

Enlightened Racism and The Cosby Show

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Abstract:

As one of the beloved sitcoms in United States history, scholars and viewers remember The Cosby Show as a progressive force in racial relations. For the first time in the representation of African Americans, Cosby and others created a television show that departed from previous minstrel traditions developed in the antebellum period. Both blacks and whites appreciated the humorous tales of the everyday life of the Huxtable family, but scholars Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis pioneered the argument of enlightened racism as a consequence to the show's viewership. Society prevents history from being forgotten, making it so that even the successful and virtually colorblind portrayal of the Huxtables suggests that Americans are not divorced from a deeply racist history. My analysis of The Cosby Show illustrates the problems within the community in determining what constitutes as quality programming for black situation comedies.

Hailed as a breakthrough in race relations, The Cosby Show remains one of the most well-known and critically acclaimed situation comedies, or sitcoms, of American popular culture. Although inherently conservative in its focus on a domestic setting and installation of morals upon the viewers, its progressiveness lay in its portrayal of the highly educated and wealthy African American family. Prior to the airing of The Cosby Show, cultural studies warned of the black family in crisis, unaided by the onslaught of the continuation of racist, stereotypic imagery of African Americans.ⁱ Bill Cosby, who used his full name and credentials in the title sequence of his sitcom, sought to create a program that would serve as a social corrective. Cosby wanted to depict a middle class family who happened to be black, so that the television show could avoid racialization and depict middle class values through the lenses of colorblindness. In this way, Cosby prescribed to the notion of color blindness, or ignoring a particular group's race and ethnicity, but inadvertently evoked the phenomenon of enlightened racism.ⁱⁱ His

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focus on de-emphasizing the fictional Huxtable family's race, according to scholars, failed to address the social and economic problems that continue to plague the black community.ⁱⁱⁱ Due to this perceived negligence The Cosby Show, because of its positive portrayal of a black family, evokes enlightened racism to its multicultural audience.

Although The Cosby Show departed from the racist portrayals found in earlier sitcoms and avoided tropes dating back to antebellum, Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis asserted The Cosby Show's unintentional consequence of enlightened racism. Color blindness, a phenomenon criticized for unsuccessfully portraying the reality of institutionalized racism, enabled the portrayal of positive black role models but simultaneously evoked the symptoms of enlightened racism. Enlightened racism, posited by the two scholars, represents the belief that an example of successful black individual or individuals suggests that the majority of African Americans who are of the working class have failed in comparison. According to this vein of thought, audiences view African Americans as facing no institutionalized obstacles due to race and that perceived inequalities stem from inherent laziness or ineptitude. This thinking diminished the support for programs including affirmative action, and reduced the perceived level of suffering invoked on blacks historically. Simply, while white audiences began to see African Americans as similar to themselves, they began to make judgments on values within the black community for not attaining a similar socioeconomic status as many middle class white Americans. Scholar Robert Entman, who wrote on the representation of African Americans on television news, arrived at a similar conclusion regarding enlightened racism. Entman claimed that the presence of news anchors and other authority figures suggest to the public that racial discrimination is no longer a problem, contributing to the phenomenon of enlightened racism.^{iv} President Barack Obama's election wins in 2008 and 2012 led many commentators to remark that race relations in the United States clearly improved^v and some news networks used the phrase "post-racial."^{vi}

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Even though sitcoms generally depicted idealized families that failed to honestly represent typical families, The Cosby Show signaled a greater disparity than what was seen from white sitcoms. Jhally and

Lewis raised the criticism the unattainability of the Huxtable family's success especially for black families during the 1980s. Compared to the period of 1971-1976, black television characters between 1984 and 1989 were mostly shown as middle class rather than working class.^{vii} Social statistics demonstrated a reversal of gains made by black Americans in the 1960s and 1970s, evidencing a deterioration of the social conditions for most black Americans.^{viii} Furthermore, the rising number of black families on television in the 1980s ran concurrent to the shrinking black middle class in actuality.^{ix} These societal conditions, intensified by the sitcom's focus on the family, are attributed to Reaganism^x and the return to the 1950s-style domestic comedy.^{xi} Academic Darnell Hunt claimed that the inception of the show coincided with the election of President Ronald Reagan, in which American society considered affirmative action as becoming obsolete.^{xii} Americans saw middle class values, specifically those of white middle class families, to be the ideal. Thus black families, who were not rising like their white counterparts in socioeconomic status, perpetuated the image of majority of blacks' ineptitude to reach the same level of prosperity.

The 1984 debut of *The Cosby Show* marked transition, as for the first time a sitcom depicted an affluent black family and carried universal messages embraced by the white middle class. Describing the televisual history of African Americans, most scholars agreed about the typicality of portraying black characters as reminiscent to minstrel-era characters.^{xiii} Professor Robin R. Means Coleman made the bold claim that from the 1850s through mid-1990s roles for black entertainers "typically were restricted to the happy-go-lucky, contented slave or the foolish, inept clown."^{xiv} Even with time, *The Cosby Show* remains an anomaly, since most African American sitcoms today are not prime-time and many characters revert to minstrelsy era stereotypes.

Despite *The Cosby Show*'s legacy, today American sitcoms are split between color lines. While *The Cosby Show*'s greatest success lay in its integrated audience, following African American sitcoms have not maintained the same popularity and esteem as its predecessor.^{xv} Even with criticism about *The Cosby Show*'s evocation of enlightened racism, for the most part since 1992, sitcoms manifest stereotypic imagery of African Americans. For instance, scholars Mary M. Dalton and Laura R. Linder, in their comprehensive study of sitcoms, remarked on a revival of minstrel representations in black sitcoms in the 1990s.^{xvi} The scholarship focused on how enlightened racism holds merit, because

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at least the creative team behind the production was black and able to choose how to represent African Americans.

The purpose of the creation of *The Cosby Show*, according to Harvard psychiatrist and consultant to the show, Dr. Alvin F. Poussaint, was to break free of the racist stereotypes depicted in the sitcoms of the 1970s.^{xvii} Compared to its predecessors, *The Cosby Show* invoked ambivalent responses about race. Decades of minstrelsy-era stereotypes permeated the beliefs among people about the definition of blackness, which sitcoms like *Good Times*, *The Jeffersons*, 227, and *Amen* embodied. Whereas *The Cosby Show* depicted a family that happened to be black, *The Jeffersons* emphasized blackness undeniable to viewers, which discouraged an integrated audience. The definition of blackness is amorphous, though black viewers did make claims of the family “being white” or even made the claim that the Huxtables were “white people in blackface.”^{xviii} To middle-black viewers, the Huxtables status and positive lifestyle was fantastical and inaccurate to what they experienced.

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In comparison to the racialized sitcoms of the 1970s, white audiences in a study conducted by Jhally and Lewis put *The Cosby Show* in its own category. Reasoning for this separate category is due to white viewers described the sitcoms of the 1970s as “slapstick,” “loud,” “full of yelling and screaming,” “stereotypical,” and more “black in style and humor.”^{xix} White audiences, reiterated by the words of Dr. Henry Louis Gates, were not the only group to identify the Huxtables as divergent from the families portrayed in earlier sitcoms. Jhally and Lewis reinforced the idea the behavior of the Huxtables made their skin color, and thus blackness, less visible.^{xx} Gates claimed that most audiences failed to see the Huxtables as a black family and raised the question of how white people view the Huxtables, perhaps as a middle ground between themselves and black people.^{xxi} Furthermore, Means Coleman echoed the findings of Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis about audiences claiming that *The Cosby Show* was “not black enough.”^{xxii} This perceived lack of blackness owed to Cosby’s level of wealth, education, and success that was an anomaly in the black community.^{xxiii} Similarly, the fictional family’s whiteness also stemmed from its color blindness philosophy.

From the pilot episode to the one-hour special finale of the series, patriarch Cliff Huxtable and his wife Claire Huxtable motivated their children to succeed no matter the odds. This moralizing issue and the emphasis of a plotline focused on how domesticity reinforced the appearance of a show with an audience broader than the black sitcoms of the 1970s. Instead of focusing on blackness and the issues facing on the black community, *Cosby* focused his show on domestic conflicts, including parenting. Racial obstacles to success in academics and personal life are rarely mentioned, specifically within the first five seasons. Any obstacles Cliff or Claire faced due to race are unmentioned; in fact, the show suggested rather privileged lifestyles prior to their entrance into medical school and law school, respectively.

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Although the Huxtable parents gave more than witticisms pertaining to trying in school and the importance of a college education, many episodes are dedicated to educational problems pertaining to a child. In this sense, the issues faced by the Huxtable family were relatable to middle class families regardless of color or aspirational to working class families in spite of color. As a response to the multiple references to education, Jhally and Lewis claimed that *The Cosby Show* provided an explanation that the majority of black Americans, who were of the working class, could have succeeded in schooling if they valued education and spent more time studying.^{xxiv} To increase this belief, the backgrounds of Cliff and Claire Huxtable suggested rather privileged lives, educated parents, and no mention to any racial barriers that they or their parents had to overcome. Thus the sitcom inspires thinking that African American families who lag behind white families in education and the workforce could achieve the American dream, if only they worked for it.

Yet Bill Cosby's motivation for *The Cosby Show* was not to alienate the black working class, but to inspire.^{xxv} Preparation for *The Cosby Show* evidenced that Bill Cosby's support of the show and use of humor was more than just for laughs. He hired young black writers and assistants, such as Harvard psychiatrist Alvin F. Poussaint to determine the script's accuracy and "to ensure that the psychological impact of the black images circulated by the show was carefully considered."^{xxvi}

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Cosby's close involvement with the development and production of this sitcom attested to his dedication to avoid negative racial stereotypes. His representation of the Huxtable family alluded to the myth of the American dream, which through his television show made the American dream appear more attainable to blacks. Further, many contemporary black families enjoyed the Huxtable's socioeconomic status and claimed that the show could show a potential future.^{xxvii}

Ironically, the criticism of *The Cosby Show* for not evoking blackness coincided with era of diversity within black sitcoms birthed in the 1980s.^{xxviii} As for the criticism levied by Jhally, Lewis, and Gates, Bill Cosby's incorporation of black psychiatrist Dr. Poussaint and use of black culture throughout the sitcom suggested a changing perception to what it means to be African American. Although Jhally and Lewis, along with their study, claimed that the Huxtable family was not "black enough," Cosby purposely added details of African American culture into the show. For instance, *The Cosby Show* featured works by African Americans throughout the house and frequently, jazz music played in the background. By the eighth season, the opening sequence featured the hip hop scene, graffiti background, and clothing associated with hip hop culture. The later seasons of *The Cosby Show* showed a greater maturity and awareness of the black community, although this extent of racialized content was not great enough to dispel its integrated audience.

Although there are various scholars who are interested in concepts of enlightened racism, a prominent issue concerning this recent scholarship is the continuation of dialogue concerning what constitutes as blackness and the expectation of black self-portrayal. Unlike the sitcoms of the 1970s, Bill Cosby ensured hiring, training, and placement of black talent in all aspects of production of *The Cosby Show*.^{xxix} Creative responsibility for many of the successful black sitcoms in the 1970s consisted of the white executive producers including Norman Lear, Bud Yorkin, the Carsey-Werner Company, Irma Kalish, Ed Weinberger, and Miller-Boyett Productions.^{xxx} Although these producers consulted African Americans and included aspects of black culture, *The Cosby Show* shifted a greater creative and representative power than what was seen in the previous decade. Despite the perceived lack of blackness in the Huxtable family, blacks controlled the creative process behind the program and thus scholars can attribute black involvement, rather than white involvement, to the extent the blackness of the fictitious household portrayed.

For the criticism of enlightened racism, the inability of scholars to define quality black programming and recommendation of the portrayal of a strong black middle class family coincided with the production and portrayal of the Huxtable family. A stereotype persists that the majority of black people, who are dissimilar from Huxtables, remain foreign and not relatable to white people.^{xxxii} If some black viewers and critics find the Huxtables' prosperity to be problematic in conveying the actualities of black life, then the definition of blackness needs to be diversified. The past failings of black sitcoms lay in racist stereotypes, yet some scholars criticized *The Cosby Show* for unintentionally invoking racism. If responsibility is placed upon the black middle class to portray middle class values and to express blackness, then it is likely that these television sitcoms would fall into the same concept as enlightened racism. A catch-22 appears: if blacks are portrayed stereotypically, then critics will reference minstrelsy-era stereotypes; yet, if a sitcom portrayed blacks in a non-racialized manner, then criticism of enlightened racism will emerge. Although expectations of *The Cosby Show* and the black middle class were to assuage racial conflict and create a sense of understanding, the concept of enlightened racism appears to diminish their efforts in some respects. Due to the ambivalence towards the concept of enlightened racism in regards to *The Cosby Show* and the inability to define quality black programming, it appears as if there is no television sitcom that can avoid racism. This reflects past and current struggles when dealing with racism in United States society. In order to acknowledge race, a television show (at least in today's society) threatens to upset viewership but a color blind message manages to belittle the struggles and reality of African Americans. Thus enlightened racism suggests that the conversation of race and racism will continue, but people of color need to take control and define themselves despite standards set by whiteness.

The amount of attention given to *The Cosby Show*, during its air-time up until today, suggests that this is a television show that is remarkable for its divergence from past black sitcoms. The unintended consequence of enlightened racism, born from a perspective emphasizing color blindness, does question the future of black sitcoms and if a model like *The Cosby Show's* should be continued. Many may claim that *The Cosby Show*, like other sitcoms, should not be expected to grapple or make sense of complex societal issues let alone serve as bastions of morality. *The Cosby Show's* universality and lack of discussion on race created an image of a world of what it could be like without the

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historical and current foundations of racism. In this sense, the show and the concept of enlightened racism are examples as to why color blindness is harmful. The world of *The Cosby Show*, like the realms most sitcom families reside in, is not real. At the same time, if sitcom families are seen as the ideal then perhaps African American sitcoms must strike a balance between a social commentary narrative and not prescribing to notions of color blindness.

i Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis. *Enlightened Racism: The Cosby Show, Audiences, and the Myth of the American Dream*. (Colorado: Westview Press, 1992), 6.

ii Evan P. Apfelbaum, Michael I. Norton and Samuel R. Sommers, "Racial Color Blindness: Emergence, Practice, and Implications," *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, Vol. 21, No. 3 (June 2012), pp. 205-06.

iii Ella Taylor, *Prime-Time Families: Television Culture in Postwar America* (University of California Press, 1989), 160-61.

iv Robert Entman, "Modern Racism and the Images of Blacks in Local Television News," *Critical Mass Studies in Mass Communication* 7, no. 4 (December 1990), quoted in Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis, "White Responses: The Emergence of "Enlightened" Racism," in *Channeling Blackness: Studies on Television and Race in America*, ed. Darnell M. Hunt (Oxford University Press, 2005), 75.

v Rogers M. Smith, Desmond S. King and Philip A. Klinkner, "Challenging History: Barack Obama & American Racial Politics," *Daedalus*, Vol. 140, No. 2 (Spring 2011), pp. 121.

vi Bettina L. Love and Brandelyn Tosolt, "Reality or Rhetoric? Barack Obama and Post-Racial America," *Race, Gender & Class*, Vol. 17, No. ¾ (2010), pp. 20.

vii Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis, "White Responses: The Emergence of "Enlightened" Racism," in *Channeling Blackness: Studies on Television and Race in America*, ed. Darnell M. Hunt (Oxford University Press, 2005), 58-61.

viii Jhally, Sut and Justin Lewis. *Enlightened Racism*, 6.

ix Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis, "White Responses: The Emergence of "Enlightened" Racism," 58-61.

x John Fiske, "Hearing Anita Hill (And Viewing Bill Cosby)," in *Channeling Blackness: Studies on Television and Race in America*, ed. Darnell M. Hunt (Oxford University Press, 2005), 107.

xi Ella Taylor, *Prime-Time Families*, 161.

xii Darnell M. Hunt, *Channeling Blackness: Studies on Television and Race in America* (Oxford University Press, 2005), 293.

xiii For examples, see Robin R. Means Coleman, *African American Viewers and the Black Situation Comedy: Situating Racial Humor* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 2000); Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretative History of Blacks in American Films* (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group Ltd, 2001); and Darnell M. Hunt, *Channeling Blackness: Studies on Television and Race in America* (Oxford University Press, 2005).

xiv Robin R. Means Coleman, *African American Viewers and the Black Situation Comedy: Situating Racial Humor* (Garland Publishing, Inc., 2000), xi.

xv Amanda Dyanne Lotz, "Segregated Sitcoms: Institutional Cases of Disparity among Black and White Comedy Images and Audiences," in *The Sitcom Reader: America Viewed and Skewed*, ed. Mary M. Dalton and Laura R. Linder (State University of New York Press, 2005), 139-140.

xvi Mary M. Dalton and Laura R. Linder, *The Sitcom Reader: America Viewed and Skewed* (State University of New York Press, 2005), 1-12.

xvii Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis, *Enlightened Racism*, (Colorado: Westview Press, 1992), 2.

xviii Leslie B. Inniss and Joe R. Feagin, "The Cosby Show: The View from the Black Middle Class," *Journal of Black Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 6 (Jul. 1995), pp. 700.

xix Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis, "White Responses: The Emergence of "Enlightened" Racism," 80.

xx Ibid., 78.

xxi Ibid., 77.

xxii Robin R. Means Coleman, *African American Viewers and the Black Situation Comedy*, xi.

xxiii Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis. *Enlightened Racism*, (Colorado: Westview Press, 1992), 6.

xxiv Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis, "White Responses: The Emergence of "Enlightened" Racism," 75.

xxv Leslie B. Inniss and Joe R. Feagin, "The Cosby Show," pp. 695.

xxvi Darnell M. Hunt, *Channeling Blackness*, (Oxford University Press, 2005), 13-14.

xxvii Leslie B. Inniss and Joe R. Feagin, "The Cosby Show," pp. 702.

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xxviii Robin R. Means Coleman and Charlton D. McIlwain, "The Hidden Truths in Black Sitcoms," in *The Sitcom Reader: America Viewed and Skewed*, ed. Mary M. Dalton and Laura R. Linder (State University of New York Press, 2005), 132.

xxix Darnell M. Hunt, *Channeling Blackness*, (Oxford University Press, 2005), 156.

xxx Horace Newcomb and Robert S. Alley, *The Producer's Medium: Conversations with Creators of American TV*, No. 786 (Oxford University Press, 1983) quoted in Darnell M. Hunt, *Channeling Blackness: Studies on Television and Race in America* (Oxford University Press, 2005), 155.

xxxi Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis, "White Responses: The Emergence of "Enlightened" Racism," 77.

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Rachel Crooks is a junior pursuing a double major in History and Latin American and Caribbean Studies. She originally wrote this paper as a sophomore, but since then she has become interested in comparative race relations of the United States and of Latin America. After graduation, she hopes to more thoroughly research the state of race relations in Latin America and focus on the media representation of socially excluded groups including Afro-Latinos.