

**Black, White, and Watched All Over: The Racialized
Meanings in 1990s Sitcoms**

by Brett J. Ehrmann

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Advisor: Evelyn Alsultany, Ph.D.
Second Reader: Lori Brooks, Ph.D.

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Introduction

Top Dawg: Carlton is not our type. He's Ralph Lauren shirts, and wing-tipped shoes, and corporate America.

Carlton: Being black is not what I'm trying to be, it's who I am. I'm running the same race and jumping the same hurdles you are so why are you tripping me up?

-*The Fresh Prince of Bel Air*. "Blood is Thicker Than Mud," November 1993.

Bud: I took my marriage for granted...Do you know what it's like to go home to an eighteen million dollar mansion and there's no one to share it with but your domestic staff?

-*Home Improvement*. "Workshop 'Til you Drop," October 1996.

Sitcoms as Meaning Makers

The quotes above help illustrate the central goal of this project. In the first quote, a heated dialogue is occurring between the headmaster of a black¹ fraternity named Top Dawg and Carlton

Banks, a black character who can best be described as stereotypically white, or by the often

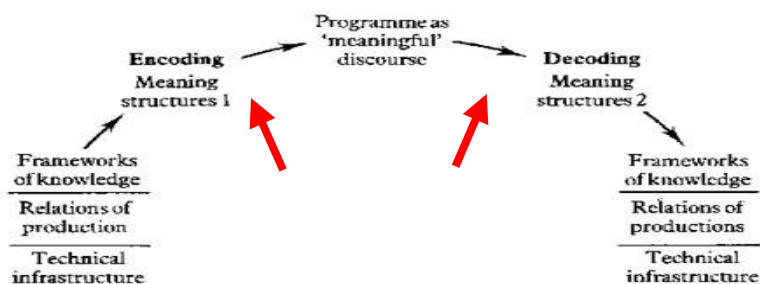
¹ I must qualify my use of language. I have chosen not to capitalize "black," "white," or any of its derivatives ("blackness," "whiteness," "black culture," and so on). Many scholars agree that capitalizing the "b" in black shows respect for a history and culture that often goes beyond skin color. However, capitalizing the "b" raised questions about also capitalizing the "w" in white. I came to the decision not to do this. In the words of law Professor Martha Mahoney, "capitalizing the 'w' does not comparably recognize history and culture [like capitalizing 'black' does]." Therefore, I had to decide if I wanted to use nonparallel capitalization of "black" and "white"—that is, if I should capitalize the former and not capitalize the latter. Many scholars discourage this practice, and I agree with them. Doing so reinforces the fact that blackness is different, while whiteness is the (invisible) norm. Although I did indeed want to show respect for the black identity by using capitals, in the end I could not rationalize capitalizing its counterpart nor could I reconcile the message that the resulting nonparallel capitalization would likely send.

inflammatory term “Oreo.” Carlton spends the episode trying to gain entry into the fraternity, but from the start Top Dawg thinks he is not black enough to earn a membership. This all comes to a head at the end of the episode, as manifested in the dialogue above. It should be noted that Will—Carlton’s cousin who generally claims an urban, more stereotypically black identity—is offered entry into the fraternity, but declines the offer due to the way his cousin is treated. How is Carlton raced in this exchange and what are the consequences of this message? The same can be asked of Will and Top Dawg. The second quote is from Bud Harper, Tim’s (Tim Allen) new boss starting in season five of *Home Improvement*. The quote is funny, but perhaps for reasons in addition to the clear irony. How does Bud, a black character, manage to lose his marriage, especially with so many resources? Also, is there something unconsciously incongruous about a black man with so much money and power, and does this in turn contribute to the humor? Hence, the quotes illuminate several questions that, when addressed, will help achieve the central goal of this project. Simply stated, the goal of this project is to use sitcoms of the 1990s to answer questions about how whiteness and blackness were constructed through them. But why focus on television, and sitcoms specifically, as a vehicle for understanding racial construction? Media scholar Herman Gray writes that “television is a system of production and representation through which [racialized] meanings...are produced.”² In other words, the actions and words of characters on television influence the way we all understand issues of race and racial identities. However, it seems that the sitcom is particularly effective, mainly because they encourage viewers to continuously formulate and reformulate their perception of these issues more subtly. Stuart Hall, in his work *Racist Ideologies and the Media*, points out that sitcoms (situation comedies) allow viewers to take in important racialized meanings under the guise of comedy. In a crucial deviation from news programs or dramas, sitcoms have the ability to relay such meanings while the viewer does not

² Herman Gray, *Watching Race*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), xvi.

realize that he or she is actually joining these discussions on race.³ This feature of the sitcom makes it an important space for analysis. Moreover, sitcoms have a crucial limitation in that they portray black characters much more simplistically than do dramas. In other words, dramas tend to construct black characters who directly engage with difficult, but all too realistic, situations stemming from their racial identity: controversial interracial relationships, overt racism from other characters, and so on. In order for sitcoms to stay funny and lighthearted, they construct representations of black characters that stay more simplistic, and perhaps unrealistic. One will learn that this can be extremely problematic in the following chapters.

Even if one acknowledges that sitcoms are spaces for analyzing meanings, this does not explain *how* specifically they are created. This can be answered using several different approaches, but I will employ a cultural studies approach. Stuart Hall has elucidated a three-step process to describe the production of meaning in sitcoms. First, the writers, producers, and directors—so called “media professionals”—react to a “raw” social event. They make meaning of the event based on their existing frameworks of knowledge, a process Hall calls “encoding.” Second, this meaning is entered into television discourse. Finally, the meanings in this discourse are decoded by the viewers, with the help of their own existing frameworks and perceptions of social events.⁴ The three-step model is illustrated below.



³ Stuart Hall, “‘The Whites of Their Eyes’: Racist Ideologies and the Media,” in *Media Studies: A Reader*, ed. Paul Marris and Sue Thornham, 2nd ed. (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 278

⁴ John Storey, *Cultural Studies and the Study of Popular Culture*. Second Ed., Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2003, Page 10. Note: citation refers to preceding four sentences.

For this project I will focus on the second step (bounded by the arrows above), which centers on the meanings being entered into the sitcoms themselves. This project focuses its analysis on two different types of sitcoms, which I will call black sitcoms and white sitcoms. Black sitcoms are those that feature mainly black main characters. There are two points worth mentioning here. First, by “black main characters” I am referring to racial identities of the characters on the show, not the actors who play them (since in many cases, there is a discrepancy). Second, the classification of a sitcom as black is independent of its viewership, although in many cases sitcoms with black characters do have a large black following. The black sitcoms I have selected for analysis happen to have a very diverse following (this is not trivial, as I will explain later in this introduction and further in chapter two). It follows that white sitcoms are those that feature mostly white main characters. The same qualifications about the actors and audiences of these shows apply. Specifically, this project focuses on two black sitcoms of the 1990s⁵, *The Cosby Show* and *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air*. In addition, the white sitcoms of *Home Improvement*, *Saved by the Bell*, and *Seinfeld* will also be central to my analysis. It seems crucial to point out that, although I place the former and latter sitcoms in separate categories, they cannot truly exist outside of contact with each other. This overlapping goes far beyond the fact that they may have had the same physical time slots during their original airing. Instead, and more significantly, the sitcoms can be thought of cultural “texts” that interact with each other in the meaning-making process. As cultural studies scholar Melani McAlister writes in her book *Epic Encounters*: “we can begin to see how certain different sets of texts, with their own interests and affiliations, come to overlap, to reinforce and revise one another toward an end that is neither entirely planned nor entirely coincidental.”⁶

⁵ Even though some of the sitcoms, such as *The Cosby Show* and *Saved by the Bell* also aired during the 1980s, I restrict my analysis to episodes originally aired in the 1990s. Hence, here I denote them as “1990s sitcoms,” and also restrict my contextualizing of them to solely in the 90s.

⁶ Melani McAlister, *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, & U.S. Interests in the Middle East since 1945*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 8.

Thus, one prominent aspect of this project will be to establish that this is in fact the case when it comes to 1990s sitcoms. Another important point about the sitcoms as meaning-makers is that their meanings do not have much essential value on their own; rather, they are socially constructed in relation to (or because of) other meaning-making events. McAlister seems to agree with this claim when she writes that “cultural productions help make meanings by their...association with other types of meaning making activity.”⁶ Therefore, one is unable to truly separate 1990s sitcoms from each other, or from other meaning-making activities of the decade. These activities include, but are not limited to, meanings created by the American racial environment in the times of their original airings. These notions will guide my discussion in the next subsection.

Setting the Stage: Situating the Sitcoms in their Historical and Racial Moments

In order to understand the other meaning-making activities of the 1990s and how the sitcoms are in conversation with them, I must situate the sitcoms into their proper contexts. I further break these contexts into two categories. These are the historical moment and the racial moment. Even then, the historical moment can be broken down even further. There is what I call the generalized historical moment, which includes above all else the dominant ideologies and popular mindsets that shaped the way the American audience viewed television at the time. But there is also the specific (or “sitcom specific”) historical moment, which in this case refers to the path paved by sitcoms of prior decades, leading up to the introduction of the shows on which I will focus my analysis. The racial moment is related to the generalized historical moment in that it refers to dominant ideologies and mindsets as well. Yet, the racial moment addresses raw social events specifically in the realm of race relations that helped to build and reinforce these accepted ways of thinking. The early to mid 1990s was a time filled with racial tension. This was a time

characterized by several racially-charged events: the police beating of Rodney King followed by the officers' acquittal and the race riots, the racially-divided reaction to the verdict of the O.J. Simpson trial, the legal efforts to eliminate affirmative action, and so on. Sitcoms became crucial as they provided Americans with an opportunity to digest these racialized meanings in a way that did not require a massive emotional investment. This, Hall argues, is both the beauty and the danger of the sitcom: it can relay these serious meanings under the guise of "good, clean fun."⁷ This project will aim to understand how both black and white sitcoms are able to pull this off by looking at the specific strategies each employ. The similarities and differences between the shows and the strategies they use will reinforce my argument that both black and white sitcoms are powerful, related, yet sometimes drastically different, meaning-makers.

The racial moment of these sitcoms was undoubtedly important and helps lay the framework for the analysis seen in the following chapters. Yet, the historical moment plays an equally, if not more, prominent role in the construction of meaning on these sitcoms. Thus, here I return to the generalized historical moment.

The Generalized Historical Moment: The Multiculturalism Backlash and Colorblindness

Two important conversations characterizing the relatively conservative period of the late 1980s and 1990s involved multiculturalism and its backlash, as well as the notion of colorblindness. Scholars argue that multiculturalism was really borne out of the identity movements of the 1960s and 70s: Black Power, Chicano, Feminism, Gay Liberation, and so on. Among other goals, multiculturalism aimed to question the notion that all Americans could relate to, and be grouped under, a common cultural identity. Through the decades, one of the most important sites of this questioning was on college campuses. As the 1990s began, professors and

⁷ Hall, "Racist Ideologies and the Media," 278.

students that were proponents of the multicultural movement included in their curricula the literature of those they felt were left out of the common American narrative. As this practice became more and more common, resistance grew exponentially. The backlash against multiculturalism during this time is what McAlister calls “the multiculturalism scare,” and it was characterized by an explosion of conservative literature against the movement that was infiltrating our prized centers for influencing the nation’s young adults. For example, a *Newsweek* article by George Will claimed that Lynne Cheney, then chair of the National Endowment of the Humanities (and thus thought to be one of the important fighters against multiculturalism rhetoric via art and literature), had a bigger challenge on her hands than her husband Dick, then Secretary of Defense as the Gulf War wrapped up. Will and others pointed out that there were forces that challenged the “habits, mores, and ideas that make up the ‘national mind’ that ‘truly constitutes America.’” Other publications and the mainstream media followed suit. They exclaimed that America was in the midst of a “putative takeover,” in which radicals were attacking the “‘unifying narratives that were the basis of national cohesion’ by privileging the stories of what some called ‘victims’ history.’”⁸ It seems this domestic battle is relevant to my discussion of 1990s sitcoms. There appeared to be an ongoing and at times, fierce, debate over the extent to which stories of marginalized people should be included in widely-disseminated texts. Thus, it seems likely that audience members were paying close attention to portrayals of such people on the “texts” of popular sitcoms. It is interesting to note how the sitcoms I will analyze specifically reacted to the multiculturalist rhetoric. In general, the white sitcoms aimed to produce an *illusion* of multiculturalism by featuring the occasional black main character and, at least on the surface, embracing their stories of difference. In the coming chapters, however, it will become clear through these “token” characters—such as Lisa from *Saved by the Bell*, Bud in *Home Improvement*, and Jackie from *Seinfeld*—that perhaps their

⁸ All information in this paragraph from McAlister, *Epic Encounters*, 245-7.

differences were not truly being embraced after all. The black sitcoms' reaction to multiculturalism is perhaps even more interesting. *The Cosby Show*, which has been often attacked for its conservative undertones, mainly featured black main characters that through hard work have attained wealth, and consequently have apparently graduated from any marginalization. *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air*, while featuring some marginalized main characters (e.g, Will's friend Jazz), also featured such a well-off black family that conversations of their marginalization hardly seemed appropriate. It might be said that these black sitcoms largely echoed the backlash against multiculturalism, stating that blacks can belong to a common American identity through the narrative of achieving the American dream. Alternatively, it may not be this simple. Perhaps the *Cosbys* and the *Bankses* had to be portrayed as "acceptable," wealthy black families in order to gain a large, diverse audience (something that the *Jeffersons*, or the *Evans* family in *Good Times* were never able to do in black sitcoms of the past). As a result, *The Cosby Show* and *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air* were then able to bring their stories of blackness and marginalization to the mainstream conversation in the spirit of multiculturalism. This, however, might have come at the cost of portraying blackness in a way that many audience members would describe as unrealistic. These conflicting representations seem to both be partially correct, and help illustrate the complexity of analyzing these meaning-makers in relation to their historical contexts.

Perhaps working in conjunction with the multiculturalism scare was the notion of colorblindness, which operated under the politically correct movement of the 1980s and 1990s. One could argue that colorblindness—which aims to minimize the differences of individuals on the basis of skin color—picked up steam during this time period, as the cohesion and unity of the American identity was seen by some to be under siege by multiculturalists. It follows that the same conservatives fueling the anti-multiculturalism rhetoric advocated for the colorblind ideal. Yet, it

also seems that many liberals also originally jumped on the colorblindness bandwagon, as not doing so would make them seem like the anti-American radicals many were accused of being. My point here is that colorblindness became a relatively universal ideal in America at the time of these sitcoms' original airing. I have already mentioned how the black sitcoms seem to portray black main characters whose ability to attain socioeconomic success through hard work and perseverance represent the realization of an American dream that transcends race. A slightly different tale is told in white sitcoms. The black characters on these shows are often observed to fail in positions of power or responsibility. That is, they are "different" than their white counterparts, who are rarely shown to have difficulty in these positions. An inherent question that stems from the colorblindness rhetoric is, "If these differences are not due to race, what causes them?" Colorblindness encourages that the reason for this must be due to personal shortcomings, rather than complex systems that encourage institutional racism. Of course, this leads one to a now-prominent liberal critique of colorblindness, which is articulated nicely by scholars such as Lani Guinier and Gerald Torres in their book, *The Miner's Canary*. They write that colorblindness is counterproductive because in the end it minimizes the important differences that individuals have based on race and skin color. In so doing, the status quo is upheld and those that have been historically disadvantaged because of these factors are prevented from mobilizing and advancing their agenda.⁹ Despite this, the notion was still quite popular among all Americans in the early 1990s. It will therefore help anchor my analysis of the meanings conveyed in the sitcoms.

"Crafting Homogeneity out of Difference," Addressing Current Issues in the Sitcom, and the Portrayals of Blackness in Sitcoms of Prior Decades

⁹ Lani Guinier and Gerald Torres, *The Miner's Canary: Enlisting Race, Resisting Power, Transforming Democracy*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 56.

I now shift to the specific historical moment of the sitcom from the beginnings of television through the 1980s, which set the stage for the sitcoms I will be analyzing. One of the important historical trends of television (including the sitcom) is that it has always done what scholar Herman Gray calls “crafting homogeneity out of difference.”¹⁰ In his book *Cultural Moves: African-Americans and the Politics of Representation*, Gray goes on to write that, beginning in the 1950s, the goal of television has been to recruit particularly working-class white ethnic viewers by having them identify with the image of Americanness that is on the screen. One challenge in doing this is to induce this audience into a feeling of sameness and familiarity even though the viewers themselves are all different. Therefore, television shows have historically tried to accomplish this by focusing on universally-felt differences (namely, that these whites are superior to people of color).¹¹ This strategy has withstood the test of time and was extensively used in the sitcoms of the 1990s, as I will discuss in the chapters that follow. An important question arises when the viewers are no longer members of the dominant race. With the emergence of cable in the late 1980s, this came to be the case. Specifically, the percentage of black viewership of network television rose drastically (although the black viewership percentage of black sitcoms has always been quite high). Crafting homogeneity out of difference was still used effectively in black sitcoms, but these sitcoms had a particularly large black following. How was this accomplished? Mainly by continuing to focus on universally-felt differences: this time from homosexuals, overbearing parents, and so on. Subsequent chapters will explore this phenomenon.

Another one of Gray’s books, *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for Blackness*, discusses a second trend in sitcoms leading up to the 1990s. Beginning in the 1980s, sitcoms for the first time began to include contemporary issues, like declines in morality, the affirmative action

¹⁰ Herman Gray, *Cultural Moves: African Americans and the Politics of Representation*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 6.

¹¹ Gray, *Cultural Moves*, 98.

debate, and the rise of single mothers, into shows. Audiences ate this up, and shows that began to include these “controversial” elements saw their ratings skyrocket.¹² The reason why television writers began this practice, as well as why it had not really been done in sitcoms of the past, remains somewhat unclear. What is clear, however, is that it continued well into the 1990s and today, and helps explain why the meanings conveyed in sitcoms of the 1990s promise to make for an interesting analysis vis-à-vis race.

Finally, one cannot discuss the historical moment of 1990s sitcoms without at least briefly addressing the sitcoms of the 1970s and 80s, and in particular the black sitcoms of this era. Some truth exists in the claim that shows like *Sanford and Son*, *The Jeffersons*, and *Good Times* did at times portray blackness somewhat positively. The shows portrayed, respectively, a loyal father-son team that owned an antiques and junk-dealing business; an upper-middle class family whose patriarch owned several dry-cleaning shops; and a family that sticks together, tries to get by, and refuses to take handouts despite being down on their luck. The positive portrayals largely end there, according to Professors Robin R. Means-Coleman and Charlton D. Mcllwain in their influential essay, “The Hidden Truths in Black Sitcoms.” They write that these shows primarily helped establish and reinforce powerful stereotypes about blackness in America. Specifically, through characters like Fred Sanford, the Evans family, and George Jefferson, blackness was equated only with poverty; disenfranchisement; and being pitiful, sassy, rude, useless, and at times, barely tolerable.¹³ Consequently, many accounts confirm that the writers of *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air* and particularly *The Cosby Show* aimed to consciously recode such negative portrayals of blackness.¹⁴ Inherent in this effort is the challenge of authenticity, to which I have already alluded.

¹² Gray, *Watching Race*, 59-60.

¹³ Robin R. Means Coleman and Charlton D. Mcllwain, “The Hidden Truths in Black Sitcoms,” in *The Sitcom Reader: America Viewed and Skewed*, ed. Mary M. Dalton and Laura R. Linder. (New York: SUNY Press, 2005), 126-7.

¹⁴ Darnell M. Hunt, “The Cosby Show,” The Museum of Broadcast Communications, 1997. <http://www.museum.tv/archives/etv/C/htmlC/cosbyshowt/cosbyshowt.htm>.

In recoding negative portrayals of blackness, do black sitcoms of the 1990s create characters that are outside the realm of realistic blackness? Perhaps put another way, do they become too “white”? These characters’ navigations of their black identities, as well as their associations with whiteness, will make up an important piece of my analysis in the following chapters.

Black Sitcoms and White Sitcoms

At this point it should be clear that both black and white sitcoms of the 1990s are vehicles for relaying important racialized meanings to a listening audience. But more interesting is the question of *how*. In the next chapter, I will focus on the black sitcoms *The Cosby Show* and *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air*. Through several strategies that I will discuss in this chapter, they all share a common theme. Due to the shows’ cross-racial popularity, and given the historical moment during which they aired, these shows aimed to mainstream portrayals of blackness. By this I mean that they brought blackness to audience members who to this point had not been regular viewers of black sitcoms (e.g, whites). As a result, the sitcoms can be thought of a cultural learning experience, in which the media professionals aim to teach these new viewers what blackness is and what it is not. If this sounds like it would be a challenge to relay such messages in lighthearted sitcoms, it most definitely was. The next chapter delineates some important strategies that they used to navigate such a challenge.

The second chapter will explore three white sitcoms of the 1990s: *Home Improvement*, *Saved by the Bell*, and *Seinfeld*. These sitcoms also tried to answer the question of what blackness is and is not. Yet, two stark differences exist between the strategies used by black sitcoms and those used by white sitcoms. First, it seems obvious that black main characters are significantly harder to find in the white sitcoms than in black sitcoms. As a result, when a black character does

take the spotlight in white sitcoms, he or she is “hypervisible” as a character of color when juxtaposed to the other white, “normal” characters. The notions of hypervisibility, and the black characters’ juxtaposition with the whiteness norm, will lay the foundation for my analysis in the white sitcom chapter. The second main difference between black sitcoms and white sitcoms is that the representations of blackness in the white sitcoms are far less flattering. Am I calling the media professionals or characters of the white sitcoms racists? No. But it is true that the strategies they either consciously or subconsciously enacted can certainly be offensive to some. Are there any commonalities between the strategies used in black sitcoms and those used in white sitcoms? Yes, but some are more obvious than others. I will leave this for the reader to think about as this project progresses.

As one moves on to the next chapter, also keep in mind some important themes I have introduced here. One must understand and appreciate the meaning-making power of television, and the sitcom in particular. One needs to recognize that the sitcoms cannot be viewed as entirely separate from each other, nor can they be separated from other meaning-making moments of their decade. Finally, one must also keep in mind the main goal and challenge of the sitcoms, which are to mainstream portrayals of blackness and send out potentially controversial racialized meanings while maintaining a relatively lighthearted viewing experience. With these concepts in mind, I begin my analysis of black sitcoms.

Chapter 1: Racialized Meanings in Black Sitcoms of the 1990s

Mainstreaming Blackness Through Sitcoms

As mentioned in the introduction, writers of 1990s sitcoms encoded racialized meanings and entered them into the program's discourse. In turn, the audience received these messages and then likely decoded them in a multitude of ways. This chapter will focus specifically on *how* these meanings are conveyed in black sitcoms. Of course, for the meanings to carry the most weight, two elements must be present. First, the show must be popular to be considered by the audience as

mainstream, or “meaningful.” Interestingly, the process of mainstreaming the portrayals of blackness on black sitcoms was a new and crucial event beginning in the 1980s and 90s. I say it was crucial because more than anything it laid the framework for relaying racialized meanings to new, particularly white fans of these shows. Second, the strategies by which the meanings are portrayed must be well-organized and seamlessly enacted. In this chapter, I will first focus on a brief background of two immensely popular black sitcoms, *The Cosby Show* and *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air*. Next, I look more closely at the five well-organized strategies enacted by the sitcom’s writers. These include: (1) the Functionally White Foil, (2) the use of humor to question the place of a black character in a white world, (3) the portrayal of characters who express a white/black dualism and a “middle of the road” identity, (4) the extending of the olive branch, and (5) the recoding of black stereotypes.

The Cosby Show and The Fresh Prince of Bel Air

One cannot analyze black sitcoms of recent history without looking closely at *The Cosby Show*, which ran from 1984-1992 on NBC¹⁵. The premise of the show was simple. The Huxtable family included the patriarch Cliff (Bill Cosby’s character), a respected gynecologist, and his wife Clair, a prominent attorney. The couple had five children, with four having attended college by the show’s end: Sondra, the eldest, attends Princeton University; Denise attends a fictitious historically-black university called Hillman college, but eventually leaves the school for Africa; Theo, the only son, matures from a troublemaker into a man who enjoys serving the community and attending NYU; and Vanessa goes on to attend Lincoln University in Pennsylvania, where she later meets and marries the head of maintenance there. The lone exception is the youngest daughter

¹⁵ TV.com, “The Cosby Show: Summary,” *The Cosby Show*, 2008, <http://www.tv.com/the-cosby-show/show/481/summary.html&q=cosby%20show>.

Rudy, who starts the show when she is only five years old and comes of age as a teenager by the end of the sitcom.^{16,17} I argue that *The Cosby Show* is instrumental in the analysis of black sitcoms of the 1990s for three main reasons: (1) its universal appeal and efforts to mainstream blackness, (2) its motive behind the show's plotlines, and (3) the shifting lenses through which the stories of the sitcom unfold.

First, *The Cosby Show* was popular among both white and black audiences. In the 1980s it held the very top spot of the ratings during most of its seasons, and in the 1990s it still remained one the most popular sitcoms among all viewers.¹⁸ Why was the show so appealing? This question can perhaps be partially answered by understanding how black and white audiences felt about *The Cosby Show*. Scholar Darnell M. Hunt notes that black audiences applauded the show's positive portrayal of an African-American family that was wholesome, had integrity, and was committed to education. On the other hand, by depicting an African-American family that had made it to the upper-middle class, Hunt argues that *The Cosby Show* absolved white viewers of feeling guilty about racism. The reason for this was simple: apparently racism was not so bad that it made attaining socioeconomic success as African-Americans impossible.¹⁹ Thus, blacks, and now whites also, approved of the portrayals of blackness from the show's outset.

Second, it seems the large, multiracial audiences viewing *The Cosby Show* made the goal behind the show's writers all the more significant. Bill Cosby and other creators mentioned overtly on several occasions that the primary motive of *The Cosby Show* was to "recode blackness." In other words, it aimed to challenge common black stereotypes partially created by sitcoms of prior decades such as *Sanford and Son* and *Good Times*. In these programs, blackness was associated

¹⁶ Hunt, "The Cosby Show."

¹⁷ Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia, "List of The Cosby Show Characters," 24 November 2008, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_The_Cosby_Show_characters.

¹⁸ TV.com, "Highest Rated: Comedy," *Highest Rated Comedy Top Shows*, 2008. <http://www.tv.com/shows/highest-rated/comedy/4/all.html>.

¹⁹ Hunt, "The Cosby Show."

with a lack of family values, poverty, rudeness, and uselessness, among other elements. Thus, as Hunt explains, the qualities repeatedly displayed by the Huxtable family included: “a strong father figure; a strong nuclear family; parents who were professionals; affluence and fiscal responsibility; a strong emphasis on education; a multigenerational family; multiracial friends; and low-key racial pride.”¹⁹ Cosby’s blatant goal sets the framework for much of my analysis of the sitcom. It should be additionally noted that the last element, “low-key racial pride,” is not trivial. One of the challenges of *The Cosby Show* was to portray a successful black American family that has not lost its black social or cultural identity. Among the numerous critiques written about the show, the failure to fulfill this challenge is the subject matter of many of them.²⁰

The third notable aspect of *The Cosby Show* for this project is the lenses through which the stories of the show unfold. Herman Gray notes that the show was unique in that it combined multiple angles of viewing the Huxtables’ blackness. At times, it featured what Gray calls the *assimilationist* lens. This lens ignores blackness as a pertinent aspect of the characters’ identity and instead defines them by other individual traits. Thus, when a character succeeds or fails, solely personal attributes or shortcomings are to blame. The second lens that is sometimes featured on *The Cosby Show* is that of the *pluralist*. The pluralist lens, which stems from what Gray calls the *separate-but-equal* discourse, places the Huxtable family in their own sphere of blackness. In this separate sphere, elements of blackness and race in general are occasionally addressed. However, the happenings in this sphere are also equal to, and thus universally recognized by, the (white) middle class. In other words, through the Cosby family’s involvement in comedic social interactions, awkward situations, and romance, their black identities become trivialized as the audience views the situations through their white middle class perspective.²¹ It seems important to

²⁰ Gray, *Watching Race*, 84.

²¹ Gray, *Watching Race*, 88.

note that although the characters' racial identities are trivialized through the pluralist lens, it is not to the extent seen through the assimilationist lens. Finally, *The Cosby Show* can sometimes be viewed through what Gray calls the *multicultural* lens. Through the multicultural lens, the Huxtable family takes on a distinct African-American identity that is embraced, not trivialized or eliminated altogether. As the differences come to be appreciated by the audience, the Cosby family is free to express their take on what it means to be African-American. Additionally, it becomes possible to address diversity within the African-American population. Hence, the multicultural lens is the only viewing lens that preserves, and actually aims to accentuate, differences between blacks and whites and within African-Americans themselves. Therefore, it does the most work to mainstream the blackness of the characters without diminishing the importance of their racial identities. The dynamic interactions of this and the other two lenses influence the means by which racialized meanings are conveyed on *The Cosby Show*. Additionally, the show's universal appeal and notable motives contribute to its importance as one explores black sitcoms of the (in this case, early) 1990s.

It is interesting to note that as NBC aired the final episode of *The Cosby Show* in April 1992, most other networks were showing the race riots occurring in Los Angeles in the wake of the Rodney King court decision.²² These events marked the diminishing of the almost exclusively wholesome, universally admirable *Cosby Show* and the rise of a slightly different type of black sitcom, *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air*. The show, which premiered in 1990 with mixed reviews²³ but quickly emerged as a top sitcom among all audiences by 1992,²⁴ features the Banks family living in a Bel Air mansion. The patriarch is Philip, an esteemed Judge. He is married to Vivian, a college professor. The children include Hilary, a spoiled airhead who is always last to get the punch line;

²² Hunt, "The Cosby Show."

²³ Scott Hume, "New TV Shows Fail to Lure Many Viewers," *Advertising Age* 61, no. 46 (1990), www.adage.com.

²⁴ ClassicTVHits.com, "1990s," *TV Ratings: 1992-1993*, <http://www.classictvhits.com/tvratings/1992.htm>.

Carlton, who is an academic overachiever poised to attend Princeton University after high school; and Ashley, who despite her status as the youngest is probably the most street smart and socially savvy out of the Banks kids. Where *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air's* featuring of an upper class black family that often tried to recode blackness is indeed taken from *The Cosby Show*, it is at this point where the similarities between the two largely end. First, *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air's* main character is not a member of the Banks family, but rather a cousin from Philadelphia who eventually becomes known as the "Fresh Prince of Bel Air." Will Smith (whose character and real name are kept the same) is sent to live with the Bankses from Philadelphia after his mom realizes he is unsafe there.²⁵ Unlike any main character seen in *The Cosby Show*, he is deeply rooted in his urban black identity and experiences a culture shock when he comes to live in the upper-class, straight-laced, wholesome, and traditionally "white world" of the Banks family (I will elaborate on this white world later). His effort to navigate this new world while maintaining elements of his black identity is integral to many of the show's plotlines. Additionally, this struggle establishes what Herman Gray calls a "representation of cultural difference." Will Smith is compelling to a wide audience because he is a "contradictory character, one where leaks, fractures, tensions, and contradictions...continue to find expression."²⁶ This can help explain *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air's* popularity: black viewers can identify with Will's struggle and white viewers can sympathize with it. Further, the show was also able to recruit a diverse audience using another strategy that deviated markedly from any used on *The Cosby Show*. Writers on *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air* were willing to directly address contemporary racial issues such as interracial relationships (both platonic and romantic), police brutality, and the difficulties of African-American advancement in a world ran by whites. This decision pleased network executives, since throughout the 1980s and 1990s, shows

²⁵ TV.com, "The Fresh Prince of Bel Air: Summary," *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air*, 2008, <http://www.tv.com/the-fresh-prince-of-bel-air/show/475/summary.html>.

²⁶ Gray, *Watching Race*, 91.

that addressed issues like these—so called “real life” issues—drew in big ratings and advertising revenues.²⁷ Therefore, the large diverse audiences, along with the show’s main themes of navigating cultural difference and addressing contemporary racial issues, make analysis of *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air* crucial in discussing the meanings produced in 1990s black sitcoms. I now move on to the specific strategies I mentioned were crucial for mainstreaming blackness and relaying such meanings, beginning with the “Functionally White Foil.”

The Functionally White Foil

In order to investigate the black sitcoms’ use of what I will call a Functionally White Foil, one must recall the primary function of a sitcom, which is to provide entertainment through “good, clean, fun.”²⁸ However, this seems to be an impossible objective, considering that underlying many of the jokes are racial hierarchies and stereotypical assumptions. Yet, popular sitcoms are indeed able to maintain the aura of fun while conveying racialized meanings through their comedy. The trick is that they do so in a way that does not spurn a serious or uncomfortable feeling in the audience.²⁸ One way this is done is through the Functionally White Foil.

The Functionally White Foil has two parts to it: the “functionally white” element and the “foil” aspect. A “functionally white” character is one that, although phenotypically black, clearly behaves as a stereotypically white character. Furthermore, the character is a “foil,” which I will define as someone who is often juxtaposed with stereotypically black characters for the purposes of drawing a contrast. This serves to distance the foil from blackness, but due to his phenotype he cannot completely disavow his black identity. What are the advantages of this technique, and how is it put into action? I first look at its use in *The Cosby Show* to address these questions.

²⁷ Gray, *Watching Race*, 59-60.

²⁸ Hall, “Racist Ideologies and the Media,” 278.

In November of 1991, *The Cosby Show* aired its ninth episode of season eight, entitled “For Men Only.” In it, Cliff (Bill Cosby) teaches a course for teens on succeeding as adults in the world at a local recreational center.²⁹ Most of the kids are stereotypically black: they wear baggy clothes, speak in slang, and adorn earrings and other gaudy jewelry. However, one character sticks out as stereotypically white despite his black phenotype. Unlike his classmates, Danny dresses neatly, lacks any kind of size or muscle, is sexually inexperienced (one knows this when the other characters discuss fathering babies and joke that Danny *definitely* has not fathered any), and speaks more clearly and properly than the others. In the two key situations that follow, one can begin to see the advantages of such a character.

At the beginning of Cliff’s class, Danny makes his first interesting statement. Amidst all the talks of his classmates on fathering babies, Danny exclaims to Cliff: “I’ll take responsibility for myself Dr. Huxtable, but I’m tired of taking blame for everything bad that happens.”³⁰ This statement exemplifies one of the advantages of the Functionally White Foil: different audience members can interpret such a statement in a way that keeps them feeling comfortable and ultimately ready to laugh. In particular, it seems likely that black audience members may still view this statement as coming from a black character, and as such they can relate because they too may feel wrongly blamed when unfortunate events occur. Conversely, and perhaps more significantly, white viewers may be able to see the “functionally white” aspect of Danny, and thus view him as more closely associated with themselves than blacks. Consequently, they either consciously or subconsciously would tend to agree that they too are tired of being blamed by the African-American community for all of their problems. Just as this may begin to make some of these

²⁹ TV.com, “For Men Only: Episode Overview,” *The Cosby Show*, 2008, http://www.tv.com/the-cosby-show/for-men-only/episode/12925/summary.html?tag=ep_guide;ep_title;8.

³⁰ *The Cosby Show*. “For Men Only,” Episode no. 185, first broadcast 14 November 1991 by NBC. Directed by John Bowab and written by Walter Allen Bennett, Jr.

viewers feel uncomfortable or racist, they can remember that they are agreeing with a character who is black and among friends, not a Ku Klux Klan grand dragon. Thus, virtually all audience members can relate to Danny in a way that keeps them from feeling too uncomfortable or offended. Perhaps most significantly, for whites this means they can criticize African-Americans in a way that to them seems safe and permissible.

The previous example revealed Danny as functionally white, but some might argue that the “foil” aspect is less pronounced since he is speaking to Cliff. That is, Danny’s role as a contrast to and distance from blackness may not be as effective when he is juxtaposed with a character (in Cliff) who is often considered functionally white himself.³¹ What happens when there is direct interaction between the Functionally White Foil and a more stereotypically black character? Later in “For Men Only,” a stereotypically black teen tells Cliff that he has fathered two babies with two different women, has no job, and only sees each baby about once a month. Although most of the characters in the scene seem to be shaking their heads, Danny seems to be the most outraged, and is the only character who confronts the father by asking, “How come you don’t have a job?”³² The choice of the writers to make Danny the most upset in this situation is quite interesting. Just as in the interaction with Cliff, different audience members can interpret Danny’s reaction in different ways. Since Danny is phenotypically black, black viewers may applaud him for being angry at a member of his own race for perpetuating a negative stereotype. Alternatively, white viewers may more clearly see his distance from blackness, and deem him as more white thanks to his contrast with the father. Hence, they construe his reaction as the collective anger of white people toward blacks that choose to father children and not support them. But again, because Danny is phenotypically black, feelings of guilt or offense over what could otherwise be a racially-charged

³¹ Hunt, “The Cosby Show.”

³² *The Cosby Show*. “For Men Only.”

confrontation are averted. This poignant episode of *The Cosby Show* illustrates how the Functionally White Foil can be used and the advantages associated with it.

No discussion of phenotypically black but functionally white characters can be complete without mentioning Carlton of *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air*. Carlton, aside from sharing many of the behavioral qualities of Danny (nerdy dress, small in stature, and proper speech) also has the socioeconomic status (extreme upper class) that is almost exclusively white. Thus, when he interacts with Will—the only main stereotypically black character in the show—the stage is set for racialized messages to be conveyed in the least alienating way possible. For example, in an October 1995 episode entitled “Bourgie sings the Blues,” Carlton gets depressed over a number of unfortunate events that occur before his interview with a Princeton alumnus. His efforts to get a job at Dole Headquarters fail, he is not selected to volunteer at a local community center, his lucky sweater shrinks in the dryer, and his grades slip a little. Carlton’s subsequent interactions with Will are not trivial. First, Will responds to Carlton’s issues by imitating a baby and sarcastically crying, “waa, my sweater shrunk, my grades are low.” Later in the episode, Carlton goes missing and Will searches for him, eventually finding him at a local blues music joint. When Will again shows a lack of sympathy, Carlton responds by telling Will that he could not understand the situation because he is lucky and has “the job, the girls, and the height.” Will retorts that it was he, not Carlton, who grew up in the projects, had no money, and whose father was never around. This is a strikingly clear example of the Functionally White Foil. Carlton establishes himself as white not only by the general aspects of his character, but in this episode, through his foreignness to a traditional African-American blues joint and his contrast with Will. Will seems much more at home at the place, and his stereotypically black identity is reinforced by Carlton when he alludes to his (hyper)sexuality and large build. The overall message in this scene—that “white” problems

pale in comparison to those that African-Americans face—is conveyed in a way that avoids an uncomfortable or stereotypical situation. In addition, the writers help maintain audience comfort by having Will conclude that he is not going to get in an argument over who has it worse, because “the truth is, neither one of us has it that bad.”³³ This statement is a loaded one. It might suggest to a black audience the importance of a positive outlook, or alternatively to whites that blacks complain too much about their circumstances. More dangerously, Will’s unrealistic portrayal of blackness (e.g., his rare transplantation into a wealthy world overnight) may wrongly convince whites that blacks can “make it” quite easily. Also, his identity may disqualify him from speaking on behalf of blacks who are in more realistic life situations. These arguments have also been repeatedly made in the critiques of the characters in *The Cosby Show*, but I will return my focus to the Functionally White Foil and its benefits. Despite some limitations, one has seen that it works by keeping the all-important atmosphere of “good, clean, fun” in black sitcoms while serious, racialized messages are being conveyed.

Questioning the Place of Black Characters in a White World

Another way in which the goal of maintaining lightheartedness in sitcoms is accomplished is by depicting black characters in what scholar Richard Taflinger would call “incongruous situations.” These are instances that generate laughs because the transpiring events seem to contradict societal norms.³⁴ One of the most commonly used incongruous situations in black sitcoms involves the placing of a black character in a foreign, white world. By “white world,” I am referring to aspects of society that are generally reserved for whites—the world of college education, money, privilege, power, and so on. The inevitable result of this placement of black

³³ *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air*. “Bourgie Sings the Blues,” Episode no. 128, first broadcast 9 October 1995 by NBC. Directed by Shelley Jensen and written by Tom Devanney.

³⁴ Richard F. Taflinger, “A Theory of Comedy,” *Sitcom: What it is, How it Works*, 1996. <http://www.wsu.edu:8080/~taflinge/theory.html>.

characters in such a world is humorous failure. Consequently, the audience consciously or subconsciously begins to question if it is possible for blacks to gain membership and thrive in a white world amidst their laughs. Several poignant examples of this strategy can be seen in *The Cosby Show* and *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air*. In a January 1992 *Cosby Show* episode entitled “Theo’s Future,” the aspect of the foreign white world that is focused on is that of wealthy corporations. In this episode, Theo goes to a corporate mixer at a downtown hotel only to take advantage of the free food. In this white world of suits, money, and sucking up, Theo establishes his foreignness right away. First, he starts eating before he is supposed to and makes a lot of noise with the buffet containers. Then, during the opening speech given by corporate executives, he bumps into silverware and makes a big scene. Next, he fills water loudly and rudely interrupts the speech. As the audience laughs while Theo is making a fool of himself, they are almost oblivious to the racialized statement that is being made through his buffoonery. Later in the scene, Theo is physically isolated from other prospective employees who are sucking up and talking about making money for the company. He continues to serve himself the free food away from the crowd. He then begins piping in to the conversation with almost unintelligible comments due to his chewing.³⁵ Ironically, one of the executives likes some of these haphazard statements, offers Theo an interview, and eventually makes him a job offer in a later episode. In this episode, entitled “Cliff and Theo Come Clean,” Theo turns down the job offer, which would have allowed him to earn \$30,000 in his first year. Instead, he decides to continue pursuing his education and working at the local community center while still living off of his parents’ money.³⁶

Theo’s placement into the white world of corporations illustrates that he fails in two ways.

First, he is physically and behaviorally an outcast and an unwelcome outsider at the corporate

³⁵ *The Cosby Show*. “Theo’s Future,” Episode no. 189, first broadcast 2 January 1992 by NBC. Directed by Janet Leahy and written by Hugh O’Neill and Gordon Gartelle.

³⁶ *The Cosby Show*. “Cliff and Theo Come Clean,” Episode no. 195, first broadcast 13 February 1992 by NBC. Directed by John Bowab and written by Adriana Trigiani.

mixer. Second, even when he is invited into this white world further with a job offer which would have allowed him to gain financial independence from his parents, he quizzically turns down this offer and continues to live in his familiar world while his parents foot the bill. This is not to say that Theo did not have admirable reasons for turning down the offer. Yet, the audience cannot help thinking of it mainly as a blown opportunity. Though the situation may have been humorous, questions of whether or not black individuals can belong to and thrive in a white-dominated world are posed to the audience through these episodes.

Theo's failures in a white corporate world in *The Cosby Show* can be considered analogous to many of Will's failures within the white world of the upper class in *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air*. As previously mentioned, Will's character is arguably the most compelling because of the challenge he faces in entering a white world of money and privilege despite his stereotypically black identity. Will's struggles to thrive in this situation are especially noticeable in a September 1995 episode entitled "Burnin' Down the House." In it, Will takes it upon himself to learn to flambé³⁷ without supervision: Carlton is at a Young Republicans camp, Philip is golfing with a colleague, Hilary is preparing for her next talk show, and Geoffrey, the butler, is busy with other responsibilities. Predictably, Will adds far too much alcohol and sets the kitchen on fire, which despite his best efforts, eventually burns down. To cap off this hilarious chain of events, a black firefighter asks Will how the fire started, and he explains his failed effort to flambé. The firefighter bursts into laughter and exclaims in slang: "Flambé?! Black folks ain't supposed to be cooking flambé! You stupid!"³⁸ Hence, like Theo in *The Cosby Show*, Will's efforts to thrive in a white world as a black character are met with little more than humorous failure. In Will's case, I can say

³⁷ Flambé is a gourmet cooking procedure that uses alcohol to ignite a hot pan, producing a dramatic visual effect and sealing the liqueur flavor into the food. "How To Flambé," *Flambé Recipes*, <http://whatscookingamerica.net/flambe.htm>.

³⁸ *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air*. "Burnin' Down The House," Episode no. 125, first broadcast 18 September 1995 by NBC. Directed by Madeline Cripe and written by Adam Markowitz and Joel Madison.

that he failed in this world for two reasons. First, notice that while the other characters are successfully reaffirming their sense of belonging to this world (through their political views, playing golf, or hosting a TV show), Will feels left out. As a result, he ends up getting into trouble when he tries to prove his own belonging to this white world. Second, the firefighter proclaims what the audience is likely thinking—that flambé is reserved to a white upper-class lifestyle of privilege to which black people are rarely welcome. Thanks to the firefighter, the audience is given permission to laugh at Will’s failed efforts. Again, one sees how Stuart Hall’s and Richard Taflinger’s observations of sitcoms are relevant to the discussion of *The Cosby Show* and *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air*. The same jokes and situations that generate laughs using incongruity and foreignness are also pivoted on “racially defined characteristics” and “relations of superior and inferior.”^{39, 40} In other words, by laughing, the audience is essentially acknowledging and affirming that blacks are stereotypically different than their white counterparts, and as such are incapable of succeeding in the latter’s world.

These two instances shed light on an important question underlying this section. Do *The Cosby Show* and *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air* construct monolithic notions of racial identity through their efforts to gain entry into white worlds? To consider this question, one must first understand the likely intentions of the sitcoms’ writers in the scenes that have just been discussed. In depicting a white executive offering Theo a job and Will having the opportunity to flambé, it seems they are trying to address the stereotypical images of blackness partially established by older sitcoms like *The Jeffersons*, *Good Times*, and so on. Specifically, they offer Theo and Will a deal: don’t mess up, and you will be granted entry into an exclusive white world. However, in depicting Theo’s and Will’s humorous failures, blackness again becomes associated solely with individuals

³⁹ Hall, “The Whites of Their Eyes: Racist Ideologies and the Media,” 274-5.

⁴⁰ Richard F. Taflinger, “A Theory of Comedy.”

who are inept, unrefined, and incapable of “finishing the deal.” Similarly, the white world, which could have come to include Theo and Will had they been successful, again becomes synonymous solely with wealth, productivity, and propriety. Therefore, it seems the sitcoms squandered a golden opportunity to respond to black stereotypes in their efforts to keep the show humorous and lighthearted. As a result, monolithic (and stereotypical) notions of blackness and whiteness are actually reinforced.

Navigating Whiteness and Blackness, and the “Middle of the Road” Identity

In the last section, I discussed a serious consequence of the shows’ efforts to keep the sitcoms lighthearted. It should follow that the writers’ primary motivation behind keeping the sitcom funny is that it will attract wide appeal and big ratings. Another effort to gain ratings is the topic of this section. Throughout *The Cosby Show* and *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air*, occasionally a character displays both stereotypically black and traditionally white traits at the same time. There may be many reasons for the writers do this, but most of them revolve around audience recruitment and ratings. Audience recruitment has been the goal of television networks since the 1950s, and, as the name suggests, aims to garner as much audience support as possible for the purposes of increasing ratings and advertising value.⁴¹ Historically, this has only really applied to white audiences, since they used to comprise a majority of the television viewers. Herman Gray suggests that in the past as well as today, one way to do this is to universalize the viewing experience by depicting characters who display the normative (white) ideals of society.⁴² In black sitcoms, one way in which white viewers connect with the black characters is through their displaying of traits generally associated with the ideal of whiteness (one is reminded here of Gray’s *pluralist* lens

⁴¹ Gray, *Cultural Moves*, 98.

⁴² Gray, *Cultural Moves*, 117.

discussed in the introduction of this chapter).⁴³ However, this strategy does little to recruit black viewers to these shows. This recruitment became especially important with the popularization of VCRs and Cable in the late 1980s. Gray suggests that as a result, white viewers of network television programs decreased, leading to an increased targeting to minorities who were becoming a larger proportion of the audience.⁴⁴ How did these shows begin to target and recruit black individuals? More and more, popular black sitcoms portrayed characters that these individuals could identify with by having them display traditionally black traits and behaviors. It seems important to reiterate that the characters who displayed these black traits are the same characters that often portrayed ideals of whiteness to keep the white audience engaged. Thus, a conflicted character is set up—one who, simply put, is “sometimes white” and “sometimes black,” at least behaviorally. As I mentioned in the introduction, it is precisely this type of conflicted character that makes for the most compelling television.⁴⁵ However, this navigation of blackness and whiteness has its bounds—at no point can the character become “too black” or “too white,” since doing so would alienate a portion of the audience and jeopardize ratings. Hence, one will see how characters in *The Cosby Show* and *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air* displayed such a “middle of the road” identity between total blackness and total whiteness.

Examining a character that particularly exemplifies this “middle of the road” approach is admittedly difficult for *The Cosby Show*. The reason for this is because all of the main characters, to an extent, can be considered representative of this technique. The Cosby family, for example, prioritized education, had a nice house, were almost always morally upright. These aspects are stereotypically associated with whiteness. Yet, the family aims to maintain a sense of low-key racial pride, through their affinity for jazz music and African-American art, among other elements.

⁴³ I have chosen not to discuss at length what actually makes up the whiteness ideal in this chapter. For further discussion, see the chapter on white sitcoms.

⁴⁴ Gray, *Watching Race*, 68.

⁴⁵ Gray, *Watching Race*, 91.

However, a character that is not a member of the Cosby family seems to stand out for this analysis. Lance is the boyfriend of Charmaine, who is friends with Pam, one of Clair Huxtable's distant cousins. I argue that Lance is especially important because the whiteness and blackness he displays is much more visible and obvious to the audience. For instance, he is one of the only characters who chooses to wear baggy clothes and talk in slang throughout the series. Yet, he constantly associates himself with whiteness by demonstrating his notorious frugality. Thus, Lance is the best example of the "middle of the road identity" because baggy clothes and frugality are more easily understood by the audience as black and white representations, respectively. This is in contrast to the more abstract and subtle notions of blackness and whiteness such as an affinity for black music and a stress on "doing the right thing," which generally are much less visible for the audience. A look at some specific episodes may help to demonstrate Lance's overt dual identity further.

In an October 1991 episode entitled "Warning: A Double-Lit Candle Can Cause a Meltdown," he clearly establishes himself as a character navigating both whiteness and blackness. In this episode, Cliff and Clair ask him to protect their teenage daughter Rudy and her friends when they go to a teen club downtown. In the opening scenes, Lance establishes the black aspect of his identity by his knowledge of the urban club scene and his aggression toward potential suitors of the teens. He even says to one man, "before you try dancin' with them three, these two [fists] want to cut in." On the other hand, he is noticeably careful about how he spends his money while at the club, refusing to buy soft drinks after he hears how much they cost. This frugality and focus on responsible spending likely resonates more with the white audience.⁴⁶ One sees further evidence of Lance's black/white dual identity in another 1991 episode, "Pam Applies to College." In the opening scene of this episode, Lance immediately reaches out to the white audience when he talks

⁴⁶ *The Cosby Show*. "Warning: A Double Lit Candle Can Cause a Meltdown," Episode no. 181, first broadcast 17 October 1991 by NBC. Directed by Malcom Jamal Warner and written by Walter Allen Bennett, Jr.

about how he wants to go to college and bring a degree back to his community. However, he also mentions that he might not be able to pay the pricey application fees, and later turns to his girlfriend Charmaine and calls her “baby.” This results in Charmaine scolding him for his overt sexuality. Particularly in this scene, the black/white dualism is obvious.⁴⁷ Furthermore, one can see through some of Lance’s behaviors the consequence of Bill Cosby’s desires to create characters that recode black stereotypes. Lance tries to equate his blackness with behaving responsibly—a trait stereotypically associated only with whites—without forfeiting the pride he has for his black identity. It seems unlikely that he alone succeeds in permanently solidifying the link between blackness and “doing the right thing.” Rather, it takes eight seasons and the conscious efforts of all the show’s characters to start to reverse such a ubiquitous (albeit maybe unconscious) stereotype.

A discussion of black/white dualism and “middle of the road” identities in *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air* should obviously revolve around Will. As previously mentioned, the premise of the show places Will in the traditionally white environment of a Bel Air mansion; this is in direct contrast to his small apartment in urban Philadelphia. Like Lance, his general character traits can exemplify Will’s simultaneous navigation of whiteness and blackness. On the one hand, he wears colorful, baggy clothing, listens to rap music, is well-built and overtly sexual. Yet, he also attends Bel Air Preparatory Academy, and as the series progresses learns to appreciate his new luxurious white lifestyle. For instance, several episodes show Will enjoying golf, driving nice cars, eating gourmet food, and so on. Often, the writers of the show craft lines that blatantly reinforce Will’s simultaneous black and white identities. For example, in a May 1994 episode called “The Philadelphia Story,” Will and the Banks family plan to visit Will’s mother at his old apartment in urban Philadelphia. Carlton does not want to go because, among other reasons, there is no “country

⁴⁷ *The Cosby Show*. “Pam Applies to College,” Episode no. 180, first broadcast 10 October 1991 by NBC. Directed by John Bowab and written by Walter Allen Bennett, Jr.

club reciprocity.” In a humorous exchange, Will scolds him for not wanting to go just because it is not a fancy resort. To end the argument, Will yells, “I hate it when people are spoiled by money.” Seconds later, he bosses the Banks’ butler Geoffrey to make him a sandwich.⁴⁸

Lance of *The Cosby Show* and Will from *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air* demonstrate how these black sitcoms portray what Gray describes as a “contested terrain of meanings and identities.”⁴⁹ These characters must resonate with white audiences who are looking for traces of the normative ideal in them. Yet, they must also cater to the black audience, who at the time of these shows were becoming an increasingly prominent faction of the national viewership. The high ratings sustained by *The Cosby Show* and *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air* suggest that both maintained a relatively large, diverse audience. I have argued in this section that one way the writers accomplished this is to portray characters that had black/white dual identities. In doing so, the characters never approached complete blackness or whiteness. That is, they took a “middle of the road” approach. In so doing, the writers were able keep both white and black viewers from feeling permanently alienated.

Extending the Olive Branch

It seems logical that sitcom audiences enjoyed characters that navigated both a black and white identity, mainly because part of this identity resonated with their own experience. One will see in this section that putting blackness and whiteness in the same discussion has other positive consequences. As part of their efforts to address controversial issues, sitcoms often echoed the dominant cultural assumptions that middle class whites felt anxious and sometime angry about blacks infiltrating their sphere. As a result, the black characters (and likely the black audience

⁴⁸ *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air*. “The Philadelphia Story,” Episode no. 99, first broadcast 23 May 1994 by NBC. Directed by Shelley Jensen and written by Eddie Gorodetsky and Maiya Williams.

⁴⁹ Gray, *Watching Race*, 2.

members by extension) felt the strain of trying to enter into such a hostile world. According to Stuart Hall, the sitcoms' representation of dominant assumptions and cultural norms can be considered one of the central functions of television in general.⁵⁰ Through this investigation of black sitcoms, however, I have to this point left out one important dominant assumption of the late 1980s and into the 1990s which was mentioned at some length in this project's introduction. The conservative notion of colorblindness—that racism is dead and that our differences (and similarities) are only on an individual level⁵¹—shaped yet another strategy used by these shows to convey racialized meanings. Colorblindness aimed primarily to universalize the black and white experiences by trivializing the differences between blackness and whiteness. In other words, the black experience was the same as the white experience, and any deviation from this can be accounted for by individual differences. Here I examine how *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air* and *The Cosby Show* reinforced this rhetoric by portraying black characters that “extend the olive branch.” I am using this term to mean that black characters claim the black experience as indeed no different than the white experience on the basis of race. I understand that my use of the term “olive branch” merits further elaboration. Through the sitcoms, the black characters extend this metaphorical peace offering particularly to the white audience members. The message from these characters essentially is that rocky race relations are obsolete because we are not really different from you on the basis of race. This kind of offering, however, is problematic. For instance, it is possible that the black characters and media professionals were not entirely aware of the consequences of such an offering. Some may have thought writing scripts reflecting colorblindness was the correct, or “common sense” thing to do (Gramsci's idea of hegemony comes into mind here). However, many now believe that adherence by blacks to colorblindness sets them further back in the end,

⁵⁰ Hall, “The Whites of Their Eyes: Racist Ideologies in the Media,” 273.

⁵¹ Gray, *Cultural Moves*, 118.

since they begin to disregard crucial differences and disparities that have been established over time due to racism. As a result, when white audience members accept this peace offering, they too begin to ignore the still-present racial inequities between blacks and whites. This was, and still remains, one of the most poignant critiques of colorblindness. Nevertheless, I explore how characters on the black sitcoms extend the olive branch to say something like “we, and our experiences, are not different from you and yours.”

The October 1991 episode of *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air* entitled “Guess Who’s Coming to Marry” merits a long discussion revolving around its main plotline: Will’s Aunt Janice creates a big stir because she is going to marry a white man. However, for now I will focus on the opening scenes of the episode, which show Will extending the olive branch to white viewers and claiming universality of the black and white experiences. First, one sees Will trying to do schoolwork, but he is unable to do so because his overbearing mother Vy is hovering over him, sharpening his pencils, fixing his hair, and asking him to blow his nose. Through this comedic interaction, the audience first can’t help but think about Will Smith’s rap song “Parents Just Don’t Understand,” which had such wide and cross-racial appeal that it won a Grammy Award in 1989.⁵² As in the song, black teenagers are making an offering to their white counterparts over the shared notion that their parents just do not get it. Additionally, it seems Vy’s behavior challenges the notion that black families lack an ideal family structure with caring parents. Hence, the black characters in this scene claim that their family experience is, contrary to popular stereotypes, very similar to the white experience.

In the very next scene, Hilary is talking to her Aunts about sex and relationships. She gets a rise out of her Aunts and the audience when she says “please, it’s the 90s, a woman doesn’t have to

⁵² Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia, “Parents Just Don’t Understand,” 10 November 2008, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parents_Just_Don't_Understand.

be married to [have sex].” This stance on premarital sex has been shown to be relatively universal among young adults across races.⁵³ The final scene of interest occurs when Carlton is sleeping with Will in Will’s bed. Carlton asks Will if he wants to get married, to which Will replies “get out of my bed.” Carlton says he didn’t mean getting married to each other, and Will sparks laughter when he says “sorry man, this is LA.”⁵⁴ This scene exemplifies perfectly what Herman Gray calls crafting “homogeneity out of difference.”⁵⁵ In other words, it brings blacks and whites together as they both declare themselves as different from homosexuals. Ironically, before the age of colorblindness, the primary way by which different groups found sameness was in collectively distancing themselves from African-Americans.⁵⁶

Similar efforts to universalize the white and black experiences can be seen in *The Cosby Show*. An episode particularly relevant to this discussion is “The Iceman Bricketh,” which originally aired in October 1991. This episode revolves around Vanessa’s (the third daughter of Cliff and Clair) decision to marry an older maintenance supervisor named Dabnis. Vanessa’s grandparents—Cliff’s father Russell and Claire’s mother Carrie—are irate that they know so little about Vanessa’s fiancé, and decide to grill him when he comes to the Huxtable home. They cover topics such as how often he goes to church and how good of a living he makes, among others. I propose that this scene is universalizing: it seems true that for both blacks and whites and their subcultures, the potential husband or wife must go through a mandatory interviewing process with the elders before approval is given. The characters are also sending the message that, just as in white families, the elders in black families care very deeply about their children and grandchildren. Later in the episode, Vanessa talks with her older brother Theo, who conveys his wariness of

⁵³ David J. Harding and Christopher Jencks, “Changing attitudes toward premarital sex: cohort, period, and aging effects,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 67, no. 2 (2003), <http://poq.oxfordjournals.org/archive/>.

⁵⁴ *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air*. “Guess Who’s Coming to Marry,” Episode no. 31, first broadcast 14 October 1991 by NBC. Directed by Ellen Falcon and written by Samm-Art Williams.

⁵⁵ Gray, *Cultural Moves*, 6.

⁵⁶ Gray, *Cultural Moves*, 98.

Vanessa kissing Dabnis, let alone marrying him. This overprotection mixed with disgust that emerges from an older brother when confronted with a younger sister's relationships is a phenomenon that clearly transcends racial boundaries. Finally, after her grandparents give their approval of Dabnis for a husband, Vanessa starts to panic as she realizes she is really going to get married. Once again, this sense of fear and hesitation about marriage can be considered an experience shared by both blacks and whites. Therefore, one can see that several black characters make an effort to extend the olive branch to their white counterparts on both *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air* and *The Cosby Show*. By promoting racial peace on the basis that the black experience is no different from the white experience, the sitcoms reinforced the conservative hegemonic norms of colorblindness at the time.

Recoding Black Stereotypes

Through my exploration to this point, it has been hard to say conclusively if the strategies used by black sitcoms to convey racialized messages were consciously employed by the show's writers or not. On the other hand, the final strategy in this chapter, the effort to recode black stereotypes, is one that is known to have been overt and deliberate in *The Cosby Show* and to a lesser extent in *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air*. Recall from previous discussions that black stereotypes from sitcoms needed recoding. Black sitcoms of the 70s and 80s, like *Sanford and Son*, *Good Times*, and *The Jeffersons* primarily did not represent blackness in flattering ways. As scholars Robin R. Means Coleman and Charlton D. McIlwain point out in their essay "The Hidden Truths in Black Sitcoms":

The Black World of Fred Sanford (*Sanford and Son*) or the Evans family (*Good Times*) was one where citizens were largely distracted by their own poverty and disenfranchisement, thereby making their Blackness inaccessible and presenting Black

circumstances as those to be pitied. In the case of George Jefferson (*The Jeffersons*), Blackness was represented as sassy and rude, barely tolerable, and hardly useful.⁵⁷

Thus, black sitcoms of the 1990s worked hard to alter these negative representations and stereotypes of blackness into positive ones. As an example, I analyze the October 1991 episode of *The Cosby Show* entitled “Particles in Motion.” In this episode, three notable events occur. First, Theo is hard at work preparing for parent conferences as one of the supervisors at a local community center. It is also known from previous episodes that he is juggling this commitment with graduate school at NYU. Second, Lisa, a black parent of one of Theo’s students at the community center, comes in for the conferences and is outraged when she hears from Theo that her daughter is not doing her homework. Lisa tells Theo that she had trusted her daughter to get her work done without her since she is attending school herself four nights a week. Although it is true that ideally Lisa should be home for her child, one cannot ignore her dedication to her own education. A third scene depicts Rudy Huxtable and her friend Kenny diligently doing their homework without much adult pushing.⁵⁸ This episode serves as only one example of how *The Cosby Show* aimed to recode negative representations of blackness by focusing on the characters’ commitment to selfless service as well as education. As mentioned in this chapter’s introduction, other episodes aim to highlight a positive black image of family structure, fiscal responsibility, and affluence.⁵⁹

Where the writers and creators of *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air* were not as overt as Bill Cosby on the show’s goals to recode black stereotypes, conscious efforts to do so are also very evident. For instance, consider Carlton’s character in general. He earns top grades in school, is actively involved in the community, always presents himself well, and respects his elders. He also

⁵⁷ Robin R. Means Coleman and Charlton D. Mclwain, “The Hidden Truths in Black Sitcoms,” 126-7.

⁵⁸ *The Cosby Show*. “Particles in Motion,” Episode no. 179, first broadcast 3 October 1991 by NBC. Directed by John Bowab and written by Linda M. Yearwood and Adriana Trigiani.

⁵⁹ Hunt, “The Cosby Show.”

challenges essentialist notions of blackness such as their being defined as good dancers: anyone who has even seen Carlton dance knows that he questions this definition. Some have argued that Carlton's character, like many of those on *The Cosby Show*, ends up deviating from what audience members may view as a realistic representation of blackness. However, one knows from dialogue in several episodes that Carlton's character does not try to transcend blackness but rather affirm the possibility of a recoded black identity. For instance, he emphatically points out in a 1993 episode that "being black is not what I'm trying to be, it's who I am."⁶⁰

Conclusion

Through the discussion of black sitcoms, I have addressed several strategies by which *The Cosby Show* and *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air* conveyed racialized meanings to a large, diverse audience. I first looked at the Functionally White Foil. One learned how a phenotypically black but behaviorally white character interacts with a stereotypically black character to convey potentially uncomfortable messages in a way that maintains the show's necessary aura of "good, clean fun".⁶¹ This theme is extended to situations when the place of black characters within a white world is seriously questioned, but buffered using the humor generated from such incongruity. Next, I investigated another way in which these sitcoms kept both white and black audience members engaged (and thus listening to the racialized meanings portrayed). Characters that simultaneously navigated a black and white identity, but never strayed too far from the "middle of the road" helped in the recruitment and maintenance of such a massive, diverse audience. Interestingly, while the differences between whites and blacks may have been accentuated in this strategy, at other times such differences were completely eliminated or ignored. Consistent with the

⁶⁰ *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air*. "Blood is Thicker Than Mud," Episode no. 81, first broadcast 1 November 1993 by NBC. Directed by Chuck Vinson and written by Devon Shepard.

⁶¹ Hall, "Racist Ideologies and The Media," 278.

conservative discourses of colorblindness and individualism of the time, black sitcoms of the 1990s also aimed to “extend the olive branch,” universalizing the black and white experiences. In so doing, they pointed out that any differences between characters of different races were strictly on an individual level and therefore we should all get along. Finally, we know that the writers of both *The Cosby Show* and *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air* aimed to recode the negative black stereotypes set up by black sitcoms in prior decades.

One can say that these strategies are indeed closely related. First, the effort to recode black stereotypes can only be effective if a large, multiracial audience repeatedly views these shows. In other words, the blackness portrayed in the shows must be mainstreamed (and watched by whites), instead of being confined to viewers who are at the margins and can most easily relate to the portrayals. How was this accomplished? It seems clear that the other strategies worked to engage and make comfortable the maximum amount of audience members possible, and as a result potentially serious racialized messages could be relayed under the guise of comedy. As a result, *The Cosby Show* and *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air* actually helped transform black sitcoms, and in particular, their portrayals of blackness. They took these portrayals from the margins and made them the center of attention even for white audience members. Only after this mainstreaming and popularization of blackness was it possible for these sitcoms to convey racialized meanings that were both provocative and capable of doing real ideological work. The next chapter will address how white sitcoms of the 1990s both interacted with, and reacted to, these meanings.

Chapter 2: Racialized Meanings in White Sitcoms of the 1990s

Hypervisibility and the Whiteness Norm

As I shift gears from black to white sitcoms, one aspect remains constant: the shows revolve around a set of main characters that are all almost entirely the same race (at least phenotypically). In the black sitcoms I have investigated, rarely if ever are white characters truly at the center of the plotline. Similarly, in the white sitcoms I will analyze, black characters rarely take the spotlight. Most of the time, they simply “blend in” with the white characters, mainly by

behaving like them and supporting their viewpoints and opinions. This may serve as an extension of last chapter's strategy of universalizing the experience via an extension of the olive branch. In other words, the black experience *is* the white experience. However, there are a notable minority of white sitcom episodes in which the usually invisible black characters are actually part of the main plot. Because of these characters' usual inconspicuous behavior and the shows' environment of whiteness, when this happens he or she not only becomes visible but *hypervisible*. This hypervisibility has many consequences, which I will outline here, but examine in more detail later in the chapter. First, and most simply, it places a burden on the character to represent his or her race in its entirety, since no other black characters are visible enough to counter their thoughts or behavior. This makes the hypervisible characters vulnerable to reinforcing black stereotypes and generalizations (as I will discuss later in this chapter). Second, the words and actions of the individual are paid especially close attention by the (mainly white) audience. As a result, any behavior depicting the character as "different," "a failure," or "an antagonist" may lead the audience to form negative opinions of them and—perhaps unconsciously—expand to the race he or she represents. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, the hypervisibility allows the audience to actively juxtapose the black character with the white characters; the latter the audience considers "normal." In other words, due to their hypervisibility, any deviations of the black character from the whiteness ideal are accentuated.

Some may be wondering what I mean when I mention the "whiteness ideal" or the white standard of normality—this concept is not trivial. Several scholars have dedicated a majority of their academic careers to exploring this question. Richard Dyer in his essay, "The Matter of Whiteness" argues that "the assumption that white people are just people, which is not far off from saying that whites are people whereas other colours are something else, is endemic to white

culture.”⁶² Further, the idea that we whites view ourselves as “just” humans or “normal” has been reinforced by federal policies practically since the beginnings of our nation, according to George Lipsitz. In his book *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness*, he points out that several different types of legislation in our history—from laws governing immigration, to the New Deal policies, to federal housing, to taxes—help emphasize the notion that we (whites) have almost always viewed ourselves as normal or ideal. As such (and polling data confirms this), we come to believe that any deviation from this normality is mostly due to personal shortcomings.⁶³ Finally, Professor David Roediger points out that whites are able to claim an ideal status using religion since, they argue, “God is white.”⁶⁴ All of these scholars effectively work to bring such *unconscious* assumptions of whiteness as normal or ideal to the *conscious*. These concepts will be critical as hypervisible black characters are juxtaposed directly with “normal,” white characters in the sitcoms.

The notions of hypervisibility and the whiteness norm lay the foundation for analysis of the black characters that make their way into the main plotlines of white sitcoms. They make for an interesting and important analysis vis-à-vis the racialized meanings conveyed in these sitcoms. In particular, these notions may help explain *why* black characters are able to help relay racialized meanings in these shows. However, to this point I have not discussed *how* these meanings are created and disseminated. Several strategies exist, and they include: (1) the “Antagonist Comes Around” technique, (2) utilizing interracial relationships and the whiteness ideal, and (3) the reinforcement of stereotypes about blacks. I will conclude this chapter with a strategy that has already been addressed in black sitcoms but also is seen in white sitcoms, albeit in largely different ways. This is (4) the questioning the place of a black character in a white world. Before delving

⁶² Richard Dyer, “The Matter of Whiteness,” in *Privilege: A Reader*, ed. Michael Kimmel and Abby Ferber. (Boulder: Westview Press, 2003), 22.

⁶³ George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 3-5, 16, 19.

⁶⁴ David R. Roediger, *Colored White: Transcending the Racial Past*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 31.

into these strategies, however, a quick glance at the sitcoms upon which my analysis here is based seems important.

Background on the White Sitcoms

As for black sitcoms, an analysis of white sitcoms would lose some relevance if the shows I analyzed were not extremely popular. Clearly, popular shows should be the focus because they are more likely to relay racialized meanings to a wide audience. This is the logic behind my selections of *Saved by the Bell*, *Home Improvement*, and *Seinfeld* for analysis in this chapter.⁶⁵

Saved by the Bell was a show about six teenagers and their antics at fictional Bayside High located in Palisades, California. It ran from 1989-1993. The characters include Zack Morris, the most popular student at the school and usually at the center of the plot; Jessie Spano, the smartest yet most high-strung out of the bunch; Kelly Kapowski, the cheerleading captain who has both shining looks and a bubbly personality; A.C. Slater, the jock who often is Zack's right-hand man; Samuel "Screech" Powers, the nerd of the group and often the butt of their jokes; and Lisa Turtle, the shopaholic who loves fashion and gossip.⁶⁶ I will focus more on Lisa, the only black main character, and to a lesser extent Slater, a Latino character, later in this chapter.

Home Improvement ran from 1991-1999. It featured Tim "the Tool Man" Taylor (played by Tim Allen), who is often getting himself into trouble, either by accidents thanks to his shoddy handiwork or by aggravating his wife. His wife is Jill Taylor, the steady force of the Taylor household who is throughout most of the series taking night classes to earn her masters in psychology. Their kids include Brad, who is popular as an upperclassman in high school but often has trouble making good grades; and Randy, who is a couple years younger than Brad but is more

⁶⁵ TV.com, "Highest Rated: Comedy."

⁶⁶ TV.com, "Saved by the Bell: Summary," *Saved by the Bell*, 2008, <http://www.tv.com/saved-by-the-bell/show/457/summary.html>.

studious than him. He also has a love-hate relationship with his older brother. The youngest is Mark, who is probably about four years Randy's junior, enjoys the arts, and is a "mama's boy." Consequently, he is frequently harassed by his older brothers. A recurring black character in seasons five and six is Bud Harper, who becomes the new boss of Tim's local cable show *Tool Time*.⁶⁷ The relationship between Bud and Tim is often tense and tumultuous, and he will be central in this analysis.

Finally, *Seinfeld* is the award winning "show about nothing" that by many accounts was the most popular show of the 1990s.⁶⁸ Throughout its run from 1989-1998, the audience got to know the four main characters who are all "thirtysomethings living the single life" in New York City. Jerry is a comedian who constantly puts himself into embarrassing or bizarre situations. He lives next door to Kramer, who is eccentric to put it nicely. The two are also friends with Elaine, Jerry's ex-girlfriend who has a short fuse with almost everybody, especially her boyfriends; and George, who many would agree is the most hilariously despicable of the bunch, never failing to act out of his own-self interest in almost every situation.⁶⁹ The show also features a recurring black character in seasons seven and eight, Jackie Chiles.⁷⁰ Jackie is a clear caricature of Johnny Cochran, and his interactions with the white main characters will be the focal point of my investigation of *Seinfeld*. In addition, I will also touch on *Seinfeld*'s identity as a Jewish male and how he is racially represented throughout the show. Now that I have looked at the white sitcoms to be focused on in this chapter, I can begin discussing the strategies by which racialized meanings are so effectively conveyed within them. This begins with the "Antagonist Comes Around" technique.

⁶⁷ TV.com, "Home Improvement: Summary," *Home Improvement*, 2008, <http://www.tv.com/home-improvement/show/635/summary.html>.

⁶⁸ TV.com, "Highest Rated: Comedy."

⁶⁹ John Docker, "Seinfeld," The Museum of Broadcast Communications, 1997. <http://www.museum.tv/archives/etv/S/htmlS/seinfeld/seinfeld.htm>.

⁷⁰ TV.com, "Seinfeld: Summary," *Seinfeld*, 2008, <http://www.tv.com/seinfeld/show/112/summary.html>.

The “Antagonist Comes Around” Technique

Like I have discussed in the chapter on black sitcoms, at the center of every strategy employed by the writers to relay racialized messages in sitcoms is the notion that in the end the sitcom has to remain “good, clean fun.”⁷¹ However, this does not mean that tension is never created. In fact, one might rightly predict that this tension can particularly arise in white sitcoms when the white main character leaves his safe, homoracial sphere to interact with a black character. This is certainly a loaded statement that breeds unpacking on two important fronts. First, I am assuming that the black and white characters often operate in separate social spheres in white sitcoms. Scholars have agreed that this is indeed the case, and that it is quite significant. Professors Robert Entman and Andrew Rojecki argue that this social distance is crucial for creating comedic situations that the largely white audience will appreciate. In their book, *The Black Image in the White Mind*, they go on to say that by having black characters situated outside of the white sphere, the white characters are able to let the audience into matters of their personal lives while keeping the black characters almost exclusively out of it. As a result, the audience builds rapport with these white characters and feels comfortable laughing with (or sometimes at) them.⁷² I will call this type of comedy “short-term” comedy, since it only lasts for a short period of time if the writers do not react to some ramifications of this social distance.

This brings me to the second crucial point of the statement above: the ramifications of tension-building due to the perceived social distance between white and black characters. What starts as an effort to breed short-term comedy also (usually inadvertently) leads to what Entman and Rojecki describe as an audience that believes the black and white characters “operate in distinct moral universes, with implicitly opposed interests.”⁷³ When this happens, the mainly white

⁷¹ Stuart Hall, “‘The Whites of Their Eyes’: Racist Ideologies and the Media,” 278.

⁷² Robert M. Entman and Andrew Rojecki, *The Black Image in the White Mind*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 159-160.

⁷³ Entman and Rojecki, 208.

audience naturally sides with the white characters, and the black character becomes an antagonist. As this tension mounts, the metaphorical smile of the audience begins to fade, and in the long run it thus becomes harder to produce comedic situations. Needless to say, this situation needs to be resolved if the show is to restore the all-important lighthearted atmosphere conducive to sustained laughter. This is where the “Antagonist Comes Around” technique comes in: the black character, viewed now as a threat by the audience, halfheartedly “comes around” to placate the white character(s) and resolve the angst. The fact that the character comes around, but does so halfheartedly, is extremely significant. If the black antagonist does not come around at all, the audience would likely be left feeling frustrated and upset at the show’s writers and the antagonist himself. In effect, this strategy returns the audience back to a level of comfort so as to encourage long term laughter as the episode and series progresses. Yet, because he or she comes around halfheartedly, some social distance between the characters is maintained, making the conditions right for short-term comedy. I will demonstrate how this technique is enacted in white sitcoms, starting with a particularly poignant example in *Home Improvement*.

One episode that deserves investigation is “The First Temptation of Tim,” which aired in September of 1995. Throughout the fifth and sixth seasons (1995 and 1996), Tim is working under a new boss for *Tool Time*, Bud Harper. Bud is African-American and probably the only non-white character to appear in several main plotlines throughout the show. Tim first encounters Bud when they sit down to a meeting over breakfast in this episode. Tim is hilariously trying to navigate the maze on the kid’s menu when Bud comes in. Bud becomes an antagonist and contributes to the episode’s humor almost right away when he tells Tim, “I’m not going to blow a lot of sunshine up your butt.” He goes on to say that in order to expand the show, he must fire Tim’s best friend and co-star, Al. Tim is astonished but turns to angry when Bud asks him to be the one to fire his own

friend. Bud says he cannot do it himself because “my grandmother loves Al.” After this uncomfortable and somewhat comedic exchange, Tim comes home upset and is validated by his wife Jill: she cannot believe Bud would put him up to this. Tim eventually decides to tell Bud that he cannot fire Al, even if it means that the show will not get expanded. Bud replies angrily, “Why are you going to the mat for this guy?” Then, just as the audience begins to seriously become angry at Bud, he changes his tune, telling Tim he respects him for being a loyal friend. However, he does not fully “come around”: when Tim asks if the show will be expanded after all, Bud promises two new markets instead of the originally promised ten.⁷⁴ The events in this episode serve as an excellent example of this strategy. Bud first establishes himself as an antagonist who has a different agenda than Tim. As the audience follows Tim home into his white environment, he is seen talking with, and being comforted by, his wife. This serves to create a social distance between them (as whites) and Bud (as black), and as a result the audience gets to know the white characters and builds a rapport with them. As the audience’s playful distaste turns into serious negative emotion toward Bud, the writers resolve the tension by having him soften his stance and show some understanding toward the white characters. As a result, this keeps the audience in a laughing mood over the long haul. Yet, because Bud does not completely come around, the social distance between him and his white counterparts is left largely intact, leaving the audience available to feel camaraderie with the white characters, and subsequently to react to short-term comedy.

The link between feeling close to the white characters and laughing with (or at) them merits some further elaboration. Psychological research has supported the notion that we all are more prone to laugh at or with someone if we know them.⁷⁵ As a result, we are more able to laugh

⁷⁴ *Home Improvement*. “The First Temptation of Tim,” Episode no. 102, first broadcast 26 September 1995 by ABC. Directed by Andy Cadiff and written by Howard J Morris.

⁷⁵ Platow et al., “It’s Not Funny if They’re Laughing: Self-Categorization, Social Influence, and Responses to Canned Laughter,” *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 41, no. 5 (2005), <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/journal/00221031>.

with “our buddies” the Taylors, and their white friends (e.g., the reaction of the audience is to laugh with—instead of scoff at—“their friend” Tim when he is trying to fill out the maze on the kid’s menu). On the other hand, perhaps an equally important consequence of getting to know the Taylors and their white world is that it compounds the social distance the audience already feels to Bud and his black world. As this metaphorical wall between “the friends” and “the bad guy” remains up, one has to wonder if the consequences are limited to keeping the white audience ready to laugh at their buddies in short term situations. It seems very likely that over time, deep associations between “blackness” and “bad” are set up and continuously reaffirmed.

The “Antagonist Comes Around” technique and its consequences are not limited to *Home Improvement*. In fact, one sees several examples of its use in *Saved by the Bell* as well. For instance, consider a November 1990 episode entitled “1-900-Crushed.” The show begins when Zack realizes Lisa (the black character) is great at helping her classmates in troublesome situations. As a result, he and Screech want to start a teen advice line with her. Lisa establishes herself as an antagonist almost immediately when she says she will only do it if she gets half of all the profits from the teen line. The plot thickens when Zack (using a voice that makes him unrecognizable to callers) takes a call from his girlfriend Kelly’s kid sister, Nikki. Nikki tells Zack she has a crush on “someone” but that he is already taken by somebody close to her. Zack, not recognizing Nikki on the other line and not sure what advice to give, looks to Lisa. However, she ignores Zack because she is dealing with someone in what she views as a more dire situation: a girl who does not like shopping. Clearly, Lisa is portrayed as shallow and self-absorbed here. As a result, Zack decides to wing it and tells Nikki to “go for it,” not knowing that he just gave his girlfriend’s sister permission to make a move on him. Lisa’s absurdity in her rationale for not helping Zack, and the resulting predicament Zack finds himself in, further establish her as an antagonist. Afterward, Zack

makes the mistake of firing Lisa because she solved everyone's problems and now nobody calls in. Zack and Screech give terrible advice to callers in the interest of money, and eventually everyone (particularly Zack) needs help working out their issues. Zack begs Lisa to come back to the teen line, but she only does so after demanding that she takes all of the profits. Eventually, after taking all of the teen line's money and ignoring Zack in his time of need, she "comes around." She reluctantly agrees to help Zack sort things out with Nikki and Kelly, and things return to normal by the end of the show.⁷⁶

The events of "1-900-Crushed" nicely represent this strategy. First, it seems important to note that even before this episode, the audience feels the greatest rapport with Zack. This is because at the beginning of almost every episode he uses a technique called "breaking the fourth wall." This means he leaves the world of the characters to talk directly to the audience.⁷⁷ He often explains what is going on in his life: upcoming events at Bayside, predicaments, his emotions, and so on. As a result of repeatedly letting the audience into his white world, the audience feels a connection particularly to him. Therefore, in situations where he is pitted against Lisa, the audience naturally sides with Zack and feels distant to Lisa and her opposing interests. One encounters such a situation in this episode. In ignoring Zack and taking all of the money, Lisa conveys to the audience that she is operating on a different (perhaps immoral) agenda than the white characters. However, just as the audience begins to view her as a serious antagonist, she eventually (and reluctantly) agrees to help Zack fix his problems. Hence, the lighthearted atmosphere is restored, but the audience does not necessarily break down the wall completely. This is probably because, like Bud in *Home Improvement*, Lisa still puts the audience's white friend through the ringer and does not completely make things better in the end—Zack and Screech are still out all their profits.

⁷⁶ *Saved by the Bell*. "1-900-Crushed," Episode no. 27, first broadcast 17 November 1990 by NBC. Directed by Don Barnhart and written by Brett Dewey and Ronald B. Solomon.

⁷⁷ Nationmaster.com, "Encyclopedia," *The Fourth Wall*, 2005, <http://www.nationmaster.com/encyclopedia/The-fourth-wall>.

It seems troubling to recognize that the repeated association of a white character with “friend” and a black character with “antagonist” likely is not trivial, especially in the formative minds of the teens and adolescents watching *Saved by the Bell*. I will largely stick with this show in my analysis of the next strategy, “Interracial Relationships and the Whiteness Ideal.”

Interracial Relationships and the Whiteness Ideal

In exploring the “Antagonist Comes Around” technique, I begin to outline how racialized meanings are conveyed even in mostly homoracial white sitcoms. In the exceptional instance that a black character is involved in the sitcom’s main plotline, the end result is the preservation and accentuation of the social distance between black and white characters. In other words, the hypervisible black characters are “the exceptions that prove the rule.” This idea can be extended to the interracial relationships that one sees in these sitcoms. Moreover, the concept can be extended to both platonic and romantic interracial relationships. Since the latter are extremely rare—almost unheard of—it seems they are a particularly interesting aspect to analyze. After all, Stuart Hall reminds one that “[t]he really significant item may not be the one which continually recurs, but one which stands out as an exception from the general pattern...” As a result, it is “also given, in its exceptional context, the greatest weight.”⁷⁸ For this strategy, I will focus on Lisa’s romantic relationships with white characters in *Saved by the Bell*, and learn how they are instrumental in relaying important racialized messages.

In a two week stretch in 1992, Lisa’s romantic feelings for Zack are revealed and acted upon. In a September 1992 episode entitled “Bayside Triangle,” Lisa is preparing for a fashion show that, if successful, will earn her a spot at the Fashion Institute of Technology. Zack is helping out at her house, and out of nowhere, kisses her. A couple of days later, just before the fashion

⁷⁸ Entman and Rojecki, 149.

show is supposed to start, Lisa and Zack are making out. This may begin to raise some eyebrows in the audience, since seconds before one of the most important moments of her life Lisa is making out with a guy (who also happens to be white). Screech, who has been infatuated with Lisa for years, walks in to wish her luck and sees her making out with his friend Zack. He is absolutely crushed and contributes to the show's flopping by purposely messing up when he narrates the different outfits. Zack later tells Lisa, "that kiss must have really shook [Screech] up." Lisa seems to blow off Screech's heartbreak when she replies, "Yeah, well Zack, that kiss really shook me up too." In the final scene of the episode, Screech is so furious that he challenges Zack to a fight in school. Lisa ends up intervening, telling Screech to get over her. She also announces that she likes Zack and that he likes her back in front of whole school.⁷⁹

This particular episode brings up some important points to discuss. First, one can see a common theme in the blackness Lisa represents in this episode and in "1-900-Crushed," which I touched on in the previous section. She is incredibly self-absorbed and does not really appear to care about anyone besides herself. Drawing on my discussion of hypervisibility at the beginning of this chapter, it seems Lisa is struggling with the responsibility of representing her entire race on this otherwise white show. Unfortunately, her portrayal of a black woman who is shallow and selfish is very apparent and goes unanswered on *Saved by the Bell*.

Second, Lisa's actions also draw on the discussions of the whiteness ideal. As a mainly white audience looks on, they see that Lisa is extremely excited about her new relationship with Zack. She must value it quite a bit, since she both risks her future on it (by making out with him moments before the show instead of preparing) and blatantly ignores Screech's feelings on the

⁷⁹ *Saved by the Bell*. "The Bayside Triangle," Episode no. 66, first broadcast 26 September 1992 by NBC. Directed by Don Barnhart and written by Jeffrey J. Sachs.

matter. Looking critically at this relationship, one can elaborate on what the live audience may only have questioned in passing.

Why does Lisa consider Zack such a good catch? Does it have anything to do with the fact that he is white and she black? I cannot say for sure, but it does bring to mind the dominant assumption that for blacks, currying favor with whites (especially by entering a romantic relationship with one) is thought to be an important step to advancement.⁸⁰ Thus, likely without acknowledging it, Lisa's relationship with Zack is mainly (and probably subconsciously) viewed as a "step up" for her by the audience. If one accepts that Lisa herself also has been conditioned to believe this, it may help explain why she behaves the way that she does in this episode. One knows that she is proud of her catch, as she gladly announces it to the entire school. Moreover, in an episode two weeks later, she calls Zack her "dream man."⁸¹ No white girlfriend that Zack ever had proclaimed his "perfection" as overtly as Lisa in these two episodes. Clearly, something is going on here. Yet, I must address a question some may be asking: Screech is white, but he is not a good catch. What is the difference between Zack and Screech in Lisa's eyes? It seems true that dating Screech may ultimately lead to advancement over the long term, especially considering he is bound for further academic, and ultimately professional, success. However, in the short term, one must remember that Lisa is a high school student, and is unsurprisingly concerned with image and popularity. Screech is undoubtedly a geek and lacks the good looks that Zack has. Therefore, even if it is being calculated subconsciously, Lisa makes the decision that the short term costs of dating Screech do not outweigh any long term gains. On the other hand, dating Zack promises both social stability for Lisa at Bayside and (perhaps over time) even some of his privileges of whiteness. Thus, to Lisa, Zack and his whiteness represent an ideal both immediately and in the future. I will

⁸⁰ Lipsitz, 3.

⁸¹ *Saved by the Bell*. "The Masquerade Ball," Episode no. 68, first broadcast 3 October 1992 by NBC. Directed by Don Barnhart and written by Bennett Tramer.

discuss the significance of this episode further when I survey the reinforcement of black stereotypes later.

Before Lisa became infatuated with Zack, she had feelings for another white character. This relationship also conveyed significant meanings, albeit drastically different from those I have just discussed. The white character, Eric, moves to California from New York after his father marries Jessie's mother. During his involvement in the show during two episodes in 1991, the audience learns that he is a complete loser. He sticks out like a sore thumb at Bayside with his leather jacket and thick New York accent, and does not help his own cause with the gang as he blackmails Zack out of his locker as well as Jessie and Slater (who are dating at the time) over some private conversations he recorded. Moreover, and most relevant to this conversation, he incessantly and aggressively hits on Lisa. At first she thinks he is a jerk, but she eventually relents and falls for him. Toward the end of the last episode in which he is seen, Eric considers moving back to New York, but decides not to primarily because Lisa kisses him and begs him to stay.^{82,83} Perhaps Lisa's romantic feelings for this white character rouse more *conscious* thoughts and opinions from the mainly white audience than the prior situation. The questions most people likely asked are "Why does she fall for such a terrible guy?" and "What does this tell us about Lisa?" The first question may help further explain how this situation differs from that of Lisa and Zack. Zack does not possess any traits that call into question his identity of being "just" white, or "normal." On the other hand, because Eric's morals do not always fall in line with what the audience considers to be the whiteness ideal, he seems a bit less "normal" than the other white characters when compared as individuals. Hence, the audience likely takes more notice when Lisa becomes involved with him. Yet, one can say that his overt sexuality and questionable morals seem to

⁸² *Saved by the Bell*. "The Wicked Stepbrother (1)," Episode no. 47, first broadcast 2 November 1991 by NBC. Directed by Don Barnhart and written by Ronald B. Solomon and Peter Engel.

⁸³ *Saved by the Bell*. "The Wicked Stepbrother (2)," Episode no. 48, first broadcast 2 November 1991 by NBC. Directed by Don Barnhart and written by Tom Tenowich and Peter Engel.

attract Lisa for some reason. Thus, as in the “Antagonist Comes Around” technique, Lisa distances herself from the white characters and is placed in a social sphere characterized by a different set of morals and interests. Also, I should point out that even though Eric deviates from the whiteness ideal on an individual level, he is still considered to be part of the white collective by the audience. His ability to have individual traits that remain distinct from and inferior to other whites, yet do not affect his belonging to a collective white identity, is what Richard Dyer nominates as one of the most significant privileges of whiteness.⁸⁴ The second question above—what this tells us about Lisa—sparks quite a provocative discussion. On one hand, Eric repulses all of the characters except Lisa. However, it appears that Lisa embraces Eric’s whiteness, and thus still views her relationship with Eric as a “step up,” as in the case with Zack. Through this relationship, one is again reminded that the white characters are each able to express different collections of traits—both good and bad—yet do not have their portrayals of whiteness threatened (in both Lisa’s and the audience’s eyes). Such a privilege cannot easily be extended to people of color. For instance, many would agree that the second an African-American attains a level of excellence in academics or public speaking, he loses part or all of his African-American identity (perhaps he is considered the derogatory terms “Oreo” or “Uncle Tom”). Lisa’s love interests help to reinforce this powerful racialized message.

Reinforcing Black Stereotypes

In the previous chapter, I mentioned in some detail that black sitcoms of the 1990s aimed to recode stereotypes about blackness that were partially set up by sitcoms of prior decades. Although the black sitcoms of the 1990s may have had some success in their mission, a closer look at their white contemporaries will reveal why recoding stereotypes is always an uphill battle.

⁸⁴ Dyer, 29.

Discussion of how white sitcoms of the 1990s reinforced the stereotypes that the black sitcoms were trying so hard to recode can be centered on Entman and Rojecki's work. I have already discussed their book, *The Black Image in the White Mind*, in some detail. One of the most important points in their book is that white sitcoms repeatedly portray black characters as operating in different social spheres with different, inferior moral agendas.⁸⁵ It is not surprising then, that tension builds between white characters that supposedly have good morals and black characters whose morals are questionable. This is just one mechanism by which white characters are repeatedly depicted as "better" than their black counterparts. Consequently, it is the assumption of white superiority (of morals, character, and so on) that is constantly reinforced in white sitcoms. As Stuart Hall notes, television allows for the production and reinforcement of such inferential racism; that is, racism that is based on unquestioned assumptions like white superiority. I will first draw on episodes of *Seinfeld* to further the exploration of this type of reinforcement.

Up to this point, I have not discussed in detail how *Seinfeld* relays racialized meanings through hypervisible black characters. In fact, *Seinfeld* will anchor the discussion of how white sitcoms reinforce stereotypes of blackness. I can say unequivocally that *Seinfeld* is one the most stereotypical white sitcoms I have watched. Despite this, the show obviously has been immensely popular. I argue that this is at least partially due to the fact that the comedy on the show kept the audience from becoming too offended, which fosters future comedic situations. This is, again, a unifying theme among all popular sitcoms. On the other hand, it also seems likely that there were not enough people in the audience to really care. Professor Steven D. Levitt points out that while *Seinfeld* hit number one among white audiences, it never cracked the top fifty for black

⁸⁵ Entman and Rojecki, 208.

audiences.⁸⁶ A few clips from a couple of *Seinfeld* episodes will demonstrate its tendency to stereotype black characters into models of inferiority.

In a November 1996 episode entitled “The Abstinence,” the episode opens with the gang talking in a restaurant while Kramer smokes a cigar. All of the sudden, a black busboy named Larry comes over and asks Kramer less than politely to put out the cigar because it is against the law. When Kramer hesitates, Larry physically intimidates him and forces Kramer out of the restaurant. Later in the same episode, George is at his job with the New York Yankees teaching Derek Jeter and another black player how to hit a baseball with his new knowledge of physics. This fits in with the running gag of the episode: George is forced by his girlfriend to be abstinent for a long period of time, and he channels the excess energy into studying and learning about a wide variety of topics to a very thorough degree.⁸⁷ Furthermore, in an October 1995 episode called “The Maestro,” George walks into a store and sees a black security guard standing in the corner. George takes it upon himself to ask if he would like a chair. The security guard barks “I don’t need a chair!” Next, George calms him down by complimenting him on his physique, and toward the end of the episode he buys the guard a rocking chair anyway. The guard reluctantly sits down in it, and the show ends as he falls asleep and lets the store get robbed.⁸⁸

How do the black characters in these episodes fit into the analysis of stereotypes? First, the busboy, the security guard, and the baseball players account for virtually all of the black characters to ever star in the show (even in a minor role). Jackie, who I will discuss later, was involved in the main plot of about six episodes, and this was by far the most frequent black character. Therefore, it seems interesting that the only depictions of blackness (at least based on these episodes) are either

⁸⁶ Steven D. Levitt, "Black and White TV: Freakonomics Blog," NYTimes.com, 2006. <http://freakonomics.blogs.nytimes.com/2006/10/05/black-and-white-tv/>.

⁸⁷ *Seinfeld*. “The Abstinence,” Episode no. 143, first broadcast 21 November 1996 by NBC. Directed by Andy Ackerman and written by Steve Koren.

⁸⁸ *Seinfeld*. “The Maestro,” Episode no. 113, first broadcast 5 October 1995 by NBC. Directed by Andy Ackerman and written by Larry David.

of unnecessarily aggressive, physically imposing working class men, or of unintelligent sports stars. Throughout the series, there is virtually no depiction of the types of black characters Bill Cosby and his team created to recode black stereotypes. Even Jackie, who is an attorney, possesses too many negative stereotypical traits to truly be considered a positive portrayal of blackness. I will discuss Jackie in detail a bit later in this chapter.

In addition to *Seinfeld*, I can also return to the *Saved by the Bell* episode “Bayside Triangle” to continue the discussion on black stereotypes. Throughout the fourth season, the main characters all begin to figure out where they are going to attend college next year. Everyone gets into schools based on their academic achievements, with the exception of Slater (who is Latino, and gets a wrestling scholarship) and Lisa (who is selected to pursue fashion design, as seen in this episode). It seems interesting that these two are the only main characters of color. Although I will mention a brief word on Slater a bit later in this chapter, I restrict the investigation here to Lisa. First, it seems unrealistic that she even gets the scholarship, since the fashion show is a complete disaster. One has already seen that she could have been more diligent about preparing for the show instead of making out with Zack. Furthermore, after the admissions officer (who is white) recommends her for admission, she says “Oh, girl you are too much...I mean, thank you ma’am.”⁸⁹ Based on this response, the audience questions further whether she is worthy of such a selective spot. That is, they start to wonder if she has the moral standing and the character to rightfully earn admission to the school. This takes one back to the assumptions of black inferiority that are so often portrayed through stereotypes in white sitcoms. Further, through this episode, it also seems that black individuals cannot get into college on the basis of academics and instead must rely on talents outside of the classroom. This is obviously another damaging stereotype. If one accepts the notion I presented in the previous chapter that the world of higher education is mostly considered

⁸⁹ *Saved by the Bell*. “The Bayside Triangle.”

“white,” Lisa’s behavior raises questions of the extent to which black characters belong in such a world. This serves as an excellent launching point for the final strategy I will consider in this chapter.

Questioning the Place of Black Characters in a White World

In the black sitcom chapter, I explored at some length how black sitcoms questioned if black characters could belong to, and thrive in, traditionally white worlds. Inevitably, these questions were answered by depicting their humorous failure in these exclusive worlds. White sitcoms pick up on this strategy, but perhaps the substrategies by which this questioning occurs are drastically different and more provocative than in their black counterparts. For instance, in black sitcoms, characters like Theo and Will are questioned when they enter places of white *culture* (the figuratively white realms of wealth, education, gourmet food, and so on). On the other hand, in white sitcoms, black characters are often put into white *positions*. White positions, unlike white culture, are places that are literally occupied by whites, such as bosses of corporations or white-collar occupations. This phenomenon, in which black characters are in a position that places them in charge of or superior to white characters, is what Entman and Rojecki call *utopian reversal*.⁹⁰ I will discuss utopian reversals involving Bud in *Home Improvement* and Jackie in *Seinfeld* later in this chapter. Another way in which white sitcoms deviate from their black counterparts in questioning the place of black characters involves the heavy use of a substrategy I will call *reminders of difference*. Recall from the previous chapter the example of Theo portraying himself as an outsider to the white world of wealth and corporations. Theo’s behavior around the corporate executives and his decision to turn down a high paying job reminds the viewers that he is in fact different. By “different” I mean that he does not exemplify the ideals of white behavior that are

⁹⁰ Entman and Rojecki, 152.

assumed to be necessary to make it in a white world. That is, he seems to have no manners, no tact, and improper priorities. This *reminder of difference* is particularly evident as Theo is juxtaposed with white characters who, unlike him, seem able to successfully navigate a white world. In white sitcoms, this kind of juxtaposition takes center stage since substantive interactions between white and black characters are more common. This makes sense especially in the case of Lisa on *Saved by the Bell*, who as a main character is constantly put in positions that draw attention to herself as different from the white characters and the ideals they represent.

The concept of white-black juxtaposition plays an important role in the final substrategy used by white sitcoms to question the place of a black character in a white world. This substrategy, which I will term the *juxtaposition of faults*, can really be considered an extension of the second substrategy, reminders of difference. The juxtaposition of faults substrategy generally takes two characters or groups of characters, one white and the other black. The white characters are shown to have faults, but they are seen as relatively minor when juxtaposed with the problems of the black characters. The effects of this are many. The hegemonic norms of white superiority are reaffirmed, and—most relevant to the exploration here—black characters' faults are deemed to originate from serious flaws in character. The latter effect is in stark contrast to the white characters, whose faults are most often interpreted as little more than silly antics. I shall discuss the juxtaposition of faults, in addition to the utopian reversal and reminders of difference, using various black characters in *Saved by the Bell*, *Home Improvement*, and *Seinfeld*. I begin with the utopian reversal.

Utopian Reversal

One episode of particular interest when examining the concept of utopian reversal is *Home Improvement*'s "Chicago Hope," which originally aired in November of 1995. Specifically, I am focusing on the behavior of Tim's new boss Bud Harper. In this episode, the audience sees the effect that Bud has had on Tim—Bud's demands have created stress for Tim such that he has not been able to concentrate on anything else besides work when he is at home. After Jill expresses her anger at this, Tim promises to make it up to her by planning a romantic weekend trip to Chicago. When Bud hears about the trip, he is upset because he had planned on calling a business meeting that same weekend. In a less than understanding fashion, he decides to bring the meeting to Chicago so that Tim can kill two birds with one stone. To make matters worse, just when Tim and Jill are about to get intimate in their hotel room, Bud calls and tells Tim that the meeting has been moved up and that he has to come down to the lobby right away. Despite Tim's pleas, Bud makes no effort to keep the meeting short, and makes Tim get a massage and sing karaoke with some executives instead of allowing him to get back to his wife. The episode ends as Jill comes down angrily from the hotel room to see Tim singing karaoke. She is understandably upset and Tim tries with limited success to talk his way out of it.⁹¹

Bud's behavior in a position traditionally occupied by whites can clearly be described as a failure. He is selfish and only cares about business matters, making it very hard for Tim to give Jill the attention and love she deserves. Despite Tim's pleading as the meeting dragged on and on, Bud would hear none of it. He shows no compassion or regard for his employee's wellbeing. These observations, however, pale in comparison to some of the other consequences of Bud's ascent to a white position. As I alluded to in the "antagonist comes around" section, this ascent creates a social distance between the black characters and the white characters. Some scholars like Stuart Hall have

⁹¹ *Home Improvement*. "Chicago Hope," Episode no. 109, first broadcast 21 November 1995 by ABC. Directed by Andy Cadiff and written by Teresa O'Neill.

argued that this potentially harmful distance is countered by the fact that depicting an African-American in a position of power to which he has been previously excluded is largely positive. Yet, he also rightly cautions that portraying an African-American character in such a way adds to the diversity of black characters one sees on television, but does not erase negative stereotypes.⁹² This seems especially true if the character seems to not have what it takes to succeed in this new position of power.

In addition, as Entman and Rojecki argue, Bud is only permitted access to this position as he tries to emulate the whiteness ideal.⁹³ He has money, dresses well, speaks clearly, and represents corporate interests. As a result, he tries desperately to distance himself from blackness in order to prove that he is deserving of this access. As Lani Guinier eloquently reiterates in her book *The Miner's Canary*, Bud's efforts to represent whiteness reminds one that "'whiteness' in the United States is a measure not just of the melanin content in one's skin but of one's social distance from blackness."⁹⁴ Thus, Bud loses a great deal of his black identity through his ascent to his executive position. However, Bud retains enough of his blackness—mainly through his phenotype—to reinforce the hegemonic notion that blacks cannot handle positions of power. In addition, by ascending out of the "commoner" ranks and into the executive position, Bud (or more accurately, the writers) forfeit a golden opportunity for racial comity. That is, Bud cannot interact with Tim in a manner that is characterized by harmony and mutual respect. This, some scholars argue, is one of the best ways that racial progress can be made via the sitcom.⁹⁵ Put another way, it seems that one of the most powerful ways to fight the reinforcement of stereotypes and assumptions of white superiority is the portrayal of white characters who see a black character as truly worthy of

⁹² Stuart Hall, "The Spectacle of the Other," in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, ed. Stuart Hall (London: Open University Press, 1997), 271, 274.

⁹³ Entman and Rojecki, 159-60.

⁹⁴ Guinier and Torres, 224.

⁹⁵ Entman and Rojecki, 160.

befriending. This may tell the audience, “Hey, this guy/girl is okay. He is my good friend,” which perhaps is more powerful of a message than many people realize.

One cannot conclude the discussion of black characters who fail in historically white positions without mentioning the character of Jackie Chiles on *Seinfeld*. As an obvious caricature of Johnny Cochran, Chiles (played by black actor Phil Morris), is doomed to failure from the outset. To many audience members, Cochran himself represented a racially polarizing person. To whites, for instance, it seems likely that he was considered a failure due to his histrionic antics and personality, showcased most prominently at the 1995 OJ Simpson trial. Though legal experts applauded his professional talent, he still got under the skin of many. He was obnoxious and preachy in the courtroom, perhaps unfairly played the race card during the trial, and has also defended other famous individuals that have questionable character: Michael Jackson and Snoop Dogg, to name a couple.⁹⁶ On the other hand, to many black viewers, Cochran’s efforts to acquit Simpson were highly revered. As scholar Sut Jhally points out, Johnny Cochran was looked at by blacks as the person who could help get OJ acquitted, and in so doing keep the positive representations of African-Americans in the *Cosby Show* era going. That is one of the reasons, he argues, why Cochran was “accepted [by blacks] with thanks.”⁹⁷ Hence, it seems important that the racially-charged OJ Simpson trial and Cochran’s ascent to the limelight were fresh in the minds of viewers as they watched *Seinfeld* in the ensuing years. Here I look at one particularly poignant *Seinfeld* episode to discern what Jackie Chiles represents to viewers as a caricature of Cochran.

Although several episodes featuring Jackie could be examined here, I focus on a January 1996 episode entitled “The Caddy.” In the episode, Kramer gets into a car accident after he stares at a woman named Sue Ellen (who happens to be a millionaire heiress to a candy bar fortune)

⁹⁶ Jared Grimmer, "Johnny Cochran Biography: OJ Simpson Trial," The University of Missouri—Kansas City. <http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/Simpson/Cochran.htm>.

⁹⁷ Justin Lewis and Sut Jhally, "Affirming Inaction: Television and the Politics of Racial Representation," SutJhally.com, 2008. <http://www.sutjhally.com/articles/affirminginaction/>.

walking down the street in only a bra. He goes to Jackie to see if he has a case, and Jackie exclaims in a “Cochranesque” manner that the woman’s behavior is “lewd, lascivious, salacious, outrageous!” Further, when Kramer mentions that she is a wealthy heiress, Jackie becomes visibly excited as he thinks about his monetary reward. As if this is not outrageous enough, Jackie later takes the legal advice of a golf caddy despite his twenty five years of experience as an attorney. The caddy tells him to ask Sue Ellen to try on the bra at the trial, and when she tries it on, it does not fit. This ruins the case for Jackie and Kramer, and Jackie is left in the final scene to contemplate why the bra did not fit. He concludes that she tried it on over her leotard and a bra should be tried on directly over the skin. If this was done, Jackie says it would have “fit like a glove!”⁹⁸

Any doubt that Jackie is a caricature of Johnny Cochran is erased when one considers the behavior and dialogue of this episode. Clearly he fails as an attorney because he accepts a ridiculous case and follows the advice of someone who knows nothing about the law. Many of the same concepts introduced in the previous discussion of Bud in *Home Improvement* can be applied to Jackie in *Seinfeld*, but one similarity has yet to be mentioned. “Success” of a black character in a white position has little to do with how Bud increases *Tool Time*’s bottom line or how many trials Jackie wins. The ultimate indicator of success for these characters is to be considered a “normal” executive and attorney, respectively. That is, the portrayal of black characters in power is only made possible by their striving to fit the mold of the whiteness norm in these positions. This is problematic because it throws any authentic portrayal of blackness out the window. As I also previously noted, thanks to their behavior, these characters each stick out like a sore thumb, and in turn draw negative attention from the audience. These, one could argue, are perhaps the biggest

⁹⁸ *Seinfeld*. “The Caddy,” Episode no. 122, first broadcast 25 January 1996 by NBC. Directed by Andy Ackerman and written by Andy Robin and Gregg Kavet.

failures of their utopian reversals. As media studies Professor Evelyn Alsultany has noted: “it seems that [the] utopian reversal is a strategy to project a multicultural world while simultaneously undermining its validity.”⁹⁹

Reminders of Difference

I have just discussed how the place of black characters is questioned when they fail to exude the ideals of white *positions*. This requires that the black characters leave the social sphere of their white “inferiors” (be they employees, clients, and so on) in order to fill these positions of power. Ultimately, the audience concludes that the character is not capable of being in such a position of power. That is, they are better suited being subservient than being leaders. However, in the second substrategy, the place of the black characters is questioned even when social distance is not established. Instead of portraying them as superiors to the white characters, something very different occurs: the black character remains in the same social sphere as his or her white counterparts as part of a peer relationship. The white characters still exemplify the whiteness ideal, and the audience expects the black character to follow suit as a potential member of the peer group. I say “potential” here because, as in the utopian reversal, the black character has a choice: he or she can conform to the expectations of the white characters (and the mainly white audience), or can do otherwise and fail. In white sitcoms, the outcome is almost always the latter. Further, in this substrategy the black character shifts his or her focus from adherence to ideals of white positions back to the expectations of white culture, which we have already addressed indirectly in the black sitcom chapter. To exemplify these concepts, I first return to Lisa in *Saved by the Bell*.

Lisa’s character serves as a great example of the reminder of difference substrategy because she is placed within the same social sphere of her white peers. If there is any doubt to this

⁹⁹ Alsultany, Evelyn Ph.D. Interview by Brett Ehrmann, January 26, 2009. University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI.

notion, consider that her character was originally supposed to be a spoiled white Jewish girl from Long Island. However, black actress Lark Voorhies aced the audition and earned the part.¹⁰⁰ Consequently, throughout the series we see Lisa more or less belonging to the group since her personality and wealthy background are largely congruent to the whiteness norms displayed by characters like Zack, Jessie, and Screech. However, there are times when Lisa fails to adhere to some of their (and the audience's) expectations. For instance, in the November 1991 episode entitled "Date Auction," Lisa is the only character that is (hyper)sexualized. She refers to the date auction soon to be happening at Bayside as an opportunity to bag a "prime hunk," and as "not sexist, [but] sexy."¹⁰¹ Instead of keeping her sexuality subdued like the other white characters, Lisa establishes herself as different here.

Moreover, throughout the series Lisa often deviates from the white cultural expectations of proper dress. She dresses much "louder" than the other characters, with no scene being more indicative than one in an October 1991 episode called "Pipe Dreams." In the episode, some of the students accidentally strike oil and the gang imagines what Bayside will be like when they cash in on the riches. In this imaginary scene, all of the white characters are dressed in classy and traditional dark suits or dresses, while Lisa is wearing a pink sequined dress with a pink boa.¹⁰² This is a blatant example of a reminder of difference. As her peers retain classiness even after becoming rich, her flashy dress suggests that perhaps she is not capable of following suit.

As I mentioned, Lisa serves as such a great example of the reminder of difference substrategy because of her position as a socially equal peer to the white characters. Even though I just indicated Bud's character in *Home Improvement* as a striking example of the utopian reversal,

¹⁰⁰ Imdb, "'Saved by the Bell': Trivia," *Saved by the Bell*, 2008, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0096694/trivia>.

¹⁰¹ *Saved by the Bell*. "Date Auction," Episode no. 49, first broadcast 9 November 1991 by NBC. Directed by Don Barnhart and written by Jeffrey J. Sachs.

¹⁰² *Saved by the Bell*. "Pipe Dreams," Episode no. 45, first broadcast 26 October 1991 by NBC. Directed by Don Barnhart and written by Peter Engel and Tom Tenowich.

the nature of his character is not so clean cut. In a couple episodes, he too enters the white characters' social sphere. Thus, the stage is set for his failing to conform to the white cultural aspects of his (temporary) peers, and consequently he reminds the audience that he is different. To illustrate this point, I analyze the March 1996 episode called "The Bud Bowl." In it, Bud asks Tim and Jill to join him and his wife for bowling. What could have been a fun experience and an example of racial comity quickly turns into a negative encounter. Tim tries to influence Bud to view the bowling game as a fun opportunity for unwinding, as is culturally expected. However, Bud fails to listen to his "friend" Tim: he does not allow Jill to order food because "somebody always spills" and is a terribly sore loser when Tim and Jill beat him.¹⁰³ Thus, the writers of *Home Improvement* (albeit perhaps unintentionally) succeed in questioning Bud's place in a white world as Tim's superior in the utopian reversal and as his peer in the reminder of difference. Particularly here, Bud fails to understand, or chooses to not follow, the norms of acceptable behavior as demonstrated by his white peers.

Juxtaposition of Faults

To understand the third and final substrategy used by white sitcoms to question the place of black characters in white worlds, I must first revert to the discussion of colorblindness from the previous chapter on black sitcoms. It seems important to point out that even though black and white sitcoms of the 1990s are different in many ways, they were still subject to the same prevailing ideologies at the time. The notion of colorblindness, integral to the conservatism of the late 1980s and the politically correct movement of the 1990s, aims to reduce the differences of diverse individuals to a personal level. In other words, to many the era of classifying individuals

¹⁰³ *Home Improvement*. "The Bud Bowl," Episode no. 120, first broadcast 5 March 1996 by ABC. Directed by Andy Cadiff and written by Ruth Bennett.

and their behavior on the basis of race was at best passé and at worst overtly racist. However, as I have alluded to in the prior chapter, this ideology has many negative ramifications for blacks and other individuals of color. According to Lani Guinier, perhaps the worst of which is that systemic origins of problems in the black community are minimized or completely ignored.¹⁰⁴ This is the very basis of the racialized meanings relayed using the juxtaposition of faults substrategy. As a white character's faults are juxtaposed with those of a black character, the white character's problems are viewed as silly antics while the black character is seen to have severe issues on the personal level. This lens of reducing the problems of the black characters to personal shortcomings was made possible—or even encouraged—by the colorblindness rhetoric of the time. One can see this clearly in the case of Bud and Jackie.

In an October 1996 episode of *Tool Time* called “Workshop ‘til You Drop,” Tim sees that Bud is very upset. Bud tells him that his marriage has fallen apart, because he took it for granted. He asks Tim, “[do] you know what it’s like to go home to an 18 million dollar mansion and there’s no one to share it with but your domestic staff?” In the next scene, Jill asks Tim to accompany her to a marriage workshop. He reluctantly accepts, mostly because he does not want to turn out like Bud. Through a hilarious set of interactions, Tim and Jill work through their issues (namely that Tim does not listen and Jill is too demanding) and end the episode with a healthier marriage than when it started. Bud, on the other hand, apparently never reconciles with his wife.¹⁰⁵ This episode is a perfect example of the juxtaposition of faults substrategy. Tim and Jill, the white characters, are seen to have some problems with their marriage. Yet, as their humorous workshop session progresses, it never really crosses the audience’s mind that these are due to character issues. That is, the audience mainly shakes their collective head and laughs, in no way seriously questioning if

¹⁰⁴ Guinier and Torres, 56.

¹⁰⁵ *Home Improvement*. “Workshop ‘Til you Drop,” Episode no. 129, first broadcast 1 October 1996 by ABC. Directed by Andrew Tsao and written by Charlie Hauck.

Tim and Jill are “good people.” On the other hand, Bud does not invoke such humor. He loses his wife by taking her for granted, which is perhaps even more reprehensible given the immense financial resources he has. Through this juxtaposition, it is almost as if the white characters are asking the audience, “You think we are bad? Well, at least we’re not that guy.” The substrategy reinforces the assumptions that white marriages are more stable than black marriages, and that Bud’s problems in this case are perhaps due to something more serious than silly behavior. Thus, one can add the juxtaposition of faults substrategy to the ways in which Bud’s place in white worlds is questioned in *Home Improvement*.

Jackie from *Seinfeld* can also serve as a nice example here. Specifically, one can focus on the show’s two part finale, airing in May 1998. In the finale, Seinfeld and the crew get themselves into a major bind when they fail to help out an individual who is being carjacked. They are prosecuted under the Good Samaritan law, and call on Jackie to help get them off the hook (even though he has never heard of the law). Through a humorous trial that calls upon the series’ most memorable people to testify as character witnesses, Jackie predictably loses the case and his clients are sent to jail. He is not too upset though, since practically during the trial he courts and later ends up sleeping with an attractive female witness.^{106, 107} Through this concluding episode, the audience sees Jackie reach a new low. Throughout the series, his skills as an attorney are questioned, but it is really more than that. His decisions to take on ridiculous cases (some have been discussed in this chapter), focus only on making money, and now, sleeping with witnesses, combine to lead the audience to one logical conclusion. He is not just a lousy lawyer; he is unethical, dishonest, and a pretty rotten guy as well. This is in stark contrast to how the white characters are viewed. In the finale and the series in general, Seinfeld and his friends are constantly getting themselves into

¹⁰⁶ *Seinfeld*. “The Finale (1),” Episode no. 179, first broadcast 14 May 1998 by NBC. Directed by Andy Ackerman and written by Larry David.

¹⁰⁷ *Seinfeld*. “The Finale (2),” Episode no. 180, first broadcast 14 May 1998 by NBC. Directed by Andy Ackerman and written by Larry David.

binds. Where they may not always make good decisions, few would be quick to say that the main characters are bad people. Morons, maybe. Foolish, absolutely. But their morals or ethics are rarely questioned. Again, the juxtaposition of faults is enacted seamlessly.

Slater and Seinfeld: Outside the black-white binary?

Although this project mainly looks at constructions of blackness and whiteness through 1990s sitcoms, it would be incomplete if it did not address constructions of race that existed outside the black-white binary. In particular, the principles and strategies of the previous two chapters can be applied to A.C. Slater, a Latino character in *Saved by the Bell*, and Jerry Seinfeld, a Jewish character, of course from *Seinfeld*. One will begin to understand in this subsection how white sitcoms aimed to conform to the multiculturalist and colorblindness rhetoric of the time by constructing the characters of Slater and Seinfeld. In the case of Slater, the writers of *Saved by the Bell* tried to create a character that was racially different, but also no better or worse than the white characters. In other words, they ironically attempted to accentuate yet trivialize his racial identity as a Latino. However, Slater's constant interaction with the white characters and his repeated "failures" lead the audience to question if he is truly different but equal. Two specific kinds of interactions, his currying favor with whites and his antagonism of Zack, depict him as someone whose differences on the basis of race are *not* insignificant. These exchanges, as well as the stereotypical limitations imposed on him because of his race, portray Slater as an inferior "other."

As one may recall, Slater is one of Zack's best friends, is dating Jessie (a white character), and is the captain of almost every sports team at Bayside. He goes on to join most of the gang at the fictitious Cal U on a wrestling scholarship, after turning down a similar offer from the University of Iowa. What can one glean from Slater's identity-in-a-nutshell? First, I must take note

of his two most important relationships: his friendship with Zack and his romance with Jessie. I have already spoken at length about Zack and how he represents the whiteness ideal. But perhaps Jessie is even more “perfect” than Zack. She is popular, smart, a loyal friend, and is a person of integrity; she has good morals and stands up for what she believes in. One cannot help but notice that Slater seems to be currying favor with people who portray the whiteness ideal.

Even though Slater is a friend of Zack’s, he also interestingly participates in the “antagonist comes around” technique with him. From virtually the first time he meets Zack, he thinks he is a wimp and calls him “preppy.” Although this comes to be an endearing nickname, it seems unlikely that it was at first. Also, in several episodes he is plotted against Zack either by falling for the same girl¹⁰⁸ or by betting Zack that he cannot get out of some impossible situation. Examples include Zack trying to find his way out of detention, or skipping school even when one more absence would get him suspended. Zack inevitably comes through, and Slater always softens his stance and congratulates him as one of these situations is resolved. After all, Slater is Zack’s friend and any long-term antagonism not only jeopardizes the lighthearted nature of the show, but also Slater’s efforts to curry favor with the whiteness ideal. Even with this in mind, the audience knows that Slater is always going to put another bet or challenge upon Zack.

Furthermore, one also can apply some of the strategies of the previous chapter to the construction of Slater’s racial identity. First, he tries to extend the olive branch. Recall that this metaphor pertains to Slater’s peace offering to the white characters and audience. The offering is on the grounds that rocky race relations between whites and people of color are obsolete, as there is no difference between the former and latter on the basis of race. In *Saved by the Bell*, Slater usually blends in with the white characters: he generally has the same interests (going to the beach,

¹⁰⁸ *Saved by the Bell*. “The Fight,” Episode no. 62, first broadcast 12 September 1992 by NBC. Directed by Don Barnhart and written by Scott Spencer Gordon.

“hanging out”) and faces the same situations (heartbreak, fights with friends, schoolwork) as the white characters. In other words, he is claiming that his experience is the same as the white experience. As a result of this blending in, one can correctly guess that in situations where Slater *does* take the spotlight, the stage is set for his hypervisible identity to be questioned next to the whiteness norm.

In addition to his hypervisible failures next to the white characters, it also seems that Slater is prone to being stereotyped. As a result, he is often assumed to be inferior to the white characters in some way or another. I have already mentioned that he seems incapable of getting into college on the merits of his intellect, and he has been repeatedly portrayed as someone who does not take school seriously. Interestingly, Zack also does not take school seriously, but unlike the case with Slater, this is appealing to the audience (especially the girls). How are these cases different? It may be that Slater is reinforcing a stereotype about his own people, and as a result he is not seen as “cool” like Zack but rather just another “stupid” person of color. The white privilege of doing what one wants without losing his membership to the white identity also comes to mind here.

To review: Slater curries favor with whites, is sometimes an antagonist to white characters, is stereotyped and limited based on his racial identity, and claims universality of his experiences with those of whites’, even though this ultimately proves to be an illusion. Does this sound much different from the black characters I have mentioned in these sitcoms? Thus, in the effort to create a multicultural show through Slater, the writers of *Saved by the Bell* actually constructed a character that closely resembles black characters and also occupies the same position relative to whites as blacks do in the black-white binary. In other words, the consequence of *Saved by the Bell’s* integration of a multiculturalist and colorblind rhetoric via Slater is only that the show

transforms a black-white binary to a colored-white binary. Interactions between the characters dictate who can claim the white, privileged identity, and who must remain outside of it.

Where Slater seems to be portrayed mostly as an “other” in *Saved by the Bell*, the same cannot be said for Jerry Seinfeld. Seinfeld, as a Jewish-American, is most often grouped with whites, as opposed to African-Americans or “others” outside the black-white binary. For Jewish people, this was not always true. As Karen Brodtkin writes in her book, *How Jews Became White Folks and What that Says about Race in America*, most Jews emigrated during the height of scientific racism in the late 19th century. They were considered nonwhite and genetically inferior to the Nordic races. As a result, they were excluded from many jobs and positions, and formed ethnic enclaves in such permissible industries as the garment industry. Yet, as the industry boomed, and with the extension of resources like the GI Bill to Jews, Jewish people eventually “made it” in America. Their final claim to whiteness, Brodtkin argues, is their distancing from African-Americans and their move (with other whites) to the suburbs.¹⁰⁹

How are Seinfeld and his Jewishness important in the context of multiculturalism and colorblindness? When he is in the homoracial sphere of his friends, he sometimes tries to differentiate himself as different from other whites. He specifically claims a proud Jewish identity. He has a stereotypical New York Jewish accent, is often high strung and histrionic, and has a father (played by Barney Martin) that could not pass for a non-Jew if his life depended on it. On the other hand, Jerry constantly portrays himself as a self-loathing Jew. Jerry’s self-loathing is not generally overt, but rather is coded for subtly in various episodes. Several instances involve his opposition to his father, who constantly exudes the cultural norms of Judaism (overzealously defending his son when nobody really attacks him, refusing to let Jerry ever pay the dinner bill,

¹⁰⁹ Diane L. Wolf, “Review of *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says About Race in America*,” *Contemporary Sociology* 21, no. 5 (2000), <http://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/asoca/cs>.

and so on). In perhaps the most blatant instance of his opposition to Judaism, Jerry shows so little respect for the lessons of *Schindler's List* that he decides to make out with his girlfriend during the movie. Of course, his (Jewish) neighbor and arch-enemy, Newman, catches him and tells Seinfeld's parents at the end of the episode.¹¹⁰ Do these occurrences suggest that Seinfeld is trying to distance himself from his Jewish identity? Probably not. In fact, the fact that he is repeatedly depicted as a self-loathing Jew more likely reaffirms his association with Judaism, as this is how many Jews (including me) would describe themselves at times. This also seems likely considering that at least half of the writers of *Seinfeld* are Jewish, with the most vocal being Larry David. Larry David, as many know from episodes of *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, may be the proudest yet most self-loathing Jew out there. Thus, Jerry Seinfeld is a character who proclaims a complicated, albeit constant, white and Jewish identity when he is around his white peers. In this environment, his whiteness is never really questioned, but he makes an effort to portray himself as different from Kramer, George, and Elaine through his characteristically Jewish pride and self-loathing.

However, it is important to note that Seinfeld's identity is constructed somewhat differently when he leaves this white sphere. His juxtaposition, and opposition to, recurring characters of color like the Soup Nazi and Jackie Chiles portray him as a symbol of the whiteness ideal, and in so doing, it seems his Jewishness is trivialized. I have particularly discussed several instances involving Chiles in this chapter. Chiles often fails to live up to the ideals and expectations of whiteness represented by Seinfeld and the other main characters. Seinfeld's differences compared to Jackie are solely accentuated on the basis of black and white, and Jewishness rarely if ever enters this conversation.

¹¹⁰ *Seinfeld*. "The Raincoats (2)," Episode no. 83, first broadcast 28 April 1994 by NBC. Directed by Tom Cherones and written by Tom Gammill, Max Pross, Larry David, and Jerry Seinfeld.

It appears, then, that the writers of *Seinfeld* are integrating multiculturalism into their show solely by showing variations on the same whiteness theme. Lines are still firmly drawn between the ever more “diverse” white identity and those who are still unwelcome. Through *Seinfeld*, they assert that whiteness can take on many different complicated forms and is not monolithic, with each form being exactly as preferred as the others. These various forms of whiteness are reaffirmed by their distance from, and superiority to, characters of color that remain outside the privileged whiteness club.

Conclusion

As this chapter began, I assumed that white sitcoms of the 1990s, like their black counterparts, indeed relay racialized meanings. I addressed *why* this is possible in the discussion of hypervisibility and the whiteness norm. The *how* question involved an engagement with several different strategies. In the “Antagonist Comes Around” technique, the black character is kept in a separate social sphere from the white characters, allowing the audience to build the rapport necessary with white characters to feel like laughing with (or at) them. However, I also pointed out that as the black character becomes the antagonist, it seems crucial that he or she eventually “comes around,” so the sitcom does not become tense and lose its ability to create humor over the long run. In the strategy I called “Interracial Relationships and the Whiteness Ideal,” I focused on Lisa and her romantic relationships with Zack and Eric on *Saved by the Bell*. Her infatuation for these characters (especially Zack), and her willingness to be with them at virtually any cost reinforces the ideologies of the whiteness ideal. Lisa relishes the idea of “upgrading” her love interests to white guys and essentially puts them on a pedestal as a result. This is interesting, since to the white audience these guys are pretty much “just white” or “nothing special,” which is putting

it nicely in the case of Eric. I then moved on to the “Reinforcing Black Stereotypes” strategy. White sitcoms (Seinfeld in particular) did little to build on the positive portrayal of black characters created by Bill Cosby and others in the black sitcoms. In fact, a vast majority of what one saw in these shows depicted black characters as inferior in the form of aggressive members of the lower working class, stupid sports stars, or individuals who had to rely on nonacademic talents to gain entry into the white world of higher education. I then addressed this concept of black characters trying to enter white worlds in a fourth strategy. Specifically, I looked at three substrategies: the utopian reversal, reminders of difference, and the juxtaposition of faults. One can see that even though the place of black characters is also questioned in black sitcoms, the means by which this takes place in white sitcoms is drastically different.

Despite these differences, however, one noticed throughout this chapter that black and white sitcoms indeed shared some similar themes. The use of humor to “soften” racialized meanings and keep the sitcom lighthearted is ubiquitous. The topic of black stereotypes is addressed (albeit in almost opposite ways). The rhetoric of colorblindness, emphasis on individualism, and multiculturalism play an integral role in some of the strategies and substrategies discussed in both sitcom types. Finally, many of the concepts and strategies from this chapter and last were extended to a brief look at A.C. Slater and Jerry Seinfeld. Slater seems to operate outside the black-white binary, yet is still constructed as an “other” inferior to whites. Seinfeld claims a white identity, yet at times affirms that he is different (or perhaps in his mind, more) than just white when he is in his comfortable white sphere. His adherence to generic whiteness and its corresponding superiority takes center stage only when he is interacting with characters of color. Discussions in the last two chapters serve as reminders that the black and white sitcoms, albeit drastically different, did not operate in separate bubbles. They were both influenced by the same

outside pressures and assumptions, and in fact often communicated with each other, either directly or indirectly. This notion will anchor much of the conversation in the concluding chapter.

Conclusion

Overlapping of the Sitcoms' Meanings

One of the recurring themes throughout this project is that the meaning-making activities of the black and white sitcoms cannot be isolated from their historical contexts or each other.¹¹¹ In the past three chapters, we have touched on the importance of situating each in their proper historical moments. But how specifically do the sitcoms overlap with each other? In this conclusion, I will discuss some of these points of overlap, although there likely are a lot more. These points include both types' efforts to keep meaning-making activities subtle and non-alienating, as well as the racialized dialogues that occur between them. I begin here with the former.

The importance of non-alienation

Both types of sitcoms seem able to mainstream portrayals of blackness in a way that is rather subtle. In other words, addressing issues of race directly seemed to be the less-preferred route of meaning-making compared to enacting clever strategies to do so. Two great examples of

¹¹¹ McAlister, *Epic Encounters*, 8.

this are the “Functionally White Foil” strategy in black sitcoms and the “Antagonist that Comes Around” in white sitcoms. It appears unlikely that audiences consciously picked up on these strategies as they viewed the original airings. Nevertheless, both succeeded in questioning the moral fiber of black characters. Perhaps one of the reasons why this message was conveyed so subtly is that these and other strategies made sure not to alienate audience members for too long. This can especially be seen in the Functionally White Foil’s white behavior but black phenotype, along with the black character’s eventual caving to the white character(s) in the Antagonist Comes Around. Both strategies keep (or return) audience members to a level of normality that encourages the subtle digestion of racialized meanings in a lighthearted environment. The media professionals’ prioritization of non-alienation can be even more blatantly seen in the “middle of the road” identities portrayed by the black characters as discussed in the black sitcom chapter. However, the direct purpose behind the shows’ non-alienation can easily be misunderstood through this investigation. Some may think that the media professionals did this to encourage discussions of race that were not emotionally or mentally taxing. Frankly, I think this is giving them too much credit. The real purpose of the non-alienation goes back to another mantra of this project: a sitcom remains popular and funny (and thus secondarily a powerful racialized meaning-maker) because it is able to maintain an atmosphere of “good, clean fun.”¹¹² This is precisely the way to gain high ratings throughout several seasons. As all of the shows I analyzed were extremely popular across racial lines and ran for several years, this seems to indeed be one major point of overlap between them.

Dialogues between black and white sitcoms

¹¹² Hall, “Racist Ideologies and The Media,” 278.

Another major point of overlap between the sitcoms includes the racialized dialogues they have with each other. I am not so much referring to direct conversation here as I am indicating more of an indirect point-counterpoint type of discussion. One of these such discussions can be seen in the black sitcoms' efforts to universalize the black and white experience, and white sitcoms' portrayal of black characters as different from (and inferior to) the white experience.

In chapter one, I introduced the "Extending of the Olive Branch" strategy used in black sitcoms. This strategy claims a universal experience of blacks and whites, drawing mainly from the colorblindness rhetoric of the 1980s and 90s. The writers of *The Cosby Show* and *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air* largely enacted this strategy by indicating that blacks, like whites, have overprotective parents, popular ideologies about sexual freedom for young adults, an extended family that wants the best for them, and the sensation of "cold feet" before marriage. At the very same time, however, white sitcoms tried to answer this claim by portraying black characters as belonging to separate, morally inferior social spheres. One of the best examples of this can be found in the discussion of the "Interracial Relationships and the Whiteness Ideal" strategy as mentioned in chapter two. As Lisa shows her romantic feelings for two white characters in *Saved by the Bell*, she is painted as someone who consciously or subconsciously views these characters as occupying a higher (and more desirable) stratum than her. This helps explain her infatuation with them at all costs, even if the audience knows that these characters are not as perfect as Lisa sees them to be. Further examples can be seen in the "Reminders of Difference" substrategy, also discussed in chapter two. One recalls that the behavior of black characters like Lisa from *Saved by the Bell* and Bud from *Home Improvement* remind the audience that they are operating in a different, morally inferior sphere than their white counterparts. Through several examples, these characters are given the opportunity by their white peers to conform to the ideals of whiteness. Yet,

inevitably in each case, the black characters fail to take this offer, and consequently portray his or her experience as different from those of whites. Therefore, black sitcoms try to make the point that blacks and whites aren't that different after all, whereas white sitcoms counter by illustrating deep, rigid divisions between the races. Recall that the Reminders of Difference technique that I have just alluded to is actually a substrategy for the questioning of black characters in white worlds. This notion serves as an excellent launching point for a third dialogue.

I have already touched on the third dialogue between black and white sitcoms in the previous chapter. The strategy of questioning the place of black characters in white worlds is in many ways a point of similarity between the sitcoms. In black sitcoms, characters like Theo from *The Cosby Show* and Will from *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air* humorously fail to gain entry into the white worlds of corporations and luxury, respectively. On the other hand, in white sitcoms, characters like Lisa from *Saved by the Bell*, Bud from *Home Improvement*, and Jackie from *Seinfeld* are shown failing to gain entry into white worlds of wealth, corporations, and professional positions. Yet, their similarities end at this point. I have discussed the differences at some length in the previous chapter, but the bottom line is worth repeating here. What is missing from these failures in white sitcoms (as compared to their black contemporaries) is the representation of these situations as “silly” or “harmlessly humorous.” In other words, in these failures within white sitcoms, one gets the feeling that the moral fiber of the black characters is seriously being questioned. After each failure, the audience actually begins to ask him or herself if these black characters are really “good people.” I argue that the audience does not get even close to this point after viewing the analogous failures in black sitcoms. Thus, the discrepancy over if—and how—to extrapolate the failings of black characters to their moral fiber appears to be another point-counterpoint dialogue between the sitcoms.

The final dialogue between black and white sitcoms that I will discuss here involves perhaps the most blatant and important point-counterpoint of all. The black sitcoms' efforts to recode stereotypes of blackness are countered with the white sitcoms' reinforcing of them. Recall from the introduction and chapter one that the black sitcoms of the 1990s had their work cut out for them if they were to recode black stereotypes on television. This was mainly because the black sitcoms of the 1970s and 80s, such as *Sanford and Son*, *The Jeffersons*, and *Good Times*, portrayed blackness in mainly unflattering ways. It is known that the writers of *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air* and especially *The Cosby Show* aimed to reverse some of these negative portrayals by constructing intact, loving black families that gained entry into the upper class by virtue of hard work and taking advantage of opportunities. Moreover, there is a stress within these families on education, morality, and racial pride. These representations fall into line with Stuart Hall's advice of how to begin reversing negative black stereotypes through the sitcom. He writes in his work, *Contesting a Racialized Regime of Representation*, that one way to recode stereotypes through television is to reverse the roles of black characters. They should have money, no longer be dependent on whites, and consequently gain both material and figurative power.¹¹³ But the white sitcoms prove that even with money and power, black characters can still be portrayed in a stereotypical manner. For instance, one recalls in the previous chapter that rarely if ever were black characters portrayed in a way that was positive and *not* stereotypical. Even wealthy black characters had to rely on nonacademic achievements to get into college, and still others saw that their only success came in sports. One also remembers that black executives and professionals continuously squandered opportunities for advancement through their selfishness and questionable character. Hence, those who are able to make it into the upper class, but fail miserably, also end up reinforcing negative stereotypes of blackness. It should be noted that in addition to these wealthy characters, most black

¹¹³ Stuart Hall, "The Spectacle of the Other," 271.

individuals are still shown as confined to being bitter members of the working class in white sitcoms.

Are there any instances where black sitcoms join their white counterparts to reinforce harmful rhetoric on blackness? In fact, there is. The ideology imbedded in colorblindness, which is that the differences and problems between one person and the next can be attributed mainly to personal shortcomings, is reinforced in black sitcoms as well. Scholarly critique of shows like *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air* and especially *The Cosby Show* sheds light on how they reinforce this damaging rhetoric. Depicting black families that apparently reach the upper class through little more than hard work and determination inherently argues that those blacks who cannot attain such success have nothing but themselves to blame. By making the point that African-Americans can relatively easily attain the American Dream, these shows give permission for the audience to wag their collective finger at those blacks who do not or cannot attain it. This is perhaps why some have attacked *The Cosby Show's* borderline unrealistic portrayal of blackness and its conservative slant.

Using these overlaps to understand constructions of blackness and whiteness in sitcoms

Why does this concluding chapter focus so much on the overlapping between the black and white sitcoms? I claim that these overlaps can be used in conjunction with the strategies I have outlined in the previous two chapters to present a somewhat cohesive representation of blackness and whiteness. It seems easier to start with constructions of whiteness, since these are relatively uniform across the board. In the rare instances that whites are seen in black sitcoms, they mainly represent power and privilege. Examples of the corporate executives in some *Cosby Show* episodes, or Philip and Vivian's friends in *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air* come to mind here. The

same representation can be seen in white sitcoms, but with one added dimension. This is the dimension of normality. Throughout the white sitcoms, the white characters are portrayed as little more than “just” white or “normal.” Of course, they have the same power and privilege that was outlined in the black sitcoms, but these attributes seem to take a back seat to the fact that these characters are nothing special. This may be solely due to the fact that white characters are in the vast majority in white sitcoms, but I would argue as I did in the last chapter that there appears to be more than that going on in these shows.

On the other hand, when it comes to constructions of blackness throughout the sitcoms, it seems that there is more than one representation. It appears that the major ones are constantly rotating and shifting in and out of both types of sitcoms. This conclusion has already touched on two of these constructions of blackness. The first is the black character as an answer to negative stereotypes, as seen on black sitcoms. He or she is educated, well-off, and morally upright. The second is the black character who reinforces negative stereotypes, as seen primarily in white sitcoms. He or she is generally unintelligent and has questionable morals. However, one has realized over the past two chapters that there is at least one more complicated representation. This is the black character who is conflicted. He must try to navigate his way through a white world, and faces the challenges of living up to the ideals exemplified by his white counterparts. Yet, he must not only succeed in these challenges, but do so without losing his black identity (e.g., becoming what some would call an “Oreo” or an “Uncle Tom”). Unfortunately, in both black and white sitcoms, the character is rarely successful at this. Recall the quote from Herman Gray that black characters in both types of sitcoms are often represented as “contradictory character[s], one where leaks, fractures, tensions, and contradictions...continue to find expression.”¹¹⁴ He summarizes perfectly the construction of blackness to which I have been alluding here.

¹¹⁴ Gray, *Watching Race*, 91.

How are these constructions of whiteness and blackness manifested? Looking back on the previous two chapters, each and every strategy helps to construct at least one of these racialized representations. They are significant, then, in that they are the framework upon which the racialized messages conveyed throughout the sitcoms are built. Referring back to Hall's circuit in the introduction to this project, these representations all relate to each other and the viewer in a way that helps them decode meaning from the sitcom.

Returning to the Historical Moment

I conclude this project by returning to a key point first made in the introduction. Just as the sitcoms cannot truly be separated from each other, they cannot be understood without placing them in their proper historical moments. At various points throughout the past two chapters, I have investigated how black sitcoms and white sitcoms address the rhetoric of multiculturalism and colorblindness that characterized the 1990s. In terms of multiculturalism, black sitcoms and white sitcoms indeed responded quite differently. Black sitcoms are a complicated case. It is true that they aimed to tell the "victim's narratives" that liberal academics were crying out for. They did so by bringing black families to the spotlight while occasionally portraying the racism and challenges that are often ignored. In addition, through Gray's *multiculturalist lens* that I mentioned in chapter 2, the sitcoms tried to construct blackness as an identity whose internal diversity should also be appreciated. Yet, it seems problematic that the only way these representations could be mainstreamed is through making families (in the *Cosbys* and *Bankses*) that through hard work, some are able to become what scholars describe as "unrealistically well-off." In many ways, the victim's narrative is trivialized by the writers' inherent claim that hard work is the only barrier to

“making it” for blacks. I will return to this point in my discussion of the black sitcoms’ reactions to colorblindness.

I mentioned in the previous chapter how white sitcoms tried to adhere to multiculturalism. They made sure to include characters of different races in at least recurring roles. But the point of “telling the stories” of these characters in the spirit of multiculturalism is to educate the masses in an effort to eliminate the assumptions of white superiority and stereotypes of these races. Through Slater and Lisa on *Saved by the Bell*, one sees that they are still subject to stereotyping and notions of inferiority when juxtaposed to white characters. The same can be said for Bud in *Home Improvement* and Jackie in *Seinfeld*. Hence, writers of the white sitcoms should have been told that merely including characters of color in their episodes is not enough to satisfy the multiculturalism ideal, especially when they end up being continually portrayed as inferior “others.”

I shift gears here to the 1990s notion of colorblindness, and how these sitcoms reacted to it. As previously mentioned, in many ways colorblindness can be thought of as a reaction to multiculturalism. Multiculturalism aimed to bring representation of minorities to the forefront, while conservative advocates of colorblindness saw no reason for this on the grounds that there are no real differences between the races anyway. The picture is slightly muddled, however, by the fact that many liberals who supported multiculturalism also supported colorblindness. Their logic was likely that the two were not mutually exclusive since telling often ignored victim’s histories did not mean they were better or worse than their white counterparts on the basis of race. The problem with adhering to colorblindness, however, is that it trivializes the institutional challenges still present for people of color by claiming equality on the basis of race. This is where the black sitcoms come in. On the one hand, *The Cosby Show* and *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air* represented the colorblind ideal by depicting black characters that attained the same socioeconomic status, and

often face the same problems, as their white counterparts. On the other hand, this representation creates a major problem. First, it suggests that institutional barriers either do not exist or can be easily surpassed by personal qualities such as hard work and perseverance. As I have already mentioned, the inherent argument that results is that those blacks who fail do so because they have personal flaws, and outside factors such as institutional racism are completely ignored. The bottom line: in many ways the black sitcoms fit in with the colorblind rhetoric of the 1990s, but this may have been more damaging than beneficial.

The same can probably be said for white sitcoms. It is true that they integrated characters of color whose experiences seem not to differ markedly from their white counterparts on the basis of race. Lisa and Slater had similar interests and faced similar challenges at Bayside as their white counterparts, and Bud and Jackie seemed to (at times) lead the same kind of life and share experiences with other white professionals. Yet, by establishing this equality via colorblindness, the inevitable failings of these characters is misunderstood. The discussion always leads to questions of these characters' character or other personal attributes, when many scholars now agree that this is not telling the entire story. This becomes particularly harmful when such notions of personal failings are extrapolated into stereotypes about an entire race, as is often the case when black characters are hypervisible in white sitcoms.

My discussion of the sitcoms' placement within their historical moments, and this project as a whole, should serve as lessons to current and future sitcoms. Understand that the shows have the power to relay powerful racialized meanings. Appreciate that telling the stories of characters of color involves more than their stereotypical presence. And know that creating such characters to conform to popular rhetoric has the potential to impart serious consequences.

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