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Developing
Homosocial and
Homoerotic

Themes in the
Work of Sherman
Alexie

January 2004

***The Cosby Show* and Its Role
In Breaking Stereotypes**

by

Anson Ferguson

A Thesis

Presented to the Graduate and Research Committee

Of Lehigh University

in Candidacy for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in

English

Lehigh University

4/25/03

THESIS SIGNATURE SHEET

This thesis is accepted and approved in fulfillment of the requirements for the Master Arts in English.

9/2/03
Date



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Abstract

The thesis paper entitled “*The Cosby Show* and Its Role in Breaking Stereotypes” analyzes the way in which Bill Cosby used the Huxtable family as a means to destroy stereotypical images of African-Americans. Cosby’s mission was to develop a program that would portray African-Americans in a positive light, as opposed to the violent, lethargic and poverty-stricken images often portrayed to the American public through mass media. *The Cosby Show* was influential for many reasons. The sitcom presented fictional realism by portraying African-Americans through a lens never before seen by the American public, creating positive and negative reactions from fans and critics for its role in the debate over stereotypical behavior. The theory of “The American Dream” was also tested by *The Cosby Show*, challenging viewers’ previous conceptions regarding this topic. Eventually, through humor and excellent plot development, Bill Cosby was able to convey the importance of education and family values in his sitcom. The astonishing success of the program demonstrated that American society was ready to accept an African-American family into their household. The efforts of *The Cosby Show* improved upon black television programming from the past, created a new present for television in general, and became the predecessor for black television in the future.

The Cosby Show and Its Role In Breaking Stereotypes

For over a decade, *The Cosby Show* was one of the most popular sitcoms for families across America. The program mixed family values, wealth, and humor all at once, giving NBC the advantage in the Nielson ratings every Thursday night in the late 80's and early '90's. *The Cosby Show*'s popularity, however, would not be obtained without some opposition from its critics. While the Huxtables represented what a typical family should be on the television screen, they did not represent the typical family in everyday life.

One of the main disputes concerning *The Cosby Show* has to do with the racial implications that it carried. The Huxtables were an all-black family who lived in a prominent neighborhood just outside of a major city. To add to the grandeur of the Huxtables, the father was a doctor, the mother was a successful lawyer, and the family would eventually see their children attend colleges such as Princeton and NYU. These accomplishments, unfortunately, did not mirror the reality of the typical African-American family. The contrast between *The Cosby Show* and reality brought forth many important questions, questions that challenged the legitimacy of the show on a societal level.

The Oxford Desk Dictionary¹ defines a stereotype as a "person or thing seeming to conform to a widely accepted type." With the American public carrying pre-conceived notions in regards to African-American lifestyles, television producers fed off of these feelings in order to make programming that involved black culture.

¹ The Oxford Desk Dictionary: American Edition. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.

The basic premise of *The Cosby Show* would be simple if not for the stereotypical environment surrounding the program. In addition to the historical prejudices that America was fighting to overcome, the media slowed efforts to eliminate discrimination and racism through constant exploitation of racial stereotypes. Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis, authors of *Enlightened Racism*, describe the climate of American society when *The Cosby Show* came into existence: "The United States is a country that is still emerging from a deeply racist history, a society in which many white people have treated (and continue to treat) black people with contempt, suspicion, and a profoundly ignorant sense of superiority"². With the American public still struggling with the effects of the Civil Rights movement, television became an outlet for people to experience other facets of life, which included an experience of "black culture."

Despite the racial climate of the post-Civil Rights era, many predominantly black sitcoms gained popularity. Shows such as *Good Times* and *Sanford & Son* earned solid reputations on television, as their humorous cast members propelled broadcast ratings. Other black families would be portrayed between the 70's and 80's, but the inception of *The Cosby Show* introduced a black family unlike any other on television. The difference between *The Cosby Show* and its predecessors was that Bill Cosby made an effort to gain popularity by shying away from what society perceived as the typical black family. *Good Times* and *Sanford & Son* made their mark by reaffirming negative black stereotypes (poverty, ignorance, etc.) and,

² Jhally, Sut & Justin Lewis, *Enlightened Racism: The Cosby Show, Audiences, and the Myth of the American Dream* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1992), 2. Subsequent page numbers to this document are included parenthetically in the text.

arguably, creating new ones. When Bill Cosby altered the landscape of television stereotypes, he proved that breaking the norm, however risky, could be profitable. Cosby's gamble did pay off, and would create an onslaught of black programming that continued to address the issues of stereotypes in America.

We all know that Bill Cosby wanted to make a successful family program. But was this his only goal? Did Cosby intend to create an affluent black family on television specifically to uplift black families watching *The Cosby Show*? Or did Cosby intend for white viewers to relate to the show's all-black cast, thus reinforcing the humanity of black people in the eyes of its white viewers?

Throughout the history of television and media, many stereotypical images of African-Americans have been etched into the minds of viewers. Most of these images are negative: black television families were always working class, always used slang, and incorporated gratuitous amounts of slapstick, often described by critics as "shucking and jiving." Television media authenticated the African-American stereotype by highlighting only those African-Americans who committed crimes. Sitcoms mirrored the "reality" that television media depicted as being black culture. While the image of the black family living in poverty was an undeniable truth in American society, the consistently derogatory illustrations of black culture led to cases of stereotyping, where viewers believed the negative images presented to them on television because they were the only images available.

With the advent of *The Cosby Show*, however, the black family – and in essence, black livelihood – was given a new image. Bill Cosby not only articulated the presence of a powerful black family in the Huxtables; he made Americans love

them as well. With this being said, however, one important question remains: did Cosby successfully break racial stereotypes through *The Cosby Show*? Was Cosby able to prove to the masses that African-Americans did not fit the mold that television and media broadcasted daily?

I will analyze certain themes in *The Cosby Show* format that separated this program from any other sitcom in history. After determining what made *The Cosby Show* unique, predecessor program *Sanford & Son* will also be analyzed. Next, I will review black sitcoms that have appeared in the post-Cosby era, in particular *The Hughleys*. Hopefully, after discussing present and future effects of *The Cosby Show*, we will find answers to the questions concerning one of the most enigmatic shows ever seen on television.

The Cosby Show, which debuted in 1984, was initially a hit not because of controversy, but because it related well to all people and not just to specific groups. An all-black cast intrigued African-American viewers to tune in; the theme of an upper-class lifestyle allowed white viewers to tune in as well. Janet Staiger, author of *Blockbuster TV*, explains the phenomenon of *The Cosby Show*'s popularity:

The Cosby Show is a useful example of polysemic appeal. It presented a cross-section of characters of all ages, providing places of identification for the audience segments most significant for networks and advertisers. Its middle-class tastes and style of humor corresponded to the "right" demographics. Its black characters permitted both a liberal response by whites (I can enjoy a show with black characters) and a set of positive images (or at least not offensive images) for black audiences.³

³ Staiger, Janet. *Blockbuster TV: Must-See Sitcoms in the Network Era* (New York: New York University Press, 2000) 151-152. Subsequent page numbers to this document are included parenthetically in the text.

Despite the discussion concerning race and class, the personalities of the characters on *The Cosby Show* would ultimately have the most influence in the success of the program.

The sitcom presented individuals and relationships that families across America could relate to. Rudy, played by Keisha Knight-Pulliam, was the youngest daughter on the show. At the age of four, Rudy was the cute child who always managed to get herself in trouble, whether it was tampering with something she shouldn't have been or upsetting her older siblings with her curiosity. Yet, her innocence was adorable, and the family displayed the type of love and affection that would allow Rudy to grow up into a respectable young lady. Vanessa, played by Tempest Bledsoe, encompassed the typical 11-year-old girl as she endured issues such as puberty and relationships with boys in school. Denise, played by Lisa Bonet, illustrated the rebellious high school teenager. Wishing to explore everything that life had to offer, Denise would consistently test the authority of her parents, as most teenagers would during this time in their lives. The only male sibling in the family was Theo, played by Malcolm Jamal Warner. Theo, who was a little younger than Denise, reacted to situations the way any boy would in an all-girl environment. He was embarrassed when his sisters found out he had a girlfriend; he would forbid his sisters to enter his room, which often contained posters of female models; and he shared a special bond with his father – Cliff Huxtable, played by Bill Cosby – mainly because they were the only men of the household.

While the children represented genuine family encounters, their parents thoroughly completed the realistic feel of *The Cosby Show*. Clair Huxtable, played

by Phylicia Rashad, would offer advice, guidance, and appropriate punishment for her four children at home. Cliff, however, was the father of all fathers on television. Not only did he relate well to his children, but he was able to do so in a very humorous fashion. Cliff was able to turn normal occurrences, like Theo's bad grades on a test, into a comedic outburst while still being able to convey the proper message to his son.

The family environment of *The Cosby Show* allowed people to ignore the fact that its characters were black – temporarily, at least. The nature of this sitcom, however, proved to both help and hurt the overall feel of the show, based on the reaction from many critics. Because the show depicted real family interaction without much mention of serious and life-altering subjects that affect many families, critics were compelled to question the genuineness of the show. Staiger had this to say: “The trouble with *The Cosby Show* was that it didn't show the day-to-day racism that existed in the streets of New York City for the Huxtable children” (145). Jhally and Lewis also acknowledge *The Cosby Show*'s negligence in addressing social issues: “The Huxtable family appears to have glided effortlessly into the upper echelons of American middle class society. The show never offers us the slightest glimpse of the economic disadvantages and deep-rooted discrimination that prevent most black Americans from reaching their potential” (7).

Many critics dispute that the absence of black economic struggle in *The Cosby Show* is highly detrimental to the viewers who watch it, since people may look at the Huxtables as an ordinary family, when, statistically, they are not. Very few black families in America hold the economic status of the Huxtables, yet their existence on television almost insisted that this type of occurrence was commonplace. Critics felt

that creating this false image of black social life suggested that all blacks, like the Huxtables, were happy in their community and inside their homes because they were never confronted with racially-charged situations. The omission of these types of situations caused many critics to question the plausibility of the show, since the general sentiment was that an overwhelming majority of African-Americans experienced some form of racism or prejudice as a result of the history of the United States.

The Cosby Show in essence created fictional realism. Fictional realism can be described as creating a realistic environment without incorporating realistic consequences. In the case of *The Cosby Show*, successful blacks immersed themselves in a legitimate environment (a brownstone in New York City), but the reactions from people outside of the Huxtable family were deemed as inauthentic; the behaviors, mannerisms, and lifestyle of the family were perceived as unreal. For example, Cliff Huxtable is never a victim of a racially-specific crime (such as racial profiling, for instance) though many would contest that Cliff's race and wealthy surroundings make him a prime target.

This dynamic can develop a plethora of problems, especially for people who only experience black culture through media outlets or television programs. Although *Cosby* wanted to present the Huxtables as a typical American family, the state of the current American culture (the post-Civil Rights era and improved economic affluence for some in the 80's) proved that the road to success for African-Americans could not have been so leisurely. In turn, *Cosby* created a successful black family that earned their wealth through their occupations, but didn't encounter

any form of racial discrimination in the past (which is implied through the behavior of the Huxtables) or in the present environment of the show.

The fear of many critics – both black and white – is that the Huxtable family will inaccurately promote the myth of the “American Dream,” which states that every man or woman can be successful in the United States through hard work and diligence. The Huxtables’ acquisition of the American Dream resulted in a profound reaction by its viewers. Many black viewers suspected that white viewers would look at the Huxtables as an example of “a black family that made it.” In reality, hard work and diligence alone could not overcome the strength of an implicitly racist environment, as many black working professionals found out first-hand. Confronted by subpar education in the inner cities of the United States, unfair economic opportunities, and an overall feeling of underachievement, the life depicted by the Huxtable family was a far cry from reality. As a result, many black viewers reject the Huxtables because their life was devoid of struggle. These same black viewers eliminated the Huxtables as a genuine black family within American society.

Critics have acknowledged the effect of *The Cosby Show*’s fictional realism in relation to the theory of the American Dream. Mark Crispin Miller, author of *Watching Television: A Pantheon Guide to Popular Culture*, had this to say about Bill Cosby’s character: “Cliff’s blackness serves as an affirmative purpose within the ad that is *The Cosby Show*. At the center of this ample tableau, Cliff is himself an ad, implicitly proclaiming the fairness of the American system: ‘Look!’ he shows us.

‘Even *I* can have all this!’”⁴. Although it is true that Cliff personifies black success, his path to fame – which should have been arduous and littered with several obstacles – is undermined. The viewer witnesses the fruits of Cliff’s labor without knowing much, if anything, about the hardships that accompanied his success.

Jhally and Lewis sum up the feelings many opponents of *The Cosby Show* harbor: “The Huxtables’ achievements ultimately lend credibility to the idea that ‘anyone can make it’, the comforting assumption of the American dream, which is a myth that sustains a conservative political ideology blind to the inequalities hindering persons born on mean streets and privileging persons born on easy street” (7-8). This particular sentiment is an issue that causes a discrepancy in how black and white audiences view the show, thus widening the gap of understanding between black and white culture, further distancing the two groups.

Of course, there are also positive aspects involved when an affluent black family becomes the centerpiece for one of the most popular sitcoms in television history. Staiger addresses one particular issue:

One question frequently asked was whether *The Cosby Show* was contributing toward better images of minorities on television.... Some of the early publicity about the program stressed that *The Cosby Show* would be about parenting. The parents just happened to be black. Moreover, they just happened to be upper-middle-class blacks. (144-145)

The casual way that Cosby and his producers sought to incorporate race into the equation of a family sitcom is nothing short of brilliant. By downplaying the always-emotional issue of race, Cosby expected his viewers to have the sensibility and maturity to look past issues that make one person different from the next. By never

⁴ Miller, Mark Crispin, “Deride and Conquer”, from Watching Television: A Pantheon Guide to Popular Culture (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), 210.

discussing racial implications. Cosby proves to be any man's equal through his actions. Producer Tom Werner states that "Cosby's universal theme of how we get through the day with our kids should appeal to a lot of people. He won't be just a black New Yorker, he'll be every father coping with every child"⁵.

Jhally and Lewis note the observations of a famous author on race relations:

Michael Dyson...has suggested that one of 'the most useful aspects of Cosby's dismantling of racial mythology and stereotyping is that it has permitted America to view black folk as *human beings*.' Here, at last, are media representations of successful and attractive black people whom white people can respect, admire, and even identify with. (5)

Those who felt detached from African-Americans because of stereotypical images now were given a new image of the African-American family. With white audiences beginning to accept the Huxtables as a viable black family, the pressure appeared to be on Bill Cosby to address specific topics inherent to the black social experience in America. Cosby, however, declined to tackle serious topics within the show. Noticing the potential for white audiences to become detached from this black family on their television monitor, Cosby chose not to tamper with his successful formula, sacrificing important issues in an attempt to keep the show relatable to all viewers.

Still, Cosby's decision to ignore serious issues appears to have been a cleverly-devised plan. Psychiatrist and program consultant Alvin Poussaint notes that "critical social disorders, like racism, violence, and drug abuse, rarely lend

⁵ Bennets, Leslie. "Carsey/Werner Shoot 'Cosby' in New York" (Hollywood Reporter, 20 Aug. 1984), 20.

themselves to comic treatment; trying to deal with them on a sitcom could trivialize issues that deserve serious, thoughtful treatment”⁶.

Cosby’s silent treatment delivers this message: if you are mature enough to disassociate race from class, then I [Cosby] will be mature enough not to mention it. By doing so, Cosby creates an environment where it is satisfactory to view a successful black family and find it to be normal. White families not only relate to the Huxtables, but they also do not have to feel guilty about America’s past, since Cosby offers a clean slate through his program. By presenting a black family that white viewers can relate to, Bill Cosby appears to have united people through his sitcom, based on the show’s ratings and overall popularity. For a nation often divided by race, both parties finally had something in common: their love for a popular television show.

Rarely has a program been able to attract both white and black viewers at the same time. Viewers enjoyed *The Cosby Show* for vastly different reasons, but the program was effective enough to consistently attract viewers to watch a black nuclear family in an unprecedented manner. Cosby created a sitcom that challenged viewers to look past race and allow the Huxtables into their homes, and for the most part, many American viewers did.

Although the upper-class lifestyle and the basis of family values appealed to all viewers, Cosby seemed to incorporate elements into *The Cosby Show* that were unanimously geared towards black people, while in the process exposing white

⁶ “The Cosby Kids”, *The E! True Hollywood Story*, produced by Lee Masters. The Entertainment Network, 2001. Quote taken from Alvin Poussaint.

viewers to black culture. “We felt that writers and producers didn’t like African-American people, and you can see it in the writing; you can see it in the production values,” said Cosby in a television interview on the Entertainment Network. “I wanted to be in charge to show a love for the African-American people.”⁷

The Cosby Show would present black culture implicitly through storylines. The implementation of African foods, the issues of Apartheid, and even grooming habits (specifically, differences between African-American hair and that of other nationalities) were discussed, but never in a way that would alienate the characters on the show from viewers who couldn’t necessarily relate. Jhally and Lewis also note that “the show celebrates black artists, from Ellis Wilson to Stevie Wonder, and political figures like Martin Luther King, Jr., and events like the Civil Rights march on Washington have been interwoven, albeit ever so gently, into the story line” (4). Cosby also made sure that music, particularly jazz music, made its way onto the show. Jazz, primarily an African-American art form, was used on a consistent basis. Whether it was through guest appearances by Dizzy Gillespie or Cliff’s infatuation with obtaining vintage records, jazz music was another inflection of African-American culture that Cosby added to his show.

In essence, the subtle reminders of black culture throughout the existence of the show helped the characters maintain their Afrocentricity without completely separating themselves from viewers of a different cultural background. These positive images of a successful black family were vastly different from the

⁷ “The Cosby Kids”, *The E! True Hollywood Story*, produced by Lee Masters. The Entertainment Network, 2001. Quote taken from Bill Cosby.

stereotypes portrayed by the news media. Through Bill Cosby, African-Americans were seen as a people with a distinct set of hobbies, interests, and rituals.

While Cosby made sure to incorporate many positive elements of family into his sitcom, nearly every episode of *The Cosby Show* consistently plays on one theme: the importance of education. This, according to the Bill Cosby, is how the Huxtable family has attained their status in society. At some point in time, each of the Huxtable children faced a school-related dilemma concerning poor grades or underachievement in studies. In this area, punishment from Cliff and Clair was swiftest and harshest, proving that this particular household would have zero toleration for deficiencies in academics. Unlike the subtle display of African-American culture, education was featured prominently by Cosby throughout the program's existence on television. Mary Murphy, a columnist for *TV Guide* expresses this sentiment: "Suddenly...you really got what they were trying to say in this show: 'I am educated, my wife is educated, and my children will be educated.'" ⁸

Cosby made certain that the importance of education would remain a factor, even as the Huxtable children matured past high school. In the first season of *The Cosby Show*, Sondra Huxtable, played by Sabrina Le Beauf, was introduced mid-season as the oldest child who attended Princeton University. Sondra would set the example for the rest of the Huxtable children through her success. Denise would attend the fictional Historically Black College Hillman University (which would eventually become the setting for Cosby's spin-off, *A Different World*, a program that confirmed Cosby's emphasis on education, as he followed the lives of black college

⁸ "The Cosby Kids", *The E! True Hollywood Story*, produced by Lee Masters. The Entertainment Network, 2001. Quote taken from Mary Murphy.

students). Later on, Theo would attend New York University (NYU) and Vanessa went to Temple University. The show ended before Rudy graduated from high school, but it was evident where Cosby was going with his show.

Despite equating education to family success, Cosby did not correlate higher education with financial success in the Huxtable family. Oldest daughter Sondra graduated from Princeton, but didn't immediately find a job. She moved back to the Huxtable home, and instead marries the bumbling Elvin, whose idiocy coincided with his chauvinistic ideals. The couple of Sondra and Elvin would eventually move out of the Huxtable home, but live through low levels of poverty, as most newlywed couples do. Denise, staying true to her rebellious nature, dropped out of college, traveled overseas, had an affair with a U.S. Naval Lieutenant and bore a child before finally landing back in the Huxtable household. Theo graduated from NYU to become an urban school teacher, a humble position, but definitely not a high-paying one. The Huxtable children weren't living a glamorous life when they grew up; they were, however, content with their lifestyles, a fact that Cosby himself intended to make clear.

It is interesting to notice that none of the Huxtable children are doctors or lawyers, like their parents. Also notice that while Cliff and Clair want the best for their children, they are not upset or disappointed by their offspring's choice of lifestyle. What the Huxtable children have in common with their parents is that they are well-educated, and this is the sole factor that seems to make Cliff and Clair most proud. Cosby makes a clever distinction in terms of education: it may not guarantee you a spot in the upper-class of society, but it will make you a better person. Cliff

and Clair are proud of all their children, and all the Huxtable kids have or are pursuing careers in higher education. Consequently, the Huxtables are a successful black family. Bill Cosby demonstrates to America – but mainly to African-American viewers – that the path to having a successful family lies in education. This is the American Dream according to Cosby: being content and comfortable in life was more important than wealth, and should be the main goal for those trying to obtain the American Dream. Education may not ensure financial stability, but it will create an enjoyable family environment, where parents are proud of the academic achievements of their children.

Bill Cosby's focus on education also worked to crush the negative stereotypes regarding African-Americans. The themes of education and poverty are on opposite ends of the social spectrum. With poverty often associated with blacks, Cosby's vivid portrait of a pedagogically-oriented family was more intense than any sitcom in the history of television. Cosby didn't just master educational values on the television screen, however. His off-camera life is also deep-rooted in education, as both Cosby and his wife hold high-level degrees in subject matter directly correlated to education. Cosby's knowledge of education makes it impossible to affirm negative stereotypes of African-Americans, especially since Cosby demonstrated an expertise in educational values.

Many factors of *The Cosby Show* were unprecedented by television standards. This was the first black family to be placed in the upper-middle class earnings bracket (recall that *The Jeffersons* did not achieve their status through "The American Dream"). The Huxtables also baffled critics by appealing to a wide array of viewers,

especially those who were white. Mary Murphy of *TV Guide* notes that “there was the belief that White America would never watch a family show like this with an all-black cast unless it was some kind of comedy that made fun of [its characters] or used racial stereotypes.”⁹ Indeed, comedic sitcoms before *The Cosby Show* that highlighted the lives of African-Americans usually maintained a basic formula. While some of these shows were very successful, many critics look back upon African-American, pre-Cosby television with regret.

Dr. Alvin Poussaint, one of *Cosby*’s scriptwriters, was often asked about *The Cosby Show*’s legitimacy in the real world. “People would say to me, ‘It’s not a typical black family’. And I would say, ‘What is a typical black family? What is your reference point? What is your context for saying that?’”¹⁰ Some would say that the mold for a black sitcom family was created from as far back as the 1970’s. While many different shows would characterize (or at least try to characterize) African-American family life, the early-to-mid ‘70’s belonged to Redd Foxx.

Sanford & Son was a spin-off of the sitcom hit *All in the Family*. Judging by the controversial tone of the white characters – who were unashamed to voice their misguided feelings on issues regarding race, gender or class – no one should have been surprised by Foxx’s banter on the show. *Sanford & Son* was the American version of a British television series called “*Steptoe & Son*.”¹¹ Foxx played the role of Fred Sanford, a rascally old man who owned a salvage company and used his

⁹ “The Cosby Kids”, *The E! True Hollywood Story*, produced by Lee Masters. The Entertainment Network, 2001. Quote taken from Mary Murphy.

¹⁰ “The Cosby Kids”, *The E! True Hollywood Story*, produced by Lee Masters. The Entertainment Network, 2001. Quote taken from Alvin Poussaint.

¹¹ Gates, David, “Redd Foxx: Leaving Fred Sanford Behind”, *Newsweek* 19 Nov. 1984: 31-32.

home as a rooming house. Lamont Sanford, played by Demond Wilson, was Fred's son who worked alongside the family business. Upon watching this sitcom, it is apparent that the social climate of the 1970's – from a racial standpoint – was much more intense than that of the 1980's and 1990's.

First, we must notice the class of the individuals on *Sanford & Son*. Fred Sanford works in a junkyard and owns a run-down pick-up truck. His home is relatively shabby as well; Sanford often complains about not having “nice things” in his home (color television, home audio set, etc.). Undoubtedly, Sanford is a member of the working class. Although visibly old and tired because of his occupation, his only means of survival comes through his junkyard business. Lamont is in the same predicament, only he is younger. He works alongside his father, but Lamont clearly does not want to live this lifestyle forever. He always wants to find a different, more lucrative occupation; most of his attempts fail.

Many aspects of *Sanford & Son* seem to define lower-class living, at least to the producers. Although Sanford does work at a junkyard, the wily old man never “looks clean, even when he ventures outside of his home. While some of Sanford's neighbors are white, most of them are ethnic minorities, namely black, Asian or Hispanic, which suggests that poor neighborhoods are densely populated by these people. Sanford also displays a penchant for alcohol and cigars, and will often spend his last meager earnings on these items as opposed to saving his money. Despite all of Sanford's shortcomings, however, he seems more than content with his lifestyle. In fact, Sanford finds humor in all situations, even if it is at the expense of others.

Redd Foxx's flamboyant behavior as Fred Sanford was the catalyst to the show's popularity. No topic was taboo for the veteran comedian, whether it was class (calling the state assemblyman the "state ass"), religion (telling a religious friend to stop praising the Lord because he didn't have any money for her) or race (calling his white brother-in-law a "polar bear" because of his crushing hugs). Foxx's humor wasn't intended to have a message behind it; rather, his humor played out as a form of retribution. If blacks felt that they couldn't respond to social injustices through economic power or votes, Foxx demonstrated that humor could be another alternative. The issues that other people in the black community were too afraid to verbalize were the main weapons in Foxx's vast arsenal of assaults and insults.

The Cosby Show wouldn't attack many perplexing social issues in society, especially those regarding race. The issues that were addressed, however, were always handled in a humorous, yet controlled fashion. Male chauvinism was a theme that *The Cosby Show* discussed through the ignorant comments of Elvin, Cliff Huxtable's son-in-law. Rather than insult him with name-calling, as *Sanford & Son* would do, Bill Cosby alienated the character of Elvin by often contrasting his chauvinistic ignorance with the powerful intellect of Claire Huxtable, who destroyed Elvin's ridiculous theories with stern (but never condescending or angry) rebuttals that could never prompt an educated or valid response from the bumbling Elvin.

Foxx's humor, however, would never be enough to mask the grim realities of *Sanford & Son*. For the most part, the plots of the show revolved around money, mainly because neither Fred nor Lamont ever really had any. Due to the circumstances of the show, the importance of money became a consistent – though

largely implicit – theme of *Sanford & Son*. Recall that in *The Cosby Show*, money was hardly ever a topic. If it was, the matter was trivialized and made humorous (an example would be Clair Huxtable demanding a refund from her daughter who left college early). As you can see, the rich family with money never discusses it, while the poor family without money is obsessed by it.

The racial innuendos of *Sanford & Son* are also impossible to ignore. Fred Sanford is more than happy to see Caucasians enter his home, mainly because he can use them as verbal target practice. However, when white people are featured on *Sanford & Son*, it is interesting to see their occupations and level of class. Very few of the white characters are of the same class as Sanford. In fact, most of them represent a lower middle class or upper middle class standing. White people hold stereotypically “white jobs,” such as lawyers, television announcers, reporters, congressmen, and so on. These images (whites hold high-level jobs, blacks hold low-level positions) were recognizable in the 70’s, but black occupations in comparison to white occupations are what make this issue depressing for black viewers. Sanford and his son are junkmen; Fred’s best friend is a wino; and the rest of Fred’s black, Asian, or Hispanic acquaintances hold minimum-wage positions.

In order to put *Sanford & Son* in perspective, however, we must compare it to *The Cosby Show*’s main theme: education. Quite frankly, *Sanford & Son* doesn’t contain an educational theme. Neither Fred, nor his son Lamont, have a high school education. One of the reasons why Lamont works at the junkyard is because he is unqualified for any other position. It is also the family business. The fact that Sanford is content with his lifestyle lessens the need of education; Fred Sanford is too

hard-headed and impatient to learn how to achieve greater earning potential. Sanford wants money, but he doesn't appear to want success and wealth from money; he wants money to pay bills and buy liquor. Education is thus trivialized because money is more important. Since Lamont can make money right away – this is, after all, the most pressing concern of the Sanford family – he continues the legacy of the family business. Lamont does strive for a better life, but without education, he is locked into his current occupation, as is demonstrated by his fruitless efforts to elevate his status.

Sanford & Son clearly exemplifies the pre-Cosby era on television. One of the reasons why programs like this were popular and successful was that for many African-American viewers, this was stark reality. *Good Times*, a sitcom which displayed the struggles of a nuclear black family, would encapsulate black reality as well, but ultimately have its message thwarted through the humor of one of its main characters. In much the same way, Fred Sanford's humor was a smokescreen for the dark realism of African-American culture. Associating black family life with poverty was reality for many people. What Redd Foxx taught viewers to do, however, was fight back through humor. While this may ultimately make you feel better, you couldn't elevate your economic status through jokes (unless, of course, you were a popular comedian). This aspect of hopelessness reinforces the notion held by the African-American community that the American Dream was unobtainable. Whatever the black community was doing to survive would be as good as it gets. *Sanford & Son* maintained a negative stereotype for the African-American culture: blacks were poor, uneducated, and generally unconcerned about improving their status in life.

The Sanfords' life of poverty was consistent with that of many ethnic minorities. But as mentioned earlier, the glorification of this poverty (taking into account that there were people whose only interaction with blacks was by watching Redd Foxx) created the negative stereotype of blacks associated with poverty. African-Americans, like many of their white counterparts across the country, were poor. Television media, however, continued to present these negative images, giving viewers with a limited outlet to African-Americans no choice but to accept them as real and all-encompassing.

Slapstick and humor were used as a way to alleviate the pain of not realizing one's dreams. These stereotypes seemed to confirm that there was no way for advancement in the black culture, and that the best way to deal with this situation was to laugh it off. Blacks watching the show and equating it to their own lives, saw the realistic nature of the sitcom, which displayed a struggling black man who seemed destined to struggle for the rest of his life. White viewers pity Fred Sanford, despite his comedic prowess, because his situation is hopeless; white viewers, it turns out, enjoy Fred Sanford, but would never want to *be* Fred Sanford, proving that the image presented here is negative.

Of course, as the social climate started to change, television programming had to change as well. With *The Jeffersons* portraying a lower class black family thrust into the upper echelon of society, viewers began to see that African-Americans could co-exist with their Caucasian counterparts. *The Cosby Show* would eventually follow and quickly surpass the trends set by *The Jeffersons*. After *The Cosby Show*'s reign

finally came to an end, the way in which television producers created black programming would never be the same.

The popularity of *The Cosby Show* opened up a market for several types of black programming. Television executives were convinced that the success of Bill Cosby wasn't just limited to his show. Cosby's success, many thought, was just the beginning of an era where African-Americans would finally get the representation that they longed for. Despite the many accolades of *The Cosby Show*, critics still felt that the show's authenticity – its inability to substantiate the “blackness” of its characters – was still one of its downfalls. With television now open to new ideas, producers saw the years following *The Cosby Show*'s run as the perfect opportunity to express a pure, unmolested black voice. Kristal Brent Zook, author of *Color by Fox*, tries to explain what happened to African-American television after the golden years of the Cosby era:

What emerged were contested narratives that challenged the very notion of “blackness” itself. Despite a seemingly coherent nationalist aesthetic (like kente décor, black-owned co-ops and cafes, historically black universities), these narratives were about more than a seamless Afrocentrism. Rather, they wrestled with the unspoken pleasures (and horrors) of assimilation, the shock of integration, and the pain of cultural homelessness.¹²

While *The Cosby Show* celebrated the success of a prominent black family, it never displayed the hardships associated with being black and successful. Dealing with inadvertent racism, confronting black peers who accused you of “selling out,” and teaching your children the consequences of being an upper-class black citizen were issues that real black families struggled with on a daily basis. With black families

¹² Zook, Kristal Brent, *Color by Fox: The Fox Network and the Revolution in Black Television* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 2. Subsequent page numbers to this document are included parenthetically in the text.

gaining more prominence in the 1990's, bringing these issues to the forefront of African-American television programming became a necessity. Many shows illustrated these sentiments, but one such program attempted to fuse the most effective elements from some of the best black programming all into one sitcom.

Premiering in 1998, *The Hughleys* was described by *Jet* magazine as “a family comedy about achieving the American Dream – and not knowing what to do with it”¹³. Comedian D.L. Hughley stars as Darryl, an urban-born man who has built a successful company from the ground up with no high school education. Because of his achievements, Darryl has propelled himself from working class to middle class. Acclimating to his new status, Darryl moves his wife and two children out of the streets of Los Angeles and into a racially-mixed suburb outside of the city.

At its best, *The Hughleys* is nothing short of a hybrid of *Sanford & Son* and *The Cosby Show*. Hughley takes a page out of Redd Foxx's book, with enough racial barbs and slick comments to offend anyone of a politically-correct persuasion. “As innocuous as I think the show is,” says Hughley in *Jet* magazine, “I still get letters from people who think I'm a racist. Some White people think I'm a racist. Some Black people think I'm a racist....I'm not doing the show from anybody else's voice but mine. I hope people understand that I'm telling it the way I see it. It's just my experience.”¹⁴

Although Hughley's character may come across as rash and mildly offensive – like Redd Foxx, white people often found themselves within his crosshairs – the

¹³ “TV Season Kicks Off New Shows Featuring Blacks”, *Jet* 21 Sep. 1998: 60.

¹⁴ “Comedian D.L. Hughley is a Hit in New Sitcom, ‘The Hughleys’”, *Jet* 7 Dec. 1998: 54. Subsequent page numbers to this article are included parenthetically in the text.

family values exhibited by Bill Cosby's sitcom still find their way into the essence of *The Hughleys*. *Jet* magazine notes that "in spite of his insensitive bellowing, Hughley's character is a genuinely loving and sensitive guy. He does have a few rough times here and there adjusting to a world made up of more than Black people. Still, his wife and kids are always supportive of him" (54).

The Hughleys also attempts to correct some of the downfalls of *Sanford & Son* and *The Cosby Show*. Darryl Hughley's favorite targets for insults are his goofy Caucasian neighbors. But rather than simply displaying Hughley's penchant for verbal abuse, *The Hughleys* emphasizes morals within the humor, so that comedic performance becomes a lesson learned. For example, one episode deals with how black and white parents stereotypically punish their children. Although both parties dispute their cases, both methods are shown to be humorously ineffective. Darryl spans his child, who becomes embarrassed when his peers find out, thus worsening the situation. Darryl's white neighbors use the "time-out" method, which doesn't have a lasting effect on the couple's devilish young boy. In the end, Darryl must confront a group of his son's contemptuous white friends, who are terrified of Darryl due to what he did to his own son. Instead of spanking the kids or using "time-out," Darryl tells a fictional account of what happens to "bad little boys." The method works, and the children are inclined to behave. Hughley alleviated the problem despite being different from the people in his surrounding environment. This not only proves that Darryl is an equal, but also that he is a superior adult in his community.

One of the primary complaints about *The Cosby Show* was its portrait of a community – arguably, a society – that wasn't structured by racial divisions. For a

majority of the show's existence, none of the Huxtable children encountered any experience involving race; neither Cliff nor Clair Huxtable, whose occupations in real life were dominated by white Americans, experienced any complications due to race. Many critics, because of this factor alone, deemed the Huxtable family "unreal." *The Hughleys*, however, makes certain that these issues come to the forefront. While outside his own home, Darryl has to confront a neighbor who assumes that he is a hired gardener because of the color of his skin. Darryl also struggles with his "black conscience," as he doesn't want to fit the mold of the black man who assimilates into a white environment and loses touch with his roots. Darryl's children are also affected by race. His son feels alienated because he is the only student of color in school, while his daughter is often teased by her black peers for being smart "like the white kids." Rather than find a comedic angle, Hughley deals with these situations without humor, stressing the seriousness of the matter at hand.

It should be mentioned that race is not the only issue explored by *The Hughleys*. In one particular episode, Hughley is startled when he finds out – through his own humorous, yet twisted analysis – that his son may be a homosexual. By the episode's end, Hughley learns that regardless of his son's sexual preference, he would love his son irrevocably. Hughley also touches upon the issue of extra-marital affairs. While Hughley never actually goes through with the deed, he does fantasize excessively about being with another woman after a tirade with his wife. At the conclusion of the episode, Hughley learns that his wife is the most important aspect of his livelihood, and that without her support, he would never have obtained the comfortable status he now enjoys.

One positive element of *The Cosby Show* that wasn't lost on Hughley is the importance of education. Hughley deals with this theme in an interesting way. Darryl Hughley, as already mentioned, is a high school dropout who was able to "make something out of nothing" and move up to middle class status. While it is unclear how much education his wife has, she is a witty and intelligent complement to the clever character of Darryl Hughley. Although Darryl has proven he didn't need education to succeed, he is aware that his situation is unique. This is demonstrated by his emphasis on education to his children. Darryl demands progress reports from his children's teachers. Failure to obtain satisfactory grades results in swift punishment. In the situation concerning his daughter being teased by her peers, Darryl (again, without humor) gives a lecture on the importance of doing well in her academics.

Darryl is also determined to give his children the opportunity to do what he couldn't have done: go to college. In fact, *The Hughleys* devotes an episode to discovering methods of funding college tuition. Darryl Hughley is a special character in terms of his ideology on education. He is not book-smart, but street-smart; his wife and children often teach him about the importance of being a good father through his adventures with them, thus making him a wise man in the end. This wisdom leads to his decisions regarding his children's future, as he makes it his primary goal to see them succeed. Conclusively, his definition of success involves education.

At this point, we should be able to successfully answer the pressing question: did Bill Cosby successfully break racial stereotypes through *The Cosby Show*? In a way, yes. Kristal Brent Zook notes that Bill Cosby's sitcom "was a controversial

attempt to uncouple blackness and poverty” (15). Indeed, it was. The stereotype most associated with African-Americans was – and in some cases, still is – a lack of wealth. The Huxtables validated their status on television, and the realistic family values of the show proved that African-Americans were comfortable and capable of living such a lifestyle.

The Cosby Show introduced something that the American public had never seen before, yet at the same time, used the classic example of the nuclear family to do it. Every American could relate to the values of a classic family, and the fact that the Huxtables were wealthy and affluent was what *every* family ultimately strives for. Essentially, the Huxtables were the perfect family. What made *The Cosby Show* break stereotypes was that this perfect family was black.

In reality, no American could say that they knew of a perfect family. Despite the Huxtables being a fictional family, they were the only family in the United States that everyone resoundingly admitted to being perfect. The African-American origin of the family, however, gave credence to African-Americans in general. The Huxtables are to television what Jackie Robinson is to baseball, what Thurgood Marshall is to U.S. government, and what Tiger Woods is to golf. These figures have paved the way for stereotypes to be broken in the same way that the Huxtables have. Even if a majority of African-Americans still don't hold these types of positions, neither blacks nor whites can claim that the existence of African-Americans in these types of roles is implausible. Notice that Jackie Robinson was succeeded by men like Hank Aaron, while Thurgood Marshall has been succeeded by Clarence Thomas. Tiger Woods will eventually have a successor as well; for now, he has influenced

African-Americans to pursue golf with rapidity, as more blacks are following the notion of “if he can do it, so can I.”

In this manner, *The Cosby Show* is no different. Evidence of this can be found in the oversaturation of black television sitcoms beginning in the early ‘90’s: *A Different World*, *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, *Malcolm and Eddie*, *The Steve Harvey Show*, *The Bernie Mac Show*, *My Wife and Kids*, and *George Lopez* (a Hispanic version of *The Cosby Show*) all are family oriented programs that aired after Bill Cosby’s influential sitcom.

Through his themes of family values and education, Bill Cosby created a family that all families could look up to, making *The Cosby Show* a realistic and hopeful program. Families not only wanted to be the Huxtables; they wanted to live in the opportunistic, color-blind environment that Cliff and his family enjoyed as well.

While this facet of the show was positive in relation to the lives of all humans, *The Cosby Show* proved to be extremely beneficial to African-Americans. Before *The Cosby Show*, blacks were swamped with poverty-stricken, crime-laden images of themselves. After the landmark sitcom, however, a new wrinkle in black culture was created. *The Cosby Show* motivated African-Americans to strive for achievement by presenting the black community with loveable role models that were both adored and respected.

Quite obviously, Bill Cosby has also established himself as the leader in the field of positive, African-American achievement in the world of television. Cosby didn’t present anything new or innovative with the idea of his show, but the result of

The Cosby Show opened up the floodgates for new and innovative thinking. By destroying our notion of stereotypes in America, Bill Cosby has now become the predecessor for black television programming, a fact that reassures the promotion of positive black images in the media.

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