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The Queer Fantasies of the American Family Sitcom

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No Sex Please, We're African American



The Cosby Show's Queer Fear of Black Sexuality

Seven years prior to *The Cosby Show's* 1984 debut, the United States Commission on Civil Rights released its study *Window Dressing on the Set: Women and Minorities in Television*, documenting the abysmal state of television's portrayals of African Americans and other minorities. Among its findings—unsurprising to most—the committee noted the overrepresentation of white males, the typecasting of minority actors, and the patent tokenism of occasional nonwhite roles in otherwise all-white casts.¹ “Whiteness frames television,” Beretta Smith-Shomade succinctly states, with the medium's historical whiteness marginalizing a vast variety of minority and ethnic voices, which gives the false appearance that issues of race affect only people of color.² To resolve this issue, the commission advocated that “production companies and network programming executives should incorporate more minorities and women into television drama,” particularly by “develop[ing] series which portray minorities and women playing a variety of roles comparable in diversity and prestige to those played by white males.”³ Heeding the commission's call, star Bill Cosby and producers Marcy Carsey and Tom Werner chose to depict an affluent black family in *The Cosby Show*, thus recalibrating prevailing cultural images of African Americans as almost uniformly poor in such 1970s programs as *Sanford and Son* (1972–77), *Good Times* (1974–79), and *What's*

Happening!! (1976–79). While breaking new ground in television’s representations of African Americans, *The Cosby Show* also sparked heated debates about the cultural messages that this landmark program disseminated about race in America. Viewers and critics approached the program with conflicting assumptions about how a wealthy black family should be represented in a domestic sitcom, with their various premises reflecting as well their understanding of the queer fantasies of genre, family-friendly programming, and, in this instance, the erotic innocence of black children.

With Cosby as protagonist Dr. Heathcliff Huxtable and Phylicia Ayers-Allen Rashad as his wife, Clair, *The Cosby Show* details the daily comic misadventures of their family of five children: Sondra (Sabrina Le Beauf), Denise (Lisa Bonet), Theo (Malcolm-Jamal Warner), Vanessa (Tempestt Bledsoe), and Rudy (Keshia Knight Pulliam). Sondra marries Elvin Tibideaux (Geoffrey Owens) and bears twins Winnie and Nelson, and the series’ sixth season begins with the surprise announcement that Denise, on a trip to Africa, has married Lieutenant Martin Kendall (Joseph C. Phillips), the father of a young daughter, Olivia (Raven-Symoné). The seventh, penultimate season introduces cousin Pam Tucker (Erika Alexander), who joins the Huxtable clan after her mother travels to California to tend to a sick relative and also introduces her friends Charmaine (Karen Malina White) and Lance (Allen Payne). This multigenerational family includes Cliff’s parents, Russell (Earle Hyman) and Anna (Clarice Taylor), among numerous other relatives and in-laws—and in one episode even the Huxtable children’s great-grandaunt, Gramtee (“The Story Teller”). The family members’ abiding affection for one another imbues the program with a sentimental sensibility, albeit with a sharp edge: as Kelefa Sanneh trenchantly observes, “In Cosby’s comedy, he returns endlessly, even obsessively, to this basic plot: the struggle of a man against the woman he has chosen and the children he hasn’t.”⁴ With Cliff as an obstetrician/gynecologist and Clair as an attorney, the Huxtables enjoy a level of financial prosperity few Americans attain, yet this affluence affords a key line of critique: that *The Cosby Show* overlooks the ways in which racism undercuts many African Americans’ lives and economic possibilities.

At their core such critiques posit that, in depicting a rich black family within the structures of a sitcom, *The Cosby Show* pardoned the United States’ history of slavery and—with pun intended—whitewashed racial injustice by refusing to represent it. Given television’s long-standing marginalization of black characters, as well as America’s troubled history of race relations, numerous critics believed that the program should have directly confronted issues of racism, discrimination, and economic injustice—as the first section of this chapter details. My argument then turns to the ways in which the inherent conservatism that some see in the program is undercut by its rewriting of parenthood as an androgynous role, as Cliff acts primarily as an

authoritative, not authoritarian, father who cooperates with Clair in raising their children.⁵ In regendering the contours of an African American family, however, *The Cosby Show* faced the ultimately queer challenge of depicting black children's sexuality, especially in light of contemporary cultural images of black teen promiscuity and a purported pregnancy epidemic. Thus, Cliff's androgynous fatherhood—and Cosby's performance of it—is complicated by his determination to police his children's sexuality, particularly his daughters' virginity. *The Cosby Show's* vigorous presentation of African American sexual innocence concomitantly reinstates the model of patriarchal masculinity it otherwise rejects, exemplifying the challenges of promoting egalitarian gender ideals when the children of the United States' defining black family begin dating, particularly in light of Cosby's respect for the thematic constraints of family-friendly programming. The chapter concludes by examining the ways in which metatextual issues concerning Lisa Bonet's and Bill Cosby's erotic lives influenced (and, indeed, continue to influence) *The Cosby Show's* reception. With the popular press addressing the program's cast as if they were truly a family, issues concerning the representation of African American sexuality exploded when Lisa Bonet pursued acting opportunities beyond the family-friendly fare of her sitcom, demonstrating the utility of sexuality for a young star's career and the difficulty of maintaining one foot in a family sitcom while taking on more provocative roles, when her "father" disapproves. More than twenty years after the show's conclusion in 1992, allegations against Cosby for sexually assaulting numerous women have further complicated his sitcom's reception by demolishing the facade of familial innocence the show so earnestly projected. In seeking to portray the Huxtables as untainted by sexuality, *The Cosby Show* ironically exposes the queer anxieties perpetually latent in such repression.

The Politics of Black Representation in Family Sitcoms

As *The Cosby Show's* critical reception illustrates, television's depictions of African Americans have historically been caught between a rock and a hard place: the rock of the demands of televisual fiction, of creating characters and story lines that national audiences will watch week after week; the hard place of doing so while recognizing the legacy of slavery as it continues into the present day, of acknowledging racism's pernicious effects on black identity. This problem is exacerbated by the television industry's primarily white power structures, as it is often white producers who greenlight African American shows—for *The Cosby Show*, Carsey and Werner—and who then often hire white writers and directors to transmit the "truth" of the African American experience. Many notable programs throughout television history bear the marks of this controversy, including *Julia* (1968–71), *Sanford*

and Son, *Good Times*, and *What's Happening!!*, with questions inevitably arising about the truthfulness of their characters' lives in a nation still grappling with the devastating consequences of racism. As Diahann Carroll declared of her starring (and groundbreaking) role in *Julia*, "For a hundred years we have been prevented from seeing accurate images of ourselves and we're all overconcerned and overreacting. The needs of the white writer go to the superhuman being. At the moment, we're presenting the white Negro. And he has very little Negro-ness."⁶ Hal Kanter, *Julia*'s lead writer, added as well, "This is not a civil rights show. . . . What we're driving at is escapist entertainment, not sociological document," and Mort Werner, NBC's vice president in charge of program and talent, agreed: "This is not the documentary arm of NBC—it's *en-ter-tain-ment*."⁷ Redd Foxx's litany of complaints against *Sanford and Son*'s production included its creation of "white versions of black humor," as he advocated instead for episodes penned and directed by black talent.⁸ John Amos, who played the father James Evans in *Good Times*, left the show after three seasons, disappointed in its emphasis on the flamboyant antics of his television son J.J. (Jimmie Walker). As Eric Monte, the program's creator, recalled, "[Amos] made it known in no uncertain terms that he was NOT going to play a degraded Black man!" And Amos stated diplomatically: "The truth is we reached a point where we were at an impasse that we could no longer dialogue civilly about the character."⁹ In *What's Happening!!* the family's absent father appears after years of separation and cannot recognize his children, Raj (Ernest Thomas) and Dee (Danielle Spencer). This episode pathologizes black paternity, with this man musing regretfully—"Does seem a shame a father doesn't know his own kids, huh?"—as he then proceeds with his con ("When Daddy Comes Marching Home"). Throughout the 1960s and 1970s and into the 1980s, issues concerning black representation on television inevitably arose owing to fears of misrepresentation: that such programs denigrated African Americans by reducing them to stereotypes and homogenizing the diversity of black culture to a uniform vision of lives mired in poverty and struggle.

Much criticism of *The Cosby Show* evinces a similar concern that the program misrepresents black culture, warning that viewers may be lulled into complacency by taking this sitcom family as proof of America's successful resolution of racial conflicts. Certainly, the program's airing during the Reagan era complicated its racial politics. Herman Gray notes that characters such as Cliff Huxtable "were seen by conservatives as possessing the requisite moral character, individual responsibility and personal determination to succeed in spite of residual social impediments" such that they served as "model minorities" whom conservatives then deployed "to counter the dependence of the underclass and to affirm their commitment to racial equality."¹⁰ Leslie Innis and Joe Feagin, in their sociological analysis of middle-class African American viewers'

responses to *The Cosby Show*, conclude: “Generally, then, the opportunity cost of having Black television characters seems to be a lessening of the concern with the Black condition and a fostering of hope that things can get better. This is perhaps the dilemma that fosters the ambivalence in Black middle-class responses to *The Cosby Show*.”¹¹ In another study examining audience reactions, Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis contend that *The Cosby Show* allows white viewers to overlook the ways in which unfettered capitalism and racism collide in the oppression of black Americans: “*The Cosby Show*, and others like it, divert attention from the class-based causes of racial inequality. More than this, the series throws a veil of confusion over black people who are trying to comprehend the inequities of modern racism. It derails dissatisfaction with the system and converts it, almost miraculously, into acceptance of its values. In a culture where white people now refuse to acknowledge the existence of unequal opportunities, the political consequences of this acceptance are, for black people, disastrous.”¹² Jhally and Lewis’s powerful argument, which takes into account numerous discussions with *Cosby Show* viewers, convincingly demonstrates television’s numbing force and how its anodyne themes comfort viewers, both white and black, about the state of American race relations. It is critical to realize, however, that interpretations of this vein mostly arise not from detailed readings of the show’s 197 plotlines but from theorizations of the meaning of its lacunae—holding it accountable for what it does not address on its surface and focusing instead primarily on the symptomology of its silences.¹³

With a pointed critique of the Huxtables’ comfortable lives, Ella Taylor condemns their apparent indifference to the struggling community living beyond their doors: “The Huxtables have friends who drift in and out of their lives but no discernible community, indeed no public life to speak of aside from their jobs, which seem to run on automatic pilot.”¹⁴ In a similar vein, Henry Louis Gates Jr. alleges that *The Cosby Show* “reassuringly [throws] the blame for black poverty onto the impoverished.”¹⁵ Such readings extrapolate from the program’s story lines to its supposed symptomology, and the argument that the Huxtables lack any sort of commitment to their community is patently incorrect, as they volunteer frequently at their local community center. The episode “Mr. Quiet” depicts Cliff presenting nutritional information to local pregnant women, and Theo donates his basketball to the center.¹⁶ When Vanessa’s ex-boyfriend Robert tells Cliff that he and Clair should donate money to charity and their medical and legal services to the community, Cliff offers to show him the many receipts proving their generosity (“It’s Not Easy Being Green”). Further testifying to the program’s concern for the Huxtables’ wider community and their economically disadvantaged neighbors, the administrator at Cliff’s hospital states that their facility “serves many low-income patients, and when our funds get cut, we have to do whatever we can to ensure that these

people continue to receive proper health care” (“You Only Hurt the One You Love”). The episode “For Men Only” depicts poor minority youth, exhausted by cultural constructions of their assumed criminality, defending themselves against these aspersions. “I’ll take responsibility for myself, Dr. Huxtable, but I’m tired of taking the blame for everything bad that happens,” one young man states, while another declares: “People think of us as negative statistics. They think half of us are in prison, and the other half is making babies.” Numerous other episodes highlight the Huxtables’ concern for their community, yet even if *The Cosby Show* evinced no such predilection for altruistic story lines, would this absence be in any way remarkable? Such an argument misconstrues the standard structure of most family sitcoms, which, as its genre promises, focuses on a family rather than on its community or its network of friends. Aside from the various exceptions to the rule such as the Nelsons’ friendship with their neighbor Thorny in *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* (1952–66), the Flintstones’ friendship with the Rubbles in *The Flintstones* (1960–66), and young Cory Matthews facing every child’s nightmare of living next door to his teacher in *Boy Meets World* (1993–2000), the majority of family sitcoms focus primarily on a single family rather than on their interactions with neighbors and community members.

With a provocative query that gets to the heart of *Cosby*’s and *The Cosby Show*’s representation of blackness, Michael Dyson muses, “Is the Huxtable family ‘authentically black?’” and then concludes that the program should depict a wider swath of African American experiences: “*The Cosby Show* . . . must be pushed to encompass and attend to other parts of that diversity within the worldview that *Cosby* has the power and talent to present.”¹⁷ Surely, though, and it is worth documenting this point at some length, *The Cosby Show* infuses the standard story arcs of the family sitcom with many moments celebrating a wide swath of black history and culture, thereby inviting white and other audiences to participate in this celebration. A panoply of black entertainers visits the *Cosby* family, including Lena Horne (“Cliff’s Birthday”), Dizzy Gillespie (“Play It Again, Vanessa”), Stevie Wonder (“A Touch of Wonder”), Betty Carter (“How Do You Get to Carnegie Hall?”), B. B. King (“Not Everybody Loves the Blues”), Howard “Sandman” Sims (“Mister Sandman”), Mavis Staples and the Friendship Choir (“The Story Teller”), Miriam Makeba (“Olivia Comes Out of the Closet”), and Uptown String Quartet (“Some Gifts Aren’t Deductible”), among others. Beyond the musical arts, Elvin and Sondra take Rudy to see a performance of Alvin Ailey’s dance company (“Full House”), and the episode “Jitterbug Break” features a dance sequence lasting approximately six minutes with little dialogue, as Denise’s friends, and then Cliff and Clair’s friends, demonstrate a range of dance styles, from break to swing. The Huxtables regularly discuss African American literature, including their appreciation for James Baldwin, Richard Wright (“Bonjour, Sondra”), and

Zora Neale Hurston (“Denise Gets a D”). For light reading Clair relaxes with *Ebony* magazine (“Theo’s Gift”) and Cliff with *Essence* (“Cliff la Douce”).¹⁸ Further highlighting *The Cosby Show*’s commitment to black history and culture, characters discuss such landmark moments in American history as the Tuskegee Airmen (“Theo’s Flight”), Negro League baseball (“There’s Still No Joy in Mudville”), and the 1965 Voting Rights Act (“Attack of the Killer B’s”). In a particularly poignant scene the Huxtables gather around the television to watch a recording of Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech, as they gaze intently and reflect on its impact on their lives (“Vanessa’s Bad Grade”). Theo writes a school essay on King’s 1963 March on Washington, learning from his parents and grandparents about their participation, as he then describes it in voice-over as “a day that changed my family” (“The March”). Beyond these allusions to black culture and history, of which many, many more could be added, the program addresses such social issues as food deserts in low-income neighborhoods (“The Price Is Wrong”) and the necessity of supporting the United Negro College Fund (bemoaning the cost of college, Cliff deadpans, “We happen to be the United Negro College Fund” [“Bird in the Hand”]). Great-grandaunt Gramtee reminds the Huxtable children of their ancestors’ struggles with slavery: “Now, your great-great-great Aunt Lucinda grew up in slavery. But she was determined to learn to read” (“The Story Teller”).

What becomes clear in many criticisms of *The Cosby Show* and its treatment of race, then, is that, for some critics, skin pigmentation, celebrations of black culture, and story lines thematizing America’s racial history serve as insufficient measures of blackness, and that other measures of blackness hold more sway in determining whether black actors in a black program can collectively achieve blackness. In this regard, “blackness” becomes a metonym for “relevance”—that the portrayal of blacks on television must be tied to the greater social good. Such calls for greater social realism evince a desire for *The Cosby Show* to tackle racial issues even more directly than it repeatedly does, yet realism conflicts with the narrative utopianism of the program’s family-sitcom foundations. Certainly one can envision episodes addressing the Huxtable children’s experiences with the brutality of prejudice—school bullies calling Rudy the “N”-word, a white boy cruelly rejecting Vanessa’s crush, skinheads savagely beating Theo—but it is much more challenging to envision how such story lines would retain the humor of the program’s family sitcom premise.

For the most part, as *The Cosby Show* recognizes, comedies do not unfold in settings threatened by crisis: Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* and *As You Like It* inhabit a green world removed from courtly intrigues, and the same is true with Cosby’s sitcom, which turns the home of a black family into a green world relatively free from discord. Psychiatrist Alvin F. Poussaint, a consultant to *The Cosby Show* and a collaborator on many of Cosby’s books, points out

the generic constraints of sitcoms, which impose numerous obstacles to the presentation of socially challenging issues: “The sitcom formula also limits the range of what are considered appropriate story lines; audiences tune in to be entertained, not to be confronted with social problems. Critical social disorders, like racism, violence, and drug abuse, rarely lend themselves to comic treatment; trying to deal with them on a sitcom could trivialize issues that deserve serious, thoughtful, treatment.”¹⁹ Focusing further on the program’s structure, June and Timothy Frazer similarly recognize the generic constraints on the series: “What *Cosby* may represent, then, is not so much some major shift in political gravity, as the persistence, despite much ideological change in the past few decades, of some very traditional forms still embedded in our everyday discourse.”²⁰ Within the confines of its genre, *The Cosby Show* integrates blackness into its story lines, which readings sympathetic to the series highlight. In her intriguing interpretation of the program’s dialogic construction of its narrative arc, Anthonia Kalu posits, “In the *Cosby* series, the legacy of double vision . . . is no longer seen as a curse; rather it facilitates reevaluation of the rich heritage of African-American culture. The dialogue with the dominant culture is acknowledged, but its stereotypes about African-America are not allowed to become the major points of reference.”²¹ The question that emerges from *The Cosby Show*, then, is how far comic structures can advance progressive critiques of prevailing ideologies, which becomes further complicated by the show’s narrative investments in sharing black culture with a wider audience and its generic symptomology of lighthearted, family-friendly escapism.

In this light, to accuse *The Cosby Show* of insufficiently thematizing racism fails to take into account how it metadiscursively stages its appeals to a multi-racial audience. Primarily, the program assumes a viewership candidly aware of the nation’s history of racial injustice while journeying forward into a better future. When the Huxtables travel to Hillman College, its president addresses an audience of graduates and alumni within the program’s fictions while speaking as well to viewers at home, including those who might fault the program for its family-centered story lines: “I will identify those topics which I will not address on this, my farewell day. Those topics are social justice; I’m not going to talk about that. Racial harmony—I’ll not talk about that. And peace on earth: I will not make mention of that. Now, let me make it lucid that I am eschewing these subjects simply because you Hillman students, who have been here for four or more years, know where I stand on those matters.” His audience interrupts to applaud, as he then continues: “We need to move on to the future, perhaps twenty or more years when you students will be twice the age you are now” (“Hillman”). One of the more notorious difficulties of discussing television reception arises in the multiple audiences and subject positions of viewers consuming it, who are constituted of various races, ages, and social

classes, among a host of other such factors. *The Cosby Show*, as with any other narrative, cannot wholly control how it is received, but it does control, at least to some degree, how it constructs its audiences, and in this scene and others similar to it, it posits an audience cognizant of the difficulties of race relations, cognizant of the necessity of addressing them, but also in a festive moment of time when pressing social concerns are to be temporarily overlooked in favor of communal celebration. Assuming that all viewers, regardless of skin tone, will understand racism's impact on African Americans is a daring rhetorical move, one that imbues the series with a racial critique that allows its surface to remain within the generic pleasures of a sitcom while its symptoms advocate forcefully for social change. The surfaces and symptoms of gender and sexuality in *The Cosby Show* likewise merit analysis, for they reveal the queer tensions between Cosby's progressive vision of parenthood and his concern over hypersexualized portrayals of African Americans, in an entertainment industry and culture prone to exploiting provocative and stereotypical images of black sexuality.

Regendering Television's African American Families

With criticisms similar to those concerning *The Cosby Show's* depictions of race, Mike Budd and Clay Steinman fault its treatment of gender: "Although the show takes on issues of gender, it does so gently. Cosby's character inevitably joins in any critique of sexism articulated in the show's story, validating both the critique and the father's own ultimate authority."²² Budd and Steinman's observation opens an interpretive paradox: Cliff ridicules sexism, yet because he is the show's star and father, his rejection of sexism then becomes the means for critics to denounce the show's patriarchal bias. But even if one grants that *The Cosby Show* treats gender issues "gently," it does so repeatedly throughout its episodes, thus cementing its commitment to gender equality. To take one example, football and machismo would appear to be topics that reinstate male authority, and, as Cosby recalls, their union influenced his earlier conceptions of masculinity, such as in his desire to see his past athletic glories renewed in his (male) offspring: "As a former Temple halfback on a truly nondescript football team, I've been guilty of such quaint machismo, such yearning to see a son who is my reincarnation on a football field, such desire to see a projection of myself get a second chance to break a leg."²³ Taking aim at such passé expressions of masculinity, *The Cosby Show* challenges football's role in developing American manhood when Theo displays little talent for the game ("Is That My Boy?"), whereas Rudy proves herself a formidable foe in her peewee league, scoring four touchdowns in one game ("Rudy Suits Up"). Dismantling the gendered paradigms of sport further, Olivia repeatedly voices her desire to be "Dr. Crusher, Middle Lineman" ("It's Your Move"). Also, Cliff takes pride in

his basketball and pinochle skills, yet Clair beats him in both of these pastimes (“It’s a Boy” and “Adventures in Babysitting”). One can point to rare moments of gender policing in the series, such as when Clair stops a hairdresser from adorning her grandson Nelson with feminine accouterments—“Oh, no, wait a minute now. This is a boy. You cannot put that ribbon in his hair” (“Day of the Locusts”)—but the lion’s share of the program dismantles crude distinctions between the sexes. Also, although Clair forbids ribbons from her grandson’s locks, Cliff sports bows in his hair after playing with Olivia (“Clair’s Reunion”; fig. 3.1), and Cliff’s and Clair’s bedclothes often reverse the standard gendered dichotomy of blue for men and pink for women (“The Dentist”). Quite simply, a heterosexual man in the 1980s who is sufficiently comfortable with his masculinity to wear pink pajamas and hair bows does not appear overly concerned with maintaining traditional gender roles.

Cosby’s deconstruction of Reagan-era masculinity contrasts sharply with the many 1980s sitcom fathers inhabiting hypermasculine roles, including Alex Karras’s retired pro-football player in *Webster* (1983–89), Bill Kirchenbauer’s high-school gym coach in *Just the Ten of Us* (1988–90), Gerald McRaney’s marine major in *Major Dad* (1989–93), and Craig T. Nelson’s university football coach in *Coach* (1989–97). These characters represent the grouchy yet ultimately cuddly Arnold Schwarzeneggers and Sylvester Stallones of the



FIGURE 3.1 With red and green ribbons in his hair and a slightly weary yet patient expression on his face, Cosby/Cliff demonstrates his comfort in challenging yesteryear’s conceptions of gender (“Clair’s Reunion”).

home front, and even they must confront the changes to American gender roles wrought during the 1960s and 1970s. For example, *Coach*'s Hayden Fox struggles with his new relationship with his college-age daughter, Kelly, and in one episode Kelly's boyfriend tells Hayden that he is "more in touch with his female side" and that he believes all people "have male and female sides," positing as well that "women are only 51 percent female and 49 percent male." Hayden defends himself against this ostensible aspersion against his masculinity, saying that his reading on such a scale would be "in the high 90s" ("I'm in Love with a Boy Named Stuart"). Much of the focus of these series is on men adjusting to changing definitions of masculinity, such as when Hayden confesses to his assistant coach, Luther (Jerry van Dyke), about the difficulties of communicating with Kelly: "Boy, I tell you, this being-a-parent stuff, it's just a mess. You're in the dark all the time. You never know where you're going" ("Kelly and the Professor"). In contrast to these white fathers grappling with shifting gender roles, *Cosby*'s Cliff Huxtable comfortably endorses a more equitable view of masculinity and femininity.

In its rewriting of cultural scripts of paternal masculinity, *The Cosby Show* portrays an androgynous ideal of fatherhood that exorcises strict gender roles from the family unit. As Poussaint explains, "A new movement has spawned that has been pushing American men and women closer to the acceptance of androgynous fatherhood—men who take a significant share of nurturing responsibilities for children and the home, tasks that were previously assigned exclusively to women."²⁴ Certainly, *The Cosby Show* rejects sexism and patriarchal attitudes, notably in casting *Cosby* as an obstetrician who apprises new fathers of the changing times. One patient's husband bloviates to Cliff, "There's nothing like having a pregnant wife to really prove your manhood" and announces his intention to rule as his family's boss; Cliff replies sardonically, "Mr. Lee, I used to think that I was going to be the boss. I don't know how I lost it, I don't know where I lost it, I don't think I ever had it."²⁵ He explains further: "You've got to understand that the days of being the boss, the barefoot and pregnant—that's thirty years ago. The old-fashioned man is out. There's more to this relationship than being boss. You're not the boss; she won't be the boss. The boss will be that baby" ("Father's Day").

Phylicia Rashad's performance of Clair Huxtable's androgynous motherhood—as an authoritative nurturer rather than as boundless maternal benevolence—complements Cliff's androgynous fatherhood, yet as with so many other elements of *The Cosby Show*, Clair, too, serves as a Rorschach test for critics. She has been celebrated for her trailblazing portrayal of a successful, professional, loving mother, and pilloried for the ostensible fantasy of this view. Donald Bogle praises the new vision of black maternity that Rashad brought to the screen: "Always maintaining her sexuality and her femininity, she could never be described as 'brassy' or 'sassy,' the terms usually associated

with forceful black women in TV series of the past. Here television moved away entirely from that longtime staple of black sitcoms: the mother as hefty, desexed mammy type.²⁶ Esther Rolle in *Good Times*, Mabel King in *What's Happening!!*, and Nell Carter in *Gimme a Break!* (1981–87) infused their maternal roles with warmth and good humor, with their bodies conforming to the “mammy” stereotype long established as the ideal for black women to play—often in white households, as for Carter. In contrast to these characters, Rashad's Clair modeled a distinctly new vision of black motherhood, one in line with 1980s family sitcoms depicting white professional women: architect Elyse Keaton (Meredith Baxter) of *Family Ties* (1982–89), advertising executive Angela Bower (Judith Light) of *Who's the Boss?* (1984–92), and journalist Maggie Seaver (Joanna Kerns) of *Growing Pains* (1985–92).

Rebutting Bogle's praise, John Fiske derides Clair Huxtable as the height of fantasy: “She has a full-time profession, is raising five children, does all the cooking and household management, all without any hired help or child-care workers, and, to cap it all, she never has a hair out of place and rarely shows any signs of strain.”²⁷ While many family sitcoms evoke the illusion of a self-cleaning home, Fiske both exaggerates the demands that Clair faces and overlooks the ways in which *The Cosby Show* repeatedly emphasizes the stress in her life. First, Clair can hardly be described as “raising five children” when Sondra is studying at Princeton and is, for all intents and purposes, an independent woman at the series' beginning, and Denise leaves for college at the second season's end. It is true that the family does not employ child-care workers, but criticisms in this vein overlook a central plank of the program's premise, congruent with its view of androgynous fatherhood: Cliff's office is located in their home so that he can tend to the children as necessary throughout the day. Theo and Vanessa are sufficiently mature to look after themselves, and Vanessa, in particular, is often tasked with watching Rudy. Furthermore, the program frequently refers to the time demands Clair must negotiate, such as when she sighs, “What it is is a life that's so crowded I don't have time to figure out what it is 'cause I'm going to be late for work” (“You're Not a Mother Night”), or laments, “I had a hard day,” which she describes in detail (“Lost Weekend”). Viewers see her working on Saturday (“You Only Hurt the One You Love”) and past midnight (“Calling Dr. Huxtable”). Cliff assists her in household management, such as when she mentions that she has been coming home late because of a case, and he demonstrates his support: “You've got a lovely dinner waiting for you in the kitchen” (“Clair's Case”).

Much as *The Cosby Show* frames its treatment of race by constructing its audience as knowledgeable of America's history of race relations, the program frames its treatment of gender and feminism as an assumed part of the fabric of American lives, as it also highlights the necessity of women's networks to resist outdated views of male privilege. When Theo and his friend Walter

(a.k.a. “Cockroach”) define the term *burger* as a good-looking girl, Denise is offended, castigating their slang as “one of the most sexist, degrading remarks I’ve ever heard.” Denise then asks Vanessa if she understands what *burger* denotes. Initially, Vanessa thinks the term is “cute,” but after her sister decodes the metaphor of a burger as a piece of meat, she changes her mind: “You guys are disgusting” (“Theo and Cockroach”). A running gag throughout the series depicts young Rudy facing archaically sexist attitudes from her friend Kenny, as in the following exchange:

RUDY: Well, Sondra says a woman can do anything.

KENNY: No. A woman will do what a man says.

RUDY: Not me. . . . A woman can have any job she wants.

KENNY: No, she can’t. (“Cliff in Charge”)

As this exchange documents, Rudy relies on Sondra’s lessons about women’s equality to counter the sexism she faces, and while in this instance Kenny contributes the final words to their quarrel, it would be unwise to think that Rudy is vanquished, for she frequently employs the simple strategy of renaming Kenny as “Bud” to dismiss his antiquated views: “You’re no man. You’re Bud” (“The Visit”). Like Rudy, Kenny has learned his views of gender from an older sibling, yet his brother, although never depicted onscreen, becomes key to the series’ demolition of outmoded masculinity. Clair pointedly tells Kenny, “Your brother has poisoned your mind about women. And one of these days, you’re going to quote your brother to some woman who is a little less civilized than I. And she’s going to grab you by the ankles and twirl you around in the air till those cavemen ideas come swirling out of your ears.” Moreover, as much as Kenny may parrot his brother’s lessons, he states admiringly to Theo of Rudy, “No man will ever tame her” (“57 Varieties”). As the years pass, Kenny begins to see his brother with new eyes, realizing that his hero does not measure up to the stature he assumed in his youth. “I guess this explains why my brother is always in his room . . . crying,” he muses (“Thanksgiving at the Huxtables”). Within the Cosbys’ world, traditional gender roles must be discarded in favor of a more androgynous ideal, yet this ideal cannot withstand the challenges of representing teen sexuality without simultaneously buckling to the queering repercussions of portraying innocence.

Family-Friendly Programming, Teen Sexuality, and the Limits of Androgynous Fatherhood

Cliff’s androgynous fatherhood and egalitarian marriage fall comfortably within the parameters of a family sitcom scheduled during the so-called family hour—one that anchored NBC’s Thursday lineup throughout the program’s

run—but the issue of his children’s sexuality disrupts these dynamics and queerly subverts the show’s heteronormative foundations, for in these story lines Cliff reasserts a patriarchal mode of masculinity to monitor his children’s sex lives. Certainly, Cosby forcefully advocated for family-friendly programming as an important tradition and lamented its demise, as he wrote with Poussaint: “Too many programs—where do we begin—use sex as a way to capture an audience. Today, even during the so-called family hour, TV shows are so loaded with sexual innuendos, suggestive situations, and foul language you’d think you were watching the adult after-hours channel. Few of these shows say one word about love.”²⁸ Avoiding sexuality in deference to family-friendly protocols only reinforces its significance when it does appear, rendering *The Cosby Show* a conflicted site in regard to its sexual themes.

In line with Cosby’s endorsement of anodyne programming, *The Cosby Show* endorses the fantasy of the family hour, so its reticence to forthrightly address issues of sexuality is encoded into its narrative structure. The program stresses its family-friendly content in several moments of metadiscourse, such as when, in introducing the episode “The Dentist,” Rudy announces in voice-over: “Hi! I’m Rudy. Tonight’s show stars Mr. Danny Kaye. It’s for all us kids, but you grown-ups should watch, too.” Similarly, “Cliff’s Nightmare” concludes with Wallace Shawn, a recurring guest star as neighbor Jeffrey Engels, intoning, “Good night, boys and girls. Eat the right things, and sleep tight,” thereby constructing this episode’s audience as primarily children. In one of television history’s most famous network battles, FOX scheduled its ode to familial dysfunctionality, *The Simpsons* (1989–), against *The Cosby Show*, which set up a direct confrontation over the family hour’s meaning for audiences. Cosby acknowledged this competition when Olivia, wearing a Bart Simpson mask, approaches Cliff, who says, “Now, cut that out” (“Same Time, Next Year”)—both batting away the competition and, at least tacitly, arguing for the inappropriateness of *The Simpsons* in the family hour.²⁹

The Cosby Show’s head-to-head battle with *The Simpsons* foregrounded its insistently innocent treatment of sexuality, yet this contrast between the program and a culture increasingly frank about eroticism had long been apparent. Many 1980s child characters of family sitcoms were well versed in human sexuality, with programs satirizing the sexual mores of yesteryear. In this exchange from *Who’s the Boss?* youngsters Jonathan and Samantha decipher their parents’ euphemism-ridden discussion of sex:

JONATHAN: What was that all about?

SAMANTHA: Sex.

JONATHAN: That’s what I thought. (“Pilot”)

Further along these lines, many 1980s programs ridicule adults' reticence to discuss sexuality, such as when Julie of *Gimme a Break!*, studying human reproduction, reads aloud her textbook's outdated lessons: "To make a baby, a man releases a substance made of thousands of tiny, little pollywogs. . . . These pollywogs wiggle their way to a special part of a woman. This is called the oven" ("Katie the Crook"). As its peer programs cast off the fantasy of sexless story lines and tackled more challenging themes, *The Cosby Show* instead concentrated on its young characters' sexual naiveté.

The show's primary narrative strategy for preserving the innocence of the family hour is to curtail any amorous behavior between Cliff and Clair following their children's interruptions. As Cosby writes, "Children who drop in at night are a means of birth control that is one hundred percent effective. In fact, for years in my house, the meaning of coitus interruptus was coitus interrupted by someone other than the participants."³⁰ The series' pilot inaugurates this tradition, as Cliff kisses Clair in bed but she cautions him: "Let's just remember this is how we got the children in the first place." Cliff turns off the light and embraces her, but Rudy and Vanessa interrupt because Rudy worries that a wolf-man is growling in the closet, so Clair permits them into the bed ("Theo's Economic Lesson"). In another such moment, Vanessa confesses to Cliff that she snuck into a horror movie and now finds herself too frightened to sleep. Cliff allows her into the sanctity of the parental bed—"Would it be better if you slept with us tonight?"—yet soon regrets his act of kindness, for Vanessa appears to kick him in her sleep ("Bad Dreams"). While Clair and Cliff's relationship simmers with affectionate energy and they often snuggle amorously, intercourse even within the bounds of marriage is broached so delicately as to be virtually inscrutable. When Cliff proposes a romantic bon voyage party for a planned vacation, a murky euphemism obscures the contemplated act. Cliff purrs, "I'll be the ocean liner, and you'll be the tugboat," and Clair agrees, "OK, then we'll dock together" ("Trust Me"). Unlike the clear erotic imagery of a train in a tunnel, a hotdog in a bun, or a rocket through a cloud, an ocean liner and a tugboat docked together obfuscates rather than communicates the idea of intercourse.

Given the program's investment in repudiating hypersexualized images of African Americans, the limits of androgynous fatherhood become apparent when Cliff assumes the role of defender of his daughters' chastity. Throughout the 1980s, many media treatments of black teen sexuality fomented anxiety over a perceived pregnancy epidemic, one that exploited the worst cultural stereotypes about the dysfunctionality of black kinship. Elaine Kaplan summarizes these allegations circulating throughout the decade in a variety of outlets: "Black teen mothers' children grow up in fatherless

households with mothers who have few moral values and little control over their offspring. The boys join gangs; the girls stand a good chance of becoming teen mothers themselves.”³¹ Sweeping away these arguments, Rickie Solinger documents the construction of this racist fantasy: “President Ronald Reagan and others began to name teenage pregnancy (and its association with welfare and ‘welfare queens’), along with the crack cocaine epidemic and inner-city violence, as the chief causes of poverty and other social ills in the United States. Despite the fact that black rates of teenage pregnancy continued to fall in relation to white rates in the 1980s, New Right politicians and political commentators boldly defined teenage pregnancy as a black problem at this time.”³² With these demeaning images sharply etched in the public consciousness, *The Cosby Show* stringently avoids any potential suggestion of a Huxtable daughter’s promiscuity, and Sondra, Denise, and Vanessa readily submit to their father’s strict policing of their sex lives. In one instance when Denise prepares for a date, Cliff informs her: “Not in those pants. Blood cannot get up to your brain from your legs. And besides, this is a school night.” After changing her clothes, Denise seeks her father’s approval: “New outfit for you, Daddy. Happy?” (“Theo’s Economic Lesson”). Vanessa requests Cliff’s guidance about dancing with boys, and as they practice together, he cautions: “You don’t mash your body up against any boy. I don’t care who he is. You understand? You’re not going to mash your body. Now step back—twelve inches” (“Back to the Track, Jack”; figs. 3.2 and 3.3). In another episode Clair reminisces, “I remember when she wouldn’t even let a boy get next to her,” as Cliff chimes in, “That’s right, and now that’s my job” (“Halloween”).

Throughout much of the series, Vanessa is characterized as “boy-crazy,” but her girlish infatuations paradoxically reinforce the efficacy of her parents’ lessons. After sneaking away with her boyfriend Jeremy, she teeters between conflicting desires to follow her passions or her parents’ admonitions:

VANESSA: I think we should stop.

JEREMY: Why? Aren’t you enjoying it?

VANESSA: Yeah—too much. That’s why I stopped.

JEREMY: You don’t have to stop. (they kiss again)

VANESSA: Jeremy, I can’t. What would my parents say if they knew I was up here? (“Truth or Consequences”)

After Cliff and Clair learn of Vanessa’s illicit escapade, Cliff talks with Jeremy in the kitchen, and with a clear nod to the story of Adam and Eve’s Fall, uses apples to represent Vanessa and Jeremy in his antierotic lesson. The narrative arc of the episode, then, is less between Vanessa and her boyfriend than between Cliff and teen sexuality, with the father reclaiming authority over his



FIGURES 3.2 AND 3.3 Vanessa assumes she will dance closely with boys, but in accordance with her father's dating precepts, she should remain at a proper distance from them ("Back to the Track, Jack").

daughter. Even after Vanessa leaves for college, her father scares off potential boyfriends, as she reminds him: “You took Jeremy into that kitchen, took two apples, put ’em on top of each other, said that was us, took one of the apples, skinned it, and said that was him. I haven’t heard from him since.” Cliff replies, “And when you went out with him, he didn’t put his hands on you, did he?” (“It’s All in the Game”).

At the same time that *The Cosby Show* celebrates children’s asexuality as a preeminent virtue, and does so by clouding hints of illicit desire, it also seeks to reform cultural conversations about sexual development by treating them with refreshing candor. Further developing the concept of androgynous fatherhood as espoused in Cosby’s show, Poussaint explains: “Children ask many questions at elementary-school age, including questions about sex. The old practice of fathers referring these questions to mothers is no longer acceptable.”³³ Notably in this regard, *The Cosby Show* features fairly frank discussions about sexual development, if not about sexual intercourse. As Rudy grows older, she worries that her breasts are not maturing, and her father comforts her: “Some girls develop them later than others.” Rudy’s fears evaporate as she realizes the truth of her parents’ words: “It’s like what mom said—‘You get what you get when you get it’—and a lot of us haven’t gotten it yet” (“Same Time, Next Year”). Rudy experiences her first period in “The Infantry Has Landed,” and Clair begins menopause in “Clair’s Liberation,” with both story lines disabusing viewers about long-standing hokum concerning female biology. Clair is determined that Rudy learn the facts of menstruation so that she won’t fall prey to misogynistic folklore (e.g., women menstruating at the beach attract sharks), and it is apparent that Rudy needs this parental guidance, as she repeats another ridiculous superstition learned from her schoolmates: “Five beets a day keeps the transfusion away.” Brushing away these canards, Clair tells her daughter, “Rudy, in biological terms, you are a woman. And if you want to be a mother someday, this has to happen.” In complementary contrast, Clair melodramatically overacts to the symptoms of menopause, sticking her head in the freezer to fight off hot flashes and bursting into tears in a display of hyperemotionality when Theo offers her corn instead of carrots, yet she does so with ironic and humorous intent, for the explicit purpose of modeling the utter normality of the female body throughout its stages of development.

Such candor about human sexual development is counterbalanced by the program’s evasive treatment of sexuality for its child characters, which underscores the queerness of children’s sexuality as unimaginable within the program’s fictions yet nonetheless a source of deep anxiety. Cliff hears Rudy singing along to her radio, “You can do it to me all night long, uh huh, baby, do it to me all night long.” Shocked by the words coming from his daughter’s mouth, he inquires:

CLIFF: What does “it” mean?

RUDY: Daddy, you know what “it” means.

CLIFF: Yes, I do. But I want to know if you know what “it” means.

RUDY: “It” means holding hands and kissing.

CLIFF: Holding hands and kissing? Yes, but that’s not all that “it” means.

RUDY: What else does “it” mean?

CLIFF: “It” means homework. Baby, do my homework all night long. (“How Do You Get to Carnegie Hall?”)

Here viewers do not see Cliff teaching his daughter about sexuality but rather resignifying “it” into schoolwork and obfuscating rather than clarifying “its” meaning. In this episode’s other story line, Vanessa and her friends Janet and Kara form their singing group The Lipsticks. Cliff and Clair are shocked by the girls’ low-cut and suggestive outfits emphasizing their breasts, and Clair pulls out the tissues stuffed in Vanessa’s bra (fig. 3.4). The episode reads as an indictment of the lax morality promoted by popular culture, from which *The Cosby Show* distances itself, yet it is also significant for establishing the boundaries of Cliff’s lessons in sex for his children and for children in his audience: in this instance not to say what “it” is but to condemn children’s natural interest in sexuality.

It is further clear that Cliff’s paternal interest in his daughters’ sex lives revolves around maintaining their virginity until their wedding nights. Before Sondra and Elvin marry, Cliff worries that they are sleeping together after



FIGURE 3.4 Modeling the crass sexuality of popular culture, Vanessa forms the singing group The Lipsticks—and meets with her parents’ stern disapproval (“How Do You Get to Carnegie Hall?”).

he hears an offhand reference to a shared breakfast, but Elvin clarifies that he did not sleep over at Sondra's residence before this meal ("Monster Man Huxtable"). In an awkward, extended conversation between Cliff and his son-in-law Martin, the two men discuss Denise's virginity:

CLIFF: You knew my daughter only two weeks, and then you got married. Now in the course of that two weeks, did, um . . .

MARTIN: Oh! (laughs) Oh, boy. I don't know if I should be sharing that with you, Dr. Huxtable.

CLIFF: Yes, you should.

MARTIN: When I first met Denise, I was very attracted to her, because she is . . . hot. I mean, no disrespect intended.

CLIFF: It's all right, it's just—watch your mouth.

MARTIN: Okay. All right, anyway, uh, I can't believe I'm telling you this, but, uh . . .

CLIFF: You should.

MARTIN: I really wanted to, uh . . .

CLIFF: Yeah, yeah, be careful.

MARTIN: Express myself physically with her. Can I say that?

CLIFF: Yeah, but you're borderline.

MARTIN: Okay. But you'll be happy to know that Denise was having none of that.

CLIFF: Really?

MARTIN: On our wedding night, I discovered that, of the two of us, only one of us had had prior experience, and as you know, I'm the one with the daughter.

CLIFF: So, you're telling me that my daughter . . .

MARTIN: Yup. ("Getting to Know You")

Obviously delighted by the preservation of his daughter's hymen until marriage, Cliff beams and dances happily. Martin's delicate euphemisms ("express myself physically") and Cliff's steady pursuit of information about his daughter's virginity reinstate masculine prerogatives over women's bodies. And when Vanessa announces her engagement to Dabnis, who is approximately ten years her senior, she tells her parents, "I have never had experience with another man, and you guys don't think I know what I'm doing" ("The Iceman Bricketh"). The confused interplay of these statements—invoking both her virginity and her parents' assumption of her naiveté precisely because she has preserved her virginity—displays the confused site of this black woman's body, with her parents exerting their authority through the status of her hymen.³⁴

Within the plotlines of *The Cosby Show*, serious sexual transgressions do not occur within the household unit but disrupt it from outside. In the

episode “Denise’s Friend”—which marks this young woman as unnamed, virtually unknowable—Denise tells her father that a friend needs assistance with a gynecological concern. At the community center, Cliff asks this friend if she is pregnant; she replies that she is not. He then asks if she has discussed her concerns with her parents, but she states elliptically, “If I do, then they’ll know I’m not what they think I am.” Cliff observes, “You don’t want your parents to know you’re sexually active,” and she states, “Believe me, Dr. Huxtable. They would not understand.” Even the specters of teen pregnancy and venereal disease are dispelled by the episode’s end, as Cliff reports that this young woman suffered from a mild bladder infection. She agrees to talk to her parents because Cliff tells her he would want to know about his children’s problems, yet when Cliff convenes a family meeting to discuss the necessity for honesty between parents and children, Rudy is conveniently absent—apparently too young for a frank discussion of human sexuality (with the paradox that child viewers hear the conversation that she cannot). Later in the series, when Pam’s boyfriend, Slide, pressures her to sleep with him, Charmaine counsels abstinence. “What I have may not be precious to the world, but it is precious to me. You understand what I’m saying? What I got ain’t no knick-knacks,” she avers, and Lance agrees that he and Charmaine share an intimate relationship, yet intimacy does not require physical consummation: “See ‘intimate’ means that our minds have met, our souls have touched, and our spirits have sat together.” Complementing this story line of sexual restraint, Cliff’s duties as an obstetrician call him to tend to an adolescent girl at the hospital, as he explains to Clair: “There you go. Good example. Got a sixteen-year-old girl ready to deliver sometime tonight. Parents say, ‘We want to have nothing to do with you.’ The boy that did it says, ‘It’s not mine, I told you to protect yourself.’ All she’s going to do is have a baby” (“Just Thinking about It”). The specter of black teen pregnancy haunts *The Cosby Show’s* treatment of adolescent sexuality, and while Pam mentions the possibility of birth control while contemplating intercourse with Slide, no Huxtable child turns to their obstetrician father for similar assistance, for doing so would reveal the sexuality the show so strenuously cloaks. In notable contrast, Natalie of *The Facts of Life* (1979–88), a white teen on a concurrent sitcom, lost her virginity to her boyfriend, Snake (“The First Time”), demonstrating both the potential innocuousness of such a story line and the ways in which whiteness rarely faces such cultural duress as blackness.

In Theo’s maturation from boy to man, his father and other mentors steer him away from the “player” model of hypersexualized black masculinity, prevalent in 1970s blaxploitation films such as *Shaft* (1971) and *Super Fly* (1972). This stereotype of African American masculinity, with its flamboyant exaggerations of machismo and bravado, nevertheless lurks in the background of his character (fig. 3.5). In one such scene, he and Cockroach share with Denise



FIGURE 3.5 With his shirt open and a gold chain dangling around his neck, Theo models a sexually libidinous vision of black masculinity from which he soon matures (“Theo and the Older Woman”).

their plans for the future, envisioning a bachelor pad resplendent in its excess. “We’re gonna fill the place with things that women love—like bearskin rugs,” Theo jauntily avows, as his sister sarcastically rebuffs his view: “Oh, yeah, we love those things. You know what else we love? Curtains that open and close by remote control” (“Bring ’Em Back Alive”). Whereas many teen boys in the 1980s hid issues of *Playboy*, *Penthouse*, or *Hustler* in their bedrooms, Theo prefers scantily clad women posing with cars over more hardcore fare. Clair discovers this illicit stash and upbraids her son—“This magazine is demeaning to women”—but Theo feebly defends himself with the language of female liberation: “No, mom, it’s not. This magazine makes women look great. And it shows that they can be mechanically inclined” (“Pentaque”). As this encounter demonstrates, Theo’s nascent sense of sexual desire is staged as innocently as possible, with gazing at semiclad, not naked, women his most significant youthful transgression. In his efforts to win his girlfriend Tonya’s affections, he buys her a “diamondoid” ring for \$19.95, but his more effective technique in seduction arises from his knowledge of African American literature, as he shares Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* with her. “Theo, I love the way you read,” she intones, and soon they kiss. This scene models black masculinity based on the courtship rituals of yesteryear, for Cliff and Theo report to his grandfather Russell that they had “the talk”:

RUSSELL: Did he mention the part about being a gentleman?

THEO: Several times.

CLIFF: I gave him the same talk that you gave me, and your father gave you.

RUSSELL: Did you listen?

THEO: Yes, Grandpa. ("The Card Game")

For much of the series, Theo imposes chastity upon himself, refusing to see women's sexual attractiveness and concentrating instead on their personalities. When Denise teases him about his beautiful date, he becomes upset and claims, "I'm attracted to her inner beauty." Denise suggests that her brother must find this young woman at least somewhat physically desirable, to which he responds, "I try not to let that part mess with my mind" ("Home for the Weekend").

Yet during his maturation it is strongly suggested, yet never conclusively so, that Theo loses his virginity. Cliff and Clair express their disappointment over his decision, yet the sexual double standard that privileges male sexual conquest undercuts the program's otherwise progressive stances toward gender and parenting. Cliff finds a bra mixed in with Theo's laundry, so he and Clair deduce that their son has been living with his girlfriend, Justine. Clair chastises Theo for his decision: "Now I'm not saying that these people have taken a wrong turn in life and are going downhill and will never amount to anything. But we do have our own point of view on this subject, if that's all right with you" ("Theo's Dirty Laundry"). Because Theo has lied to them about his living situation, Cliff and Clair expel him from their home. The episode ends with the potential fracturing of the Huxtable household, but this family tempest has calmed by the subsequent episode, in which Theo comes and goes as he pleases in his parents' residence ("What's It All About?"). For a program so invested in dismantling gender paradigms, the issue of children's sexuality undermines its egalitarian vision, with these story lines reasserting the Huxtable daughters' virginity as an arena of narrative and parental control, whereas, while Cliff and Clair register their disappointment over Theo's sexual activity, the issue quickly recedes from view.

In a further instance of *The Cosby Show's* discomfort with sexuality, no gay or lesbian characters enter its heteronormative world, one that brooks little possibility of queer sexuality but also little overt homophobia (other than such passing moments as Clair's concern over ribbons in her grandson's hair, as mentioned earlier). Still, in presiding over his daughters' sexual maturation, Cliff finds himself engaged in homosocial friendships that create slight chinks in the program's uniform heteronormativity by positioning him as the predominant avatar of the program's repressed queerness. When Sondra and Elvin break up temporarily, she dates Darrell, who models Cliff's brand of forward-thinking masculinity: Darrell endorses women working outside the

home, cooks for himself and others, and, in a nod to Cliff as a role model, attends medical school. Cliff prefers him over Elvin and invites Darrell to dinner after his date with Sondra, although Cliff must soon admit to him that Elvin will accompany her back to Princeton. Given Sondra's obvious preference for Elvin, Darrell wonders why Cliff invited him, and Cliff answers, "Because you're the fellow I like." He plaintively adds, "You like me, don't you?" ("Cliff in Love"). Also, the episode in which Vanessa and Dabnis break off their engagement is titled "Cliff Gets Jilted," pointing to his investment in his daughters' romantic interests and his disappointments when his homosocial bonds must be broken as a result of their decisions. Cliff pesters Dabnis about the breakup so much that Dabnis finally rebuts, "Vanessa is annoying. Are you happy?" in an exasperated attempt to end the conversation. A few episodes later, Cliff tries to ward off Vanessa's possible interest in a Senegalese exchange student, telling this young man, "Her fiancé's name was Dabnis, and I liked him" ("Clair's Reunion"). As Gail Rubin and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick have demonstrated in their pioneering studies of men's traffic in women and of male homosociality, men often negotiate their relationships through women, and despite Cliff's commitment to androgynous fatherhood, he succumbs to archaic modes of gender policing that ironically expose the homosocial underbelly of his desire to preserve his daughters' virginity.³⁵

Metadramatic Black Sexualities: Cosby, Bonet, and the Queer Legacy of *The Cosby Show*

Despite *The Cosby Show*'s rigorous policing of black eroticism, metadramatic controversies concerning Cosby and Bonet proved the impossibility of quarantining sexuality from the program and thus demonstrate the queer potential of sexuality to subvert plotlines from which it has mostly been erased. Bill Cosby is not Cliff Huxtable, and Lisa Bonet is not Cosby's daughter, yet their public disagreements concerning her non-*Cosby* roles were frequently painted in terms of a family feud. Furthermore, decades-old allegations that Cosby fathered an illegitimate child and that he drugged and raped dozens of women over his career have now affected the reception of *The Cosby Show*, demonstrating the difficulty for many viewers in jettisoning the alluring fantasies both of the Huxtables' world and of the actors who created it.

During the show's run in the 1980s, Bonet sought to elude the typecasting that hounds so many child stars by appearing in Alan Parker's sexually provocative *Angel Heart* (1987), a film that required sustained editing to avoid an X rating. Cosby presented himself as above the fray, stating, "I did not want to read the script. She has a mother and father,"³⁶ as he dismissed the film's premise: "that film doesn't offer my appetite anything."³⁷ By denying his position *in loco parentis*, Cosby implies as well his ultimate authority—that he

could have chosen to read the script and, at the very least, attempted to veto Bonet's participation in a film of which he did not approve. Bonet's performance as Epiphany Proudfoot fractured her good-girl image as a member of America's preeminent television family, particularly because this supernatural thriller indulges in numerous stereotypes about African American spirituality and sexuality—notably in a sequence in which Proudfoot dances in a voodoo ritual, sacrifices a chicken, and drenches herself in its blood while exposing her breasts (see fig. 3.6). For the most part the film presents its racist characters as unsympathetic and unlikable, yet audiences must still endure the ugly stereotypes that are central to its story. Proudfoot, as another character describes her, is a “a mambo priestess, like her mom. Has been since she was thirteen,” and the protagonist, Harold Angel (Mickey Rourke), pursues her to learn the whereabouts of the missing Johnny Favorite—despite a policeman's warning that in Louisiana “down here we don't mix with the jigaboos.” The film concludes as Angel realizes that, not only has he slept with his daughter, Proudfoot, but he has murdered her as well. Bonet received praise for her performance, with Roger Ebert opining that “she was probably right to take this controversial role as her movie debut; it's such a stretch from the *Cosby* character that it establishes her as a plausible movie actress.”³⁸ Nonetheless, because her performance clashed with her *Cosby* persona and the sitcom's premise of innocence, the character of Denise was increasingly shunted to the margins.

Rebutting Bonet's and the film's lurid depiction of African American sexuality, *The Cosby Show* rewrote the horrific sex quest of *Angel Heart* in its “Dead End Kids Meet Dr. Lotus” episode, which ridicules voodoo when Theo



FIGURE 3.6 In this sensual image from *Angel Heart*, Bonet plays on her sex appeal, despite her television father's disapproval. Nighttime shots of her character sacrificing chickens with her breasts exposed were too dark for reproduction.

visits Dr. Lotus, “a specialist in the spiritual sciences,” for assistance in ridding him of his amatory competition for Justine. Providing an alternative to black magic, Cliff fakes a ritual of his own, pouring oil on Theo and banging pots, as he teaches him the only magic needed: “I will pay more attention to my woman.” *Angel Heart* and this episode share the same basic narrative—a man consults a voodoo shaman in his quest—with *The Cosby Show* lambasting the film for disrupting the familial ethos of the former and therefore recasting the story line of the latter into one of gentlemanly romance.

Following the controversies of *Angel Heart*, Bonet married rock star Lenny Kravitz in 1987 and gave birth to their daughter, Zoë, in 1988, which created numerous filming difficulties for *The Cosby Show* and its spin-off *A Different World* (1987–93). Behind-the-scenes accounts detailed skirmishes and Bonet’s unprofessional behavior on set, notably in late arrivals and lack of preparation. Regarding Bonet’s pregnancy, Susan Fales-Hill, a producer and writer of *A Different World*, recalls: “We had a lot of intense discussions about whether to incorporate the pregnancy into the show. We ultimately came to the conclusion as a group—and firmly guided by Mr. Cosby—that with the problem of teenage pregnancy, it was a little dangerous to send out an [unwed mother] message.”³⁹ The entertainment media yet again cast these creative differences between two professional actors as a family drama. The title of a *Jet* article—“Lisa Bonet: How Bill Cosby Will Handle Return of His Prodigal Daughter”—confuses the actors with their roles, as it further blurs the borders between fiction and reality: “like the Biblical father . . . Cosby allowed his prodigal daughter to return to his show, salvaging her acting career while she deals, in real life, with her marriage and pregnancy.”⁴⁰ Bonet recalled that her disputes with Cosby and the show’s producers arose because they did not allow her to voice her sense of the character. “They took on, like, a heavy parental-control thing. . . . Instead of allowing me to stay true to myself, they tried to put a clamp on my spirit and my character,” apparently confusing the relevance of her personal spirit to a fictional character.⁴¹

Of Bonet’s replacements in the series, and of her screen time being redirected to newcomers Erika Alexander, Karen Malina White, and Allen Payne, Cosby took the tone of a schoolmaster distributing rewards to his honors students, saying that her story lines “will be taken up by the new kids on the show who are working hard, studying so hard, and really deserve a shot during what will be our final year.”⁴² He further explained of his screen daughter’s arrested development: “There was nothing challenging for her. . . . I blame myself for that—creating a character who simply never developed. Denise never grew up—and it’s not fun to have someone 21 acting like she’s still about 12.”⁴³ Of course, Denise’s character could have evolved, and her lack of evolution as a Huxtable child reflects a decision on the part of the show’s creative talent. On the contrary, Cosby acknowledged the similarities between his personal

difficulties with one of his daughters and her Huxtable counterpart Denise: “There are so many things to play with. So many things that you could do with it. . . . I have a daughter that I am so in love with now because she’s turned around. . . . I love her to death now because she turned around. She came back.”⁴⁴ Almost a decade after *The Cosby Show* ended production, entertainment reporters still treated Bonet and Cosby as estranged kin: “Bonet’s feelings toward Bill Cosby are as complicated as those between a daughter and a once-beloved but now estranged father: an unsteady combination of gratitude, respect, disappointment, and resentment,” wrote Josh Rottenberg for *Us Weekly*, summarizing Bonet and Cosby’s disagreements over her portrayals of African American sexuality and her life following her young marriage.⁴⁵ Bonet disappeared from *The Cosby Show*, and in its final episode Denise calls home to report her pregnancy, but viewers neither see nor hear Bonet imparting this information. Denise can be redeemed through the joys of motherhood in marriage, yet Bonet could not return to the fold.

The Cosby Show’s treatment of Denise/Bonet highlights the hypocrisy of sexual policing, for Cosby’s own sexual affairs were far more controversial, if occluded from public view for much longer. As Cathy Cohen observes of Cosby’s extramarital affair with Shawn Berkes Thompson and the paternity allegations of her daughter, Autumn Jackson, which came to light in the late 1990s, “The case was disturbing on many levels, but it serves as a reminder that even those who struggle very publicly with their own moral challenges jump at the chance to reprimand the black poor and black youth for their ‘deviant’ culture and self-destructive behavior.”⁴⁶ Further complicating *The Cosby Show*’s current reception, dozens of women have accused Cosby of sexual abuse and rape over the decades of his career, further eroding the innocent image of black sexuality he sought to portray, in the determinedly thin lines between his star persona, his roles, and his life.⁴⁷ These controversies led to the cancellation of his latest pilot, in which he was to return to television as the patriarch of an extended family, in an obvious homage to *The Cosby Show* and its phenomenal run. In a blow to its legacy, *The Cosby Show* has been pulled from TV Land syndication and from Black Entertainment Television’s Centric Network.⁴⁸

On one hand, such a response is little short of ridiculous: Heathcliff Huxtable is a fictional character, and if viewers demanded that all actors live morally blameless lives, very few shows would reach the air. (No such similar outcry demanded that the *Little Rascals* be shelved when star Robert Blake was accused of murder, and Woody Allen’s films still garner international acclaim despite persistent allegations of child sexual abuse.) On the other hand, many family sitcoms purposefully obscure any distinctions between their stars and these actors’ star personas—perhaps most obviously in *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*, in which the characters of the Nelson family were played by the members of the Nelson family. As a result of these dynamics, many viewers, no

matter their sophistication, can no longer see Heathcliff Huxtable as meaningfully distinct from Bill Cosby but instead as a queered husk of the black sexual normativity that he so strenuously projected for himself and his TV family. The show's star has fallen, and only time will tell if, after the taint of these rape allegations and the damage they have inflicted on his image of paternal beneficence, future generations will again appreciate *The Cosby Show* for the fantasy of its impossible innocence.

In the final analysis, television's pressures in representing African Americans and African American sexuality did not prohibit Bill Cosby and the artistic talents behind *The Cosby Show* from creating one of the most enduring and popular programs in television history, yet issues surrounding these representations dogged its critical reception over the question of how truly this family could represent black America. Of course, no single family can represent all of black America, and no family's experiences with sexuality can represent the nation's, yet such concerns coincided with rigorously sterile depictions of teen sexuality in *The Cosby Show* that queerly undercut its endorsement of androgynous parenthood through the reinstatement of patriarchal prerogatives. America's premier television father of the 1980s, otherwise progressive about gender roles and female autonomy, Cliff Huxtable had to protect his daughters from losing their virginity, for all of America was watching, and the meaning of blackness was on the line. The queerness of *The Cosby Show* attests to a troubled spirit of sexual repression that inevitably seeped out into the open—a situation sharply contrasting with Roseanne Barr's *Roseanne*, which, as discussed in the next chapter, tossed the family sitcom's chaste superego out in favor of its erotic id and the queer power of erotic representation.