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FOR THE LOVE OF CLIFF & CLAIR

The debut, or even the mere announcement, of a new situation comedy with a predominantly black cast, often leaves me in a state of panic. Accustomed to the frequently one-sided view of black life depicted on American television, I continually find myself wondering how far into the program it will be before I'm presented with the image of a black teenage boy, speaking in broken English with jeans slung well below his waist, or a driving hip-hop beat behind a black girl with unkempt hair, cursing out her baby's daddy. Normally, the wait isn't very long.

While I long for something more, something different, in the world of situation comedy, I find myself routinely left to observe the intact remains of archaic black stereotypes pimping their way across the screen. Though the world of primetime drama allowed Dr. Peter Benton to make his way to the *ER*, Detective Ed Green to search for a sense of *Law & Order*, and attorney Eugene Young to join *The Practice*, in the land of laugh-out-loud situation comedy—with the exception of the splendidly written and acted *The Bernie Mac Show*—the image of America's black citizens is still trapped in a holding pattern: Cute enough to be seen, but not important enough to be taken seriously.

During my youth, television never served as a baby-sitter in our house. However, pop culture fanatic that I've been since the age of five, I managed to place myself in front of a set as often as possible. As an adult, I now understand that my constant channel searching was simply my soul's way of attempting to uncover any trace of someone who reminded me of me. As a teenager, in the early years of the network's most treasured demographic, that's what I believed television's role to be; to provide a glimpse into the life of everyday America. A life like mine. Unfortunately, I found no television reality that came anywhere near mirroring my existence on the planet.

Then, on September 20, 1984, the world as I knew it drastically changed. When the opening credits of *The Cosby Show* rolled, and the Huxtable clan

came tumbling out of their minivan, somewhere deep inside I knew I was witnessing a monumental moment; a dramatic shift in American culture.

For the first time in the history of television, a medium that by 1984 was nearly 40 years old, a vast number of America's black citizens saw an onscreen reality that came closer to resembling their family life than anything ever seen onscreen before. For the first time we weren't simply portrayed as occasional guest stars, whose presence was quickly forgotten once the "very special episode" was over, but as living, breathing, fully functioning human beings. We were doctors and lawyers with extensive education, a sense of direction and a vision for the future.

While not implying that much has drastically changed, the United States of America in the early 1980s was a country struggling under the weight of racial unrest brought center stage in the 1960s and 1970s. Norman Lear's series *All in the Family* (a program which forced the country to step from beneath the false cloud of racial harmony it had been shading itself under) provided a small glimpse into the social climate of the time, though what was truly occurring was too massive for any television screen to capture. Images of Eldridge Cleaver and the Black Panther Party swirled in the atmosphere, outrunning the wrath of Senator Joe McCarthy and J. Edgar Hoover, mingling with unresolved bereavement issues surrounding the deaths of Malcolm X, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and countless other freedom fighters. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 had been signed, but the pain and confusion of American society—struggling beneath the five-hundred-year-old weight of oppression and degradation—had yet to be confronted head-on.

The most popular television images associated with blacks followed specific guidelines: staunchly maternal domestics such as *Beulah* (1950-1953); musical, à la *The Nat King Cole Show* (1956-1957); humorous, as evidenced by *The Flip Wilson Show* (1970-1974); or the trusty sidekick as found on *Benson* (1979-1986), skillfully portrayed by Robert Guillaume. In the minds of Hollywood writers, directors and producers, American blacks still existed on the periphery, never being allowed to land front and center for all to see. Setting the table, but not sitting at it. The school janitor, but never the A student. Then, on a Thursday night at 8pm, three years and eight months into the conservative reign of President Ronald Reagan, Dr. Huxtable, his wife Clair, attorney-at-law, and their children—Sondra, Denise, Theodore, Vanessa and Rudy—altered the American landscape in such a way that it could never be looked at in the same light again.

The first season's opening credits alone, with an almost hypnotic musical intro, suggested the viewer was about to begin a mental journey, a mind-trip to places previously unseen. Television theme songs and opening

credits are meant to provide a peek into the lives of the people the viewer is about to begin observing, as evidenced magnificently by *All in the Family*, *Maude*, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* and even *Welcome Back Kotter*. Suddenly, as this family of seven exited their vehicle, it was as if we were seeing images, characters and stories waiting to be set free and have their day in the sun. For years, the image of black people dancing on television largely consisted of production numbers that were throwbacks to the minstrel-style of the Jim Crow era, or the slide down the Soul Train line on Saturday morning. Throughout the run of *The Cosby Show*, African rhythms, jazz, rap and multicultural artistic imagery served as a detailed introduction to the at-home audience, presenting the full spectrum and diversity of America's black experience.

Although I didn't grow up in a Brooklyn brownstone, or have famous musicians stopping by for dinner, I did have parents who were involved in my education, a spacious backyard and a sister with whom I performed countless skits and full-costume production numbers on our living room staircase. The lifestyle of the Huxtable children was immediately recognizable to me. From *Leave it to Beaver* to *Eight is Enough*, the television industry spent nearly four decades providing white children with the opportunity to observe, and possibly relate to, financially stable, success-driven family environments. For young black children, this concept was simply unheard of.

What stood out immediately with the Huxtable family, is that they genuinely enjoyed being around each other. Indeed there were the normal desires of any teenager to spend time with his/her friends, and the everyday frustrations of parenting that Cliff and Clair endured, but time spent with the family wasn't given an overly negative spin. Their home was a welcoming, safe space where neighbors and friends felt at ease stopping by. It was no longer the "family down the street" that possessed all of the finer things in life. Ten Stigwood Place, the Huxtable residence in Brooklyn Heights, had it all. Suddenly, a black family served as the American ideal.

When Diahann Carroll appeared onscreen in *Julia* (1968-1971), American audiences weren't at a place to comprehend the notion that a single woman, let alone a single black woman, could raise a child and present him with a promising future. The series ended before the viewers ever had the chance to make this decision for themselves. *Sanford and Son* (1972-1977) presented extreme squalor, with Fred and his son Lamont forever struggling to make ends meet in a Los Angeles junkyard. With no one in sight to offer any sound financial advice, the Sanfords were left to take in what the rest of America discarded.

Good Times (1974-1979) showed us the Evans family in constant turmoil with no real hope of ever making it out of the ghetto, and a father unable to

maintain a steady job. American audiences learned to pity this struggling inner-city negro family, destined to remain nearly penniless in Chicago's South Side. Michael, their youngest child and the young black hope, was a politically motivated young man who never learned how to fully rage against the machine and overcome the crushing weight of a racist society. The final episode, titled 'The End of the Rainbow', was a poorly constructed finale that presents the family's exit from the housing projects as more fantasy than any type of reality that a viewer could relate to.

That's My Mama (1974-1975) and *What's Happening?* (1976-1979) fared no better; each continuing to present the black experience in a broken or fractured family unit. *That's My Mama* gave us the character of Clifton Curtis, a young man wandering on an aimless search for himself, with Theresa Merritt in the role of his mother (written as more large-breasted mammy than as a fully fleshed character), while *What's Happening?* saw Roger and Dee Thomas, along with their friends Dwayne Wayne and Re-Run, living their own inner-city blues in fear of a whipping by their mama (the talented Mabel King in yet another role written in mammy style).

The Jeffersons (1975-1985) portrayed Louise Jefferson as a wealthy stay-at-home wife, unsure of what to do with her free time, and abundance of cash, since she was no longer a domestic or working in her husband's shop. Her husband George, a supposedly intelligent and driven businessman, slowly morphed into a caricature of a down-on-his-luck little tramp during the course of the show's run. Their son, Lionel, was intelligent, however he was an adult when the series began. The viewing audience was never given the opportunity to see him being raised, thus his character was observed as the exceptional black child, lucky to be born to parents who attained wealth. Later in the series the characters became more comfortable with their economic status, but by this time the program no longer displayed a political/social bite and had become a standard, run of the mill, one-note situation comedy. However, running for ten years, it showed the strength of the American desire to hold on to the view of wealthy American blacks as a frivolous fantasy.

Arnold and Willis Jackson on *Different Strokes* (1978-1986), once again products of the ghetto, were rescued by the loving hands of wealthy white America. What led series creators Bernie Kukoff and Jeff Harris to think, "A show about a rich old white guy who adopts two little black boys will be a hit" remains an enigma. But the country embraced the concept.

From television's inception, popular American thought was only interested in connecting with certain types of blacks, male or female; dependent, struggling and skating dangerously close to the poverty line when not moving on up to a stratosphere that most people couldn't even begin to

fathom. The Huxtable family took that notion, threw it in the trash and tossed it outside with yesterday's garbage.

As with any good thing, when the program gained in popularity, along came the detractors. America, in all of its ethnic diversity, still wasn't fully prepared to see its black citizens portrayed in such a positive, independent light. The program didn't show white America as a powerful sect of people to be wary of, or even a sect of people worthy of dominating household discussion. While not avoiding or denying the trials and tribulations of the world outside their front door, when the Huxtable family was inside their home, the most important thing to this family was itself.

They aren't real. No one can be that happy.

Their not being real is a given. Situation comedy is but a temporary glance into the world of the characters the writers have created. Somehow, picturing the as-average-as-average-can-be Keaton family on *Family Ties*, with a mix of happy, sad and sappy moments, was considered normal in the 1980s, but a black family that seemed to smile in spite of the pressures of the everyday world wasn't something everyone could grasp.

Clair Huxtable could never have gone to law school, worked those hours, given birth to five children and still have a clean house.

Nor could June Cleaver (*Leave it to Beaver*) clean all day and look smashing in a white cocktail dress, with a steaming hot dinner on the table when her husband and children came home. Even today's viewing audiences realize the utter impossibility of this, but accept the suspension of reality on *Leave it to Beaver* for what it was. While not considered the greatest television program to ever grace the small screen, it occupied its place in the history of American television as a "simple family show." It was the type of home people fantasized about one day having. Was it asking too much for America to offer the same scenario to the black community?

The kids never got spanked, beat or whipped like most black kids do. They weren't black enough.

And so the slave mentality, the brazen white elephant holding court in the American psyche, comes roaring front and center. The holdover from decades before. We must keep our Negroes in check! They must always be recognizable, a step behind us and capable of being spotted from a distance. If not, they may blend in too easily with the rest of the crowd. And if they cause too much of a distraction, they must be whipped into submission, publicly, where everyone can see.

What Bill Cosby did, along with co-creators Ed Weinberger and Michael Leeson, was dismiss the notion of a “certain type” of black person. Slowly, they picked up the baton from *All in the Family*, and subtly started an American dialogue which suggested that race, in and of itself, did not make us as different as we’d been taught to believe. At its core, the show forced us to acknowledge that when it came to parenting and family relations, our similarity, our sameness, was greater than any society was willing to acknowledge. Of course cultural differences and history apply to various situations and circumstances, but at the simplest level we are all human beings in search of the same things for, and from, our families: love, support and understanding. Even today, as the program appears in syndication worldwide, and continues to be embraced, the notion of our similarities makes many uncomfortable. America, after all, is a nation whose power was built on a platform of separation. Whether publicly acknowledged or not, from a 214 year history of white male presidents, to yearly award ceremonies dividing performers into best male and best female, to empowerment organizations broken down by ethnicity, sexuality and gender, American culture is one that thrives on the existence of identities that are separate, distinct and recognizable to the naked eye. *The Cosby Show* made us observe the world through different eyes and realize the glasses society had given us were never rose-colored, but fogged-over, cracked and broken.

After decades of the black image being presented in the form of hookers, drug dealers, baby making machines, welfare recipients, illiterates, hustlers, rapists, thieves and running/jumping athletes with little or no formal education, the notion that we could sit around the dinner table and discuss everyday life was as foreign as the idea of intelligent beings in a galaxy far, far away. Sure Vanessa Huxtable was wonderful, but a black girl poppin’ gum, rolling her head from side to side, with ten-inch nails is more what we’re used to, right? Theodore Huxtable was a nice boy, but wouldn’t it have been better, more recognizable, more familiar, if he put a little more pimp into his step, gave everybody a high-five when he saw them and called his sisters bitch every now and then? Wouldn’t that have kept it a little more real?

The Huxtable children—by virtue of the writers never allowing them to view themselves as second-class citizens—gave thousands of kids the chance to imagine that they could be anything they chose to be. The opportunities of the world lay at their feet if they chose to move toward them. Sondra, the mysterious fifth child, was away at Princeton and doing amazingly well in her studies. When had the name of a black child and a prestigious university ever existed so harmoniously in the same sentence, without an athletic scholarship being referred to? Denise had her own sense of style and flair, not

tied down to how popular culture suggested young black girls should behave, or what type of music they should listen to. Theodore, with a learning disability that he overcame, realized his love for the written word and the ways in which it could inspire impressionable youth. Vanessa, a more independent character than she is ever given credit for, had no desire to follow the life her parents mapped out, but intended to live the life she chose. And young Rudy? When had a little black girl ever been considered America's sweetheart?

For all the talk of "fakeness" and "un-reality," the Huxtable family was presented no differently from other situation comedies of the time. There were college-educated parents with a vision for their children, who were not fulfilling that vision, wondering how they could calmly fix the situation without going insane. There were grandparents making appearances to remind the children that their parents had once been as mischievous and misdirected as them. There were neighbors who dropped by to share the trials and tribulations of their crazy lives. And in thirty minutes, the viewer was transported over the river and through the woods to a tidy ending until the following week's episode, just like every other situation comedy. The only difference with *The Cosby Show* was that these black people, this African American family, these Negro parents, these colored children...were happy.

From copies of *Ebony*, *Jet* and *Essence* magazine casually being read as the characters relaxed on their couch, to art that depicted the black experience hanging on every possible wall, to the soundtrack of black life heard in jazz, blues and soul records played during the course of countless episodes, Bill Cosby never needed to play the race card. He simply placed a cultural history in view, and allowed it to subliminally enter the mind of America.

If not for the Huxtable residence, where else would jazz vocalist Nancy Wilson, musician B. B. King, African song-stylist Miriam Makeba, crooner Joe Turner, the legendary Lena Horne, and entertainer extraordinaire Sammy Davis Jr., have been able to pop into the living rooms of American audiences with such ease? The Huxtable living room provided insight into a cultural history often ignored in classroom textbooks, and put it on display once a week.

If not for the Huxtable kitchen, where else would America's black citizens hear conversations about health issues and the best ways to take care of their bodies? Where else would a family such as this be shown making meals together, sharing secrets and cultural remembrances, passing on the unwritten history of a people from generation to generation? When else had the ancestral chain been so realistically portrayed as successful from one link to the next?

Since the program went off the air in 1992, I continually find myself in conversation with people of various races and ethnicities stating that they

recognized members of their own family within the Huxtable clan. I also come across those who say that too big a deal is made about the impact of the program on television and American history. They argue that a family is a family, and that a family's cultural heritage has no bearing on the viewer. But I know better.

Just as I know there were happy Latino households when Desi Arnaz appeared in *I Love Lucy*, and single Jewish women able to relate to the trials and tribulations of Rhoda Morgenstern on *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, and active, energetic elderly women relieved at the arrival of *The Golden Girls*, and that the gay and lesbian community breathed a sigh of relief when Ellen Morgan stepped out of the closet on *Ellen*, *The Cosby Show* allowed a segment of society that often felt ignored, to finally feel that they too had a place at the table, and had as much right as anyone else to grab their piece of the American pie.

On May 19, 2002, NBC aired *The Cosby Show: A Look Back*. With the exception of actress Lisa Bonet (Huxtable daughter Denise), whose presence was greatly missed and left an obvious hole in the evening's presentation, the program was a touching tribute to a family admired by many. Through hours of footage, and the actors' own personal recollections, we were once again reminded why we as a country welcomed these people into our homes. They made us laugh and feel good about ourselves. Men were not more important than women. There was no battle between light-skin and dark-skin blacks. The Huxtable family simply gave us an opportunity, for thirty minutes each week, to not let the weight of the world hold us down, but to take a deep breath, exhale, regroup and move toward the next day with a sense of purpose.

For some reason, the producers must have felt that the show had aged, or that there was the possibility of an audience not tuning in for the broadcast. They chose to add rap impresario Sean "Puffy" Combs into the clips—discussing his affection for the program—to, I suppose, pull in that young, hip demographic so treasured by the networks. Unfortunately, I think they underestimated the intelligence of the viewing audience and the power the show still has to this day. It is a legendary classic, in need of no one or nothing to provide greater support. It stands sufficiently on its own.

Toward the end of the program, actress Tempest Bledsoe (Huxtable daughter Vanessa), stated "I'm most proud of being part of monumental television history. You know, there are only four other Cosby kids on Earth." I'm unsure of how to break this to her, but while she may not have seen me sitting in the backseat of the station wagon during family trips, or playing with Rudy and her friend Peter in the living room, or performing right alongside them at

their grandparents' anniversary parties, I was living inside of that house as well.

I am, and always will be, a Cosby kid.