

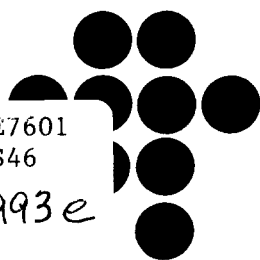
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COMMUNICATIONS
FORUM

"From *Julia* to *Cosby* : Race and American Television"

October 8, 1993

3:00 to 5:00 p.m.

Bartos Theatre

20 Ames Street

Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Cambridge, Massachusetts

MIT COMMUNICATIONS FORUM

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Speakers:

Aniko Bodoroghkozy, Lecturer
Communications Studies
Concordia University

Justin Lewis, Associate Professor
Department of Communications
University of Massachusetts, Amherst

Patricia A. Turner, Associate Professor
African-American and African Studies Program, American Studies Program
University of California, Davis

Ayida Mthembu, moderator
Assistant Dean in Student Assistance Services
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Kelly M. Greenhill, Rapporteur
Graduate Student, Dept. of Political Science
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

MODERATOR: I would like to welcome you to today's Communications Forum, entitled *From Julia to Cosby: Race and American Television*. We are privileged to have three panelists here who will speak about this very interesting topic. Our first speaker, Aniko Bodroghkozy is currently a lecturer in the Department of Communications at Concordia University, and is concurrently finishing her doctoral dissertation entitled *Groove Tube and Real Revolution: the Youth Rebellion of the 1960s on Popular Culture* at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. Ms. Bodroghkozy will be speaking about the relationship of the television show *Julia* to the 1960s civil rights movement.

The second panelist, Justin Lewis is an associate professor at the Department of Communications at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. His most recent book *Enlightened Racism: The Cosby Show, Audiences, and the American Dream* will form the basis of his talk today. Specifically, he will discuss a recent ethnographic study of black and white audience responses to *The Cosby Show*.

Finally, we have Patricia Turner, an associate professor in the African and American Studies Program at the University of California at Davis. She is currently working on a book entitled *Blues for Calaban and Topsy*, which centers on shifting representations of "intelligent" African-Americans on television. Without further ado, I welcome all of them and you to this Communications Forum.

ANIKO BODROGHKOZY (AB): I have done work on the television show *Julia*. First, I will give a little background about where the show came from, and try to situate it between the civil rights movement and the history of representations of African-Americans on television. *Julia* premiered in 1968, a crucial year in the civil rights movement--a year of enormous social and cultural dislocations, the year that Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated, the year of the Poor People's Campaign, and the year that many poor neighborhoods exploded into rebellion and riot. It was also a period in which Afro-Americans were starting to see more representations of themselves on commercial television, typically in sidekick roles (e.g. Bill Cosby in *I, Spy* and Nichelle Nichols in *Star Trek*). We also began to see more African-Americans in commercials.

Julia was noteworthy as the first black family sitcom to appear on TV since the 1950s, when shows like *Amos 'n Andy* had been taken off of the air due to controversies surrounding their stereotypical presentations of blacks. 1968 was also the first time we actually saw blacks in leading character roles. *Julia* starred Dihann Carroll as a widowed black nurse, raising her disgustingly adorable son in an integrated middle-class apartment building. The network, NBC, originally thought the show would fail abysmally. But they planned to do what they viewed as a socially responsible act anyway, as an attempt to break the television color bar. However, the show had a very successful three year run. Though quite successful, the show generated an enormous amount of controversy over issues of representation, specifically the way that Dihann Carroll represented a specific idea of the African-American experience. The controversy surrounded whether or not she was a "white Negro," and the fact that many thought the lifestyle she and Corey lived indicated nothing about how the majority of blacks lived.

I am going to show a few clips to give you a sense what this show was like. (*Video clips of Julia shown here--several comedic episodes are shown.*) I think these give you some sense of the textual innocuousness of the program. It did not really deal with race issues at all. My research on the show revolved around a series of viewer letters to the show's producer, Hal Kanter. He deposited his papers at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin. There was a big cache of letters from viewers writing to the producer. What I found fascinating about these letters was the way these viewers used this seemingly innocuous television show to think through changing definitions of what it meant to be black and white, within the cauldron of American race relations at this key moment in history.

I thought I would go through some of what I found in these letters, as I am particularly interested in how people use the texts of popular culture to make sense of their

own social situations. So a show like *Julia*, coming at a moment when racial issues were so highly charged, can give us some clues about how people were trying to make sense of those kinds of issues at that point in history. I want to start with some white viewers, many who were very self-conscious about their whiteness. Many of the viewers who wrote to Hal Kanter to say how much they liked the show felt compelled to identify the fact that they were white (and yet liked it, anyway). One person, for example, wrote, "I am white, but I like *Julia*." There was almost a sense that the show was not being targeted at white viewers. Another wrote, "My whole family, from grandmother down to my five year old loves it; we just happen to be Caucasian." There is this weird sense that "white" as a category was no longer normalized, so some viewers felt they had to point out that they were white and yet they were enjoying this "black" show.

Another strategy that some white viewers used to derive pleasure from this show was to deny difference between the experience of black and white Americans. One example is a letter from a 15 year old girl, who wrote, "Some people have an idea of a peaceful and loving existence. So what if their skin pigmentation is different and their philosophies are different than ours, they are still people." One other woman wrote, "I love the show. Keep up the good work; this way the world will realize the Negro is just like everyone else, with feelings and habits as the whites have." Hence there was another way for whites to make sense of the show, which was to erase difference between white and black. The problem with this is that when viewers tried to deny difference, the norm was a white norm of experience. There were some textual clues in the show that allowed white viewers to make this analysis because the Baker's lifestyle does suggest and mimic this idealized notion of white middle class living. There are no markers of any specific African-American tradition. At least *The Cosby Show* made attempts to show that some African-American culture or tradition was being addressed in the show. They had, for example, works by black artists on their walls. So, there were some indications attaching the Huxtables to a black historical tradition, which was not the case in *Julia*.

Some white viewers who wrote to the producer were not so enthusiastic about the show. One complaint expressed was that the show displayed no differences, that it was portraying blacks just like whites; this is the notion of the "white Negro." Some white viewers demanded that the characters be made more black, not that any of these viewers suggested just what that would mean. Some press critics asked, for example, why *Julia* was living in a white middle-class apartment building if the real black experience was the ghetto experience. There was a playing around with what is the black American experience. Is it the ghetto experience? Is it the experience of young African-American males? A lot of criticism in the popular press surrounded the fact that *Julia* was a middle-class woman, while at that time so much of the socially circulated commentary was "the black problem," in which "the problem" was seen to be young black men in the ghettos. So there was a lot of anxiety involved in figuring out exactly what the black experience was, and how it should be represented on television.

Another thing I found really interesting in this batch of letters to Hal Kanter, were letters specifically from black viewers, or viewers who identified themselves as black. There were a number of strategies used by these viewers to understand the show. One strategy which appeared again and again was a participatory strategy, in which black viewers would itemize what they found wrong with the show, and then at the end of their letters they would say something like, "Well, if you would care to use my services, I write short stories and I would love to write some scripts for you." There was a real sense of viewers wanting to get involved with the production of the program as a strategy to deal with the fact that while the program was trying in some way to represent African-Americans the show was written principally by whites.

A further example of this participatory strategy can be seen in a letter by an eleven year old boy who wrote, "I am a Negro, and I am almost in the same position as Corey. Your show really tells how the average black person lives. I like your show so much, if you ever have a part to fill I would be glad to fill it." This was a way for this child to enjoy

the show by climbing into the text and becoming Corey's friend. Another letter came from a female teacher in Los Angeles, "The thought occurred to me that Julia might be in need of a close friend on the show. Or Corey Baker may need a good first grade teacher: me." She ended the letter in a very interesting way, by stating "I am not a militant, but a very proud Negro." So I think this participatory quality was a way for some black people to enter into the text, which they knew was being produced for them by whites. They conducted this fantasy of being able to interact with the show and intervene in it. This may have given some black viewers what they saw as control of the show, trying to make it their own.

One of the main criticisms of the show (much of which came from the black press) was the fact that Julia was a single mother. It was another representation of the black family as being without a father, and even though Julia's husband supposedly died in Vietnam, there was still a lot of controversy surrounding the notion of the "black matriarch." There was, and there still is, a whole cultural dilemma about whether matriarchal families are by nature dysfunctional, and whether they create pathologies. (For example, the 1965 Moynihan report basically blamed this family structure for all of the pathological situations in black communities.) I came across a number of letters from black women viewers who castigated the show precisely for portraying a black family that had no male head. One letter said, "You white men have never given the black man anything but a hard time. If you really want to do some good, you'll marry Julia to a strong black man before the coming season is over. Take her from that white doctor's office, and put her in the home as a housewife where she belongs. Otherwise a lot of black women, like me, who love, honor, and respect their black husbands will exclude Julia from our TV viewing, just as you have excluded black men from your show."

There was a real sense of seeing this show as a larger manifestation of social controversy. Looking at the text today, it looks so innocuous, but at the time it aired it raised enormous amounts of emotion. One thing I found particularly surprising were racist responses to the show. This show went to such lengths to evacuate racial differences, and yet there were large numbers of letters that were vehemently racist. Many were anonymous, which really indicates that these people did not want to set up a dialog with the producer, or anyone else. They just wanted to spew forth their venom. One person, who signed their letter, "The silent majority from Texas" wrote, "My whole life I used to live around the Negroes, and they used to be really fine people until the TV set came out and ruined the whole world. Not only have you poor white trash taken advantage of them and ruined their chances, now you have ruined the college set. You are good at getting people at their most vulnerable, and changing their entire thinking." Another said, "We've had so much color shoved down our throats on special programs this summer. It is enough to make a person sick." Yet another said, "After all the riots and the network filled black shows this summer, white people are not feeling that kindly towards colored people shows. You are ahead of the time on this one."

To wrap this up, the importance of *Julia* or any popular text is not what is going on in the text itself, but rather the way the text helps TV viewers to think through, in this case, questions of race and changing definitions of race, particularly in such a highly politicized moment. So what I argue is that meanings are not inherent in the text, but that shows like *Julia* can function as thinking tools at particular historical conjunctures. It is, therefore, that shows like this are particularly important as they tell us how ordinary people are thinking during particular political moments.

JUSTIN LEWIS (JL): I will try to build on the themes raised by Ms. Bodroghkozy, by summarizing the results of the study I did with a colleague at the University of Massachusetts. We did a series of focus group interviews in Springfield, Massachusetts, using 52 focus groups, 26 of whom were white, 23 were black, and three were Latino. We wanted to explore people's perceptions about race, class, and television, to see if we could draw connections between them.

We decided to frame our research around a television show, one discussed these days perhaps more than any other. The TV show chosen was *The Cosby Show*. We would show people an episode from *The Cosby Show*, not exactly to get their reaction to that episode specifically, but to get their reaction to the show as a whole, and to get them to talk more generally about issues of race representation on TV. We got back an enormous amount of material, which we then analyzed. What we think we found, I shall sum up now. (I should say in passing that the study was funded by Bill Cosby, with no strings attached--which I believe we be evident based on the results of our study).

We actually began our study quite well disposed towards *The Cosby Show* as part of an overall television trend. First, before we started the study we looked at the way African-Americans had been portrayed on television over the last twenty or so years. We found something quite significant. In what might be called a pre-Cosby era, African-Americans were disproportionately inclined to represent working class or lower middle class positions. After *The Cosby Show*, we begin to see a dramatic upward mobility on TV, where blacks are just as likely as whites to occupy upper middle class positions as whites in major character roles. (This is true for what we call fictional television, but not, of course, for news and current affairs, where that certainly is not the case.)

We began by being very well-disposed towards this trend and what it represented. We had read all of the criticisms of *The Cosby Show*, and felt they were quite churlish. In some ways, the show was trying to change and break out of an area in which stereotyping had clearly pretty much been the norm. So we viewed it quite favorably for that reason. However, after doing our study, our conclusions were much less sanguine, and we became quite gloomy about what the trend represented (though we did not pin any blame on *The Cosby Show* particularly). Essentially, we found that *The Cosby Show*, and shows like it, were contributing to a new kind of racist ideology, an enlightened racism--one which appears to be colorblind, but which reconstructs some very vital tenets of racist ideology. Now I will explain how this works, and how our work suggested these conclusions.

In order to understand racism in the United States, one must recognize that it is not simply a individual pathology, it is a social pathology. Racism exists not just on the level of what individuals think, but the way society operates. Racial inequalities are inscribed very clearly within class structures, and these structures inscribe and maintain racial divisions. In other words, out of a civil rights movement in which civil and legal liberties were fought for, many things were changed. However, the movement did not change the economic structures that exist in capitalist societies, which perpetuate racial inequalities and limit social mobility. We argue that to understand racial inequalities in the U.S., you have to understand economic inequalities. To fail to understand this is not to understand how racism works in this country.

The problem as we saw it is that this simple point is very hard to grasp if your sole source of understanding about the way the world works is television, and for many people this is the case. The way TV talks about class is to neglect to talk about class. TV deals with class by avoiding any discussion of things like class barriers, and by putting forward a notion of class that is completely at odds with how things actually are in the United States. What it tells us about class barriers is that they are easily overcome by anyone with the talent or the inclination to do so. If you are willing to work hard, you can overcome any barriers; the only time we see any barriers is when someone is jumping over them. We almost never see someone worthy come up against a class barrier, and be defeated by that barrier.

We are not aware of class divisions or barriers; television tells us only about what could happen, what might happen. Yet all of us know that if asked to make a bet about which of two children, one poor and one affluent, will be a success in thirty years time, regardless of how bright each of them are, there is little doubt about where to put one's money. So people sort of know about class barriers, but it is a repressed thought, a thought that TV helps repress. The whole discourse of class on TV is about aspirations; it is about what we would like to be rather than what we are. For example, there are more

janitors than doctors and lawyers combined in this country, and yet on TV there are very few characters who play janitors, though there are scores of doctors and lawyers. So TV skews societal expectations upwards, towards an upper middle class reality. In fact, one of the things we discovered is that major black characters on TV (in our survey) are 19 times more likely to be upper middle class. That clearly does not reflect the way things are.

The problem is that to be normal on TV (this is a kind of Orwellian double-speak), one cannot be normal. That is where *The Cosby Show* comes in. In trying to create a black family that was not marginal, Cosby was forced instead to create a family of black characters who were not typical, either for black or white people in the United States. Yet he was forced to do so because to show a working class black family on TV is not to present a normal family (as it would be in normal demographic terms), but somehow a marginal family. So Cosby was impelled by this landscape to create characters who were in reality abnormal. Hence the Huxtable family was seen as unusual and at the same time, normal. This kind of double-speak was repeated over and over again.

The way this affected the way people view the world varied from black to white. For blacks it creates a very awkward Hobson's choice. Most of the black audiences were, unlike white audiences, very aware of how much was at stake here in terms of how black characters were portrayed. Most of our focus group expressed a real discomfort with the whole issue of *The Cosby Show*, and with having black upwardly mobile characters on TV. On the one hand, the show was viewed as a good thing. These were not stereotypical black characters of the past. On the other hand, there was discomfort because the Huxtables were not the same as most of the people they knew, with the exception being the upper middle class black focus groups we interviewed. But amongst working class and lower middle class focus groups, there was a slight feeling that it would have been nice if the Huxtables had not been quite so affluent.

Amongst white people we discovered something much more pernicious. There was a combination of two ways of thinking. The first was uncovered when we asked our white focus groups about things like Affirmative Action, and what they thought about it. The majority of white focus groups reflected a very clear opinion, and that was that Affirmative Action was a bad thing because it was no longer necessary. Sure, we used to need Affirmative Action, but we do not need it anymore. As a discourse, this is very interesting because if we look at the levels of inequality that existed ten years ago, the levels of inequality that now exist have not decreased, and in many cases, have increased. Yet this discourse suggested exactly the opposite. How is this possible? It is possible because attitudes are changing in response to a change in television portrayals of black people. For many white people, their understanding of the world comes from television. What that culture now tells us is that African-Americans, if they choose to and have talent, can make it. There are no obvious barriers in their way. So consequently, if blacks in the United States are not making it, the fault must lie with them.

The second kind of knowledge is a different sort of knowledge. Most of the whites we interviewed did not think the world had changed so profoundly. They believed the world had changed on TV, but when we asked them whether white people were disproportionately likely to be represented in the upper echelons educationally and class level, they would say that indeed, black people are less likely to be rich and/or educated than whites. Think about these two ideas: anybody can make it if they try, and yet whites are making it more than black people. If we do not have a discourse about how class systems work, and we do not have an explanation that says that this is really due to a class system that affects black people disproportionately, then we really only have an explanation that is a straightforward racist explanation (which suggests that whites must do better than blacks because they work harder, are simply better, etc.)

The thing we discovered was that this is not a straightforward or easily articulated explanation. Most of the white people we spoke to were, on the surface, quite liberal on issues of race, and in some ways, used their enthusiasm about *The Cosby Show* as proof of that fact. Yet as our focus group interviews progressed, and when other more difficult

issues surfaced, such as Affirmative Action, old racist ideologies began to slip into conversations. We would hear stories about welfare queens, who would be characterized as black rather than white. We characterized this as a "missionary" kind of racism. It is a racism that does not see people's behaviors or attitudes as determined by skin pigmentation. Instead, it sees racism as a product less of skin color entirely than of culture. Skin color simply becomes a kind of symbol for that, just as the missionaries of old would try to rescue people from what they viewed as "inferior" forms of behavior. So this "missionary racism" becomes a similar thing: blackness becomes a condition from which blacks can, if they want to, choose to escape.

Finally, whom is to blame for this? I certainly do not think *The Cosby Show* should be blamed. *The Cosby Show* is simply part of a trend. It is more a reflection of the state of television in general. I should just say, the way class is represented on American television is quite unique, particular to this country, in particular to a discourse of the American dream. I do not think you can put the blame on Bill Cosby, or any other attempt to change the picture. The problem lies much more with the structure of American television, which is based around certain kinds of expectations by networks, certain kinds of discourses around advertisers, and certain viewer expectations. But I think we need to address them, and see how we can change some of these ideological conditions that give rise to these expectations.

PATRICIA TURNER (PT): I am going to try to make some connections between *Julia*, *The Cosby Show*, and some shows that fell in the middle. One of the chapters in my upcoming book, newly titled *Ceramic Uncles and Celluloid Mammies: Black Images and their Influence on Culture*, is entitled "To be Young, Gifted, and Black." This title comes, of course, from Lorraine Hansberry in the 1960s, when she spoke about that historical moment as being a wonderful time to be young, gifted, and black. She also said, at that time, that we, African-Americans, did not exist on television.

I got to thinking about this when I was teaching at UMass, Boston a few years ago. The whole Charles Stewart incident had exploded. (Stewart was the man who murdered his wife, and claimed that she'd been killed by a black assailant.) So, for a number of months thereafter, there were a great number of Boston police officers looking for this alleged assailant. I had a great number of young African-American men and women in my classes, who (particularly the men) were being stopped on the streets. When they would be out walking, people would cross the street when they saw them coming. Other people would walk out of elevators when they got on. I looked at my students, and they just looked like young, gifted, black students to me. But the public at large was looking at them, and seeing something else. So, I got to thinking about popular culture and how if a white assailant was out there, I did not believe that white students would feel that same kind of pressure that my black students were feeling.

I thought about how television tells the world that young, gifted, black students look, dress, and talk. What do people on television look like who fill that profile? If we start with *Julia* and Corey Baker, the son is portrayed as a very bright six year old. In one episode, he was shown as a particularly gifted student, such that a normal school could not even satisfy him. That show situated the Baker family in a very white environment. There was not even any attempt at symbolic ethnicity. There was no way of locating this family as African-American in any kind of way. Corey was bright and gifted, and clearly thrived in this kind of environment.

The next program that had a single black mother in a family situation came on about five years later. It was a program called *What's Happening*. The mother was divorced, and in a couple of episodes the father showed up. This was clearly an attempt to show the audience that here was an African-American family where the parents had been married, and there had been a divorce, but the mother was not intended to be perceived as a welfare queen. She had two children, Raj and Dee. Raj was tall and thin, and wore what we used to call high water pants, over-sized tortoise shell glasses, and was very bright and did well

academically; but he was clearly fairly marginalized from his own peer group. His best friends were ReRun, the really fat kid and Dwayne, the really shy kid, and all three were really outside the popular clique of their neighborhood. In short, Raj was a black nerd, one of many black nerds to inhabit TV's situation comedies.

Moving on from Raj to other characters, we find a pair of sitcoms, *Different Strokes* and *Webster*, both of which focused on young, African-American children whose birth parents had stipulated that in their deaths, their white best friends or employers were to assume responsibility for their children, and raise them as their own. That basic storyline came under a lot of fire as many in the African-American community felt that we have within ourselves, relatives, neighbors, and others, to whom we would have left the care of our children. What happens to these black children that our brought up in these white environments? Both programs featured particularly short characters. Of course, the producers of *Webster* were probably doing what TV producers always do, which is to look at an earlier hit and try to reinvent that formula for their own success.

Since *Different Strokes* had been successful because of young Gary Coleman as Arnold, when the producers of *Webster* saw young Emmanuel Lewis, they probably thought now is our chance to reproduce *Different Strokes*. The youngsters in those programs were depicted as bright, they were not as nerdy as Raj, but clearly their academic success was linked to the households in which they were raised and the schools they attended, and the peer groups with which they associated. When in *Different Strokes*, the older brother, Willis, was having some academic problems, in typical situation comedy fashion, these problems were resolved in 22 minutes. What the surrogate father did, in that instance, was to hire a tutor, and all of the sudden, all of the problems disappeared. It is interesting that the one brother who had problems was the one who was the closest to a normal-sized character in these three comedies.

I have just gone over several programs in which a bright, or a pair of bright, African-Americans were featured in the sitcom. Now, I would like to look at another program which shows the other side of this, and that is, of course, *Good Times*, a show in which the markers of African-Americanism were clear, which was very much the intention of the producers, who got a lot of mileage out of promoting the show as "accurately" depicting the way black Americans really lived. There were three primary children in this show. The youngest was Michael, who was, at least at first, an exception to the nerd rule. He was obviously bright, but also had street smarts and the ability to fit in with his peers. One never got the sense that Michael was ostracized from his peers. But as those of you who are familiar with the series know, after six or seven weeks into the series, the show was taken over by the character, J.J. He was extremely tall and thin, spoke in broken English, his language was filled with tired cliques, and he danced and pranced around the household constantly. His antics were always getting his siblings, and sometimes his entire family, into trouble. He was depicted as embedded in the African-American community, and he clearly was someone not portrayed as smart in the conventional sense.

Another program, and character, that was a bit of an exception to the trend I uncovered is Lionel from the Jeffersons. The Jeffersons started as the neighbors of the Bunkers in *All in the Family*, but eventually moved up to the East Side, and their own show. Lionel underwent a rather dramatic transformation during the move from Houser Street to the East Side. The early Lionel was fairly (for TV) militant. He was bright, and was working so he could go to school. We were told that he was a successful student. When, however, the family was spun off into the Jeffersons, a slightly different Lionel emerged. That character actually contemplated buying a term paper, and though he did not do it in the end, the original Lionel would not even have considered doing such a thing. So, at least in his original form, Lionel was an exception to this trend.

Now, what about the Cosby kids? Let's look at each of the five kids: Sondra, Vanessa, Denise, Theo, and Rudy. Sondra was the Princeton graduate who married the Princeton graduate, and her big rebellion involved managing an outdoors goods store for a season or two before going off to law school. Vanessa and Rudy were both very

academic-oriented, certainly depicted as smart. The two Cosby kids who had the most academic trouble were Theo and Denise. Denise was depicted as the family's loosest cannon. Yet she was the one who was the most African-American in the decisions she made--she is the one who went to the all black college, she was the one who took time off from college to do photography in Africa, and yet she was always the one who was always getting into trouble, and had to be bailed out by her parents.

Likewise, Theo was depicted as a "typical teenager," interested in the fashions of the day, girls, and hanging out with his friend, Cockroach. One scene which appeared early, and which expressed a theme that reappeared many times, was when Dr. Huxtable was talking to Theo about his poor grades, and Theo asked, "Why can't you love me as I am, as a D student?" And Dr. Huxtable replied, "That is just crap. You are lazy, and your mother and I will not tolerate it." Eventually it emerged that Theo was dyslexic, and his so his academic success had been undermined by a learning disability. It is interesting that they picked the male child to have the learning disability, the child who had no problems getting dates had the most academic problems.

Jumping forward to some of today's series, the two sitcoms I will talk about are *Family Matters* and *Fresh Prince of Bel Air*. Both of these shows feature pairs of characters. In *Family Matters*, there are Steve Erkel and Eddie Winslow. Eddie is much like Theo. He is a popular, easy-going boy, the character most likely to have academic trouble, while Steve Erkel is Raj reinvented (with a vengeance). His high water pants are so short that they are basically pedal pushers. He wears argyle socks, over-sized glasses, etc.; he is nerdiness personified.

In *Fresh Prince*, the young pair are Will and Carlton. Will is the one with street smarts, and is, at the same time, depicted as intelligent. In one episode, he scores higher on a standardized test than Carlton. But Carlton is usually seen as the smart one; he was the class valedictorian, also wears argyle socks, and though not as conspicuously nerdy as Erkel, he is not far off. He cannot dance, has trouble getting dates, etc. It is as if the producers of these programs cannot imagine young African-Americans as being simultaneously street-smart and intelligent, in tune with fashion and with school. So, in the seven hours that the average family watches TV, people rarely see anything but these hyperbolically nerdy black men succeeding. But in the news and current affairs programming, they are seeing the more criminal element. And there are a whole category of people, like those in my class at UMass, who are not represented anywhere. Since I am looking forward to getting all of you involved in this discussion, I will stop there.

QUESTION 1: Just a few follow up questions. . .What was Cosby's reaction to your study, and what is your opinion of the show, Martin, which has generated a good deal of controversy?

JL: Bill Cosby was nice about it, but was sorry that the news media (which gave a good deal of coverage to our study when it came out) jumped on it the way they did. As for his real reaction, I am not sure what Mr. Cosby thought. My own view about Martin is that it is a reversion to many of the stereotypes Cosby was trying to get away from. I personally view it as a step back.

QUESTION 1 again: But it is so popular.

PT: Many of these shows are popular. That is one of the sad things about much of what all of us are doing. Someone once said to me that I should not be worrying about something so trivial, I should be writing about Toni Morrison or something because nobody watches these shows like these anymore. Yet when I was in my hotel room, getting ready to come over here, the Jeffersons were on. These programs are still in syndication, and our students are still watching these things.

QUESTION 2: My question is for Professor Lewis. How and why were the focus groups chosen as they were, and why were there so few Hispanics?

JL: The main dynamic we were trying to explore was the way black people saw white people and the way whites saw blacks. So with that in mind, we focused more on those two groups. While it would have been interesting to focus on Latinos, those were not the groups we were trying to get at. Besides, we wanted groups that were large enough to include different class backgrounds, so to include more Latinos would have spread our samples very thin.

QUESTION 3: Did you get response from the television industry to your book, Professor Lewis? I say this in response to what it seems is the extraordinary proliferation of black characters on TV in the last two seasons. There has been a great deal of coverage of this in the press, and they seem to attribute it to the extraordinary success of *Cosby*. Did you get reaction from the industry?

JL: Yes, we did get some reaction, but it tended to focus on peripheral issues and avoided the main issues we were interested in, namely the representation of class on TV. They said, "Look, people do not want to see working class characters on TV. They think it is depressing." To which we responded, "why don't people in other countries get depressed? They have working class characters." That was unfortunately the reaction.

QUESTION 3, Part II: In regard to *A Different World*, I found myself doing something with that show that I had never done before, which was to use a lot of it in the classroom. Although some issues of race got mixed up, it seems that a lot of it was sensitive and useful. I am thinking specifically about Dwayne, who was both intelligent and street smart.

PT: I think you are thinking about the period after Debbie Allen became a part of the production picture. There were some rather significant alternations in a number of characters after the first season. In the first season, Dwayne Wayne was a complete nerd. No one would sit with him in the cafeteria, the girls in Denise Huxtable's room would close the door if they saw him in the hall. This changed once Debbie Allen became a part of the picture, and made the characters much more three dimensional.

Another point I want to make is that these patterns we have seen with African Americans are symptomatic of a pattern we see with sitcoms in general. There is an anti-intellectual climate in the U.S. We are uncomfortable with smart people, in general. But it can be especially dangerous as there are so few "normal" African-American TV characters. So, people do not quite know how to deal with a normal looking guy walking down the street with a backpack. They think he must be carrying a gun, though what he really has is an organic chemistry book.

QUESTION 4: I am curious in a general sense whether you have over time, from *Julia* to *Cosby* [or to *Martin*], if you have seen any common themes, common criticisms, or if not, how they have evolved over time?

PT: If I understand your question correctly, one other thing I have thought about recently is that there has never been a long running show that focused on the rural African-American experience. It is as if all African-Americans live in the city.

AB: I think with the construction of black families there has been this recurrent anxiety in television representation, and what *Good Times* was originally trying to do was to correct the previous picture of black families as always being dominated by a matriarch. I think

that was seen, at least by some people, as a more positive representation of these families as having a strong male head of family.

PT: It is so ironic because Norman Lear said that was one of the goals of the program, but by the end of the last season, not one but both of the parents had been written out of the show due to the dominance of the J.J. character.

AB: That is, I think, what *The Cosby Show* was trying to idealize. Here we had not just the perfect family, but also the perfect mother and father.

QUESTION 6: Earlier there was reference made to blame being placed on Bill Cosby, and I was just wondering, why can we not lay blame at his door?

JL: Well, I guess you can, but I am reluctant to place too much blame on his show. It would be unfair to dump all of the idealizations and representations on one person. Also, it is wrong to pinpoint any individuals, but if I were to do so, it seems far more appropriate to pinpoint the head of Time-Warner or someone who actually makes these shows. Shows like *Cosby*, for example, only get on because an environment has been created which accepts them. If *Cosby* did not make this show, somebody else would.

QUESTION 6 response: But, with all the talk about violence on television, and the reaction to it, we should be able to do something about this issue to, especially since it seems so easy and obvious.

PT: Those programs are selling products, and so the audience has to be culpable, too. Since advertisers realize a return on their investment with these kinds of shows, everyone in TV wants to create the next show that is as successful as *The Cosby Show*. So, I do not know that we want to put all of the blame on the people creating the shows without also laying some of the blame on those watching these shows.

QUESTION 7: This is a question for Justin Lewis. When doing your study, did you actually look at American culture? It seems you walked right into the biggest morass that exists in terms of sociological, anthropological, and psychological thought on race. And that is, "What do we do about America's mixed up notion of class?" We cannot represent the American underclass as they are the downtrodden, the ones who are getting shot in the streets every week. We would never use these people in a sitcom. So things have become schismized in a different way. Do you have any comment?

JL: All I would say that, yes, I agree with you that America has a real problem with class, and in a society in which TV is so important, the fact that TV does not talk about it, reinforces what is already there. One example of this problem is the show *thirtysomething*, which was known as the "yuppie show." I began to think about why this was the case, and I decided it was because it is a very class conscious show. It is a show dominated by upper middle class people, and the difficulty in dealing with class issues became apparent in one episode where one of the characters wants to work with homeless people. And during that show, we are made to be aware of the awkwardness between her, as an upper middle-class person, and the homeless people she is working with. You wince, it is embarrassing, you are made to feel the class conflicts and difficulties. But it is very unusual for American television. Usually when an upper middle-class person does something nice for the homeless, they are celebrated. So television just exacerbated the whole problem.

AB: I think class worked in a very interesting way in *Julia* because that show was really working within an already set family sit-com genre of a woman with kids, part of a



subgenre including *The Doris Day Show*, *The Lucy Show*... In those shows, questions of class never played a part. But in *Julia*, they came up all the time in critiques of the show. It was always issues like, "She lives in this opulent apartment, and how could she possibly afford this on a nurse's salary?" There was a sense that class issues were more apparent, at this point in history, in relation to representations of African-Americans, while those questions were invisible in the representations of white people on TV. I thought that was an interesting phenomena in relation to this TV show.

QUESTION 8: I guess I am a bit impatient with the account you give, Justin. It seems there are disproportionate items in your own discourse, on the one hand, there is *The Cosby Show*, and on the other hand, there is the discourse of class in American society. The question of the way in which the American dream has been dramatized is one question, and the evasiveness of class striations is truly a distinctive American tendency. But it seems to me not particularly productive to speak only about television in this way. One of the reasons for this is because we need a more systematic historical overview of the nature of American television.

Until the 1970s, television was managed much like the Hollywood studio era of yore. In the late 1970s, and proliferating through the 1980s and 1990s, we have seen the beginning of a system of plural voices, instead of a limited number of voices aiming for an imagined consensus. It seems to me that recognizing that historical difference is useful. Because if we compare shows over time, we do see a significant widening of views, types of characters, etc., a widening not limited solely to issues of race.

JL: Just a couple of comments. About the issue of class generally, I do not think the lack of discussion about class is a uniquely American phenomenon. Also I do not agree that television is becoming more diverse. Since the 1960s, the dominance of upper middle class characters has actually increased. And with the advent of new technologies, such as cable, the proliferation of images that we see, is largely an imaginary one. If one looks at the programming we get on 46 channels, instead of three, really it is extraordinary how little has changed. One night I tried to see how many new programs were showing, and out of 46 channels, there was only one new program showing. All of the other channels (excluding music television) were either showing previously shown movies or old shows. Due to the economics of television, unless we change the economic system, we are not going to see any major changes on TV. So, although I agree we need to look at the history, I disagree with you otherwise.

AB: I think one way to make sense of this proliferation of different representations of race, class, and ethnicity in the 1970s, is to ground them in that particular moment in social, cultural, and political history. A number of powerful social movements managed to reconstruct hegemonic forces in such a way that previous kinds of representations were no longer valid. So it is not really useful to focus only on the institution. And the only way to understand why we get certain representations at certain times is to look at the social movements driving these changes.

MODERATOR: Well, I would like to thank all of our panelists for joining us. We hope you have enjoyed this very lively discussion.