

2 "The Cosby Show" and American Racial Discourse

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INTRODUCTION

"The Cosby Show" is a key case for the analysis of discourse and discrimination, precisely because on so many levels it is atypical of American television fare. Media images of Americans of African descent have usually varied from the blatantly to the latently racist.¹ This portrayal has often been challenged by black protest, from those against *The Birth of a Nation* in 1915 to those against "Amos 'n Andy," to *Fort Apache—The Bronx* in the early 1980s.² It has also been challenged by black independent film-makers.³

However, in academic literature, the roles and images of black people in television, in particular, have been woefully understudied and undercritiqued.⁴ A recent bibliography on black involvement in television was compelled to devote most of its pages, not to books or journal articles, but to magazine and newspaper commentary.⁵ From one angle, then, a critique of black images in the media has many potential targets, not least including their backdrop, the abysmal representation of black people in professional and management positions in the media.⁶ In such a situation, it might seem a little odd to analyze a television show that has had excellent ratings from the general public, from television critics, and—most significantly—from within black communities.⁷ Why not analyze instead a program like "The Jeffersons," another all-black comedy running for many years, which was widely felt to convey a farcical, lampooning depiction of black people? And if not "The Jeffersons," there were other possibilities; indeed the fall of 1985 saw the emergence of two new all-black comedies, "227" and "Charlie & Co.," modeled

on the success of "The Cosby Show."⁸ Besides these there were shows such as "Benson," "The A-Team," and "Miami Vice" with black actors in leading roles,⁹ not to mention the many shows in which a black face was never to be seen at all.

It is, however, relatively easy to go into the fray with fists and feet flying if standard network television fare such as "The Jeffersons" is the target. In my view it is more demanding and more constructive to focus on a positive achievement, a show out of the ordinary in many respects. First, though, "The Cosby Show" must be contextualized.

THE CONTEXT OF "THE COSBY SHOW"

Reference has already been made to the history of demeaning, hostile media images of black people, and to the attempts to challenge them. Bill Cosby's own career has embraced a number of attempts to transcend these images, including an outstanding documentary ("Black History: Lost, Stolen Or Strayed?"), and his 1976 doctoral dissertation, which focused on the construction of racially unbiased video materials for classroom use.¹⁰

However, there are other important strands within the show's context. Chief among them was the intensification of overt racist activity during the 1980s. This has taken many forms. There has been a resurgence of the KKK as an active force, even in areas such as Connecticut previously thought to be immune to the organization if not its underlying motive.¹¹ This onrush of grass roots activity is closely associated with the determined erosion of civil rights and affirmative action by the Reagan administration.¹² Meanwhile the statistics for income, unemployment, and poverty indicate that there has been little progress for most black citizens in the 1970s and 1980s.¹³

Appearances were sometimes against the figures and the facts. By 1986 there were many black mayors and also quite a number of black television newscasters. Yet these real, highly visible advances—hard to visualize in 1966—had significantly cosmetic components. Both roles, in terms of the realities of power, tended to be those of front men. To the outside observer their occupants seemed to enjoy great authority. The original structures of power, however, were still firmly in place, whether the steel industry in "Richard Hatcher's" Gary, Indiana, the old Democratic machine in "Harold Washington's" Chicago, or the largely unreconstructed police force in "Wilson Goode's" Philadelphia.¹⁴ The lack

of editorial control by newscasters is an even stronger instance of the gap between power and its appearance.

In 1986, then, despite appearances and despite some real victories, the black struggle for justice and equality in the United States still confronted a mountain of obstacles. "The Cosby Show" must be read in that context. In no way was it an index of problems solved.

In some ways, the position of black women was changing faster than that of black men. Historically, the black woman has been even more heavily exploited, bearing a double yoke.¹⁵ However, with the rapid development of low-paid office, service, and junior administrative employment in the American economy, particularly during the 1970s and the first half of the 1980s, but still forecast to be in force (at a slower pace) up to 1995,¹⁶ the growth of job opportunities has been greater for black women than for black men. The reason is that these categories are mainly areas of women's employment, although it must never be forgotten that they are, concomitantly, low-paid sectors. Similarly, with the enormous increase over the 1970s and early 1980s of women taking two- and four-year college courses,¹⁷ there is little doubt that black women have also been part of this major employment-related trend.

Sometimes a by-product of these trends in employment opportunity for black women may have been an increase in gender tensions. Such tensions can arise from a variety of sources. Very high unemployment among black men, especially among those with least formal education, has been argued to deprive them of a major familial role because of their incapacity under these circumstances to act as providers, a function taken over by the welfare system and channeled through the mother.¹⁸ In turn, criticism of their lack of success by wives or girlfriends would be likely to provoke considerable bitterness. Such friction is well known within working class cultures the world over and is in no way peculiarly black.¹⁹ Employers have repeatedly tried to use wives against husbands during protracted strikes, for example, sometimes with some success. On the other hand, in a racist society, such criticism can twist the knife still further in the wound. The theme is one explored from time to time by black theater, and in summer 1986 a popular black number ("The Rent," sung by Gwen Guthrie) rammed the point home with its constant refrain:

If you want to be with me,
You've got to have a J-O-B . . .
No romance without finance . . .

Even among black success stories in the corporate world, black executives could find they were divided from one another by gender, sometimes with rancorous results.²⁰ The forthright naming of sexism in "The Cosby Show" may be directed in part to trying to reduce such fissures, which only serve to undermine cohesion.

This discussion leads straight into the next dimension of "The Cosby Show"'s context, namely the family. In 1985-86 the condition of the family in the United States was under constant public discussion. A repeated topic in newspaper and magazine articles was whether it was an institution threatened with extinction, or at least by major attrition as a component of society. For conservative and fundamentalist spokespersons, such a trend, if confirmed and sustained, practically meant the disintegration of America (presumably leaving the field clear for godless communism).

Certainly there were statistics that indicated that about half of all marriages ended in divorce, thus creating many children growing up with one parent and sometimes a stepparent. (As it happened, three of the five young actors in "The Cosby Show"'s Huxtable family had been brought up in single-parent families). Certainly, too, there was a small but increasingly vocal trend toward parenting by gay and lesbian couples, a prospect that had conservatives foaming at the mouth, but hardly spelled the death knell of the family structure—compare the increase in gay and lesbian marriage ceremonies, or even the frequent adoption of traditional gender roles within such relationships.²¹ Different and genuinely alarming was the spread of drug dependency and alcoholism among the young, crystallizing their adolescent alienation into forms terribly destructive to themselves and to their family relationships.

In early 1986, however, there was particularly active public debate around the black family structure. It was sparked by a new intervention on the subject by Daniel Patrick Moynihan, author of *The Negro Family* (1965), a text that had aroused strong opposition for its argument that the black family was snared in a "tangle of pathology" inherited from slavery and reimposed by urban migration in the twentieth century, and that black poverty was largely attributable to this "pathology."²² Now a senator from New York, Moynihan had disclaimed in a new work many of the attacks on his original text and returned to the theme of family disintegration in a modified form.²³ In turn, television journalist Bill Moyers produced a documentary for CBS, which was aired in January and again in March, entitled "The Vanishing Black Family." The docu-

mentary interviewed a series of single mothers and the fathers of their children, in Newark, New Jersey, to put some flesh on the statistical bones, namely, that the rate of single parenting was currently twice as high for blacks as for whites. The program made no reference to issues such as mutual help networks in this family form.²⁴ Basic to the program's self-conception was the view that this was a nettle to be grasped and that it was not racist to raise it in public. Indeed, in the opening shots of the *second* screening a middle-aged black woman tells the viewers that the problem has nothing to do with racism but is located deep within the black community itself. In this way, Moyers implied he must have been correct in his selection of feckless interviewees to clarify the issues. . . .

I would suggest, however, that what the revival of the topic signified was that commentators in the United States will deal with virtually any issues in their analysis of black dilemmas, except ongoing racism and structural unemployment. The family figures may well be broadly accurate, and they are alarming in and of themselves insofar as they reflect the effect of structural unemployment in a racist society (and these effects do sponsor other problems in their turn). But whatever the structural condition of perhaps 40 percent of black families, these twin features of the American social and economic structure, racism and structural unemployment, would still be in place. The figures imply that one major line of black defense against these forces may be in disarray. But it is only a defense against these ongoing realities, not an attack on them, and certainly not a solution to them. For the white majority, the familial angle of vision distracted attention from the structures they are in a position to alter.

The other main contextual issue for "The Cosby Show" is education, or, to be more precise, the state of education in urban public schools. For many decades the issue of black scholastic underachievement has been batted backward and forward, with the IQ-testers lending pseudoscientific luster to three-hundred-year-old slurs of defective intelligence, and their opposition pointing to adverse social conditions across the board. The fact remains that underachievement lets future employers off the hook of discrimination: the basis of effective protest is absent. The responsiveness and seriousness of educational institutions is—or is capable of being—a key long-term component in the diffusion of black talent throughout society. This does, however, require an active partnership between educators, students, and parents. Precisely at that point the despairing, restricted focus of many poverty-stricken families militates against the long-term effort education demands, and acts to

mediate the fatalistic messages from structural unemployment and racist processes. In turn, educators, only a few of whom are heroes, usually swim with the tide.

Enter "The Cosby Show." Its analysis requires we bear in mind not only this context, but also the audience segments who watch it: black people and white people, men and women, boys and girls, manual workers, office workers, professionals. We are not dealing with a homogeneous reception, nor with a passive one; each subsegment is likely to bring its own specific concerns to the program, as well as those it shares with others. These remarks are meant to underline that a full analysis of the effect of "The Cosby Show" would require much more space than is available here, and also that a successful entertainment program has to appeal across several boundaries, and maybe for different reasons to different people. A successful all-black show has particularly tough boundaries to overcome, not least at the stage of prior network approval.²⁵

In the analysis, closely interrelated dimensions of the program will be reviewed: first, the treatment of social class, the family, and sexism; then the question of racism, central to this discussion; and finally the dimension of humor. The inclusion of all topics is essential if the full character of the show is to be appreciated—and especially if the role of "The Cosby Show" as a discourse within a racist society is to be accurately evaluated.

SOCIAL CLASS DISCOURSE

The Huxtable family is patently upper middle class, yet class is always assumed rather than affirmed. The father (Cliff) is a gynecologist and obstetrician, the wife (Clair) a lawyer. Their oldest daughter (Sondra) is at Princeton University, and their second (Denise) is expecting to go away to a university, the third generation of the family to attend college. They live in a very sizeable brownstone on a leafy Brooklyn street. In one episode Clair buys a painting at an auction for eleven thousand dollars from her personal account. Cliff and Clair pay for his parents to go on a European cruise calling at Amsterdam, Lisbon, and Monte Carlo, to celebrate their forty-ninth wedding anniversary. The house furnishings, the children's clothes, all bespeak a very comfortable life-style.

There is no specific discourse naming "class" as there might be in some academic treatise, but class perspectives are evident at a series of

points. Cliff is confronted in one episode with a friend of Denise's who has a urinary infection, but has not told her parents because it might mean admitting she was sexually active. He remarks to Clair afterward: "[She is] a lovely girl, intelligent, beautiful—could've been one of *our* children." (On one level, this is simply a statement of opinion and of enlightened sexual ethics, but implicit is also a class judgment: Denise's friend is not a run-of-the-mill, sexually precocious, irresponsible child.) When seventeen-year-old Denise buys her first secondhand car, Clair says, "she has passed the Huxtable driving test; now she must pass the Huxtable quiz" (meaning a series of do's and don't's about letting friends drive the car and so on). This implies a structure of expectations not characteristic of "lesser" families. On a different occasion, Rudy (the youngest child) has switched on the juicer and has made a mess. Theo, the only son, chided for not cleaning it up, replies, "If she makes a mess, and we clean it up, she will never learn responsibility." It is a get-out, but an unassailable get-out, as Cliff's face ruefully and comically registers.

These three instances also serve as a useful introduction to the general discursive style of "The Cosby Show." Crass, crude statements of the kind that abound in American television are rare indeed. Humor, adroit verbal fencing, and quiet suggestions for daily living are frequently in evidence. Yet the difference between "our" type of children and others, between "our" family and others, the ethic of individual responsibility, are all implicit expressions of upper-middle-class codes. They are emphasized lightly, but, we may surmise, all the more effectively for that very lightness of touch. I am not implying that working class codes, with their greater emphasis on commonality, exclude these emphases. I am suggesting that "The Cosby Show" evokes its response on the twin bases of "race" and social class.

Social class values are at their clearest in the repetitive emphasis given to the importance of doing schoolwork. In general, there is a closure at the end of each episode; this topic was the only major developing theme across episodes. Theo, the fifteen-year-old only son, is in some sense a muted echo of the high school dropout and his/her alienation. He does as little homework as possible, complains bitterly about his math teacher (nicknamed "dragon lady"), and wants no more than to be left alone to hang out with his friend Walter (nicknamed "Cockroach") and to impress his charms on the opposite sex (clumsily). His room normally looks as though a bomb had hit it. His friend "Cockroach" has even less time for schoolwork and is reckoned to be the least interested student in Theo's class.

In a number of episodes, the question of Theo's attitude to education is a major topic. Mrs. Westlake, a Brazilian woman married to an American citizen, is his math teacher. The very first day he is in her class, Theo is grouching to Cliff about her practice of giving out lots of homework and of calling on students who do not have their hands raised. Cliff listens attentively and then says, deadpan, he is going to phone the school about it in the morning. "What are you going to do?" asks Theo, interested. "I am going to ask if she will come to live here!" says Cliff. Again, a strong message, tempered by humor.

In a later episode, Mrs. Westlake and her husband come to supper. All the other children but Theo are out, so he has to be center stage. He makes every effort to avoid the situation because he has just done a math test and is convinced he has flunked it. Mrs. Westlake arrives, looking chic and unlike the tough schoolmarm Theo has portrayed to his father. The adults get on famously, with Theo looking at them as they chat and joke, with a mixture of incomprehension, distaste, and tension. At one point Mrs. Westlake is describing her previous jobs as a waitress and a taxi driver, and in the course of doing so turns to Theo: "I didn't mind. I was in America. I knew that if I worked hard I could be whatever I wanted. That's why I make you work so hard. I don't like it when I see children take education for granted. That's why I'm tough." Here are combined the American Dream, the Protestant Ethic, a middle-class view of education and discipline, all in the mouth of one of Brazil's most popular screen actresses, Sonia Braga, whose presence in the classroom would probably be calculated to soften even the most inveterate innumerate! (But what to do about less beautiful, less dedicated teachers, whose style can easily confirm attitudes such as Theo's and Cockroach's?)

In a third episode, Mrs. Westlake is forced to stay away from giving a major test to Theo's and Cockroach's class because she has given birth the day before. In her absence, her substitute teacher is faced with advanced classroom disorder, one pupil even playing a radio. Cockroach then leaps to his feet and reads the class the riot act:

You guys are making me sick! We are Mrs. Westlake's class and look how we are behaving! Now this woman has worked hard all year to try to teach us something and we are not going to let her down. To show her how much we care, I want each and every one of you to go home tonight and study. Study like you've never studied before. And get the best grades we've ever gotten. So she will be proud she was our teacher. And if I find out that any one of you did not give your hundred percent, you're going to have to answer to me!

The rebel unexpectedly turns missionary, the strongest tribute, the most effective voice. The class, or part of it, goes to visit Mrs. Westlake in the hospital to give her a congratulatory signed card in the shape of a huge parallelogram. She especially thanks Cockroach, asking him to stay behind a moment so she can speak with him. "Why?" she asks. "It—I don't know. It just wasn't your class." In a gesture of friendliness she says to him as he leaves: "Good-bye—Cockroach!"

This episode seemed to be communicating several things: first, that adolescent resistance is often aware that it is taking self-destructive forms, and may suddenly crack open like a chrysalis at quite unexpected moments; second, that dedicated teachers can achieve a great deal with what first seem to be unpromising students, especially in conjunction with the students' parents; and third, that a mixture of firmness in the classroom and friendliness outside it is a winner. All these messages are rolled together in the basic message, however, which is that a positive attitude to education is essential and that teenagers must be persisted with if they display a negative attitude toward it. And sparkling around the edges of the message is the power of human energy and warmth.

Not only does the discourse reflect a class experience—and so a view—of education, it effectively offers a series of recipes whereby resistance to that view may be whittled away, and one or two beacons to encourage the weary and fainthearted to persist. In some ways "The Cosby Show" presents what seems a *realizable utopia*, with hints and suggestions, not for gardening or cooking, but for solving life's problems. The prescriptions offered are not conveyed like commandments, but emerge from the action like a contemporary morality play. When Theo gets 89 for his math test, Cliff tells him: "You studied. You studied for a whole week. *That's* why you got the 89." In a different episode we have seen Theo's preferred, minimalist mode of studying, as we have also Vanessa's, his twelve-year-old sister. The practical contrast is there for anyone with eyes; insistent, but not pious.

THE FAMILY DISCOURSE

The family in its nuclear form—the Huxtable version—has often been the site of both intense affection and deep hatreds. It has, particularly, been the location in which the mother either works in isolation or works her second shift, and in which her children have learned that that is normal, even acceptable, even god-willed. Both the warmest of human emotions and the perpetuation of sexism have been nurtured

within the selfsame structure. The public discourse about the family in the United States in the mid-1980s, by and large defining it as a perfect institution under threat, has been outlined above.

Apart from nuclear, what kind of family is the Huxtables'? A little larger than the average (five children, ranging from six to nineteen). There are four daughters and one son, and so a family in which women dominate. Its social class we know already. The show strongly emphasized their individuality: in the opening credits of each episode, they were shown dancing, each one of them with a clearly identifiable personal style. The three major young actors in the episodes studied were Denise, Theo, and Vanessa, respectively presented as a little kooky; as an awkward teenager; and as a nice but empty-headed, dress-conscious twelve-year-old striving hard to seem older than she really was. (The youngest member of the family, Rudy, was really there as a clown-figure, though it has to be said that her performance; timing, and delivery were exemplary.) But what was the dynamic of their interactions? First let us look at parent-child relationships, then at sibling relationships.

Cliff and Clair are a mixture of firmness and a readiness to talk matters through with their children. They have family conferences, for example, on Sondra's wish to spend her first summer vacation from Princeton with a girlfriend in a Paris apartment, or when Cliff becomes anxious that the children will conceal problems from them, as Denise's friend did with her parents about her urinary infection. In the first of these conferences there was a vote, in which Cliff found himself a minority of one. The children dispute with their parents, though never rudely and never whining.

At the same time, there is considerable structure in the form of clearly stated rules. Vanessa is not allowed to make or receive telephone calls after ten at night. When she has worn a sweater of Denise's despite Denise's explicit "No," she is told no calls at all for two days, no change of outer garments for two days, and to pay to have the sweater cleaned. When Theo has striven to get by with the bare bones of homework for a test on Macbeth, Clair tells him he will have to do her test on the play as well.

Explicit statements of parental responsibility are frequent. When Rudy is anxious that Cliff will not catch her when she is learning to ride her bike, he says to her slowly and deliberately: "Look, you're my child. We're related. You're my daughter. I love you. I will catch you."

There are other detailed statements of parental understanding, very much in the implicit prescriptive mode for viewers. On one occasion

Clair complains to Cliff that Theo and Cockroach are tearing the place apart. Cliff says, in terms that adeptly combine insight and humor: "They're boys, dear, fifteen-year-old boys. Fifteen-year-old boys get together and the first thing they do is talk about girls. See, that then gets them all excited. Then they don't know what to do with each other, so they start throwing each other up against the wall." Another time, Theo is busy crashing about with a basketball all over Clair's new-sown garden, because he feels he has been humiliated by Denise's girlfriend. Cliff goes out and tries persistently to engage Theo in conversation, to get him to express his feelings of hurt, with a blend of olive branch, diversion, irony, and realism.

The parents always seem to be able to set aside time immediately for the children when they need it—a circumstance made much easier by the routines of the comedy than by the pressures of everyday life. It is another important prescriptive "message" from the show, underlined in one scene by the camera panning slowly across the children's intently listening faces as Cliff speaks to them in deliberate tones of the unique love he and Clair have for them. At the same time, the parents exhibit no saccharine piety about the children. On Rudy's first day at school, Cliff wakes Clair up:

"Clair, Clair, it's the first day of school."

"The first day of school?"

"The first day of school."

"We get the house back?"

Sibling conflicts, which often seem to be the very warp and woof of family life, are also given space in the show. The clash between Denise and Vanessa about the sweater, referred to above, ends with the two physically fighting each other with such passion that Cliff, off balance as he tries to separate them, topples over on to the floor. Similarly, when Denise's attractive girlfriend comes over to do a high school sociology project on the Huxtable family, Theo is all over her, unable to let her hand go when he meets her, tidying his room, saying all the "proper," mature things that he thinks will impress her, appearing apparently casual with his shirt open to the waist, to the point where Denise is trembling with fury at his antics.

Yet they are shown to be prepared to help each other too. Denise advises Vanessa to wear a headband to conceal a pimple on her forehead that she is in full panic about, and stays up all night to help Theo with a history test. They all support Sondra in her conflict with Cliff about spending the summer in Paris. There is a careful balance between realism and positive prescription here, of a kind that mirrors the frequent reality of sibling conflict/comradeship.

It is hard, though, completely to credit the muted level of the conflicts expressed. Theo is the furthest "out," but even he never expresses any of the snarling truculence so often encountered in adolescent rages. No one sinks into catatonia, no one stays out all night without permission or letting the parents know where they are, no one even hints at drugs or alcohol (the nearest is a friend of the parents who is dependent on cocaine). Denise's friend is sexually active but not pregnant, and in every other respect a model daughter. Middle-class families are in no way exempt from these traumas, and to some extent the Huxtable family seems never to have been tested beyond a moderate point for its resourcefulness in dealing with real crisis.

THE DISCOURSE OF SEXISM

Curiously, the only form of discrimination named as such in "The Cosby Show" is sexism. Neither class nor racism is specified in this way. Yet sexism is often on the agenda.

On one occasion, Theo and Cockroach are shown in the corridor of their high school, together spotting a new, attractive female student. Their private code for such a person is "burger." "Burger alert!" says Theo. Cockroach comments: "De-luxe burger! With the works!"

Later, at home, they are trying to work out a fast way to find out about Macbeth, which they have not read, for a test the next day. Denise suggests they get some study notes from the bookstore near Brooklyn College.

THEO: Oh, Cockroach, I bet some great burgers hang out there.

COCKROACH (*enthusiastically*): Yeah.

DENISE: What's a burger?

THEO: It's a good-looking girl.

DENISE (*scandalized*): You call them 'burgers'?

THEO (*grinning*): Yeah.

DENISE: A burger is a piece of meat.

THEO: We don't mean it that way.

DENISE: I don't care. It has to be one of the most sexist, degrading remarks I ever heard. You don't call a woman a "burger" or any other object. We're people. I ought to call you a—a "Clydesdale." You know, "Look at that Clydesdale, he's a twelve-wagon puller."

VANESSA (*entering*): You guys off the phone yet?

DENISE: Hey, d'you know what these guys call a good-looking girl?

VANESSA: You mean "burgers"?

DENISE: You *know*?

VANESSA: I thought it was kind of cute.

DENISE: Vanessa, it's wrong. As a woman you should be insulted. A burger is a piece of meat.

VANESSA: I never thought about it that way. You guys are *disgusting*!

THEO: We're sorry.

COCKROACH: We won't do it again, we promise.

THEO: Hey Denise, how do we get to the bookstore?

DENISE: If you want to know, ask *another* "burger"—Clydesdale!

This lengthy quotation underlines two things: the extent to which sexism is on the explicit agenda of "The Cosby Show" and the comparative silence about class or racism as such. How this contrast should be interpreted will be discussed in the conclusions.

On another occasion, Sondra's Princeton boyfriend Elvin is in the Cosby home. They are noted to have broken up on a previous occasion because of his tasteless, patronizing attitude toward women. He is given a series of gauche lines, putting his foot ever further in it, and visibly straining the patience of both Cliff and Clair. Another time, when the family is preparing to celebrate the grandparents' forty-ninth anniversary, Sondra and the other daughters have offered to cook the meal:

SONDRA: We thought it would be nice if we cooked the meal for grandpa and grandma's anniversary.

THEO: And I'm sure you girls will do a great job.

SONDRA: Theo, I mean all of us.

THEO: I don't cook.

CLAIR: Maybe you should learn.

THEO: Why?

CLAIR: Theo, you're going to leave this house one day, and you're going to want to eat.

THEO: I'll have my girlfriend cook.

CLAIR (*angrily*): Now where are you getting this attitude from?

THEO: Cockroach. You see we decided we're only going to date girls who cook.

SONDRA (*with a little Princeton hauteur*): Women of today have better things to do than stay in the kitchen.

THEO (*smirks and thumps his chest*): Women of today haven't met the man of tomorrow!

This exchange is also indicative of "The Cosby Show"'s discursive style. Theo is barraged by the women's irritated responses, but is allowed the last, jokey word—which nonetheless underlines his callowness. Similarly, when mightily trying to impress Denise's friend as she does her sociology project, he says: "Now some guys might find it hard—living with four sisters. But it's made *me* more sensitive to the wants and needs of women." By this time, Denise is nearly ready to kill him, especially as her friend appears impressed by this hyperbole. The audience, however is heavily prompted to see Theo's behavior largely through Denise's eyes, to the point where her friend appears naive in continuing to take Theo seriously.

Thus the program is thorough in its identification of sexism as a force to be denounced and resisted. Sexism is, though, a phenomenon basically exemplified by callow youths. This makes for a good scoring point, but does not penetrate very far into the heart of the problem. In the fifteen episodes studied, too, only one briefly showed Clair at her lawyer's office.

The relation between Cliff and Clair is basically portrayed as one of great mutual respect and love. The camera often uses a protracted single take, varied only by restrained zooms, of the couple enjoying a moment of affectionate exchange or tenderness. Cliff can be outvoted, pressured to change his mind, teased, fenced with, mildly ridiculed, told off. Their sexual relationship is handled with grace, the viewer left in no doubt that that component of their marriage is very much alive, but without any of the lumpen soft pornography of the "steamy" soaps. Yet Cliff is a (benevolent) paterfamilias, a strong father not in the sense of harshness or rigidity for its own sake, but representing the personification of what fatherhood is supposed to mean at its conventional best. He is the one who ceremonially hands over the carving set to Theo at the outset of the Thanksgiving dinner, because Theo has been asking him if he could carve, and it is, is it not, the role of the man of the house. He is the one who restrains Clair from her instant impulse to scream at Theo for his crashing about in his bedroom and over her garden. He is the one who—delicately—extracts an apology from Clair for her tetchiness after she has cracked a bone in her toe and bitterly resents using a cane. He always has the effective last word in any situation, even if he rides with the punches along the way (see the dialogues reproduced in the section below on humor). He is patriarchy with a human face.

Yet his condemnation of everyday sexism perhaps communicates itself all the more powerfully to male viewers precisely because he cannot be written off as a henpecked wimp. Nor is he a Jackie Gleason of "The Honeymooners," all sound and fury, signifying nothing. His behavior could equally reasonably be interpreted as the assertiveness of a strong but considerate human being, maybe wrong on occasion, but not oppressive, because always open to discussion, to reason, to change. His posture is about as fair as could be demanded—except from a separatist-feminist perspective, from which he would almost have to be denounced as a smiling, deceitful mask over oppression—though we may still question how common his stance is in families up and down the land.

THE DISCOURSE OF RACISM

By contrast with sexism, racism was never once mentioned in the fifteen episodes I analyzed. The discourse was *always* indirect, allusive.²⁶ There was exactly one moment when it seemed as though racism was about to figure directly in the action, when Rudy announced she was

not going back to school after her first day there, because she hated it. Asked why, she says a boy had called her names. Asked what, she said "Rudy Huckleberry." Cliff advises her how to respond to childish pranks of this sort, and the trivial matter disappears.

Yet there is an abundance of black culture in the series, expressed without fanfare, but with constant dignity. The picture Clair buys for eleven thousand dollars is by Ellis Wilson (said to be Clair's great-uncle) and formerly in the family. Elvin, Sondra's Princeton boyfriend, knows Wilson's work. At the art auction, another black buyer interested in the work talks knowledgeably about the painting's form and character to Cliff. There are other paintings with black subjects hanging on the walls of the Huxtable home. Theo has a poster of Wynton Marsalis on his bedroom door, and an "Abolish Apartheid" sticker above it, which apparently NBC fought unsuccessfully to have removed.²⁷ Denise has pictures of Frederick Douglass and Martin Luther King hanging in her bedroom.

African-American music is also often an element in the show, whether in Cliff's reminding Clair that Ray Charles's "I Can't Stop Loving You" was playing when he proposed to her, or in Clair's luring a tired Cliff back downstairs at night by playing his favorite "Candy," or in the entire family entertaining the grandparents with a hilarious mime to Ray Charles and the Raelettes' "Night Time Is the Right Time." One episode centered on Denise having a slight accident with Stevie Wonder's car, which ends with Stevie Wonder inviting the entire family to spend some time in his recording studio. Stevie Wonder's consistent commitment to black causes, such as the liberation of Zimbabwe and the institution of Dr. Martin Luther King's birthday as a federal holiday, and his well-known support of politically conscious black musicians such as Gil Scott-Heron and the late Bob Marley, made his presence on the show at least as much symbol as entertainment.

In the episode in which Denise and Vanessa have their fracas about the sweater, presented in mid-January 1986, the style of handling these subjects was well illustrated. At the close of the episode, Cliff and Clair move from the kitchen into the living room to find Rudy all by herself watching television with great attention. A newsreel of Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" speech at the 1963 March on Washington is playing, in commemoration of his birthday, being observed for the very first time as a federal holiday. They sit and watch, and all the other children come to watch as well. Vanessa steals a glance at Denise, catches her eye, and mouths "Sorry"; Denise's face melts into a smile. The scene closes on King speaking. His message, its implications for

relationships within a black family and within the black community as well as for relations between black and white are not enunciated—but they *are* communicated. The absolute respect that his presence and his speech command, the honor this remarkable twentieth-century leader from their country and community evidently enjoys in the Huxtable family speak volumes without words.

The very solidity of the family itself, especially in the context of the Moynihan report and its recent recycling, is an assertion of black dignity. The painting that had been in Clair's family and now was returned to it, the carving set that had been in Cliff's family for generations, the grandparents' forty-ninth anniversary, their obvious devotion to each other were all indexes of family strength. The Huxtable family stood as both model and rebuttal.

Similarly, their relations with the relatively few white characters were typified by relaxed good humor, with none of the false friendliness or the eye-avoiding tension that normally pass for race "relations" in the United States. Whether Rudy's pudgy, comically tongue-tied playmate Peter (or his equally reticent father), or the delightful Danny Kaye playing the family dentist, the white characters are themselves, the Huxtables are themselves, and there is neither reticence nor apology nor caution nor awkwardness. When Mrs. Westlake is lying in her hospital bed waiting to be trundled down to the delivery room, Cliff asks her if she is nervous. "Now that you are here, I feel totally confident," she replies. The prospect of having a black male obstetrician is one that would still haunt the racist sensibilities of many white American women. Again, it is a brief exchange, with no meaningful pauses or looks or camera flicking from face to face to batter the presumed semiconscious viewer over the head with the fact that SOMETHING SIGNIFICANT IS BEING SAID. The relation between them is personal, totally transcending "race." So are Cliff's relations with his prenatal class in the clinic, a group of women of many nationalities and skin colors, with whom he clearly has a wonderful rapport.

Aspects of international culture are also part of the Huxtables' taken-for-granted world. Sondra plans to spend a summer in Paris, Cliff and Clair pay for a European cruise for his parents (toying with a trip to Nairobi as an alternative), Cliff dreams of visiting Rio de Janeiro, his father signifies he would like a Linzertort and an imported cigar for his anniversary dinner, Clair speaks quite creditable Portuguese with Mrs. Westlake.

In other words, a set of relationships is portrayed at length and in detail in which racism and the response to racism have been definitively

transcended, and yet not simply glossed over in the spurious ways common to American television. There is no black character resembling the semimute, totally loyal assistant to Raymond Burr in "Ironside"; no comic relief jackass of the Huggy Bear type in "Starsky and Hutch"; no childlike gorilla like Mr. T in "The A-Team"; no super-cool cop like Philip Michael Thomas (Tubbs) in "Miami Vice." Judged in this context, "The Cosby Show" is simply light-years ahead of most American television. Yet given the strengths of the series, the viewer might wonder whether this sleeping giant might not have powerful resources with which to tackle the enduring menace of racism head on. This will be discussed in the conclusions.

A final, inevitable comparison is with "All in the Family," which was originally based on the racist, sexist "Till Death Us Do Part" BBC series-idea, but which developed over the years to present Archie Bunker as someone who could learn, though painfully, to become a moderately sensitive human being. There is little doubt in which family most viewers would prefer to grow up—if only, in the case of white viewers, they could evacuate their racist anxieties. For humanity, humor, security, and not least affluence, the Huxtables would win every time. Do the two series speak to the same issues? Often they do, but one does so through abusive remarks, tortured relationships, jokes at someone else's expense, and frequent tension; the other deftly, creamily, subtly, attractively. "All in the Family" is about objects; "The Cosby Show" is about subjects.

HUMOR IN THE DISCOURSE

One of the problems in analysis of creative works is that the butterfly's wings are often destroyed by the analyst's leaden tread. It would be a travesty if "The Cosby Show"'s discourse were to be examined without reference to its frequently sparkling wit, which is an integral element of its style. Not merely is it funny, however; not merely do Cliff and Rudy clown around. Its humor is often offered as a sweetened prescription to couples and families in dispute.

One example is when the children, rather than going to find one another to speak to each other, yell for each other through the house (a familiar familial scenario). Cliff and Clair decide to bellow a series of questions and answers at each other, standing almost eyeball to eyeball, to give the children some idea of what their noise sounds like. The children are totally nonplussed, because no one explains to them what

is going on, but the audience, having seen the total sequence, might be thought to have ingested a point through its laughter.

Especially in the relationship between Cliff and Clair, after more than twenty years of marriage, humor is a method of defusing minor tensions. In one episode Cliff has just said that at least Theo has good taste in the opposite sex, alluding to his instant infatuation with Denise's attractive classmate.

CLAIR: Better than yours. I saved you . . . You were chasing a girl of eighteen who was still in the ninth grade. I saved you, you poor thing.

CLIFF: I still wonder about her sometimes.

CLAIR (*taking him by the throat*): And what do you still wonder?

CLIFF: Uh-u-u-uh—I wonder if she's still in the ninth grade.

On another occasion, there is a brilliant example of verbal fencing. When Rudy has broken the juicer, it turns out that Cliff had left it plugged in and so bears some share of the blame. His wife puts on her lawyer's tone and air:

CLAIR: May I ask you a question, Dr. Huxtable? Who left the juicer plugged in to the electrical socket with the top off?

CLIFF (*pauses for reflection; deadpan*): Theo.

CLAIR: Perhaps I should remind you of the penalty for perjury in this state. Let me rephrase the question, Dr. Huxtable: Did *you* leave the juicer plugged into the socket with the top off?

CLIFF (*reluctantly*): See I don't think that—

CLAIR: Just answer the question, please. Yes or no?

CLIFF: What I'm trying to—

CLAIR: Yes? Or no?

CLIFF: Yes but—

CLAIR: Then you admit it! You are guilty! You are guilty of contributing to the delinquency of a six-year-old!

CLIFF (*brainwave*): I object.

CLAIR (*sitting down in a large chair, and dropping her voice an octave*): Overruled.

CLIFF (*moving toward her on his knees and taking her hand*): Well then I throw myself on the mercy of the court.

CLAIR: The court has *no* mercy in this case. You are hereby sentenced to five years of appliance probation, which means you may not buy, look at, or touch an appliance. (*Cliff kisses her hand, very deliberately.*) You're trying to influence the judge. That's ten more years! (*Cliff fondles her hand and kisses it again.*) I find you in contempt of court. That's fifteen more years. (*Clair strains back as Cliff leans over and tries to kiss her neck.*) Dr. Huxtable, what are you doing?

CLIFF: I'm going for life. (*Clair cracks up, and Cliff kisses her.*)

This playacting, with its ambivalent messages, its tension, and its final resolution through Cliff's superior verbal wit—his habit of winning in the end was noted above—is absolutely characteristic of the depiction of their relationship, and of the timbre of the series in general. Humor is used as a method of distancing from conflict, to give more perspective on it. Cliff's parents, for instance, are seen reminiscing with each other about his years as a teenager. His mother says: "Did you ever think he would wind up with such a fine family?" Her husband replies, "I had my doubts. When you have a boy that clowns around in school, never cleans his room, and tries to parachute off a garage—it's hard to say, 'Well, there's someone who should raise children!'" Their comments are intercut with Cliff and Clair as they talk about their own children, and the editing underlines the importance of not getting too distraught about teenage behavior.

On another occasion, Denise and Clair have had a particularly ram-bunctious run-in with each other. Denise, her voice cracking with anger, has attacked her parents for refusing to let her use her \$1600 savings on buying a secondhand car. "Are we still in America or what?" she snaps. Clair has read her the riot act in return: "If you ever take *this* attitude with *us* again, you can take whatever is in that bank account of yours and go *discover* America!" Cliff acts as rational defuser of the row, and, the temperature lowered, just after Denise has gone out of the door, he quips to Clair: "That's *your* child!" Clair's emotions are still riding high, but she is spurred to a moment's self-reflection and does not make a further rejoinder.

The humor in the show is never of the "laughometer" variety, never cheap. Perhaps being taped before a live studio audience helps a great deal, insofar as it obviates the wooden pauses for canned mirth that punctuate so many other comedies. But the scriptwriting, in which Cosby himself plays a major role, and the general acting are of a much higher order than the general run, and these elements are integral to the program's success.

Compared with the use of humor in programs such as "Till Death Us Do Part" and its clones (not only "All in the Family," but also a West German and a short-run Dutch series), humor in "The Cosby Show" is a different commodity. In those,²⁸ humor was claimed by the scriptwriters and the broadcasting authorities to be a safety valve for racist tensions, in that audiences were invited to laugh at the absurd, ranting prejudices of the male lead, and so to distance themselves from their own identification with those prejudices. In the event, many people found their prejudices confirmed and solidified by their canonization in a public medium. In his excellent analysis, Charles Husband has drawn attention to the multiple dimensions of humor in society, especially its destructive potential in the relaying of racist "jokes" which—precisely because they are deemed harmless—allow people who choose to think of themselves as somehow postracist to connive in the perpetuation of racism. The humor of "The Cosby Show" has different functions, as indicated already. In the context of American culture, especially in the context of the family debates, the Huxtable family's humor, especially Cliff's and Clair's, would perhaps mark them out as something akin to magicians for being able to respond to teenage mayhem with such artistry. In this sense, their wit may suggest to white audiences that there are indeed enormous but untapped resources within the black community, that it is indeed highly racist when the black minority in the United States is categorized, as it is so often by liberals and conservatives alike, as a series of problem-creating people. Nor does the humor take the scatological and disruptive form used by black celebrants of permissive mores such as Richard Pryor or Eddie Murphy, which makes them cult figures in some quarters for talking rude. Funny as they often are, they depend upon the ongoing Puritanism within American life for their effect. Cosby's wit, often unscripted, which is reputed to make him hard to work with for less experienced screen professionals, is fundamentally a healing wit, directed always to the construction or reconstruction or reaffirmation of caring human relationships, to the encouragement of imaginative ways of interacting with other human beings during difficulties. He and the show remind us that conflicts with people

close to us need not be permanently rending, yet without glibly preaching at us. But if not glib, is the series not all the same a little creamy? This question, which has surfaced several times, will be addressed in the conclusions.

CONCLUSIONS

On one level "The Cosby Show" may function as a kind of televisual Doctor Benjamin Spock manual on family interaction: detailed, humane, rational, helpful, enjoyable, insightful. For families suffering from tortured, tense teenage relationships, that can be a contribution. On another level, "The Cosby Show" may operate as a reinstatement of black dignity and culture in a racist society where television culture has generally failed to communicate these realities, and has often flatly negated them. On another level, it may celebrate the virtues of upper-middle-class existence as the most desirable way of life to which the vast mass of citizens can reasonably aspire (indeed "Dallas," "Dynasty," "Knots Landing," basically suggest that ruling class life is very little fun at all). We might further consider that the first and third of these aspects, combined with the program's notable dramatic qualities, may well be the factors that allowed the second message to be communicated at all, given the conventional processes at work in decision making about prime-time television.

Certainly the audience for "The Cosby Show" is multiple, as already emphasized, so that a variety of messages must be being communicated, though many of them simultaneously rather than separately. The suggestion that the attack on sexism might be all the more effective because Cliff comes across as a strong individual is an instance of the potential complexity of this text.

The only dimension of this multiple communication in the discourse that can be examined at this time is the one central to this essay: the question of racism and the closely connected issue of whether life is not too easy in the series. What follows is in the form of statements, but each one would require further detailed analysis to be considered as fully grounded.

Does "The Cosby Show" let the ever present problem of racism off the hook? If the question requires that the issue be addressed head-on, as I put it earlier, the answer would have to be affirmative. However, I am going to suggest that that would be a misconceived question in most respects. First and foremost, let us look at the practicalities of getting a

prime-time series on the air, over an extended period of time, which did indeed deal frontally with the question of racism: neither the numerous layers of network executives whose vetoes have to be evaded, nor the advertising executives whose views of programs are also influential either directly or by experienced anticipation, would exactly leap to embrace such a show. When I described "The Cosby Show" as a sleeping giant earlier, perhaps I should have altered the image a little. The series might better be seen as Gulliver, ensnared and helpless through the myriad webs tied by the busy Lilliputians swarming around his frame, each one, in the case of television decision makers, acting (as always) as the exquisitely tuned measure of the public's sensibilities.

There is still another dimension to this question though, which is that on one level, the public is inured to a type of gritty, "let's eat these indigestible facts" program, which is often couched in a format that seems designed to tickle the masochistic palate, for which a ration of gloom and degradation is an acquired but academically essential taste. If "The Cosby Show" had been cast in that mold, it is uncertain that its effect would be so strong, however many critical plaudits it might have earned. Lastly, in terms of television practices, it is pointless to expect a particular product somehow to carry the weight of the failures of all the others, and single-handedly to compensate for them. If then "The Cosby Show" were to be urged to realize its full potential, the targets of public demand would have to be the networks and the advertisers, not the people who create the show. The former are the forces with which "The Cosby Show" has had to negotiate its existence; indeed, ABC turned the series proposal down. To be as good as it is *and* to have gotten past these barriers is a major achievement in itself.

However, some components of this achievement, in moving the culture forward a little from its racist roots, are worthy of reemphasis. First, the attack on sexism. By implication, if this is identified and denounced in a household where major black political leaders are clearly honored, then racism is also discountenanced. Sojourner Truth's picture is not in evidence in the Huxtable residence, but her presence is. Without beating an antiracist gong, this stance and commitment, combined with the fact the Huxtables are black, make the antiracist message potent and assimilable at the same time.

Second, social class. Because social class mobility and success are important components of dignity in cultural perception in the United States, the class position of the Huxtable family is likely to convey a positive message about black dignity. Their class style, it should be noted, is very different from the one excoriated by E. Franklin Frazier in

1957 in his scathing attack on the black upper-middle class.²⁹ The Huxtables are open, generous, relaxed, internationalist.

It certainly is a paradox, though, that the celebration of class could be simultaneously an antiracist statement. Yet "The Cosby Show" is never a celebration of class *against* class, even though that opposition is structurally inevitable in a class society; indeed, in Brooklyn the Huxtables (and I) would almost certainly be a part of the gentrification process, which has as its effect, if not always intention, the displacement of poor residents. Class is a relation, not just a social status or a way of life. Perhaps the paradox can best be illuminated by a conversation I had while attending the Second Festival of African Culture and Art in Lagos in 1977. A West Indian musician living in Britain noted that Nigeria was indeed a sharply class-divided country, but that at least the situation there was defined in single terms. If you had money, there was no additional skin-color barrier. The comprehensive viciousness of racism is such that a situation based purely on class can seem like a form of deliverance. Thus, while for the white audience, the Huxtables' class position may help negate the dismissal of black people as insignificant, unachieving members of society, for the black audience it may additionally suggest an insulation against the sharpest effect of a racist society. (How truly so is yet another matter.)

Herman Gray has argued,³⁰ based on his analysis of black male roles in "Benson," "Webster," "Different Strokes," and "The Jeffersons" (all comedies with a regular or entire black cast), that American television comedies "[idealize] racial harmony, affluence, and individual mobility" and notes that these options are "simply not within the reach of millions of black Americans. . . . The major impact . . . is to deflect attention from the persistence of racism, inequality, and differential power" (p. 239).

The force of this argument is indisputable, and "The Cosby Show" is not exempt from its strictures. Yet the *full* effect of "The Cosby Show" cannot be so defined. Frederic Jameson has argued that mass culture contains "utopian" as well as manipulative components: "works of mass culture . . . cannot manipulate unless they offer some genuine shred of content as a fantasy bribe to the public about to be manipulated . . . cannot do their job without deflecting . . . the deepest and most fundamental hopes and fantasies. . . ."³¹

Insofar as this position is valid, the treatment of social class in "The Cosby Show" is not simply a matter of blanking out the ugly realities of continuing oppression, but also of offering some sense of resolution to the grinding everyday realities of racial tension and mistrust in the

United States, as well as some vision of what a financially secure family life might be like. The hopes and fantasies nurtured a little in this communication are *also* the stuff of continuing resistance to a harsh reality, not simply its denial.

Finally, one more comment on the family itself. It presents in microcosm the importance of black unity—between genders and generations—without any sloganizing about the necessity of holding together for survival in a hostile environment. Nor is any child in the family favored for her or his lighter skin shade, historically one of the most insidious penetrations of the majority's racism into the minority's everyday life. The family's assured dignity and fundamental cohesion offer a powerful communication on several levels, countering the "shambles" image of black family life referred to above.³²

Thus, addressed to the American public in its mid-1980s condition, "The Cosby Show"'s treatment of sexism, the family, and social class actually enabled it to convey positive messages to multiple audiences. These messages addressed the problem of racism, not by focusing directly upon it, but rather upon three of its many "correlates," if the term may be so employed. Sexism, social class, and the family were used as key points of access from which to erode racism, still the most glaring division in the daily culture of the United States. The implications may be considerable for future strategies to this end.

NOTES

I should like to thank Ash Corea, Helen Newman, Louise Spence, Susan Toliver, and the editors of this volume for their helpful suggestions in connection with this essay. Final responsibility rests with the author.

1. Robert C. Toll, *Blackening Up* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974); Daniel Leab, *From Sambo to Superspade* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975); Thomas Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977); President's National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (Kerner Commission Report) (New York: Bantam Books, 1968), chap. 15.

2. A. Shankman, "Black Pride and Protest: The Amos 'n Andy Crusade," *Journal of Popular Culture* (fall 1978), 236–52; Richard Perez, "The Campaign against *Fort Apache—The Bronx*," in Douglas Kahn and Diane Neumaier (eds.), *Cultures in Contention* (Seattle: The Real Comet Press, 1985), 180–97.

3. Gladstone Yearwood (ed.), *Black Cinema Aesthetics* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1982).

4. A notable contrast to Britain, where this topic has been researched thoroughly. See, for example, P. Hartmann and C. Husband, *Racism and the Mass Media* (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1974); C. Husband (ed.), *White Media, Black Britain* (London: Hutchinson, 1975); Stuart Hall (et al.), *Policing the Crisis* (London: Macmillan, 1978).

chaps. 1–4; my *The Media Machine* (London: Pluto Press, 1980), chaps. 3–4; and my "'Coillons . . . shryned in an hogges toord': The British news media discourse on 'race,'" in Teun A. van Dijk (ed.), *Discourse and Communication* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1985), 295–323.

5. George H. Hill and Sylvia Saverson Hill, *Blacks on Television* (Metuchen, New Jersey: The Scarecrow Press Inc., 1985).

6. Nick Kotz, "The Minority Struggle for a Place in the Newsroom," *Columbia Journalism Review* 17.6 (March–April 1979), 23–31.

7. From 9/23/1985 through 4/13/1986, which encompassed the period during which I studied the program, "The Cosby Show" was regularly ranked first in the ratings, outdistancing "Dallas," "Dynasty," "Knots Landing," "Sixty Minutes," "Miami Vice," and the regular Sunday movies. From the AIRS data-base and from the NBC NAD ratings summary, it is clear that although the show was even more popular with women than men, and in families than with childless couples or single people, it had a popularity which spanned economic categories and regions of the country, including the South. I am grateful to Jeffrey C. Boehme, Director of Audience Measurement at NBC, for supplying me with these figures. Lena Horne, at the NAACP's 70th awards ceremony in 1985, at which Cosby received the Springarn Medal, said in the conclusion of her address: "Thank you, Dr. Cosby, for giving us back ourselves." *Amsterdam News* 12/21/1985, p. 24.

8. Martha Bayles, "Television: Send in the Clones," *Wall Street Journal* 10/21/1985, p. 22.

9. With apologies to Robert Guillaume ("Benson") for seemingly bracketing him in this manner.

10. William H. Cosby, Jr., "An Integration of the Visual Media via 'Fat Albert and the Cosby Kids' into the Elementary School Curriculum as a Teaching Aid and Vehicle to Achieve Increased Learning," University of Massachusetts, 1976.

11. John Turner (et al.), *The Ku Klux Klan: A History of Racism and Violence* (Montgomery, Alabama: Southern Poverty Law Center, 1986) 2d ed.

12. The Reagan administration imposed heavy staff cuts on the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and the Office of Federal Contract Compliance, thus hacking away at the watchdog and enforcement roles of these two bodies. The Civil Rights Commission was stocked with Reagan appointees hostile to its basic purposes. The Justice Department was active in numerous cases throughout the country to get affirmative action declared unconstitutional. I am indebted to Steve Ralston of the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund in New York City for supplying me with detailed material on these topics.

13. See the annual *State of Black America* reports by the National Urban League. Figures kindly supplied by the Bureau of Labor Statistics indicate that although the average income of black husband-wife families gained an inch relative to similar white families between 1974 and 1984 (from 75.8% of their white counterparts to 77.7%), the overall gap between the average income of all black families and all white families widened, moving from 59.6% down to 54.9%. These data come from a BLS report unpublished at the time of writing, *Employment Conditions among Black Americans*, table F.1, p. 37.

14. Edward Greer, "Air Pollution and Corporate Power: Municipal Reform Limits in a Black City," *Politics and Society* 4.4 (1974), 483–510; Georgia A. Persons, "Reflections on Mayoral Leadership: The Impact of Changing Issues and Changing Times," *Phylon* 46.3 (Sept. 1985), 205–18; Margot Harry, *The Philly Bombing* (Chicago: Banner Press, 1986).

15. Toni Cade (ed.), *The Black Woman* (New York: New American Library, 1974); Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow* (New York: Basic Books Inc., 1985).

16. H. N. Fullerton, Jr., "The 1995 Labor Force: BLS Latest Projections," *Monthly Labor Review* 108.11 (Nov. 1985), 17-25; G. T. Silvestri and J. M. Lukasiewicz, "Occupational Employment Projections: The 1984-95 Outlook," *ibid.*, 42-57; and the special double issue "Slipping through the Cracks: The Status of Black Women" of the *Review of Black Political Economy* 14.2-3 (fall-winter 1985-86), which among many useful articles has some important critiques of the Jacqueline Jones text cited in n. 15. I am indebted to Lynne Burbridge of the Joint Center for Political Studies in Washington, D.C., and to Margaret C. Simms, editor of the *Review*, for guiding me to these sources.
17. V. W. Plisko and J. D. Stern (eds.), *The Condition of Education, 1985 Edition* (Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics, 1985), table 2.4, p. 94.
18. Elliot Liebow, *Tally's Corner* (Boston: Little Brown & Co., 1966). A recent study of data from the National Survey of Black Americans indicates that, as might be expected, anxiety about the provider role directly correlates with income position (Robert Taylor, Bogart R. Leashore, and Susan Toliver, "An Assessment of the Provider Role as Perceived by Black Males," unpublished paper, available from the authors at Boston College, Howard University, and Hunter College respectively).
19. In a different study, the experience of sudden unemployment among white blue-collar males was not found to affect their perception of themselves as providers, but did increase tensions within the family. See Jeffrey H. Larsen, "The Effect of Husband's Unemployment on Marital and Family Relations in Blue-collar Families," *Family Relations* 33 (1984), 503-11.
20. George Davis and Glegg Watson, *Black Life in Corporate America* (New York: Anchor Books, 1985), chap. 8. Though even this information has to be read in the context of a growing conviction among black executives that, women and men alike, they were being blocked for significant promotion. Their response was increasingly to start their own small firms, or to seek employment in existing black firms. See Jonathan P. Hicks, "Black Professionals Refashion Their Careers," *New York Times* 11/29/1985, pp. 1 and D2.
21. See Rayna Rapp, "Family and Class in Contemporary America: Notes toward an Understanding of Ideology," in Barrie Thorne (ed.), with Marilyn Yalom, *Rethinking the Family: Some Feminist Questions* (New York: Longman, 1982), 168-87; Tamara Harevan, "American Families in Transition," in Fromm Walsh (ed.), *Normal Family Processes* (New York: Guilford Press, 1982), 446-65; E. Macklin, "Nontraditional Family Forms: A Decade of Research," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 42 (1980), 905-22; M. Nehls and S. Morgenbesser, "Joint Custody," *Family Process* 19 (1980), 117-29.
22. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (Washington, D.C.: Office of Policy Planning and Research, U.S. Department of Labor, 1965.) For the controversy following its publication, see L. Rainwater and W. L. Yancey, *The Politics of Controversy* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1967). For compelling evidence on the historical inaccuracy of Moynihan's thesis, see Herbert Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom 1750-1925* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977). See also Lee Rainwater, *Behind Ghetto Walls* (Harmondsworth, U.K.: Pelican Books, 1973).
23. *Family and Nation* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986).
24. Carol B. Stack, *All Our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black Community* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), chap. 6.
25. Todd Gitlin, *Inside Prime Time* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983), 180-200, 314-16, notes an illuminating series of cases about the problems facing attempts to deal with racial issues in a coherent manner in prime-time television. Given his overall portrayal of the numerous levels at which a series idea can be torpedoed, the obstacles confronting worthwhile television ideas can be assumed to be formidable.

26. British studies have often noted the avoidance of specific racist terminology in functionally racist discourses. See Martin Barker, *The New Racism* (London: Junction Books, 1981); Charles Husband, "News Media, Language, and Race Relations," in H. Giles (ed.), *Language, Ethnicity, and Intergroup Relations* (London: Academic Press, 1977), 211-40; F. Reeves, *British Racial Discourse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); and a comparable case study from the Netherlands by Teun A. van Dijk, "Elite Discourse and Racism," to be published as part of a forthcoming collection, *Ideology, Discourse, and Literature*, edited by I. Zavala, T. A. van Dijk, and M. Diaz-Diocaretz, and published by Benjamins, Amsterdam. "The Cosby Show" discourse represents a different "de-racialization," but one which is equally strategic in its own fashion.
27. Mary Helen Washington, "Please, Mr. Cosby, Build on Your Success," *TV Guide* 3/22/1986, p. 8.
28. Charles Husband, "Some Aspects of the Interaction of the British Entertainment Media with Contemporary Race Relations," in H.-D. Fischer and S. R. Meirik (eds.), *Entertainment* (New York: Hastings House, 1979), 196-207.
29. E. Franklin Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1957).
30. Herman Gray, "Television and the New Black Man: Black Male Images in Prime-time Situation Comedy," *Media, Culture, and Society* 8 (1986), 223-42. My thanks are due to Professor Gray for sending me an early copy of his article.
31. Frederic Jameson, "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture," *Social Text* 1 (1979), 130-48. The quotation in the text is taken from p. 144.
32. For further suggestive evidence against the stereotype of the disintegration of black communities, see Ira E. Robinson et al., "Self-Perception of the Husband/Father in the Intact Lower Class Black Family," *Phylon* 46.2 (June 1985), 136-47.

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