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CLAIR HUXTABLE, MEET RENÉE RADDICK How Long a Way Have You Really Come, Baby?

Women lawyers are a common sight today. Since the last quarter of the twentieth century, girls have attended major American law schools and have been recruited by leading law firms. No one questions a woman's right to practice law anymore, at least not outwardly. In addition, the profession has become accessible to all women of all races. Black female lawyers would certainly not have been a predictable occurrence at the end of the nineteenth century, but today black female counsel or judges do not cause the slightest blink of an eye, or at least no longer cause white male lawyers to choke over business lunches.

Film and television have confirmed this impression that women have indeed come a long way in the legal profession. The first time a female lawyer was the main character of a major television network sitcom was in 1954. The series did not however revolve around her professional activities, nor did it last very long. Moreover, audience access was relatively limited because the program was broadcast at 11 o'clock in the evening. The television legal series of the 1960s included many women, but mostly in paralegal positions. Then, in the 1980s, women lawyers were everywhere, in private practice and in the District Attorney's office, from *L.A. Law* to *Night Court* (both on NBC).

The Cosby Show, also on NBC, from 1984 to 1992, was the number-one rated sitcom for four of its eight years on the air. Clair Huxtable, the mother in this series was a lawyer. She was a particularly important symbol of women's achievements as she was a successful black female professional, married to another successful professional (Cliff Huxtable was a New York obstetrician), with whom she shared a loving, caring, "normal" family of five

children. Her upper middle class lifestyle was apparent through signs such as the family's classic brownstone house on an elegant street in New York.

Another black female lawyer who came later to the television screen was Renée Raddick of the *Ally McBeal* sitcom, running from 1997 to 2002 (on Fox TV). Renée was a deputy District Attorney living and working in Boston. She was an independent professional woman, although admittedly looking for a soul-mate as most of the other female lawyers, of different ethnic groups, in the series. Renée gave perhaps a more realistic vision of life as a big city female lawyer than did Clair, whose life seemed nearly too perfect to be true.

How exactly would the well-known slogan of the advertising campaign for Virginia Slims (a brand of cigarettes produced for a special consumer target in the years of the Woman's Movement: the liberated female smoker) actually apply to the women studied here? The slogan, "You've come a long way, Baby!", could not ring more true if one were to compare Clair and Renée to someone like Myra Bradwell who, in 1873, was refused a license to practice law in Illinois, simply because she was a woman. Myra had been at the top of her class at law school and the editor of the *Chicago Legal News*, a respected journal. She came from a good liberal Illinois family that both could afford and would consent to send a daughter to law school. She appealed the Illinois court decision to the Supreme Court of the United States which upheld the refusal to issue her a practicing license saying "the paramount destiny and mission of women are to fulfill the noble and benign offices of wife and mother. This is the law of the Creator" (*Bradwell v. Illinois*). What could Myra Bradwell have expected had she been black as well?

It is clear that for black women of the twentieth century, entry into the legal profession was more complicated than for their white sisters, for whom the battle was only fought on the grounds of gender. A surface reading, as media scholars would say, of *The Cosby Show* and of *Ally McBeal* give the impression that both Clair and Renée had much in common and represented the progress achieved by black women in making a place for themselves in the legal profession. A more analytical reading, on the other hand, may give a different answer to the question of exactly how far Clair and Renée and the women they represented had really come.

Television viewers, meet Clair Huxtable

Cosby's original project, which was rejected by both ABC and NBC, revolved around the family life of a blue-collar worker. When Cosby decided to change the main characters into upper-middle-class professionals, NBC agreed to produce the series. The family was obviously comfortable but frugal. It was

important for the Huxtables to educate their children in the values recognized as those of the Protestant ethic. This was meant to be a sign of the parents' own good upbringing. All of the Huxtable children who grew to college age during the years of broadcast attended schools of higher education in the series, two of them went to Princeton and New York University. After an expected series of boyfriends and girlfriends permitting narrative variations on a single theme, the two eldest daughters married and a third became engaged. It is necessary to bear in mind that the United States at this time was governed by the Reagan administration. It was thus a time of strong accentuation on family values. The program offered something for all audiences as well. The family was close-knit but modern, dealing humorously with the minor hitches of living together. Parents and children viewing the series were thus invited to laugh at and with each other. White middle-class audiences saw in the show evidence of a non-racist American society and black audiences were pleased to see a positive image of black Americans, a contrast to the usual portrayals of blacks as poor, unemployed or outright villains.

The Huxtables' social status removed the members of their family from the majority of those problems traditionally facing black characters in television programs up to that period. The fact that the show basically avoided any racial issues helped all audiences identify with the Huxtables as modern day parents trying "to raise a family in a calm and loving manner" (Brooks and Marsh, 211). Indeed there were very few episodes that brought white characters into the cast. However, the absence of whites, although criticized by some as creating an isolated or even unrealistic world, was alternately considered to render the issue of race irrelevant. The deliberate focus of the show was the family and any conflicts dealt with in the weekly episodes were those between siblings, between generations, between genders.

Because the series reassured white audiences and gave a positive image of themselves to black audiences, *The Cosby Show* was rated first or among the top five shows for practically all the years of its run. Clair may not have been the star of the show, but she definitely prevailed over the family. If the children were often able to pull one over Cliff, it was very rare that they could fool their mother. Her children recognized her authority yet trusted her as they knew she understood them and was open to dialogue. She was a no-nonsense person, but had a sense of humor and was very playful. Clair's relationship to Cliff also was a double-faceted one. She enjoyed a certain complicity with her husband in their important united front vis-à-vis the children. Yet, in addition, she was constantly waiting for him round the bend as he gullibly got taken in by one of the children's maneuvers or tried to sneak in some high cholesterol treat into the daily diet she watched over so carefully.

That was perhaps what was so seductive for women viewers. The minor conflicts which permitted weekly plots, always ended up with the spouses on the same side. After all the years of mutual child-raising, she and Cliff still cared so much about one another. She took good care of him not because it was expected of her, but because she was shown to want him to stick around and in good condition. Clair was happy. It was suggested that she had a good sex life with a happy husband. Clair was the symbol of common sense and she was modest. She was a veritable wonder woman. As such, she was an inspiration to many female viewers, especially those engaging in a surface reading of the discourse of the series. Clair made it all look so easy:

She has a full-time profession, is raising five children, does all the cooking and household management, all without any hired help or child-care workers, and, to cap it all, she never has a hair out of place and rarely shows any signs of strain. [Fiske b, 112]

Indeed, Clair was attractive and always elegantly though simply dressed. She was usually in good spirits. She rarely seemed hassled over the difficult balance between a professional life and household responsibilities. Television viewers rarely, if ever, saw Clair get home late from court or the office to make dinner. She was never seen preoccupied by a case and, except for once, never absent to prepare one. In addition she almost always had time to drop whatever she was doing to become available for Cliff or one of her children who needed her help or advice or just plain attention. Nothing was more important than her family and they were all happy thanks to her sensible, loving care. Clair was a master. She had everything under control. She was a picture of good taste and good behavior. Her professional life, it was suggested, was just as successful as her family life which was a great source of happiness and fulfillment.

Television viewers, meet Renée Raddick

In 1997, five years after *The Cosby Show* went off the air, ABC and Fox bought two new legal series created by David Kelley. Each of these series included a young black female lawyer. In *The Practice* (ABC), a dramatic series, Rebecca Washington started off as a paralegal and office manager who eventually studied to become a full-fledged lawyer. In *Ally McBeal* (Fox) a sitcom, Renée Raddick was a deputy District Attorney who shared an apartment with Ally, a white female lawyer in a private law firm. Renée and Ally were good friends and Renée was usually the source of sound advice in her roommate's troublesome adventures with men.

That information about Ally's background or her family should have been incorporated into a number of the subplots was justifiable as she was the principal character. However, television viewers came to learn a lot about the extra-professional lives of many of Ally's colleagues as well. Nevertheless, not much was ever divulged about Renée. What was known about her could be deduced from experience of American society. For example, as mentioned above, Renée was a deputy D.A. This is neither a high-powered nor a well-paid position in public legal service. Since in the United States, class is often linked to money, it can be hypothesized that Renée was of working-class or lower-middle-class origin. At one point in the series, Renée, having had enough of depressing cases, decided to set up a partnership with an older female judge who wished to go back into practice. The fact that Renée went into partnership with an older professional woman, and one who had become a judge thus symbolizing professional success, made it possible to avoid dealing in the narrative with the financial worries involved in setting up a firm. The fact that the judge was white did not hurt either.

If Clair Huxtable operated mostly in her home, the picture was quite different for Renée. Her operating spaces included the courtroom. In fact, Renée was often seen in court and shown to be quite competent there. In this regard, Renée's life was portrayed more realistically than Clair's. Like most of the female lawyers of *Ally McBeal*, Renée was never seen buried behind a mountain of casebooks late at night at the office to prepare a court performance. However, it is important that as a female lawyer she was shown to be active and capable in the professional sphere.

Kelley has said that *Ally McBeal* was not about the law but about solitude and searching for a soul-mate. Although part of the merit of this series was the fact that it often posed important questions about the role of law in society and the use citizens make of the laws, it is true that an ever-present parallel theme was the quest for love and the construction and breakdown of personal relationships. Therefore, it was not surprising that Renée's operating spaces included extra-professional territory like the apartment she shared with Ally, restaurants, and especially the bar in which all of the lawyers of the series went after work to unwind. Many episodes ended at the bar where cases were discussed, colleagues and clients danced with each other or watched others dance. Some of the lawyers even got up to sing, some reluctantly, some not so reluctantly, and some with so much exuberance that one could wonder whether the law had really been a first career choice. This was the case for Renée. It was rare that she would miss a chance to sing. In this, she was often placed in a competitive relationship with Elaine Vassal, an oversexed secretary in the firm of Cage & Fish where Ally worked. Renée's frequent rivalry on

stage at the bar with Elaine made possible certain assumptions about Renée's class, tastes and professional commitment which will be discussed below.

These were not the only contradictions noticeable in Renée's character. Like Clair, Renée was always there for sound advice which Ally often needed with respect to her love life. Nevertheless, Renée's own private life was a shambles. Like Ally, she made it clear that her first priority was finding a man, but there never was a steady boyfriend to last more than a couple of episodes. There was a brief encounter with one of the main litigators of Cage & Fish which fizzled out by itself without any real breakup or follow-up in the overall story. There was an episode of suggested jealousy and maneuvering over Ally's black American doctor boyfriend of a few weeks. The underlying feelings became clear while Renée sang a song with him at the bar for Ally's birthday. There was another brief relationship with a sexy, male, less than scrupulous lawyer working for Cage & Fish during the next to last season. He, like others, arrived and left, using Renée for sex, interested in someone else, never phoning.

Because of her status as a single professional woman, Renée could also be seen somewhat as Clair's opposite. Her balancing act was not between family and career, but between professional ambition and her desire for personal happiness. Renée's adventures were mostly disappointing, but she was perseverant in trying to find a good man. She was however also lucid about finding Prince Charming: he was probably not out there she would say, or if he was, he was already married. Renée thus offered television viewers a very modern, more realistic image of the working woman of today. The suggested promiscuity could be seen as a wink at Clinton's administration in contrast to the family values promoted by Reaganism in the 1980s.

The polysemy of television texts

John Fiske (a, chapter one) has explained that television programs survive when they appeal to different viewers, which they can do because the television texts carry a wide variety of meanings. How the different groups among television audiences read the same texts (television discourse) determines the meanings they will find and/or create. As mentioned above, there is a superficial or surface reading possible of Clair's character and the scenes in which she appears. This would produce an interpretation of her as seen above, a successful professional and homemaker easily balancing the different aspects of her life as wife, mother, lawyer and finding the time to take care of herself as well. However, analyzing the codes of television texts makes it possible to uncover other meanings structured into the programs studied here and to arrive

at different interpretations of Clair and Renée and the various messages they project to television audiences. In other words, decoding the images of Clair and Renée on screen can reveal different ideologies structured into the texts.

Space and settings

During the seasons of *The Cosby Show*, Clair was practically never seen in a professional setting. Her territory was the home and her career as a lawyer was basically accessory. When in one episode Cliff sits in on a court session in which Clair pleads, he commends her when court has adjourned on how pretty and sexy a lawyer she is. Another episode shows her prepping her eldest daughter who was studying to be a lawyer, but Clair's role here was principally that of a source of support, a mother, a caretaker. Clair was often shown putting away groceries, cooking or checking on what her husband or the children would eat. Thus, her main role was to nurture her family and her career as a lawyer was granted to her, like an ornament, as long as it did not interfere with her essential function. Thus, there was an underlying ideology at work in the text, that of a conservative patriarchal society. The words of the Supreme Court in 1873 resound again:

The civil law, as well as nature herself, has always recognized a wide difference in the respective spheres and destinies of man and woman. Man is, or should be, woman's protector and defender. The natural and proper timidity and delicacy which belongs to the female sex evidently unfits it for many of the occupations of civil life. The constitution of the family organization, which is founded in the divine ordinance, as well as in the nature of things, indicates the domestic sphere as that which properly belongs to the domain and functions of womanhood. The harmony, not to say identity, of interests and views which belong, or should belong, to the family institution is repugnant to the idea of a woman adopting a distinct and independent career from that of her husband. [Bradwell v. Illinois].

Contrary to Clair, Renée's territory was more diversified. Renée showed competence in the court room scenes of which there were many. However, as a deputy District Attorney she enjoyed neither the power nor the prestige, nor again the money, of private litigators. Renée was empowered more through her occasional singing performances at the bar in the evening. When she sang she dominated the stage, everyone watched her and overtly appreciated her talents. She frequently entered into competition with Elaine who was not a lawyer and whose only moments of glory were when she sang on stage. Competition exists between equals. Why then was Renée's rival a person whose professional status was beneath her own? In addition, despite the fun-loving atmosphere of the bar after hours, it can be easily imagined that for a lawyer

to sing on stage before colleagues, adversary counsel, and clients, projects somewhat of a less serious image of Renée as a lawyer. This is not to suggest that Lisa Nicole Carson, who played Renée, should not have sung on the show. Her performances were good and not incongruous with the various plot lines of the episodes in which they occurred. However, meanings depend on how one considers the same details of a text and Renée's delight at singing on stage challenges her image as a serious lawyer.

Failure in Renée's private space would not have been so important if it were not for the constant reminders that she and Ally would have dropped everything for the perfect love and a family. Renée could have been seen as a free woman, not bound by the responsibilities of a household like Clair's, however she was deprived of this image as she was not free by choice. Nell, one of Ally's co-counsel at Cage & Fish often proclaimed her total disinterest in maternity, even disgust, and thus provided a yardstick by which to measure the other free, modern, professional women of the series. It is nevertheless necessary to remember that Nell was usually depicted as a bitch. The underlying message then was quite clear. There is a price to pay for professional success. If the male legal profession "makes" room for a female colleague, she will have to renounce "having it all".

Was Renée being punished for trying to have it all? In this, there was more similarity between Clair and Renée than difference. Clair's professional life was alluded to, but was not a screen reality. She seemed to have both a family and a career, but the career was illusory. Therefore, she did not need to be "punished" since she did not really challenge the dominant male ideology underlying the text.

Personal appearance, hair and clothes

A study of Clair's appearance will also provide further possible readings. Clair always dressed simply but very well. Her clothes were of a classical style. She wore skirts or trousers, but very rarely jeans and her clothes were never tight. Clair often wore a silk scarf on her shoulders and some gold jewelry, which are fashion conventions of quality. She was attractive but her appearance did not make any waves. She dressed according to her age and class. Her hair was straightened. Her second daughter Denise, on the contrary, dressed in a much more original way. This was acceptable as she was identified through several devices as a kooky "independent-minded teenager whose departure to college (led) to a series of her own, 'A Different World' on NBC" [Brooks & Marsh 210, 259].

Everything about Clair's appearance fit her role and status in society. Her elegant clothes were both a sign of financial success (hers or her hus-

band's at this point is of no importance) and upper-middle-class good taste. As said above, *The Cosby Show* did not confront the problems of race relations in the country at the time of its run. This was not the purpose of the show. Clair's clothes and straightened hair were also signs that she adhered to the appearance codes of the "dominant" white society. Clair had assimilated and thus projected a reassuring image to television viewers. Assimilation is part of the process of integration and thus the message received in televisionland was that, as in the Cosby family home, all was well.

If Clair's tastefulness implied success, Renée's tastelessness reinforced the impression that, for her, success was not yet quite within reach. As the seasons progressed, Renée's appearance became increasingly encoded. Her hairstyles changed regularly but often took one form or another of an Afro. Sometimes her hair could even be described as wild. Renée's makeup was frequently exaggerated. Close-ups drew attention to the vivid colors chosen for her eye shadow and her full lips in bright red lipsticks. It could be argued that her skin color allowed her the possibility to take liberties with colors that white girls could not. However, the liberties that Renée took with clothes cannot be argued away as easily.

Renée wore short skirts as did most of the females on the show. Ally was known during the first season for her excessively short skirts which got her a contempt of court charge from one totally humorless judge. Renée's skirts were not only short, they were very, very tight. What is more, Renée took in one season to wearing suits in court with a low décolleté and must have had a super Wonderbra underneath. Her topheaviness became so exaggerated it was a wonder she did not topple over while addressing a jury. Male colleagues made comments to her about her inappropriate dress in court. This became a bone of contention, though, granted, not a major theme, during a few episodes. In one particular broadcast, she and a male colleague were arguing a sexual harassment case and discussions between them during court recess over Renée's outfits offered television viewers different perspectives from which to consider the problem of appropriate dress and behavior in the workplace.

One decoding of Renée's wild hairstyles or exaggerated makeup or dress could be that she was totally liberated and could assume who she was. Another reading was that she was tasteless, oversexed, threatening, and unacceptable. Renée's tastelessness or voluptuousness, according to who is in the audience, was both based on an obviously exaggerated sexuality. Even her way of speaking sometimes became raspy and slow, inside court as well as outside. Sexuality in a woman, especially on television, is threatening. Women's sexuality is still a taboo and many of the men in the series were un-

comfortable with overt sexual signs from Renée, Elaine, or some women clients. Their discomfort was an opportunity for humor of course, but the frequent recurrences of such opportunities made it clear that there were deliberate choices made in writing, costume, and even casting.

Renée's unacceptability is highlighted by the comparisons which can be made between her and the other females she dealt with in the series. The first obvious contrast to come to mind is between Renée and Ally. Renée was black, had little class and questionable taste, appeared as slightly overweight, very curved, and quite hot. Ally was white, had straight dark blond hair, and wore designer clothes on a skinny androgynous body. Although pretty, Ally was sexless. Her body was straight as a stick. As her skirts got longer during the seasons, her sexuality coincidentally improved. This must have come from greater maturity and the writers' impatience with her adolescent personality. Nevertheless, Ally did not present a threat, Renée did.

Another female with whom Renée could be paired and compared was Elaine Vassal. Elaine was presented at times as Ally's assistant and at others as a legal secretary in the firm; her surname was probably not a complete coincidence. It has already been noted that in singing at the bar, both Elaine and Renée were very ready volunteers and often fought to upstage each other. Singing empowered both Renée and Elaine, allowing the assumption that their professional lives were not complete sources of power, especially not for Elaine. Of all the women in the series, Elaine was, strangely or not, the most like Renée in appearance. Elaine was white and blond, but her hair was not straight. She was also a bit pudgy and often wore tight clothes. Mention was frequently made of her sex drives and it was obvious that she made many of the men in the firm uncomfortable although some others hardly noticed her at all. Elaine was pretty, as was Renée, but her excesses and her tastelessness as well as her professional status suggested she was of a lower class than the other white females in the firm. Both Renée and Elaine were threats and as such had to be contained and kept at a distance.

Clair could not really be contrasted to anyone in *The Cosby Show*. The other regular women were her daughters. The only other possible pair that could be made was obviously with her husband, Cliff. No light is shed by such a comparison on Clair's class or race, but some insight can be gleaned as to her power as a woman. Cliff was a comic and Clair was his "straightwoman." This means that as with most comedy teams, the comic's foolish behavior makes his partner seem to dominate. Clair was the Dean Martin and Cliff the Jerry Lewis of the team and much of her power came from his being a lovable bungler.

Girls, meet Coretta

Renée disappeared from the series during the last season. Whatever the personal or contractual reasons for her absence, no explanation real or otherwise was ever written into the scenario. She reappeared, tattooed, in the final episode as all Ally's friends gathered at the bar to wish her well before she would move to another city and thus close the series. During the last season, several newcomers came and went as Kelley tried to decide whether or not and how to end this sitcom. One newcomer who stayed throughout the season was Coretta, a black female lawyer hired at Cage & Fish.

Coretta's resemblance to Clair is striking. She was a slim, though not anorexic, elegant dresser. She usually wore suits and skirts which were feminine but not frilly. She did not wear flashy colors. Her makeup was not excessive and her longish hair was straightened and either tied back or worn loose, but not wild nor in an eccentric hairdo. Her clothes were in good taste and indicative of the same social class as Clair's. Her general appearance was so close to that of Clair that one is almost tempted to indulge in bad psychoanalysis and wonder whether the first letter of her name was accidental.

Indeed, she was Clair's equivalent in many ways. It became clear early after her arrival that she was a reliable person who would be able to help her colleagues when facing minor difficulties. Coretta was a competent litigator who pulled Richard Fish out of a difficult case when she seconded him at court. Because of Richard's bungling, a client almost lost his trial, but Coretta turned the situation around thanks to clever pleading. Coretta was also of not necessarily sound, but always imaginative advice so she was often able to cheer up co-counsel or find a solution for an office friend with a problem. She was cheerful, funny, and uncomplicated. Coretta did not get involved in the personal lives of her colleagues and the audience did not get a view of her own personal life. Her operating spaces thus were essentially her professional spaces: court and the law firm. Although Clair's professional life was rarely seen, for Coretta, it was essentially this aspect of her life that was present in the narrative. However she was very like Clair because she was a caregiver for the office family.

Coretta therefore was a nurturer who, like Clair, did not have to deal with the conflict between her career and her personal life. Her cheerful disposition, her professional competence and reliability as well as her tastefulness in appearance and behavior made her as reassuring a character as Clair had been nearly twenty years earlier. Since Coretta presented no threat in the ways that Renée did, she had less difficulty in finding her place in the firm, and in the profession. She was empowered in court as second chair to Richard who would not have managed without her. Consequently, there is again a surface

reading that renders Coretta a successful female professional. Another possible reading, however, literally places her in second chair, the efficient savior of her boss and mother to a reconstituted family.

Coretta did not fill in Renée's place in Ally's world. Nevertheless, when she came to the series, Renée was essentially gone. Coretta's differences from Renée and her likenesses to Clair are significant reinforcers of what Fiske would call the dominant white male ideology structured into these television texts. Had black female lawyers come as far as the advertising slogan predicted so long ago? A reading resistant to the dominant ideology might find that they had, because these women clearly claimed their right to have both a happy private and a successful professional life. A different reading based on an analysis of the codes built into the texts would lead to the alternative conclusion that women were still being forced to choose between these two worlds and were not really taken seriously. The message going out to television viewers was that professional women just could not have it all.

Both Clair and Coretta sent messages outward which reassured both black and white audiences, with positive images of black female professionals and indications that American society was an integrated society offering equal opportunity to anyone who is efficient and willing to do a job. For those who felt that affirmative action had outlived its necessity, this reading of *The Cosby Show* and of Coretta's character in *Ally McBeal* was a welcome message. Inward readings based on a close analysis of television codes and devices suggest a different message. Where is the reality? Myra Bradwell would certainly be granted a practicing license today but at what price? On the surface, the legal profession seems to be conquered territory. However, the multiple interpretations of these characters' personal and professional lives engages viewers in a dialogue over questions that have apparently not yet been truly answered.

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