

The Cosby Show is, in this respect, caught in a double bind, compromised by the ideological structures that envelop it. It appears to cultivate both the racial tolerance for which it has been applauded and the profound myopia for which it has been criticized. A more honest message is clearly needed to educate white audiences, yet to include it risks losing most viewers to the safer territories explored on other channels. Racism, it appears, is something that most white viewers simply don't *want* to know about. The world, as *The Cosby Show* demonstrates, is far happier without it.

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White Responses: The Emergence of "Enlightened" Racism

In the previous chapter we suggested that the presence of upper middle class black people on television created the impression among white TV viewers that anyone, regardless of race, color, or creed, could "make it" in the modern United States. We now come to the most disturbing aspect of this misconception.

THE INSIDIOUS RETURN OF RACISM

Although *The Cosby Show* and others like it seem to persuade some white viewers that black doctors and lawyers have become almost commonplace, most white respondents realized that the Huxtables were, in fact, unusual black people. The role of television in this sense is more complicated than it first appears. Our evidence suggests that shows like *The Cosby Show* cultivate, for white viewers, a curious contradiction: the Huxtables' presence on TV finally proves that "anyone can make it"; yet most people know that the vast majority of black people are not like the Huxtables:

He's not representing what most blacks are. He's not even representing what most whites are—but especially, he's not representing what most blacks are.

They [the black people the respondent sees every day] are all lower income and have that jive talk, so that I hardly understand them, whereas this . . .

[Father and daughter discussing whether class would make a difference] Money would be a big issue at that point. . . . The house is the biggest part of the show. It's a gorgeous, big house. . . . Do you know how much a house in New York goes for, Dad? You know how many typical black families live in those homes?

Despite their statements about how real, average, or regular the Huxtable family is, most white viewers realized that the Huxtables were not a typical black family. Many observed that they were far less typical than the more working class characters in black sitcoms like *The Jeffersons* or *Good Times*:

It's not a typical black family though. . . . [The] Jeffersons is typical.

[Other black shows] are directed more to blacks. . . . That show [The Jeffersons] tries to grasp as a family, you know, any black family type of thing.

The only show that I've watched on a daily basis was Good Times. It was so much more realistic than The Cosby Show. They were poor, which is easier to make for a black situation considering what the average layman perceives of black people.

This contradiction, despite some of the liberal ideas that inform it, leads to a decidedly illiberal conclusion. The only way to explain the failure of most black people to achieve what the Huxtables have achieved is to see most black people as intrinsically lazy or stupid. Few white respondents actually articulated such a nakedly racist attitude, preferring to suppress (publicly, at least) the logical outcome of this contradiction. We can see, nevertheless, that the absence of an awareness of the role of class in sustaining racial inequalities means that this racist conclusion is kept simmering (consciously or unconsciously) beneath the surface. Our study would seem to confirm the fears of Henry Louis Gates (1989: 40):

As long as all blacks were represented in demeaning or peripheral roles, it was possible to believe that American racism was, as it were, indiscriminate. The social vision of "Cosby," however, reflecting the minuscule integration of blacks into the upper middle class, reassuringly throws the blame for black poverty back onto the impoverished.

The Cosby Show, by demonstrating the opportunity for African Americans to be successful, implicates the majority of black people who have, by the Huxtable criterion, failed.

The show's emphasis on education, for all its good intentions, simply compounds this impression. The Huxtables' children are constantly urged by their parents to recognize the importance of educational achievement and to try hard to get good grades. This provides the viewer with an explanation for the comparative failure of most other black people: if they had only tried harder in school, maybe they would have succeeded. As Bill Cosby says of the Huxtables, "This is an American family—an *American* family—and if you want to live like they do, and you're willing to work, the opportunity is there."

The lesson was not lost on most white respondents. Although they happily welcomed the Huxtables into their homes, careful examination of their discussions made it clear that this welcome would not be extended to all black people. What shows like *The Cosby Show* allow, we discovered, was a new and insidious form of racism. The Huxtables proved that black people can succeed; yet in doing so they also prove the inferiority of black people in general (who have, in comparison with whites, failed).

In his study of television news, Robert Entman makes a similar point. He highlights the contradiction between the black people who appear on the news as stories and the increasing number of black anchors and reporters who tell those stories. He suggests that black people in news stories are mainly linked with crime and special interest politics. Entman (1990: 342–343) writes:

These images would feed the first two components of modern racism, anti-black affect and resistance to blacks' political demands. On the other hand, the positive dimension of the news, the presence of black anchors and other authority figures, may simultaneously engender an impression that racial discrimination is no longer a problem, bolstering the third component of modern racism, an impression that blacks are not inferior and undesirable, working against old-fashioned racism [our emphasis].

In other words, there is a distinction to be made between the crude racism of old and its new, more insidious, and apparently enlightened forms. We shall, in this chapter, explore the origin and character of this duplicitous attitude.

DEFINITIONS OF BLACK: COLOR VERSUS CULTURE

We are used to thinking of racism as an attitude that is crude in its simplicity. The racist discriminates between people purely on the basis of race or color. Although it would be foolish to assume that this kind of prejudice is a thing of the past, we must acknowledge that racism

today clothes itself more respectably, allowing a deep-rooted racism to appear to be open-mindedly liberal.

It is easy to forget that race and racial difference involve a great deal more than the categories of physiognomy and skin pigmentation. The differences between a black person and a white person in the United States are deeply rooted in their distinct and separate racial histories, histories encapsulating a host of material and cultural distinctions that render the experience of being black quite different from the experience of being white. Race, in other words, is a social as well as a physical construction.

Racial discrimination, throughout its infamous history, has usually been predicated on a series of perceived symbolic links between skin color and culture. To colonialists, slave owners, and promoters of apartheid, such discrimination meant a straightforward denunciation of black culture as uncivilized, inferior, or threatening. Despite their manifest crudity, these racist attitudes have never been as simple or homogeneous as they sometimes appear. From colonialism onward, the racist discourses within white societies have borne contradictory assumptions about the relation between nature and nurture. Black people have been seen as simultaneously within the reaches of white society and beyond it. The black person's soul was therefore treated, on the one hand, as a changeable commodity open to the influences of missionary zeal and, on the other, as the heart of darkness, inherently irredeemable.

Once placed in the industrial melting pots of the late twentieth century, black people struggling for achievement in an oppressive white world disentangled many of the associations between race and culture. The successes of some black people, against the odds, in a predominantly white environment have made notions of biological determinism decidedly less fashionable. Even limited black success makes white claims to racial superiority difficult to sustain. Although the notion of white racial superiority has certainly not disappeared, it is less common now than ideas of racial equality. But this does not mean the end of racism. Far from it. As an instrument of repression, racism now takes more subtle forms.

In most Western countries, particularly in the United States, the idea that white people and black people are irrevocably tied to discrete cultures has been seriously compromised by the promise of social mobility: the idea that anyone, regardless of race, creed, or class, can change their class. The principle of social mobility is now enshrined within legal structures that, although not guaranteeing racial equality, at least give the idea of equal rights a certain amount of credibility.

Racism is, however, capricious, and it has adapted to this discursive climate by absorbing a number of contradictions. The history of racism,

we have demonstrated, is now embedded in an iniquitous capitalist system, where economic rather than racial laws ensure widespread racial segregation and disadvantage. These, in turn, encourage white people, looking around them at the comparative prosperity of whites over blacks, to believe in an imagined cultural superiority and simultaneously to give credence to the idea that we are only what we become.

These beliefs lead to an attitude that separates blackness from the color that defines it. Blackness becomes a cultural notion associated with African Americans, but, from a white perspective, not irredeemably so. It is the same perspective adopted by nineteenth-century missionaries: blackness is seen as a condition from which black people can be liberated.

How is such an apparently archaic attitude sustained in the modern United States? The answer returns us, once again, to the national failure to come to terms with the harsh realities of class barriers. The phenomenon of racism, unlike inequality of wealth and opportunity, is understood not as a consequence of social structures but as the collective sum of individual opinions. If white people as individuals, the thinking goes, stop discriminating against black people, then racial equality is suddenly possible.

We have, we hope, revealed the naïveté of this position. Yet it persists not only among the gullible but throughout mainstream opinion in the United States. Accordingly if, as our study suggests, most white people believe such racism is a thing of the past, then how can we explain the failure of black people, as a group, to achieve parity with white people? In the absence of a class analysis, the answer is to see most black people as culturally inferior. This classless logic says that if most black people fail when there are no individuals discriminating against them, then there must be something wrong with them.

Bill Cosby, whether as himself or as Dr. Heathcliff Huxtable, is easily assimilated into this ideology. He is, as Mark Crispin Miller (1986) argues, visible "proof" of the meritocratic mythology that fuels the American dream, a black person who has achieved success beyond the confines of a racially defined culture. He has, in this sense, escaped from the shackles of his racial origins. It is as if racial disadvantage is something that black people are born with rather than something imposed upon them.

This is racism masquerading as liberalism. White people are willing to accept that black and white people can be equal, and their enjoyment of *The Cosby Show* is testimony to this. They can accept the Huxtables as people who are "just like us." Beneath this progressive attitude, however, lies an implicit and unstated rejection of the majority of black people, who are not like the Huxtables and, by implication, not "like us."

How does this apparently liberal racism manifest itself among the white groups in our audience study? The answer, we shall suggest, reveals a great deal about the ambivalent way many white people *really* feel about black people.

THE BLACK AND WHITE COSBY SHOW

One criticism that black people have made of *The Cosby Show* is that the Huxtable family behaves, as Gates has put it, "just like white people." Although this statement is more complex than it sounds at first, it raises an interesting possibility. Perhaps white people do not actually see the Huxtables as a black family at all. Perhaps they see them as white—or as some shade of gray in between.

We discovered that many white people do not view the Huxtables as only black. Just as people were able to see *The Cosby Show* as both realistic and unrealistic, most members of our white audience saw the Huxtable family as simultaneously black *and* white. Before we describe this ambiguous perception in more detail, it is useful to clarify what it means.

Most white people—certainly those who watch *The Cosby Show*—no longer see skin color as a barrier to liking someone or treating them as an equal. Unimpeded by such all-encompassing prejudice, they are able to discriminate between black people, some of whom have succeeded, some of whom have not. However, they quietly (and perhaps unconsciously) retain the association of blackness as an indicator of cultural inferiority, albeit one from which African Americans, if they are talented enough or hard working enough, can escape. This position is arrived at not through malice but through a failure to adequately recognize the disadvantaged position black people occupy in the class structure. This failure is extremely significant because, without such a recognition, there is no nonracist way to resolve the disparity between the Huxtables (and other successful black TV characters) and the majority of comparatively unsuccessful black people. Television, we have suggested, is culpable, albeit unwittingly, at every stage in this process.

This argument explains why many white viewers express considerable ambivalence about issues of race on *The Cosby Show*. The Huxtables are, on the one hand, undeniably black, proving the just nature of the brave, new, nonracist world. They are, on the other, unlike most other black people because they fit neatly into the privileged middle class world of television. Because this world has traditionally been the preserve of white people, the Huxtables' entry into it does indeed make them appear to be "just like white people." It is hardly surprising, in this context, if many of the whites' responses were confused: the Huxtables represent

the compromise between black and white culture that is unconsciously seen as a prerequisite of black success.

The degree to which the color was seen to fade from the show varied. Some respondents insisted that, as one person put it, "You can't notice it [the Huxtables' race] at all." This statement is itself revealing. It does not refer to variations in skin tone; rather, it demonstrates the perception of blackness as a function of culture (in its general sense) rather than skin color. Their color is, after all, no more or less noticeable than is that of any other group of African Americans. It is their culture, the way they speak and behave, that makes their color less noticeable.

Respondents were asked whether they felt *The Cosby Show* would be very different if the characters were white rather than black. As we pointed out in Chapter 3, a number of respondents felt that the Huxtables' assimilation into a white televisual world was complete enough to say, as these respondents did:

If they were carrying off the thing the same way, you know, really making a satire of life the way they're doing it, average everyday things that happen every day, then I don't think it would be that much different, you know. Because what they do is they really carry it off and say these are the things that can happen to anybody, I don't care if you're white, black, pink, yellow, or green, this happens to everybody in everyday life. That's what they do. They just satirize everything that happens in normal life.

I don't think it would be all that different; they seem to come across . . . I think it is generic enough so that anyone could watch it and appreciate it. Like they acknowledge their own heritage and they happen to be black.

I think at the beginning you would notice it more because it is an all-black show and it was something different. . . . I don't think it makes a difference if they are black or white if it's funny.

You can't [notice color], really! I mean, it wouldn't be any different if they were white.

I would imagine there's some kind of subtlety there that I'm missing, that I'm not picking up on right away. It would have to be different, I would think; but I can't see in what capacity. . . . They don't seem to make any reference to their race.

This last comment is particularly interesting. The respondent feels sure that there must be some difference, yet she is unable to detect anything identifiably "black" about the Huxtables.

There is an underlying tension beneath these apparently liberal statements. The fact that "you just think of them as people," praise for which *The Cosby Show* is singled out, does not prove that race is no longer an issue. Quite the contrary: these particular black people are unusual because they have *transcended* their racial origin and, in so doing, have become normal.

The notion of "average," "everyday," or "generic" that these respondents refer to, although it appears to be ethnically neutral, is actually racially specific. The statement that they are "just like any other family" or "just like us" is specific to the Huxtables; it does not refer to black people in general. As one respondent put it:

I like the fact that they're black and they present a whole other side of what you tend to think black families are like.

The Huxtables may be thought to be normal or average, but they are unlike most black families. The everyday world of the Huxtables is the everyday, generic world of white television. One respondent made this point directly:

What they're trying to do here is portray a black family in a white family atmosphere.

Most other group members preferred to make this point by implication, referring to a notion of "normality" that is clearly white. So, for example, when one respondent suggested that, unlike most black TV characters, "they just act like people," he was implying a separation between ordinary people and black people. So, unlike most black people, as another respondent put it:

You can just identify with this family, even if they're a different race.

Similarly, one group member stated:

I have Jewish friends, that are so good, that I don't know they're Jewish. . . . There is no constant reminder that this is a black family.

He was implying that being white Anglo-Saxon is the norm from which others deviate.

These responses are ambiguous rather than color-blind. The respondents knew that they were watching a black family but "forgot" in the face of its familiarity. "You lose track of it," said one woman, "because it's so average." Another respondent described how the Huxtables' race "just sort of drifted" out of her mind while watching. This forgetfulness is

simply a way of sustaining two contradictory interpretations of the same thing. The Huxtables are, in this sense, both black and white. This working class white woman, when asked if she was aware of the Huxtables' race, replied:

Not at all. But at the same time they don't neglect the black pride which I think is a hard thing to do; and I think they've done it successfully. They've done shows on Martin Luther King and on going down to Washington to do Civil Rights marches when they get together with the grandparents . . . but they do it in a way that's not [too conspicuous or threatening].

Other respondents replied to the same question in the same way:

It depends on what they are talking about. Again, what issue they are dealing with. If they are dealing with something that pertains to black people in particular, I'm aware of it; but if they are not, it really, I don't think it really comes to mind.

Yes and no. You're aware because at points they make you aware, but you could lose track of it because it's so average.

Their attributes are white—in comparison to Good Times or something like that. . . . I'd say it's fifty-fifty, sometimes their culture and attitudes, the things they say, bring you back to the fact that this is an entirely black cast, so I'd say 50 percent of the time I notice, 50 percent I don't.

There's something in Clair's voice. There's something in Clair's voice that is not white American.

NOW YOU SEE IT, NOW YOU DON'T

What makes these ambivalent responses particularly interesting is their particularity to *The Cosby Show*. These respondents were not usually so ambiguous about race. They share a common definition of what blackness is, and they recognize it when they see it. This perception manifested itself when respondents were asked to talk about other, more traditional black TV sitcoms, shows like *Good Times*, *The Jeffersons*, *227*, and *Amen*. While most respondents were able to link these shows under the general category of "black sitcoms," they did not, significantly, include *The Cosby Show* in this category (only one person in the entire white sample made such a link). As one respondent put it, "I think [those shows] are totally different." The difference being that those shows, unlike *The Cosby Show*, involve what is identified as "black humor" in a "black setting."

The black shows that are seen to signify blackness more strongly are, accordingly, compared unfavorably to *The Cosby Show*. These other black sitcoms were often denigrated by white groups for being "slapstick," "loud," "full of yelling and screaming," "stereotypical," and more "black in style and humor":

I don't like them, to be honest with you. They're sarcastic, they're loud, they yell, there's no, they just criticize each other openly.

I think they are more stereotypical black shows than Cosby. I don't think Cosby is stereotypical black. . . . I mean they really don't make much point to the fact that they're black. And certainly don't do black stereotypical things like Good Times used to do. But I think Amen, 227, are more that way. They talk the slick black accent, and they work on the mannerisms, and I think they make a conscious effort to act that way like they are catering to the black race in that show. Whereas Cosby, you know, definitely doesn't do that. He's upper middle class and he's not black stereotypical. There's a difference in the tone of those shows, completely.

I think there's a lot of black families out there that are similar to the Cosbys that they're not such a stereotype black. You know, talking like the black slang or that kind of stuff, . . . being portrayed as intelligent, white-collar workers and that kind of thing. I should think, from a black perspective, The Cosby Show is more complimentary to blacks than some of the other shows. You know, the 227, the older woman hanging out of the window watching the neighbors walk by and stuff like that, which is reality in a lot of situations but in terms of. . . . It just seems to be heavy into black stereotyping.

Cosby is much better. . . . The actors are much better, a lot funnier, more stuff you can relate to; they're a lot funnier than the other two. . . . Like Amen, the daughter who dates the priest, or whatever he is, you know she's just not realistic, from my point of view anyway. With 227 and Jackie, I don't relate to her or care for her at all as an actress, and she's hardly a realistic person. You can get involved in The Cosby Show and feel that you understand it, you're a part of it and can relate to it; while on these other shows there's not even usually a whole plot, it's just kind of there.

If you look at Good Times, it's a majority of black. It was very racist the going over the white. The "whitey" down the street, you know.

They [the Huxtables] don't base any humor on black and white kind of thing yet; they let it be known that they are a black family, etc., etc. But the Jeffersons actually made many, many jokes on black-white interaction.

I couldn't picture doing some of those things they did [on Good Times] or being so desperate for a new refrigerator.

I don't watch that much TV so I don't watch that many; but I've seen one of them with a black cast and they weren't as funny. Atypical of whatever happens in life and all that.

It's slapstick. It's too noisy for me . . . and I don't remember much about the family, or the interactions, or relationships. Except the slapstick and the volume of it. I'd usually miss half the dialogue. It was all extraneous.

I remember that it [The Jeffersons] was a little bit more slapstick, a little bit more . . . stereotypical. Much more stereotypical. They were more concerned with racial issues, blatant racial issues. There was a couple in the building who were mixed race. And it was much more interested in class, and the difference between class, middle class versus working class. So it was a much different show.

Running through these statements is a clear dislike of the kind of blackness these other sitcoms represent. The use of the term *stereotypical* by these respondents is interesting in this respect. Normally the term *stereotypical* implies a critical awareness that the stereotype is, in some important way, misleading. This was not necessarily the case with members of our white groups. On the contrary, a vague awareness of media stereotypes was combined with an equally vague assumption that perhaps these stereotypes were, after all, accurate. So, for example, a show that "seems to be heavy into black stereotyping" may also be "reality in a lot of situations." What makes these shows stereotypical for these white viewers is partly that they are seen as unambiguously black. They remind the viewer of racial issues that *The Cosby Show* allows them to forget. So they are "much more stereotypical" partly because "they were more concerned with racial issues, blatant racial issues." These programs are seen as "black humor" for black people; as one respondent says: "Like they are catering to the black race in that show." This perception is not impartial: the blackness on display here is seen by these respondents, almost universally, as negative.

One respondent made an unusual attempt to pursue the question of stereotyping in relation to news coverage, but even she went on to acknowledge that it was difficult for her to make a critical judgment:

You know how they show, in a courtroom, when they accuse someone, and they would probably always be black. And then the white tend to be left out, I think, in terms of crime. And I don't know, is that really what's happening? Or is it just the way the media are reporting it? You have no way of knowing. I have no way of knowing.

In other words, in the absence of other information, we have to accept the stereotypical image as the most plausible one. As a consequence, there was, for the white respondents, only a tiny discursive space between an awareness of TV stereotypes of black people and acceptance of those stereotypes. To condemn other black shows for being stereotypical was, therefore, close to condemning them for being too black. *The Cosby Show*, as a corollary to this, is less stereotypical and therefore less black.

Some white respondents (particularly in the upper middle class groups) expressed their dislike for these stereotypical shows by not watching them at all:

Do you want to know the truth? I tried once, and I couldn't relate to any of it. I don't even know which one I had on. It did not hold my attention at all, and I never turned them back on.

Those who did watch one of these shows appeared to do so without much enthusiasm, particularly when they were compared to the "calm, thought-out" *Cosby Show*. A typical complaint was that they were "less easy to relate to." "They're just not like our family." Just as the absence of race on *The Cosby Show* allows the inclusion of white viewers, the cultural presence of race on other shows serves to alienate the same white viewers. One woman suggested that she was aware of race when watching other black sitcoms, "But you don't think about it with *The Cosby Show*. . . . It doesn't even cross my mind." Or, as another respondent put it, although other black sitcoms exploit identifiably "black humor," with *The Cosby Show* "you just think of them as people."

What do these responses to the Huxtable household signify? In the first instance, it appears that *The Cosby Show* has an appeal among white audiences that other black shows do not. These respondents, as we described in Chapters 2 and 3, had few problems relating to or identifying with the Huxtable family. This identification allows them the enjoyment of taking part vicariously in the pleasant lives of the Huxtables "because," as one respondent observed, *The Cosby Show* "relates mostly to usual, regular families and stuff, and their regular problems, and stuff like that."

Would these viewers enjoy the show as much if its blackness was overtly signified? Moreover, is the absence of any discussion or acknowledgment of racism on *The Cosby Show* a prerequisite for these viewers'

enjoyment and participation (as viewers)? The answers to these questions reveal the limits of the apparently liberal perception that the Huxtables are less obviously black because they are, for these white viewers, "just like us." On the whole, these respondents want to be reminded neither that the Huxtables are black nor, still less, of the existence of any form of racism.

A number of respondents were aware, when prompted, that black issues were either introduced with the greatest delicacy or entirely absent from *The Cosby Show*. One respondent suggested that, having been accepted by a wide audience, the Huxtables were able to make gentle references to their race:

The early shows, to the best of my recollection, were devoid [of reminders they were black]. They could have been anybody. They didn't have to be black. It was only after the show maintained its popularity for a while that they—I interpret—that they had the ability to keep reminding people that they were black. . . . Suddenly they would be speaking in a black idiom. . . . It's just to put a little bit blacker face on what was until then just happened to be a very good comedy, about realistic people who were played by black people.

Although a couple of the more self-consciously liberal respondents were critical of the show's failure to go beyond such gentle reminders, most felt that this restraint was positive. Although one respondent did suggest that *The Cosby Show* had now established enough credibility (among white people) to deal with racial issues, she remained unenthusiastic about the prospect:

They don't want to deal with the issue of interracial. . . . Life is tough enough anyways, and then to get into interracial. . . . I think if the Cosbys did it, though, I don't think they would have any problems. I think it would be all right, you know; people have a lot of trust in them.

Most other respondents rejected the idea much more unequivocally. Some expressed this by saying that they watched the show to enjoy it, not to be preached at; others stated that the introduction of black issues would be "alienating" and that the show would "lose a lot" if it dealt with racism, with the ominous consequence that they would "probably lose the white audience they have":

I think they'd get a lot of mixed publicity for the show. And it would start to alienate some people.

I don't think they want to get into those provocative things . . . you know, controversial subjects which raise race, gayness, grievances, losses, yeah, that stuff. I suppose they think there's enough of that anyway. Let's keep this nice and easy.

I think it was intentional on The Cosby Show; they want them, they don't want them to be a racially oriented show. They want it to be just another family.

It's the only show I can ever remember where a black family was shown, and they were upper middle class, professional family, having situations that were familiar to most people—well, familiar to that type of person. And race is never an issue.

I think it's low. It would diminish their show. I wouldn't want to see them, you know, doing the black and white thing. Yeah, I don't like that. I really don't think they need to do that.

Other respondents expressed a similar sentiment in relation to Bill Cosby's support for black causes and politicians. Such support made them distinctly uneasy:

But why did Bill Cosby go after this [Tawana Brawley case]? There are plenty of children on the streets of New York that have been raped. And why is he not, as a parent, going after these? . . . Excuse me, but does he also support Jesse Jackson? That really upsets me, about Bill Cosby. . . . So in terms of principles and stuff, I really question Cosby. . . . But then I have to question Bill Cosby's philosophy and principles and everything, if he can stand behind someone like Jesse Jackson. I don't see Bill Cosby in the pure sense that I saw him years ago.

Then you read about him giving money to the Negro College Fund and you wonder, you don't want to watch a show that's against you, you know . . . against the white race.

Bill Cosby is, in these responses, removed from the comfortable sanctity of *The Cosby Show* and placed in a context that emphasizes his blackness. Our respondents reflect here the accuracy of TV producer Norman Lear's assessment of white viewers when he says: "I don't think there's any question that white America is uncomfortable with victimization, or however you want to term the black experience, that which makes you feel guilty, feel uncomfortable" (quoted in Riggs, 1991).

To introduce black issues would transform the Huxtables from a celebrated Everyfamily into a *black family*, an identity these respondents would prefer to avoid. One respondent illustrated this perspective thus:

My speculation is that they're trying to present a family who's just a normal American family. And that, as white people don't talk about racial issues all the time, or confront them, or deal with them, then neither would this family. They're trying to get the point across that it's not an all-consuming issue in their lives.

To be "normal" here means, as we have seen, to be part of the dominant culture, which is white and, on television, middle or upper middle class. Class is therefore seen as a signifier of race: to be working class and black is seen as being *more* black.

One manifestation of this entangling of perceptions of class and race occurred during a discussion with an upper middle class white group. The group, having complained that the Huxtables, as working professionals, could not possibly cope without some form of domestic help, were asked if such a character should be introduced into the show. Their response was equivocal because, for them, the presence of class differences automatically signaled racial tensions:

A loaded issue. If they bring in help, what's the color going to be? Are they going to be treated as a second-class citizen? . . . It would take some courage because it makes it trickier.

Questions of class are not seen as generally difficult; they are "tricky" in this case only because the Huxtables are black. The Huxtables' perceived universality is, therefore, partly a function of their privileged class position.

This reaction to class differences is compounded by the nature of contemporary television. The middle class world of television is one without struggle. To admit a black family to this world without disrupting it, the family must, like white TV characters, rise to this social position effortlessly. As far as most viewers in the study were concerned, to include class or racial issues would have made *The Cosby Show* seem less "normal" and ironically, less "realistic."

We can see, in this respect, how television has created a form of doublethink in which it becomes necessary for black characters to deny the realities that distinguish black experience in order to appear credible and realistic.

The general resistance of most white viewers in our study to the possibility of transforming the Huxtables into a blue-collar family suggests that this perception is widespread. The Huxtables, having risen to the comfortable upper middle class world, have, for many white viewers, thereby disentangled themselves from their racial origin. They did not want to see the show, as one respondent put it, "stoop down to another cultural level." To be a blue-collar family, in the media world, would emphasize their "blackness"; as professionals, contrarily, they merge into

the "normal" white world of TV. Social mobility, in this sense, becomes a form of sanctity from more unpleasant reminders of racial difference.

BIOLOGY VERSUS CULTURE

The significance of this ambiguity about the Huxtables' race becomes a little clearer when we examine the responses of whites who did *not* articulate it. For these viewers, the Huxtables' race, their blackness, formed a nonnegotiable part of the show. Although such responses were less common among white viewers than some variation of the more color-blind response, they took a number of different tones ranging from progressive to reactionary. These differences originated in quite different attitudes toward black people and race relations.

Viewers who held a number of overtly racist assumptions or were antagonistic in some way toward *all* black people seemed unable to ignore the Huxtables' color. This inability made it difficult for them to identify with the show, and watching it was less enjoyable. Such responses in this study were present only in glimpses. The reactions noted by one interviewer while recruiting participants suggested that some people with strongly held racist views would dislike *The Cosby Show* simply because it was black. One person, refusing to take part in the study, remarked that the show was "stupid, stupid, stupid." Because the respondents were only people who watched *The Cosby Show*, we were less likely to hear this kind of response. Whenever an overtly racist judgment was made, it was fairly blatant. One interview group, for example, was interrupted toward the end of the session by friends, who castigated *The Cosby Show* for being "too black":

The show is too black. . . . It's too black, centered around the black race.

A more subtle articulation of this reaction came from a viewer who, unlike all the other white interviewees, put *The Cosby Show* in the same category as other black shows. Though he enjoyed some aspects of these shows, he criticized them for excluding white people from their casts. In an inverse version of the discourse of racial stereotyping (used by most black respondents), he argued that the only white people who appeared on the show were "fat and stupid"—this being evidence of what he saw as *The Cosby Show's* pro-black, anti-white position.

The differences between this kind of reading and the more ambiguous view of *The Cosby Show's* race is instructive. The more overtly racist viewer is less able to distinguish between blackness as a physical and a cultural category. It is more difficult for those expressing a more overt

form of racism to forget that the Huxtables are black because skin color is seen to bear an inevitable cultural message. It is a discourse of biological determinism that can only work to amplify the signifier "black." The ability of other respondents to disentangle the physical from the cultural is, by the same token, a prerequisite for their apparently enlightened failure to identify *The Cosby Show* as a black show.

A few respondents articulated racial awareness in quite a different way. These people also rejected the idea that the Huxtables could be white but saw their "blackness" as enjoyable. This idea, though perhaps deeply felt, was expressed only tentatively. As one woman put it, "It wouldn't be as funny if it was white. . . . They have a way about them—I don't know what it is." The inexplicable appeal of the Huxtables' blackness—the idea that the show would lose an ineffable something if it became white—was, for some respondents, clearly more difficult to articulate than the idea that "you forget that they're black." If nothing else, this tells something about the nature of the dominant white culture, and, in particular, what that culture allows white people, or makes it easy for white people, to say about black people. It is easier, in other words, to celebrate the absence of blackness than its presence.

Only the viewers who were most positive about *The Cosby Show* as a black show were able to offer any explanation. One referred to her enjoyment of black culture, while another felt it was more "fun" and "colorful" because it was a black show ("Black moms are cooler"). These people tended to be the most progressive in their racial attitudes, and they usually had considerable experience of black people in their own lives.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF CLASSLESSNESS

There is a sense in which *The Cosby Show* does appear, for a number of white viewers, to cultivate a liberal attitude toward black people and racial equality. The lapses into moments of color-blindness that characterized so many white responses is, in this sense, a major step forward. The series does, as Dyson suggests, allow white North Americans "to view black folks as *human beings*." *The Cosby Show* proves that black people can be just like white people or, as one respondent put it, "that black people are just like us." The inevitabilities of crude racism have been disentangled; the color of someone's skin can, indeed, signify nothing.

Before we hurl our hats into the air proclaiming *The Cosby Show* to be the vision of the racially tolerant society to come, we should reflect that this victory in race relations is a rather hollow one, achieved at an extremely high price. For many white respondents, the Huxtables' class position distinguishes them from other black people, making it possible

for white audiences to disentangle them from preconceived (white) notions of black culture (they're "upper middle class," not "black"). The Huxtables, in this sense, look like most white families on television. If it is necessary for black people to become upper middle class to be spared the prejudice of whites, then it is a price most cannot afford to pay. The acceptance of the Huxtables as an Everyfamily did not dislodge the generally negative associations white viewers have of "black culture," attitudes quickly articulated when other black TV sitcoms were discussed. *The Cosby Show* caters to a need for familiarity, and, in this sense, the price it pays for acceptance is that the Huxtables do appear "just like white people."

For many white respondents in our study, the Huxtables' achievement of the American dream leads them to a world where race no longer matters. This attitude enables white viewers to combine an impeccably liberal attitude toward race with a deep-rooted suspicion of black people.

They are, on the one hand, able to welcome a black family into their homes; they can feel an empathy with them and identify with their problems and experiences. They will, at the same time, distinguish between the Huxtables and most other black people, and their welcome is clearly only extended as far as the Huxtables. If *The Cosby Show* were about a working class family, it would be an unpleasant reminder of the class-based inequalities that support our racially divided society. *The Cosby Show* thus allows white people the luxury of being both liberal and intolerant. They reject bigotry based upon skin color, yet they are wary of most (working class) black people. Color difference is okay, cultural difference is not.

This tells us something about the nature of modern racism. The blackness that many white people fear or regard as inferior is no longer simply a function of skin pigmentation; blackness is seen, instead, as the cultural category that appears to bind most black people to certain class positions, to stunt their capacity for upward mobility. As we have suggested, in a culture that makes it difficult to talk in terms of social and class barriers, this neoracism is the only way to explain why the Huxtables have made it in a United States where most black people have not.

At the same time, *The Cosby Show* panders to the limits of white liberalism, allowing white audiences the sanctimonious pleasure of viewing the world through rose-tinted spectacles. Although we disagree with Shelby Steele's general analysis of race, we concur with his description of the relationship between *The Cosby Show* and white audiences when he says:

the success of this handsome, affluent black family points to the fair-mindedness of whites who, out of their essential goodness, changed society so that black families like the Huxtables could succeed. Whites can watch *The Cosby Show* and feel complimented on a job well done. . . . On Thursday nights, Cosby, like a priest, absolves his white viewers, forgives and forgets the sins of the past (Steele, 1990: 11).

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ENLIGHTENED RACISM

*The Cosby Show, Audiences,
and the Myth
of the American Dream*

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WESTVIEW PRESS

Boulder • San Francisco • Oxford

1992