Position paper for "More Failure" roundtable
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I study failure all the time. I research racial representations, and many of the series that I find interesting failed to earn high ratings. This includes shows deemed 'high quality,' or otherwise protested as premature' cancellations, such as The Leslie Uggams Show (1969, 11 episodes), or City of Angels (2000, 22 episodes). But it also includes programs whose brief existence was not widely mourned, such as Luis (2003, 4 episodes), or Whoopi! (2003, 22 episodes). Of course, part of these programs' failure was due to factors external to the text, such as scheduling. But racial politics were also central to their short runs and what people said about them: Uggams walked a tightrope between 'black' and 'mainstream' that often resulted in blandness. Whoopi's effort to revive the confrontational ethnic humor of Lear sitcoms was deemed overwrought and contrived. Neither show 'worked,' and that's fascinating.

Scholarship and instruction on television focuses on popular shows, and this includes how we talk about race and representation. We look at successful texts such as Good Times (1974-1979) and The Cosby Show (1984-1992), and evaluate how the racial characterizations within them come up short. We lament a few short-lived examples of 'quality' or 'positive images,' such as The Nat King Cole Show (1956) and Frank's Place (1987). (And in class, we use Marlon Riggs' Color Adjustment [1992] to help things along; perhaps it's another successful text that we need to venture beyond.) By focusing on successful texts, we reify a notion that racial representations on television are limited. And indeed, they are. But we have a stunted understanding of the number and types of racial 'others' that have appeared on television.

The need to appeal to a mainstream (white) audience shapes a great number of things, including racial representations. As the call for responses begins, "failure defines television." Failed shows tell network executives what NOT to pick up or continue. While I wouldn't argue that all popular texts are inherently conservative racially, it is clear that networks want to diminish 'risk,' and the calculation of 'risk' has often included racial representations. When programs that aim to be innovative in their racial representations fail in the ratings, that can illustrate the limits of what television will allow. For example, one of the concerns about City of Angels was that it was "too black." But what did that mean? Lots of blacks on the cast, the gospel interludes, several in-jokes (about topics such as "ashy" skin)? Programs that fail might contain racial representations that didn't ring 'true' to audiences, didn't get the full support of network executives, or didn't meet the demands of advertiser support. For example, did characters such as Luis' Spanish-speaking Chinese deliveryman or Whoopi's Iranian handyman help to make the show 'too quirky' or just too unfamiliar?

An important exception to the neglect of failed shows is the case of All-American Girl (1994-95, 19 episodes). This show has been studied because of, not despite its failure

among viewers and critics. Work on this show has helped us to understand how difference was (over)managed because of fears about what the (white) audience could handle. But its standing as the only primetime show about an Asian-American family made it significant to scholars as well as to Asian-American viewers and community groups. This is not possible for Cavemen (2007, 13 episodes), a sitcom based on the popular Geico insurance commercials in which present-day "cavemen" object to stereotypical protrayals in the ad-within-an-ad Geico slogan "So easy a caveman can do it." However, its portrayal of the modern-day cavemen facing racism (cast here as sub-speciesism), but being 'hypersensitive' to it captures the contradictions in our 'post-race' social context which admits that there is lingering racism, but that people of color obsess about it too much. Cavemen was cut short by poor ratings and the writer's strike, and although it was clearly about race, without the increased buzz and discourse generated by strong community investment, it will most likely become an obscure text.

Finally, as we reconsider our fascination with the popular, we have to ask ourselves: who declares a show a failure? Starting in the mid 1990s, there was more attention to a split between television viewing patterns in black and white homes: programs that were highly rated often got low ratings in black homes, and vice versa. So when we marginalized 'failed' shows, we may be complicit with a discourse of 'popularity' that itself privileges white viewing habits and tastes.