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A black family that tv hadn't seen before

'Cosby would have been damned if he didn't make
The Cosby Show. In the event, he was damned because he did.'

Bill Cosby presented us with television's equivalent to one of those ambiguous images that can look like more than one thing: like a skull that also resembles a beautiful woman gazing in a mirror, or the drawing of an old hag that could also be a young woman. They are full of double meanings, so we apply our own interpretation. Many sat back in wonderstruck admiration at Cosby's innovative *The Cosby Show*; others raged and ranted at the monstrosity Cosby had helped create. They were all looking at the same thing: they'd just seen it differently.

The amiable Cosby excited and astonished many, who hailed him as a representative of a new black America. Pamela Browner White, chair of Philadelphia's Anderson Award committee, paid tribute to Cosby's long career as an inspiring entertainer, calling him the "face and voice of the African-American middle-class family ... a man of strong values, [he] has inspired thousands of young adults to achieve their dream of a college education." The comic actor, who, as Jamal Eric Watson put it, "single-handedly changed the way African-Americans were portrayed on television," was the creator of *The Cosby Show*, which Patricia A. Bell maintains "opened up a new era in television, leading the way for other shows to depict upwardly mobile and successful black people."

The show drew less respectful responses from, for example, Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis, who complained that Cosby introduced a "new and insidious form of racism." And, according to John Fiske: "Others have claimed that Bill Cosby is a contemporary Uncle Tom, or Afro-Saxon." (Afro-Saxon usually refers to whites, who adopt black cultural styles; but we see what Fiske is getting at.) His show exasperated countless others. Clearly, Cosby was – and, indeed, is – someone who arouses not just strong passions, but fiery intellectualism too.

Herman Gray believes he knows why: "Much of the reason for the critical suspicion and celebration of *The Cosby Show* is, of course, its focus on a black upper-middle class family." Gray's inclusion of "of course" makes this seem more self-evident than it actually is, but he has a valid point. At the center of Cosby's illustrious, pioneering show was a black nuclear family that lived far away from the hood, had no obvious dysfunctions and no money worries. There's no logical reason why that should satisfy and infuriate simultaneously;

Cosby's achievement was in smashing a commonly held, but hideously distorted, image of black people. His offense was in replacing it with a less commonly held, but according to some, equally distorted image.

Next question: did Cosby succeed in changing conceptions of African Americans enough to make a Barack Obama candidacy possible? By now, the reader will have inferred that I believe in the role of popular culture as an agent of social and political change. I started this book by positioning Obama as the figurehead or emblem of a significant shift in American culture, and, in this and chapters to follow, I'll examine the parts played by black celebrities from entertainment and sports in effecting that shift. Entertainers and athletes portended the arrival of a black president. Oprah is the most conspicuous and influential figure on the landscape. Few can doubt this. There are many others whose precise roles I will scrutinize in chapters to come. Bill Cosby's part is unique and of its own kind.

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In many respects, Cosby was like Oprah: an advertisement for himself, someone who used his own life as a means of recommending something – in this case, ambition. Cosby aimed high and wished other African Americans would follow his example. Like Oprah, he had a relatively humble background, in his case in Philadelphia (where he was born in 1937), and joined the navy, completing his high school studies through a correspondence course. He won an athletics scholarship to Temple University, Philadelphia, and supported himself through part-time work behind a bar. He tried his hand at some standup work in local clubs and, in his early twenties, began to do spots on television shows. Cosby's imperturbable stage presence and his languorous delivery caught the eye of the producers of the NBC tv show *I Spy* and, in 1965, Cosby started playing the role of Robert Culp's sidekick. The show ran till 1968, after which Cosby moved to his own show, *The Bill Cosby Show*, playing a teacher. He created an animated series called *Fat Albert and the Cosby Kids* and featured in a number of movies in the 1970s, all the time pursuing academic study.

"Black viewers," Jennifer Fuller discerns, were "underserved" by the major broadcasters in the 1980s. "They [the tv networks] limited black programming to a single night" (p. 290). But Cosby's appeal was broad enough for him to avoid television's equivalent of a ghetto. *The Cosby Show* began on NBC in 1984 (ABC was offered, but rejected, the series). Cosby played the paterfamilias of the Huxtables, described by *Ebony* magazine as "a Black family that tv hadn't seen before." Actually, it might have added that black families hadn't appeared on US television at all until 1968 – I'll return to this shortly, as it's important to understand Cosby in historical context.

The Huxtable family lived in a New York City brownstone that teemed with affluence. Cosby's own original idea was for the husband to be a limousine driver and the wife to be a carpenter, but the roles were changed to an

obstetrician and lawyer respectively. The fictional grandfather lived in a time of segregated armed forces, and segregated music clubs where he worked as a musician. His son had become a doctor and married another professional and his grandchildren were in college. While *The Cosby Show* was character-driven, Cosby himself never claimed its characters were representative. Actually, he could have: in the 1980s, America's black population was variegated, so the fictional family was representative of a relatively small but growing affluent and upwardly mobile class.

The themes or topics of the show were generic rather than specific to the black experience – if, in the 1980s, there was a uniform black experience: friendship, dating, college, and family tensions were typical fare. The audience was persuaded to think of the Huxtables as a family, which happened to be black, rather than a “black family.” But that in itself was unusual. Black families were rarely depicted as ordinary: they were much more likely to be funny, eccentric, pathological, or, in some way, uncommon. In this sense, *Cosby* offered television's equivalent of what's called in baseball a change-up: a deceptive pitch intended to throw off the batter's timing.

There were other notable surprises. In 1977, for example, ABC television broadcast *Roots*, a twelve-hour dramatized documentary, based on Alex Haley's 1976 *Roots: The saga of an American family*. The story traced the author's family line from his ancestors' enslavement to his descendants' liberation. It was a bold initiative, though Haley's book was a bestseller even before the show. Haley was the co-executive producer of another show, *Palmerstown, U.S.A.*, which told of a friendship between a black boy and a white boy in the 1930s South. Haley's co-executive producer was Norman Lear, who was also instrumental in bringing *Cagney & Lacey* to the screen in 1981. CBS was hesitant about featuring two female detectives as leads in a cop show, but, after two changes of actor, the series became, like *The Cosby Show*, one of the defining tv series of the decade, engaging with the sexism of the eponymous pair's mostly male colleagues in the 14th Precinct of the New York Police Department. The show is also credited with boosting recruitment of women into police forces across the US and Britain. So, *The Cosby Show* was not quite as out-of-kilter as recent commentators have assumed; though it certainly divided critics and prompted arguments like no other show of the 1980s.

From 1985 to 1987 the show broke viewing records, with *Cosby* becoming the strongest audience-puller in television. At its peak, *The Cosby Show* drew 70 million American viewers (about 30 percent of the nation's population) and became one of the most popular series in television history; it is still shown in syndication in the US and abroad. The show closed in 1992, the final episode being about the only son's graduation from New York City University. At the time there were 537,000 black males in college or university – only 3.5 percent of the total enrolment, according to James Earl Davis (p. 620). There were 583,000 black males in prison.

Cosby himself was a stalwart supporter of education as a channel of mobility for blacks (his own son was a graduate student at Columbia University when he was shot to death while in Los Angeles in 1997.) In 1988, Cosby and his wife had made the largest contribution ever from a black donor to any black college when they donated \$20 million to Spelman College, Atlanta. Even after the show had finished, Cosby continued to barnstorm the US to talk about the problems that affect black children and families, always “encouraging an ethic of personal responsibility,” as Watson notes (p. 8). Cosby had a parallel career as a pitchman for Kraft Food’s Jell-O pudding, and appeared in tv commercials from 1974 till 1999, later assuming the executive producer’s role for an advertising campaign in 2010.

After the 2008 presidential election, Dr. Alvin F. Poussaint, a psychiatrist and professor at Harvard Medical School who was a script consultant on *The Cosby Show*, sketched out a possible connection between Cosby and the president: “There were a lot of young people who were watching that show who are now of voting age.”

The thread seems tenuous, but there is logic in Poussaint’s reasoning: Cosby’s depiction of black family life as recognizably *normal*, changed the way whites viewed blacks. The show itself was not as important as the way viewers, in particular white viewers, interpreted it. “It’s what people have done with themselves by watching that show and believing in it,” said Poussaint to *New York Times* journalist Tim Arango (November 8, 2008). This is essentially why audiences loved the show, but many commentators hated it: it was too believable.

“*The Cosby Show* offered viewers the comfort of seeing characters with whom they identified enjoy the spoils of Western capitalism,” observed Timothy Havens. He meant *most* viewers: many were made to feel deeply uncomfortable by the show’s depiction of black life in the 1980s and early 1990s. For example, Jhally and Lewis agreed, “The Huxtables proved that black people can succeed,” but they pointed out that one of the effects of the show was to “encourage white people, looking around them at the comparative prosperity of whites over blacks, to believe in an imagined cultural superiority” (p. 97).

Actually, there is an interesting backstory to Jhally and Lewis’s research. In a classic case of biting-the-hand-that-feeds-you, Jhally, a professor of communications at the University of Massachusetts, in 1994 asked Cosby (by then a well-known philanthropist) for \$16,000 to fund a project on why his show had been so popular among black and white viewers alike. Cosby had no influence on how the research was conducted, nor any editorial prerogatives. The researchers used focus groups and in-depth discussions, consisting of black, white and Hispanic participants, subdividing the black and white groups by social class. The two main questions they used as a starting point for

discussion were: how much the image of the Huxtable family reflected viewers' conceptions of black people; and how "real" were the characters and events in the show. The results, as I alluded to earlier, suggested the show purveyed an insidious form of what the researchers called "enlightened racism."

Put simply, the researchers argued that whites regarded the show as a slice of American life: anyone, black or white, could navigate their ways up the social hierarchy. But they also recognized that the well-to-do Huxtables were far from typical of African Americans. Conclusion: blacks who have not managed to clamber as far as Cosby's make-believe characters, have probably failed because they are too lazy or feckless. "The Huxtables proved that black people can succeed; yet in so doing they also prove the inferiority of black people in general (who have, in comparison with whites, failed)" (p. 95).

In a separate piece of research, Leslie B. Inniss and Joe R. Feagin concurred with the first part of this: "The overall impression is that the American dream is real for anyone who is willing to play by the rules" (p. 709). Inniss and Feagin never explicate those "rules," but let's guess they involve not grumbling about discrimination or getting involved in radical politics, and certainly not getting mixed-up in the kind of misdemeanors associated with rap artists in the 2000s. Rules change.

Inniss and Feagin also add: "We are left with the impression that they will not face any barriers or obstacles in their quest for the good life. They are decidedly upper middle class and can only go up – no discrimination or downward mobility for the Huxtables or by extension for Blacks as a group" (p. 709).

So, we have at least two conflicting, if not competing, representations, or models of Cosby's show and its legacy. One is nicely summarized by Havens, who suspects he knows why audiences took such comfort: "Integral to their enjoyment was the show's representation of a dignified blackness, which broke with centuries of popular Western images of blacks" (p. 387). The positive impact of seeing prosperous, attractive African Americans on screen was uplifting and affirming. Black people were emphatically not handcuffed to history.

The other model is the one Jhally and Lewis believe has more strength. The show worked as a cultural bulwark, fortifying an American mainstay: that the hierarchy is open to all and, to scale it, an individual needs talent, hard work and a certain stubborn streak that prevents him or her buckling at the experience of misfortune. Racism was so rarely mentioned, it was easy to forget or ignore, leading Andrea L. Press to declare: "The show, as a piece of ideology, works to obscure its viewers' understanding of the structural limits to individual mobility in our society" (p. 220).

The limits Press refers to are both racial and class-based. "White viewers in particular become convinced of their own, and society's, lack of racism when they find themselves viewing, and liking, the obviously successful Huxtable

family” (p. 220). One of the show’s many implicit messages was that affirmative action and, for that matter, any other race-specific policy is superfluous. In the Cosby worldview, individuals progress on their own merits. “Racism will end when blacks become successful,” is how Press reads the policy implications of *The Cosby Show*.

Yet, for Press, “most will by definition not succeed on this level.” Cosby’s narrative deftly elides America’s class structure, which, on Press’s argument, condemns the majority of African Americans to lives of poverty, and functions to exacerbate racial disharmony. She concludes: “Even if blacks were to achieve economic equality, much racism would persist” (p. 221).

The one character in the show who, it might be assumed, emerged untouched by criticism was Clair Huxtable, played by Phylicia Rashad. A partner in a law firm, Clair, like her husband, escaped traditional stereotypes. In many ways, she embodied feminist ideals: independent, ambitious and sassy, she was able to play both mother and professional without breaking stride. And yet, as Jennifer Bailey Woodward and Teresa Mastin report: “Viewers saw her as overly aggressive, not maternal enough, too outspoken, and overly controlling toward both her husband and children” (p. 272).

The Cosby Show has been vested with more importance than any television series in history – and I’m not forgetting *Roots*, *The Wire*, or the show that took over from Cosby at the top of audience ratings, *The Simpsons*. None of the others has hefted so much social and political weight as *The Cosby Show*. Aficionados and detractors alike agree that Cosby tried and succeeded in conveying a new and unfamiliar image of black people that owed little to historic stereotypes.

Whether they praised it or damned it, everyone agreed that this depiction of African Americans as educated, aspirational and family-oriented was a development in popular culture. The viewing figures suggested another basis of agreement: blacks and whites alike watched the show in their millions. The fact that whites flocked to their tv whenever the show played indicated that its influence went farther and wider than any previous show featuring black people as central characters.

But what exactly was its influence? This is where we find critics and commentators circling and squabbling. Much of the discord seems to be about whether Cosby is judged against an historical background, or in the context of the day. Cosby’s supporters recognize his service in breaking a long-hardened mold: as I will soon show, blacks were woefully under-represented on American television and, arguably worse, forced into such a narrow spectrum of roles that a complete absence would perhaps have been preferable.

Fault-finders consider his show to have performed a disservice to black people by portraying them in a way that was representative of only a minority; and, in doing so, to have deflected attention away from the genuine hardships and suffering of the majority of African Americans. While he didn’t state this

in the early 1980s, Cosby might have said that it's better to aim high and miss than aim low and hit the target.

Ten years after the end of the show, Cosby himself decided to speak out, not only on the show, but on the condition of black people in America. The squabbling then became a full-blown war of words.

One feature of *The Cosby Show* about which all agreed was that it gave succor to whites by offering an image of black people that was clearly at odds with popular ideas. African Americans were great athletes and gifted entertainers, but not much good at anything else. Less than two years after the end of Cosby's show, the publication of *The Bell Curve* reopened a century-old but still box-fresh discussion about whether intelligence is inherited and, if so, is the disparity between blacks' and whites' educational attainments attributable to nature rather than nurture? The implication of Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray's thesis was that the USA was and is a genetic meritocracy and seemingly intractable social problems were not actually soluble. "If nature disposes, the argument goes, there is little to be gained by intervening," as *New York Times* writer David L. Kirp put it in his "After the Bell Curve" (July 23, 2006).

In one way, *The Cosby Show* was refutation: far from being intellectually impaired or inferior to whites, the whole Huxtable family was conspicuously bright and disposed, if not by nature then by culture, to progress as far as their talents would take them. But, in another way, it was supportive of some of the crucial policies implied by *The Bell Curve*. Affirmative action and compensatory education, while superficially laudable, are futile and profligate. Herrnstein and Murray's reason was that no amount of social engineering could change what nature decrees. Cosby's reason, by contrast, would be that policies like this are just not necessary: black people are individuals and, as such, they will, or at least should, take responsibility for their own lives and not rely on assistance from government or anyone else.

After *The Cosby Show* completed its run, Cosby must have grown restless with a social contradiction that his show, in its own way, helped bring about: at a time when black people had more legal freedom than ever, a record number of them had sacrificed that freedom and ended up behind bars. Cosby's show had resisted the fatalistic style of thinking that black people have the odds stacked against them and will invariably fail to achieve anything of note. And yet, he must have agonized over the manner in which schools were re-segregating and black neighborhoods were recrudescing into ghettos where dope-dealing and prostitution were viable career options. Even worse: ghetto culture was being valorized by an entertainment industry fascinated with pimps, bling and rock (cocaine, that is; not music).

Cosby was moved to clarify his own views, at first in a speech to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the *Brown vs. Board of Education*

decision of 1954, and later in a series of "Conversations with Cosby" held in cities with large urban and poor populations. "We can't blame white people," Cosby argued. African Americans were not "holding up their end of the deal" and should take "personal responsibility" for their problems. The "Blame the Poor" tour, as it became known, allowed Cosby to voice his concern over unplanned pregnancies, high crime figures, dropping out of education and the urban slang that proliferated. He even fulminated over black names "like Shaniqua, Shaligua, Mohammed and all that crap."

Gone was the affable Cliff Huxtable, replaced by a grouchy, barely recognizable 67-year-old. "Please don't give me anything about systemic racism," he urged an audience in Detroit (where 87 percent of the population is black). "Yes, it's there," he acknowledged. "But why is your mouth not working?" (reported in *Black Issues in Higher Education*, February 10, 2005, p. 20).

In a searing rebuke, Cosby insisted blacks needed to stop blaming whites and take control of their children and their communities. Singling out lower-income blacks, who prioritize the right kind of sports footwear over education, he pointed out: "Nine hundred kids enter many of these high schools, and 35 walk out with diplomas ... The rest are in prison, pregnant or wandering around doing nothing." At the time, only 30 to 40 percent of black men graduated from high school; African Americans were three times as likely as whites to be in prison and their sentences likely to be six months longer; young black women aged 15 to 19 had a pregnancy rate of 123.8 per 1,000, against the national average of 70.6 per 1,000; and black unemployment was 10.8 percent, compared to 4.7 percent for whites.

"Cosby spoke the truth," wrote Julianne Malveaux in a 2004 response, "but he spoke it without context." She explained: "It's easy to blame parents of children gone wrong without examining the context in which parents raise children, the wages they are paid, the employment opportunities they have, and the malicious way that public policy has affected these parents and children" (p. 122).

Other responses also took note of Cosby's obliviousness to social context. Michael Eric Dyson's riposte was the most acerbic: he disagreed with practically everything Cosby said. "For instance, the belief the poor are lazy and don't work; that the poor don't have a desire to be in education; that the poor are fundamentally satisfied with their condition which is why they are poor, and basically they're poor because they want to be poor," as Dyson told Ronald Roach in 2005 (p. 15). Dyson's book *Is Bill Cosby Right?* pointed out that, as a member of an elite, "the Afritocracy," the actor-turned-social commentator was disengaged from the majority of African Americans and experienced "embarrassment over the bad behavior of the poor" (p. 182). Cosby may have belonged to the same ethnic group as African Americans, but he was a class apart.

Dyson also took issue with the philosophy that undergirded everything Cosby advocated: "The appeal to internal self-explanations reflects the embrace of the dominant ideology of individualism and makes it more likely that its advocates will stress personal responsibility to the strongest degree in blaming people" (p. 208). Similar observations were made of Oprah, who encouraged reliance on one's own powers and resources rather than those of others. "Since the myth of romantic individualism still strongly grips the culture, it is unsurprising that the individualistic explanation for poverty is most widely favored," wrote Dyson (p. 203).

And, as if to ensure that he didn't let any detail of Cosby's argument go unpunished, Dyson reckoned Cosby's disdain for non-European names said more about him than the people who owned them. "Names like Shaniqua and Taliqua are meaningful cultural expressions of self-determination."

"Cunning lies and garbage" is how Paul R. Griffin described Dyson's argument, in *Diverse Issues in Higher Education* (November 3, 2005). Dyson's text was cluttered with factual errors, many picked up by the magazine *Education Next*, which concluded: "These and other misstatements of fact, tales, and quotes out of context are used to impugn the reputation of a public figure who dared to ask black parents and students to exercise a greater sense of responsibility" (vol. 6, No. 1, 2006).

Cosby continued to challenge black parents rather than abstractions like dominant ideology or systemic racism, and he maintained his sense of individualism. With Poussaint, he authored a book with the imperative title *Come On, People* and, in 2009, went door-to-door in Detroit to talk to parents about the city's troubled schools. So he could claim quite literally to have walked the walk as well as donating millions to educational institutions and other causes. Dyson mentioned only the \$20 million Spelman College gift in his book, and likened Cosby to a fairytale character. "People who give a bunch of money are deferred to, even when they are wrong. The emperor cannot be shown to have no clothes," he told Deborah Robinson of the *New York Times* (March 27, 2007).

The reference is to Hans Christian Andersen's children's story of 1837, *The Emperor's New Clothes*, in which a clothes-obsessed sovereign ruler walks among his subjects naked after being conned into thinking he is wearing clothes that are visible to all but the stupid and those "unfit for office." A conspiracy of silence prevails until an unknowing child's shout of "The emperor has nothing at all on!" serves as a reality check. Cosby is cast as a credulous, conceited poseur, showboating for the benefit of sheeplike followers, but bereft of anything material. A strained analogy; or is it?

"Truly, *The Cosby Show* is unique. In its day (in 1968), so too was *Julia*, but it was still a case of Black images being created by white hands" (p. 141). So

writes Linda K. Fuller in her 1992 book *The Cosby Show: Audiences, impact, and implications*. She refers to an intelligent, if issues-heavy, piece of television that deserves some attention, especially in the context of the medium itself. *Julia* was a weekly show based on a single widowed mother (the husband was killed in Vietnam) and nurse, played by Diahann Carroll. In its way, this was a groundbreaking show: Carroll's character was a self-starter, motivated to pursue her career without the help of others. Too glamorous to be a "mammy" figure and too independent to be a "welfare queen," she didn't fit into any of the established racial stereotypes that had populated tv previously.

Challenging conventional portrayals as it did, *Julia* could have become a teledramatic event, adventurously tackling social issues. But it turned into a frustrating curio; what Darrell M. Hunt in his essay "Black content, white control" calls an "assimilationist show." He intends this pejoratively, meaning that the black characters in the show were "tokens in a white world disconnected from the realities of the rest of the black community" (p. 270).

Just prior to the show's run, 1968–71, there was civil unrest across the United States. Starting with the explosive six-day conflict in South Central LA in 1965, the rioting spread to several other major cities, culminating in 1967 when police raided Detroit gambling clubs used by blacks, provoking major disorder. The period was marked by severe discontentment, and an official inquiry, published as the Kerner Report, concluded that the cause of the riots lay in racism and the resulting poverty suffered by blacks, leading to their being undernourished, underpaid, badly clothed and poorly housed. None of this was mirrored in *Julia*. Then again, where in television was it mirrored? Only on the news.

Sanford and Son, 1972–77, *Good Times*, 1974–79, and *The Jeffersons*, 1976–85, were all black shows produced by "white hands," to use Fuller's phrase. High-spirited comedies, companionable in tone and with time for sardonic cracks amid the family crises that were common occurrences, the shows were commercial successes, lasting at least five years. Reason: "They were controlled by white producers to appeal to the largely white television audience," as Hunt points out (p. 270). The appeal lay in the depiction of "the gritty realities of inner-city urban life." Why should this be appealing to white audiences?

"Containment" is Helán E. Page's answer. She means that whites have long regarded black people, especially black men, as potentially harmful and so keep them under control or within safe limits. Traditionally, whites contained blacks both physically and aesthetically. The idea of presenting images of safe and friendly blacks for the delectation of whites isn't so new.

Minstrel troupes featuring white performers, their faces blacked-up to resemble blacks, began to appear on the American eastern seaboard in the 1820s, offering a distorted image of black life. It's been argued by many historians, including Joseph Boskin and Robert Toll, that, during the Jim Crow era of segregation, there was an oblique function: whites were assured that the

inoffensive “plantation niggers” or “coons” known generically as Sambo were childlike, but happy in their servitude. There was no reason for whites to feel guilty, less still afraid. A black grinning visage with thick lips and wide eyes was a reminder of blacks’ contentment – and containment. (“Jim Crow” was actually used as a song title by white entertainer Thomas Dartmouth “Daddy” Rice, 1808–60.)

The arrival of *Sanford and Son* and the other black-themed comedies prompted murmurings that “the medium had regressed back to the buffoonish portrayals of the 1950s,” according to Hunt (p. 270). Back then, shows such as *The Amos ‘n’ Andy Show*, which ran from 1951–53, and *Beulah*, 1950–53, were like lineal descendants of minstrel shows, furnishing viewers with black characters who were lazy chumps or dependable servants. (Both began as radio shows, the former starting in 1928 and sometimes drawing 40 million listeners – a third of America – six nights a week, making it the longest-running and most popular radio program in broadcast history.)

The black comedy shows of the 1970s and early 1980s were well-crafted and sharply-written comedies, but they seemed from the same boilerplate as the earlier black shows. *Sanford and Son* was derived from the much-lauded BBC show *Steptoe and Son*, while *The Jeffersons* was spun off *All in the Family*, which was also derived from a BBC comedy *Till Death Us Do Part*.

The Cosby Show did have, to extend Fuller’s metaphor, white hands on it, but Cosby himself was a co-creator of the show and had a writing credit on all 200 episodes, several of the other writers being African Americans. Cosby himself had executive-produced his earlier *The Bill Cosby Show*, though Marcy Carsey and Tom Werner exec-produced the bulk of *The Cosby Show*. Cosby appointed Poussaint as a script consultant, his brief being to assess the impact the show was having psychologically on audiences, particularly black audiences. “It changed some attitudes and perceptions,” Poussaint later reflected.

The political climate was not auspicious: in 1984 Ronald Reagan was re-elected by a landslide vote, signaling a significant lurch to the right in the US. Part of Reagan’s appeal was in taking up the cause of disaffected whites, who attributed many of their own problems to affirmative action and other policies seeming to favor minorities. Reagan famously opposed every major civil rights initiative and so contributed to an environment in which racism became, if not acceptable, then tolerable.

While he became outspoken later, Cosby himself was not a controversial figure during the Regan era, 1981–89. Anything but: he was arguably the most popular entertainer on American television, if audience figures are a gauge. For a black person to occupy this position in the 1980s was something of a distinction. At the time, Cosby brushed aside questions about why his show didn’t include racial issues by wondering out loud why similar questions were not raised about other shows with predominantly white casts. Perhaps the frustration of constantly fielding questions like

this drove him to his pronouncements on personal responsibility, systemic racism, Shaniqua and so on.

Ron Howard's 1982 movie *Night Shift* is about two morgue attendants, played by Michael Keaton and Henry Winkler, both white, who start a sideline prostitution racket. Andrea Press recalls a comedy sketch in which Eddie Murphy, on hearing Howard describe the plot, snaps back: "It was a story about two pimps and there wasn't no brothers in it? I don't know whether to thank you or punch you in your mouth, man!" (p. 219).

The equivocation reflects the response to Cosby and *The Cosby Show*. Were Cosby to have followed obediently the pattern of previous black-centered sitcoms, he would doubtless be remembered fondly, and possibly admired, but probably not respected. "Why didn't you use your popularity and your leverage with the tv networks to break away from the old-fashioned characterization of blacks?" critics might have asked.

Instead, they asked: "Why did you characterize blacks as so well-off that everybody is running away with the mistaken idea that all black people are like the Huxtables?" Admittedly, not everyone pointed fingers at Cosby. But, as we've already seen in this chapter, critics eventually rounded on him. It seems that Cosby would have been damned if he didn't make *The Cosby Show*. In the event, he was damned because he did.

Dyson's diatribe against Cosby – an emperor without clothes, remember – included the judgment: "There is significant disadvantage still to black skin in an American culture that proclaims the virtues of individualism while denying it to blacks, *as a group*" (p. 211).

Cosby wouldn't recognize any validity in this. His credo was based on the fundamental humanity and individuality of blacks, and the illegitimacy of any attempt to conceive of black people otherwise – either as a group, as Dyson suggested, or as a race, as many whites, then and now, maintained.