Critiquing Reality-Based Televi sual Black Fatherhood: A Critical Analysis of Run’s House and Snoop Dogg’s Father Hood

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In the 1980s, The Cosby Show broke all molds for the negative representation of Black people in media by supplanting them with an upper middle-class family whose forays into high culture and familial values served to dignify Blackness on television. Two decades later, at least two Black families have emerged on reality television shows, both of which provide a platform from which to examine the televi sional construction of Black fatherhood years after Cosby’s debut. Run’s House and Snoop Dogg’s Father Hood (Father Hood), both shows based on “real” Black families, can be interpreted in comparison and contrast to Cosby’s version of upper-middle class Black fatherhood to (a) investigate themes of Black fatherhood in a variety of positive forms while challenging limited images of Black fathers on television; and (b) revive debates from Jhally and Lewis’ book Enlightened Racism as the families in the reality shows simultaneously corroborate, shift away from and flaunt issues of race and class while still fostering a strong identification with viewers.

Keywords: Critiquing; Reality TV; Black Fatherhood; Run’s House; Snoop Dogg’s Father Hood

The Cosby Show (Cosby), a network situational comedy, debuted September 20, 1984 to critical acclaim (Inniss & Feagin, 1995). From 1984 to 1992, Bill Cosby, producer and star of the show, unveiled a Black family who did not live in public housing or lament on how they would manage household expenses. In fact, scholars (Berman, 1987; Inniss & Feagin, 1995; Gray, 1995) declare that by design, the show was the first with an all-Black cast that managed to avoid racial stereotyping. Instead, the show
focused on themes of family stability, heritage, and education, giving the NBC network a ratings winner and instilling a sense of pride in Black people everywhere. Cosby himself said the show reflected his own philosophy that the Black community must take responsibility for its own fate (“The Cosby Show Legacy,” 2005). Though Cosby was criticized as showcasing a Black family in White face that did not address racial and social issues, the show continued in the genre of happy endings, family values, and escapism as it sauntered into the history books. The show was hailed as portraying Black men in a positive light; portraying Black families optimistically; showing Black Americans as being like other U.S. Americans; and modeling good examples for Black children (Inniss & Feagin, 1995). With its focus on parenting, values, and Black respectability, *Cosby* essentially normalized the nuclear family.

Two decades later, at least two Black families have emerged on reality television shows, both of which provide a platform from which to examine the televisual construction of Black fatherhood and family years after *Cosby’s* debut. *Run’s House* and *Snoop Dogg’s Father Hood* (*Father Hood*), both shows based on “real” Black families, can be interpreted in comparison and contrast to *Cosby’s* version of upper-middle class Black fatherhood to (a) investigate constructions of Black fatherhood in a variety of positive forms while challenging limited images of Black fathers on television; and (b) revive debates from Jhally and Lewis’ (1992) book *Enlightened Racism* as the families in the reality sitcoms simultaneously corroborate and shift away from issues of race and class while still attempting to foster a strong identification with viewers. Throughout the article, arguments will be contextualized by comments from critics and fans of the shows.

According to Brooks and Jacobs (1996), attention must be given to the potential inherent in television’s ability to promote antiessentialist and nonstereotypical images of African Americans (see Orbe, 1998). That being the case, this focus on unscripted “reality” television has the capacity to present the whole of Black family life in “authentically” complex ways. Such possibilities appear more likely—outside of traditional networks—within the cutting edge programming found on cable networks (Brooks & Jacobs). MTV has certainly enjoyed success while supporting this argument with its own version of Black family life portrayed in the show *Run’s House*, as has *Father Hood* on E! Channel as the stars of both shows set out to construct their own version of the twenty-first century family.

**Run’s House**

Multiple studies (Berry, 1980; Greenberg & Atkin, 1978; Greenberg & Neuendorf, 1980; Merritt & Stroman, 1993) have analyzed the imagery of Black families on television and considered the messages that are perpetuated by the media. Some of these messages include the Black family as female-headed, characterized by conflict, and having children in the home who experience little supervision and concern from their parents. But on Thursday, October 13, 2005 MTV debuted a Black television family that appeared to be in direct contradiction to these “realities.”
Run’s House is, according to the main character and “father” of the household Joseph Simmons (Rev. Run) of Run.DMC fame, what critics consider a “real life” version of Cosby and Father Knows Best (Collier, 2006). Presiding over discussions about education, empty nesting and child anger management, Simmons and his wife Justine put family life on display along with their children Vanessa, Angela, Jojo, Daniel (“Diggy”), and Russell II (“Russy”). In constructing his version of the authentic Black family, Simmons says the show is less about dismantling long-standing Black stereotypes and more about toppling stereotypes about rap music artists: “I’m just trying to give another perspective and show what rap is all about, especially for someone who knows only the negative things. Me and my family are rap all grown up” (MTV Networks, 2008). Despite past stereotypes of female-headed households, the show effectively presents a Black male in the dominant role of head household figure which statistics confirm represent 75% of Black households (U.S. Census, 2004).

Though constructed as the mature side of rap music, Run’s House can compare to Cosby in many ways. For example, Jhally and Lewis (1992) describe Cosby as being a narrow, “post-Civil Rights,” privileged exhibit of “the lives and experiences of typical Black Americans” (pp. xv, 6). The authors also lament the show’s avoidance of very real “Black” issues like economic peril, racism, and societal barriers. In this way, comparisons of Run’s House to Cosby are unavoidable, and a conclusion is invariably made that what Cosby presented as fiction can actually be seen in a Black household that is being pegged as “reality” (interrogations of the actual “reality” of reality TV will be explored later in this article). Specifically, like Cosby neither Run’s House nor Father Hood deal in any strong way with racism, economic distress, or other societal barriers on their shows. Instead, like their predecessor show, both build their plots around family success, humor, and harmony. This is particularly curious considering that Simmons and Snoop Dogg represent opposite sides of the unharmonious divide between East Coast and West Coast rap artists, respectively. From the 1990s to the present, rivalry through rap lyrics between East and West Coast rappers have stimulated record sales to help situate rap music as a $1.6 billion industry (Leland, 2002). Yet the contentious nature of their art is never reflected in either of their shows. Instead, viewers continue in the ideal world of Black families as perpetuated for the most part by both of these reality shows.

Snoop Dogg’s Father Hood

The rap artist Calvin Broadus (Snoop Dogg) leads the theme song to Father Hood by making a direct comparison of his show and parenting style to that portrayed in Cosby. The title of the show itself emphasizes that Snoop, a prominent West Coast rapper is a father from the hood. Snoop Dogg, came to fame in the 1990s when his debut album Doggystyle became a platinum seller in its first week (Quinn, 1996). Now as head of household in Father Hood, Snoop starts the show by rapping that “this ain’t The Cosby Show . . . and I don’t make my kids eat their vegetables . . .” establishing at the inception that the structured family life of the 1980s hit show
will not be replicated in the Broadus household. In fact, notions of distinguished, high-brow and dignified Blackness (Gray, 1995), and controlled representation are overwhelmed by the Broadus family’s antitypical representation of family compared with the archetypical Huxtable and Simmons families. The selection of Snoop and the Broadus family appears a likely choice for a new reality show especially considering the liberties television takes in its 21st-century portrayals. Robinson and Skill (2001) contend that “it is clear that TV portrayals of family are becoming more complex and diverse” and “television portrayals of the family have become less conventional” (p. 160). Obscene language, references to illegal drugs, and memories of confrontations with the law all represent material explored in *Father Hood*. In this case, it is relevant to remember that the producers of *Father Hood* have labeled the show as “real” day-to-day activity as opposed to material created for television. Consider that the “less conventional” Broadus family challenges stagnant impressions of family life, normal TV conventions for family, and anticipated roles for adults and children in families.

Slocun (2008) posits that reality TV is crafted to “find compelling storylines in hundreds of hours of videotaped life” (para. 3). That being said, it is important to note that both Simmons and Broadus state that their portrayals are stimulated by wanting to show a positive familial side of rap music and a family quite different from *Cosby* respectively. Slocun continues by asserting “we as viewers hope, desperately, to find something relevant to our own lives . . . The possibility that reality-based stories will reveal something real is so enticing that the televised society is just fine with us” (para. 21). In viewing *Run’s House* and *Fatherhood*, it is not difficult to believe in the storylines though the entertainers themselves cite some intentional activity for their shows.

The remainder of this article focuses on (a) emergent themes of televisual Black fatherhood, (b) challenging the limited images of Black fathers on television, and (c) making connections with the audience in terms of race and class in the way that Jhally and Lewis (1992) examined *Cosby*. Prior to these analyses, descriptions of the methodological and conceptual/theoretical frames of the study are presented.

**Conceptual/Theoretical Framework**

Central to the analysis of *Run’s House* and *Fatherhood* is both shows’ ability to revive discussions outside of *Cosby* of televisual issues of race and class in connection with a Black family. The definitive nature of reality sitcoms implies that they are truer reflections than scripted sitcoms, like *Cosby*. However, it is important to acknowledge that all TV programming, to some extent, is simultaneously real and unreal. While not defined as reality TV, *The Cosby Show* played with the boundaries of fact and fiction of Bill Cosby’s life (Jhally & Lewis, 1992). The title of the show, for example, encouraged the viewing audience to understand the show as having a real-life reference point.1

Enlightened racism is a concept that grew out of the audience analysis work of Jhally and Lewis (1992). While this critical essay does not borrow methodologically
from this seminal work (as it is not an audience analysis study), it does draw conceptually from the idea that *The Cosby Show* promoted a new sense of enlightened racism among Whites. Jhally and Lewis’ seminal work argued that hyper visibility of The Huxtable family reinforced the notion of social mobility—in that they have achieved the upper echelons of the middle class. Their social mobility was made problematic in that no attention was given to the economic disadvantages and deep-rooted racial discrimination that prevent most African Americans from being socially mobile. As such the show contributed to a contemporary form of racism that is based on the idea that racism is no longer a problem in the United States, and that lack of African American success is based within lack of effort and/or ability. The existence of the Cosbys—and other popular mass mediated African American success stories, such as Oprah Winfrey, Michael Jordan, and Colin Powell—are taken as proof of this stance. The logic, then, is that “their success assures us that in the United States everyone, regardless of race or creed, can enjoy material success” (Jhally & Lewis, 1992, p. 73). If racism does exist, it is manifested within interpersonal interactions (and situated as a personal issue) with no connection to historical, institutionalized policies, procedures, and/or practices. Consequently, the media glamorization of these individuals reinforces both the availability and desirability of the American Dream.

Similar to the Huxtable family, the Simmons family from *Run’s House* has continued to present Black families “without struggle” who represent “effortless” and “nice” Blackness (Jhally & Lewis, 1992, pp. 107, 47), further confirming the myth of easy access to the American Dream that *Cosby* started over 20 years earlier. Also, *Run’s House* places emphasis on the tremendous wealth and comfortable lifestyles of the Simmons’ sustaining the fantastical “myth of social mobility” that Jhally and Lewis (1992) discuss in their work (p. 7). That is, they move exertion-free through their White-washed utopian lives with little to no reference to struggle.

While *Run’s House* tends to advance the notion of class trumping race, *Father Hood*, on the other hand, contends with this concept in a variety of ways. Simmons’ “rap grown up” implies that he is beyond the reckless, gangster lifestyle that has, unfairly or not, characterized some rap artists. His retreat to family life in the New Jersey suburbs parallels the upper middle class existence of *Cosby*. In contrast, though wealthy and famous, Snoop Dogg connects more visibly on his show to Black cultural “institutions,” food, and environments. Snoop’s reconnection to his old “hood,” frequent meals of fried chicken, and visits to soul-food chain Roscoe’s House of Chicken ‘n Waffles identify him with working class Black people in a way that was absent from both *Cosby* and *Run’s House*. Further, Snoop’s confrontations with the law are also realistic occurrences that are not addressed in the other two shows. Snoop as a real Black father of considerable upper class status has clear association with working class society in contrast to *Cosby* which blurred the cultural connection between the Huxtables’ race and their class status.

Most significant to this article is that the race-based struggles and issues that are left out of the texts of *Cosby* appeared to enhance the ways in which White audiences related to the show. The same can be said of *Run’s House*. Mythical social mobility is
rooted in what people are willing to watch when being entertained. The ease with which the members of *Cosby* and *Run's House* move about their daily lives gives the impression that “anyone can make it” (Jhally & Lewis, 1992, p. 7) and that the American Dream is unquestionably attainable. Of *Cosby* the authors said that viewers’ class position did not diminish the vigor with which they identified with the Huxtables. In fact, they say “working class respondents were just as likely to relate the Huxtable’s world to their own as middle or upper middle class respondents” (p. 24). Recognizing the world that the Huxtables lived in and one that they could draw references to their own lives with regard to culture, parenting styles, etc. was meaningful to audiences. Indeed, *Run's House* viewers indicated in their messages that they too discovered a world they recognized and identified with in the wealthy Simmons.’ Likewise, *Father Hood*’s light treatment of real-life struggles and references to working class prompted viewers to comment on *Father Hood* Message boards that that Snoop “keeps it real” and, regardless of mobility and access, is inextricably linked to his “hood.” Thus I advance the argument that despite any issues of race and class, the perception that was overriding in *Enlightened Racism* works here as well: that the Simmons’ from *Run's House* and the Broadus’ from *Father Hood* are—to some extent—”just like a real family” (p. 24) to their viewers who indicate a strong identification with the wealthy families.

**Methodological Framework**

In interrogating themes of fatherhood and, by extension, family in *Cosby, Run’s House,* and *Father Hood,* I describe myself much like Ang (1985) as both an avid viewer of all three shows and as a researcher. In much the same way that Fiske (1994) studied himself as “fan,” I assert that my own recognition of common themes among the shows contributed to the methodology for this article. While I own seasons 1–4 of *The Cosby Show* (1984–1988) and revisited many of the episodes for the purpose of this analysis, I also referred to the episode guides that detail all 201 episodes of the show at MTV.com. I have watched every episode of all four seasons of *Run's House* (even viewing many of the episodes more than once during MTV marathons of the show). Finally, I have twice-viewed each of current nine episodes in Season I of *Father Hood.* Though my viewing of all three shows began in my home strictly for entertainment, I later began to study them for scholarly purposes.

As aforesaid, while watching each of the shows, I wrote down themes that were apparent in all three. These included parenting style, type of family (nuclear, extended), professional status, economic issues, experiences with racism, interaction with famous people, and neighborhood demographics. I also taped the first two seasons of *Run's House* during a marathon and I taped *Father Hood* for nine weeks so that I could stop and start the shows at will to examine the dialogue more closely alongside my own copies of *Cosby.*

In addition to acknowledging my own perception as methodology, I also have analyzed online texts from “Run’s House Official Blog” on the MTV Web site and from E! Channel’s Message Board for *Father Hood,* from both of which I directly
I visited “Run’s House Official Blog” on February 9 and read all messages posted for Season 4. I visited E! Channel’s Message Board for Father Hood on February 20 for the first time, then visited three times later and read messages from viewers. Finally, I utilize direct dialogue from all three shows in my analysis.

Critical Analysis: Themes of Black Fatherhood

As a means to offer a critical analysis of emergent themes of televisual Black fatherhood and Black family life, three particular points of analysis emerged: (a) Black fathers as present in the home, (b) Black fathers’ disciplinary styles, and (c) Black fathers as positive role models.

Black Fathers As Present in the Home

Budd and Steinman (1992) suggest that Cosby was reactionary in that the patriarch’s role on the show “can be seen as an attempt to remediate White stereotypes of absent African American fathers . . .” (para. 30). On the show, Cosby’s Dr. Cliff Huxtable portrays a successful gynecologist. Yet the fast-paced, on-call lifestyle of a medical doctor does not impact his frequent on-screen presence during the show. There are minor glimpses of him working in his basement office, but for the most part, he is much more consumed with solving family issues than delivering babies.

Run’s House. As a member of Run.DMC, Joseph Simmons (Rev. Run) can be typecast as the stereotypical, high-living, gangster baller that characterizes other rap artists. Quinn (1996) says that Run.DMC’s success in remaking Aerosmith’s song “Walk this Way,” was “in effect” responsible for “opening the doors, as well as the charts, to rap and hip-hop” and “giving Run-D.M.C access to (White) rock stations and then notoriously White MTV” (p. 67). Yet in Run’s House Simmons is more modest than one might expect from a celebrated rap artist.

As a Black father, Simmons has an immense presence in his suburban New Jersey mansion and is obviously the household principal. Both Simmons and Cosby portray very successful fathers who, as a result of their achievement can be “mostly housebound.” That is, the male is “so successful in his job that he gets to hang around the house—a lot” (Braxton, 2001, p. E-01). Clearly, Simmons’ success in the entertainment industry has made it possible for him to dictate his own schedule, which translates into significant home time on his family show. And, like the patriarch on Cosby, Joseph Simmons is never seen performing the duties of an ordained minister though he talks about faith and religion in his home and displays religious commentary on his automobile.

Continuing a theme seen on Cosby, at home the Simmons’ entertain their share of famous friends. In the same manner that the Huxtables socialized with Lena Horne, Stevie Wonder, and Dizzy Gillespie, the audience gets a chance to look in on Simmons’ interaction with his friends. Artists Kid Rock, JaRule, Bow Wow and Omarion lead a procession of prominent friends of the Simmons family. The
Simmons’ famous friends fall into a certain demographic on MTV suggesting that their appearance on the show is designed to appeal to a certain demographic. Time Warner Cable (n.d.) cites that MTV “owns the young adult demographic” that includes ages 12–34. This demographic would more likely identify with seeing the Simmons’ hip-hop artist friends who represent the current royalty in celebrity just as Lena Horne did in the 1980s for *Cosby*. Though their visits to *Run’s House* appear to be random, their presence in fact manipulates a public relations boon for their careers.

In further interrogating Black fatherhood, the prevailing attitude is that Black males are in peril, which directly impacts Black fatherhood. The Census Bureau revealed in 2005 that Black households headed by mothers outnumber those headed by both parents or fathers. Psychologist Alvin Poussaint says that “You go into whole neighborhoods and there are no fathers there” (as cited in Herbert, 2007, para. 18). Meanwhile Herbert (2007) says it’s important to reconnect “Black fathers to their children” (para. 17). Joseph Simmons heeds the call to Black fathers to reconnect with their children, validating the role of the Black father being active in the home much in the manner that *Cosby* was known for doing. And, Simmons’ version of Black fatherhood bears some similarities and contrast to that portrayed in *Father Hood*.

*Snoop Dogg’s Father Hood*. Like Cliff Huxtable in *Cosby* and Joseph Simmons in *Run’s House*, Snoop Dogg is not only present in the home, but he also has the economic wherewithal to determine his own schedule. Though seen traveling to Germany and to the east coast from the west coast to perform or make a guest appearance on a talk show, it is in the Broadus home with his wife Shante (“Boss Lady”), “honorary” son Anthony, sons Corde’ (“Spank”) and Cordell (“Rook”), and daughter Cori (“Choc”) where we most see him interacting as a Black father. Far from the thriftiness of the fictional Huxtables or the understated wealth of the Simmons family, bedroom slippers worth thousands of dollars (and subsequently sold to bail out his sons from a parking ticket) and an on-grounds retreat featuring video games define the comfort Snoop basks in at home. Following the theme of its predecessor families, they also show off their famous friends including singer Keyshia Coles. Soccer great David Beckham appears in an episode where Snoop arranges a soccer lesson to expose his children to the sport. A *Father Hood* viewer commented about Snoop’s presence on the show: “Love Snoop Dogg’s Father Hood . . . Love it when Snoop and Snoops kids, play soccer with David Beckham. Thanks for being there for your kids Snoop. Thanks for not being an absentee Father!”

Some individuals, like the one quoted below, spoke even more specifically about Snoop’s presence as a father:

*Snoop* I think that you are a great father . . . and even though you had some rough times in the past and you have a music career you still find time for your children and that is all good.

Dates and Stroman (2001) assert that minority families are typically not portrayed accurately by media, given that the layers of representation simply cannot be hosted
by electronic media. Instead, media takes a stereotypical approach to delivering portrayals of minority families. Reality shows like *Run's House* and *Father Hood* help to present another view of Black families and Black fathers within the context of their own “real” homes. There are great similarities in the presence of the father in the home in the two reality shows compared with *Cosby*. All three fathers enjoy profitable careers confirming Jhally and Lewis’ (1992) assumption that “Black TV characters tend to occupy positions at the higher end of the social scale” (p. 59). The fruits of their labor are more likely portrayed on screen rather than the work itself. While there are instances where Snoop appears at a promotional event for his work or spends time in the studio, the work itself is less visible in the series. Instead we have the benefit of seeing a Black father spending a tremendous amount of time at home connecting with his children.

**Black Fathers’ Disciplinary Styles**

Budd and Steinman (1992) called Cosby’s character in the show “the perfect TV dad” (para. 24) and say “he shows parents how to have a touch that is firm but light, how to discipline with humor . . .” (para. 24). Indeed, Cosby does not discipline with a firm hand, but the action of discipline is not lost altogether in the show. Issues of body piercing (Son Theo contracts an infection after a nonprofessional ear piercing in Season I; Episode 14), and adolescence (Youngest daughter Rudy doesn’t want to go to school because she is less physically developed than her peers in Season 7: Episode 151), are all addressed by the father. Additionally, he deals with underage drinking by daughter Vanessa (Season 6; Episode 127) by tricking her into a humorous drinking game and then resisting her attempts to get medical relief for her hangover.

Malone-Colon and Roberts (2006) contend that “African American fathers who are married and living with their children are much more financially and emotionally supportive, and spend more time socializing their children (setting limits, disciplining, helping the child with personal problems)” (p. 2). While *Cosby’s* Cliff Huxtable deals in a lighter hand toward discipline, his wife Claire tends to refute Malone-Colon and Roberts’ assessment that mothers are more “nurturing” in their disciplinary and parenting styles (p. 4). On more occasions than one, Claire is the more vocal disciplinarian. She addresses curfew violations by her children, their dating habits, and even “disciplines” her husband on his less than stellar eating habits, prompting audiences in the Jhally and Lewis (1992) study to describe Cliff as showing “restraint” and Claire as having “attitude” (p. 52). The same theme—with some subtle differences—of passive patriarchal disciplinarian and fiery matriarchal disciplinarian is evident in the two reality shows.

*Run’s House*. In *Run’s House*, the theme of Black father as disciplinarian is well demonstrated in the episode where Russy has issues of anger management. Malone-Colon and Roberts (2006) conclude that “fathers tend to have a unique style of disciplining their children . . . (and) are more likely to use strict and demanding parenting behaviors when dealing with boys” (p. 2). This hypothesis is refuted in
Season 2, Episode 9 of Run’s House appropriately titled “Anger Management.” During the course of the show, Russy takes out his frustrations on expensive hand-held video games which he destroys and expects to be replaced by his parents. Instead they determine that professional consultation is necessary. Later, at the behest of the therapist, much like Cosby’s light hand, the strictest that Rev. Run gets is when he enrolls Russy in karate lessons to assist him in channeling his anger toward productivity and focus. However, Simmons’ discipline style is considered to be positive. Collier (2006) explains:

> Family discussions are a constant in the Simmons household. They can often be found all sitting around the sofa discussing such things as Russy’s anger issues or how to resolve conflict. What fans see, in spite of some arguing and debating, is a very close-knit and respectful family. (para. 10)

Such family discussions, where children and adults were provided equal time to articulate their ideas, were thematic of Cosby. Different from Cosby, however, Rev. Run utilizes some time at the conclusion of each episode to provide the viewing audience with a covert important life lesson. For example, reflecting on Russy’s problem with anger management, Rev. Run journals the following text on his Blackberry messaging device (while his voice-over verbalizes the message for the audience):

> How do you channel your personal strength? In putting forth the effort that our daily life requires, energy plus optimism equals progress, while energy plus anger results only in frustration. Do the math and you’ll soon add up the difference between what’s work and what’s whack. God is love.—Rev Run

Comments on Run’s House Official Blog indicate that viewers identify with the discipline displayed on the show and with the message that concludes the episodes. Without exception, the response was overwhelmingly positive. One person wrote: “... Rev Run. (is) never afraid to discipline and be a parent, but always loving and fun” while another said “... Love the way they all get along and seem to talk through issues as they come up.” Still another person wrote “This show should be required viewing for each and every family in this country. Ironically enough a show on MTV that is promoting family values.” Others lauded the reality show for featuring a Black family “with people that don’t act up.” In this regard, some viewers described the Simmons as an ideal family, like the person who shared: “I love this family so much ... I hope I can have a family that’s something like theirs ... The parents don’t let their kids take anything for granted.” Some viewers pointed to the positive nature of Run’s House, despite not being a fan of the reality television genre as a whole: “I am not a fan of reality shows ... but this is one ... (that) shows the family in the “FOR REAL” state ... The greatest thing about this show is that each week, there is a learning lesson behind each episode.”

When it comes to mothers’ disciplinary style on the show, Simmons’ wife Justine, similar to Claire Huxtable, is the less easygoing disciplinarian in the household. She encourages her husband not to replace the expensive computer games that fall prey to Russy’s anger issues, insists that the two youngest children complete their schoolwork
before playing video games with their father, and enlists an etiquette coach to teach her children better manners. She disciplines Rev. Run as well, admonishing him for playing games with the two younger boys instead of checking to their homework. In this way, Justine is a firmer household authority than her husband, who, though effective, seems to seek friendship with his children rather than establish his role as authoritarian.

Despite the style of discipline, family issues are all dealt with under the watchful eye of the Simmons father. Simmons’ discipline as a father can be directly tied to the advancement of his children. Daughters Angela and Vanessa enjoy a lucrative women’s athletic shoe and fashion business and serve as role models/spokespersons for the Girl Scouts of America. Meanwhile, oldest son Jo Jo is preparing for his own music career while youngest sons Diggy and Russy are achieving in school. All of these accomplishments are situated within a strong foundation of family support and encouragement.

_Snoop Dogg’s Father Hood._ In the episode titled “Dogg Whisperer,” Snoop complains that the family’s more than 10 dogs have too much freedom in their home. In another episode he laments that the house is disheveled. Yet the first line of the show’s theme song ("I don’t make my kids eat their vegetables") provides the sense that Snoop is not a strict disciplinarian on any level. In fact he frequently refers to his sons and others as “nigger” and uses profanity often as a matter of course. When Snoop complains that his home is untidy, the children do not react. Likewise, when their dogs run amok in the household, it is their father who hires a dog trainer to teach the dogs obedience. In comparing _Father Hood_ to _Run’s House_, one _Father Hood_ viewer wrote: “They need to spend the day at Run’s House. Please . . . drop this show. They can keep their business and nasty house to themselves . . . He needs to control his kids.” Clearly this viewer sees a sense of order in the Simmons’ household that is not visible in the Broadus.’

In another episode “Rook,” rough-housing with friends, gets hit in the eye. Snoop, who had earlier cursed the kids and asked them to stop the rough activity, laughs and tells his son “You got to be able to take a blow if you can give a blow, cuz.” Despite resistance from his wife, who coddles her injured son and demands that her husband stop chiding the boy, Snoop continues to laugh and tease rather than use the incident as a forum to display disciplinary action and teach a lesson to the children involved.

The E! Channel description of the show featuring Beckham says “Snoop Dogg wants his kids to play soccer but they won’t practice . . . .” reflecting that, at times, he has failed as an authoritarian. In another incident, Snoop implores “Spank” to help him stop “Rook” from stealing money out of his pockets in his absence. On the other hand, the episode guides—and Snoop himself—brag about “Rook’s” infatuation with money sending a mixed message. Finally, Snoop’s style of discipline is actually highlighted in advertisements for the show. The promotional photo advertising _Father Hood_ features the Broadus family presumably at a dinner table loaded with fried chicken, corn bread, and waffles, even as three pet dogs stand atop the table.
Snoop’s “honorary” son Anthony fares no better in the discipline arena, often behaving like a big kid himself. In two episodes where Snoop’s sons were left alone in Anthony’s care, they were cited by law enforcement and had their car towed for illegal parking, prompting them to sell Snoop’s $5,000 bedroom slippers for $500 to bribe their way out of the charge. In another episode, he collaborates with the Broadus brothers to have a pizza party in their parents’ absence. One Father Hood viewer wrote:

I think “honorary son” . . . is a terrible adult to have around any children. I saw the episode where Snoop left “honorary son” in charge of his 2 boys. He covered for Snoop’s son taking money . . . He participated in taking the Porsche without permission. The worst thing was lying to Snoop (in front of his sons) . . . He helped Snoop’s sons to deceive their father. “Honorary Son” is nothing but a sorry oversized child. Snoop and his wife should never allow this man to ever be alone with their children.

Martel (2007) describes Snoop as “barely (rising) to the responsibility of fatherhood” (para. 1), and Johnson (2007) quotes the rapper as saying he “likes to be more of a friend than a father figure” (para. 6), both comments being oppositional to the order found in Cosby and Run’s House.

In the same manner of the wives on Cosby and Run’s House, Snoop’s wife Shante’ is seen as the primary disciplinarian on the show. Even Snoop calls her “Boss Lady.” Gamble (2007) says that while Snoop “may run things in his hip-hop career . . . at home, being the ‘top dogg’ is another story” (para. 1). He continues describing Shante as an authority in the Broadus household by saying: “his wife and high school sweetheart Shanté, a.k.a. Boss Lady, runs the show” (para. 2). Indeed she does, as in several episodes she not only disciplines the kids but firmly regulates her husband as well. For instance, in the episode titled the “Doggs and the Bees,” Shante’ tells Snoop to have a talk about sex and intimacy with his oldest son, which he does with little seriousness. This comes on the heels of Snoop’s production of a video for his new sex-laden single “Sensual Seduction.” Yet what cannot be dismissed about this episode is that a real-life issue is being discussed by father and son. Issues of sex were not as prominent in either Cosby or Run's House.

Black Fathers as Positive Role Models

Malone-Colon and Roberts (2006) reveal that functional Black fathers garner a firm respect from their children and are seen as positive role models. Their interactions with their children, conversation, and authority promote social competence and prepare their children to be active, viable citizens. In this regard, Black fathers serve as important role models for their children. Inside and outside of media, Bill Cosby is known for his expertise as a father. As the author of books dealing with fatherhood and on-stage entertainment segments about parenting, he is without doubt one of the quintessential fathers of our time. On Cosby, Cliff Huxtable’s emphasis on education, and his own achievement as a medical doctor, place him in a position of influence in what Jhally and Lewis (1992) call “demonstrating the opportunity for African
Americans to be successful” (p. 94). Miller (as cited in Jhally & Lewis) describes Cosby and his alter ego Dr. Huxtable as verification of the access of the American Dream. Similar themes are evident in Run’s House and Father Hood.

Run’s House. Virtues of hard work and pulling one’s self up by their own bootstraps are rampant in Run’s House. Joseph Simmons parleys humility and values to his children. Again, comparisons can be tied to Cosby. For example, like Cosby where the patriarch, a medical doctor, insisted that he and his wife, an attorney were “rich” and that his children had no wealth, Simmons implores his children to make their own living.

Further, Simmons very real depiction of religious values closely aligns with those of “real” Black families. According to Pipes (1981), “preaching and churches have traditionally been a mainstay of Black families” (p. 54). As a Black father embracing religion, a key tenet of African American culture, Simmons proves the real existence of religion in a Black household in a way that Cosby did not. Simmons insists that religion and respect are staples of his household, whether the cameras are on or off (Collier, 2006). In other words, as a Black father, Simmons shows television religious reflection in a family even if we never see him in official reverend capacity—something not previously seen, even on Cosby, where religion was never a matter of explicit discourse.

Like Cosby, Simmons seeks the ear of his wife to recollect family issues as they settle into bed for the night. Yet, a trip to a tattoo parlor with daughter Angela, a golf/spa outing with son JoJo, or a family vacation to Las Vegas so that the Simmons parents can renew their wedding vows all simmer down to a ritual closing scene where the patriarch Simmons, amid a cozy bubble bath, emits lessons of the day via his electronic Blackberry. This “ownership” of the parental lesson of the day outside the influence of his wife is the lasting impression at the close of each show.

As a Black father, Simmons seeks out his children to give judicious advice and coach them through obstacles they encounter. While Snoop Dogg may not achieve the same results in a fantasyland TV manner, he does make an attempt at being a role model for his children as well.

Snoop Dogg’s Father Hood. Perhaps the greatest commentary on not only Snoop Dogg’s being a positive example for his children but also his relationship to Black working class comes in the episode where he visits the Long Beach neighborhood where he grew up. This episode reflects an important point of distinction in that such representations of social mobility are never explicit with Cosby or Run’s House. In the episode which aired February 2008, Snoop takes his two young sons to the neighborhood where he was raised and socialized. During the episode he is pensive about his upbringing, admitting that his mother could not teach him what it meant to be a man. He talks about growing up without a father and how that fact motivates him to have a presence in his own sons’ lives. Highlights of the boys’ visit included a walk through Snoop’s old high school and a conversation with his former teacher. The teacher implores them to get a good education and Snoop laments that he wishes he had been more diligent as a student. One viewer said “The episode that had any
substance and positive influence was when Snoop took his children to Long Beach and left them alone with the principal [teacher]). Still another viewer stated that they enjoyed “the episode where Snoop speaks about how he came up without a father and how that pushes him to be a good father and how the public don’t get to hear about these situations. [S]o from all us responsible fathers especially us single ones thanks.” During the episode, Snoop impressed upon his sons that they needed to understand where he came from to be able to better grasp where he is, admitting that his upbringing is not reflective of the current success he enjoys. While visiting Long Beach, the boys meet Snoop’s uncle, a recovering crack cocaine addict who advises them to stay away from drugs, but not before detailing the harsh realities of a drug addict’s existence including lying, stealing, and sexual acts to gain a fix. This lifestyle is certainly remote from the comfortable lifestyle the Broadus brothers enjoy as a result of their father’s achievements in entertainment. And this conversation is like none ever seen on Cosby or Run’s House. One viewer noted the show’s value as an authentic representation of Black life—Black life in Long Beach, California, specifically—which was something valued by viewers and commented on specifically on the Father Hood Message Board:

This show is hilarious . . . he’s definitely from “da LBC” . . . he even (has) a shack in the back like the (old) days . . . now if you don’t know then you wouldn’t understand . . . he’s original and . . . and he definitely ain’t front’n.

While Snoop’s forays into his old neighborhood were meant as a lesson for his sons, he still maintains his existence as a counter image to Cosby. For example, in contesting the image of the faultless Black father, during yoga class he daydreams that he’s lying flat on his mat as a result of a police officer’s mandate—reminiscent of his real-life brushes with the law. Later, he imagines that the mellow feeling he gets from yoga is really a result of being high. Still in another episode Snoop ignores “Choc’s” complaints that she can’t concentrate on her schoolwork because his music is playing too loudly.

Viewers have conflicting views on Snoop’s ability to be a positive influence as a father. One person criticized the decision to provide a venue for highlighting his behavior:

You have got to be kidding. Now they are giving a THUG like Snoop Dogg a TV show? . . . Now we have come down to watching absolute garbage on TV with watching self proclaimed thugs and gangsters like this idiot . . . Snoop Dogg is not a mainstream citizen and all the media are doing is helping a criminal . . . look legitimate and part of mainstream society . . . let’s stop glorifying these criminals and remember just because they are famous does not mean they should be admired.

Other viewers were quick to take issue with this viewer’s point of criticism. One questioned the problematic nature of the label “mainstream citizen,” while another pointed out that “it’s the MAINSTREAM WHITE media that has labeled Snoop as a gangster, thug, and criminal.” This issue was also addressed by others, such as the viewer who wrote:
when did Snoop ever state that he was a criminal or thug? . . . he professes to be . . . a father, husband, rapper, who hustles . . . and if you don't know what hustles means that is a slang word for he works hard to provide a LEGAL lifestyle for himself and family.

Other viewers make a comparison between Snoop’s ability as a positive role model and that of Ozzy Osbourne, another famous father and musician who also had his own family reality show on MTV for three years beginning in 2002:

If someone like Ozzy Osbourne can have a show . . . why on earth can’t Snoop Dogg? . . . I originally thought he was just a typical rapper jerk. But watching . . . Father Hood show has shown his “human” side . . . I may not agree with . . . his music, but I do commend him for how he cares and provides for his family.

Despite his laidback parenting style, most viewers have a positive reaction to Father Hood. Though Snoop raps in the opening song that he’s a nonconventional father, some of the same lessons of humility and success through education thematic of Cosby and Run’s House are also canons in the Broadus household.

Discussion: Reality TV and Enlightened Racism in the 21st Century

Given the void of scholarly examination of Black fathers on reality TV, the first expressed objective of this article was to critically analyze post-Cosby mass mediated constructions of Black fatherhood with a focus on two current reality TV programs: Run’s House and Father Hood. This analysis focused on three specific themes: (a) Black fathers as present in the home, (b) Black fathers’ disciplinary styles, and (c) Black fathers as positive role models. Through the explication of these themes, other points of commonality were exposed including how each of the families’ professional and material success was represented within a reality void of racial prejudice, discrimination, and/or racism. This section addresses the second objective of the article in that it utilizes these thematic insights to discuss the implications that reality-based constructions of successful African American fathers implicate, reinforce, or resist in the perpetuation of enlightened racism in the 21st century.

As the traditional roles and values of Black family life become increasingly dynamic, televiual constructions of Black fatherhood should reflect this reality. While Snoop’s style is described as a “benign older brother,” with gangster appeal (Martel, 2007, para. 8), Rev. Run is a more conventional father. This examination of Black fathers in reality television confirms, contradicts and challenges images of Black fathers that exist in our culture. Orbe (1998) asserts that the lens through which we view Black life is skewed: “Many critics have posited that the vast majority of African American media images represent portrayals of Black life as European Americans see it” (p. 33). Both Simmons and Snoop defy this view. Run’s House is coproduced by Simmons and Snoop’s own Snoopadelic Films coproduces his show on which he also serves as executive director. Therefore, both fathers have some degree of influence regarding their construction of Black fatherhood for reality TV. In other words, neither Run’s House nor Father Hood are restricted to outsider perceptions about the Black father and family, and both make their intentions clear about what they hope to
reveal through their shows. Run’s House and Father Hood feature “real” daily-life activity that is actually constructed just as Cosby was to respond to a limiting view of Black fatherhood and family. Simmons goal was to counter the negative stereotypes leveled at rappers and though Snoop’s goal was to deviate from Cosby, he rebuffs claims that he has “rebranded” himself as “family-friendly instead insisting that he always was (Forrest, 2008): “I am. That’s what I always been ... People ... always get information on me as far as when I go to jail and my criminal record ... Negative things ... They never hear about my football team, my wife, my kids, my standing in the community, the gang interventions that I do” (para. 26).

Central to this analysis is the argument that Run’s House and Father Hood work to extend the representations of successful Black fathers popularized through Cosby. The likelihood that these shows work to reinforce existing forms of enlightened racism is strong given three points. First, all three shows display professional and material success in environments void of any race-based obstacles. Two, the two reality sitcoms, viewed as more “real” than traditional sitcoms, lends credence to belief of the [raceless] American Dream. Third, reality TV—like The Cosby Show—has proven its ability to attract diverse audiences which increases opportunities for White exposure to Black fathers/families. While such a stance is important to articulate, this discussion works to avoid critical analyses that utilize a dichotomous approach—where the media generally, and reality TV specifically, is described in absolute terms. Instead, I advocate for more complex readings that interrogate the ways in which shows are both productive and unproductive, negative and positive, good and bad, and supportive yet resistant of enlightened racism. The remainder of the discussion is situated within this approach.

According to Jhally and Lewis (1992), the fact that White viewers of The Cosby Show thought of the Huxtables as unraced is not evidence that race was no longer an issue. On the contrary: their behaviors were seen as being able to transcend race as a mean to be defined as “normal.” In this context, viewers who described the family as “normal,” “generic,” and “average” were not using terms that were unraced; instead the terms were racially specific—the family was implicitly viewed as White. As such, Jhally and Lewis found that The Cosby Show represented different things to its White and Black audiences. For most Whites, Bill Huxtable was a Black father; for most Blacks, he was a Black father (Jhally & Lewis). Whites saw a middle-class family that could transcend race; Blacks saw a middle class Black family where positive images helped to counter negative media stereotypes.

Within the two reality TV shows analyzed here, interrogating the saliency of racial identity for Rev. Run and Snoop Dogg lends insight into the ways in which such upwardly mobile mass-mediated personalities can continue to centralize their presence as Black fathers. Both men represent “rap grown up”—albeit in diverse ways—an explicitly Black form of expression that situates their life experience in racialized ways. While this can assist in avoiding one of the building blocks of enlightened racism (i.e., race is no longer relevant), the fact that African American achievement of the American Dream is possible only through limited venues (e.g., rap music or sports) contributes to problematic existing stereotypes.
According to Kobena Mercer (1992), African American creators/producers of shows that represent Black life are oftentimes confronted with two opposing forces: (1) the need to present positive images to counter historical representations that reinforced negative stereotypes, and (2) the desire to “keep it real” which inevitably includes both positive and negative aspects of the African American experience (Cornwell & Orbe, 2002). Negotiating this tension is the commonly accepted belief that African American shows that feature content about prejudice, discrimination, and racism is counterproductive because it alienates substantial sections of the viewing audience who would struggle with identifying with such issues and/or be uncomfortable in being forced to see their own role in these social ills. Given this context, it stands to reason that shows featuring Black fathers/families are likely to focus on success; however, the invisibility of how the realities of race must be confronted in order to obtain professional and material success must be contested. If nothing else, one could argue that introducing such obstacles into established storylines would enhance the attractiveness of the show—especially when racial barriers, in the end, are successfully overcome. While superficial treatment of such issues may further perpetuate beliefs that racism is easily overcome, it could also help to draw attention to continual forms of race-based oppression.

One of the core elements of enlightened racism is acceptance of the desirability and accessibility of the American Dream. While each of the Black fathers/families analyzed within this essay reflect “American success stories,” how they live out their successes differs in significant ways. In Father Hood, for example, Snoop introduces how his past served as a challenge—but not a permanent barrier—for his success as a rap artist (he was cleared of a gang-related murder charge in 1993; his uncle continues to struggle with drug addiction). Interestingly, his race-, class-based struggle lends “street credibility” to his music, something that is also reflected in the ways in which he continues to live his life (e.g., “keepin’ it real” by not losing his cultural edge). I would suggest that Father Hood, within this context, reinforces the accessibility of the American Dream while simultaneously challenges its desirability.

The myth of the American Dream rests within the assumption of equal opportunity; what is left uninterrogated within this belief is how opportunity is largely negotiated through socioeconomic status. According to Jhally and Lewis (1992), there are at least three ways in which socioeconomic status works to enhance or limit life opportunities. Interestingly, each of these seem to be a central feature of Run’s House. The first element involves the intergenerational transmission of wealth, and the second focuses on parent-child transmission for the capacity to command income. Both of these are evident within the multimillionaire dollar family of businesses instituted by Russell and Joseph Simmons, and continued with the next generation of entrepreneurs who are seen working to establish themselves in music, publishing, fashion, footwear, and jewelry. The third source of inequality of opportunity goes beyond educational achievements to include family training that passes along ways of thinking/behaving that allow individuals to participate in various professional environments (e.g., cultural capital). Reflecting this, the Simmons children are seen getting specific instructions from their father (and uncle)
on how to participate in, and subsequently influence, various business dealings. Therefore, while both Rev. Run and Snoop Dogg’s social mobility are situated within their celebrity status as rap artists, living the “American Dream” is distinctly different. Snoop, as a successful Black father, refuses to leave behind his cultural upbringing despite professional and material success. Rev. Run, in comparison, embraces his identity as a successful Black father and utilizes that success to facilitate intergenerational wealth. In this vein, both represent diverse ways of “rap all grown up”—which can serve the function of role model albeit in different expressions of success.

In closing, this essay looks to contribute to historical debates on race, class and audience responses to Black television families. If Cosby is the quintessential Black family television show, what new observations and characteristics of Black fathers, Black mothers and their families loom post-Cosby? How are such constructions situated within shows that span the continuum of fictional and reality-based depictions of Black life? For starters, I argue that Run’s House and Father Hood succeed at providing a post-Cosby televisual look at Black fathers and families in US society while revealing further angles with which to discuss issues of race, class and viewer identification with these shows. The “safer” show, Run’s House, demonstrates template-like similarities to Cosby; while Father Hood further drives behind the scenes to show the audience working class realities consistent with Snoop’s intentional opposition to Cosby’s reality. Run’s House and Father Hood are valuable in the movement against continual stereotypes about Black fathers and families picking up the torch from Cosby and bringing much-needed visibility to alternative constructions of Black fatherhood/family. Jhally and Lewis (1992) suggest that “we learn to live in the dreams sold by network executives” (p. 133). Reality-based TV represents a genre that has opened the possibilities of diverse representations of Blackness—especially on cable networks that are more likely to assume the risk of less conventional programming. Within this expansion lies the potential to negotiate how diverse audiences embrace, negate, and adapt to living various forms of the American Dream.

Notes

[1] The blurring and blending between the lives of Bill Cosby and Cliff Huxtable is well documented by the Jhally and Lewis study. As one viewer aptly stated, “I like Bill Huxtable” (p. 27).

[2] Throughout all three shows, each wife attempts to monitor the eating habits of their husbands; in strangely similar ways, they also aggressively force their husbands to see doctors regarding health issues—something that each husband has avoided.

[3] This point does not discount African Americans who also embrace enlightened racism. Such individuals were not explicitly evident within the work of Jhally and Lewis (1992), however, I would argue that they are increasingly prevalent in contemporary US society. Ironically, Bill Cosby’s recent criticism of African Americans participating within their own oppression, reflects elements of an enlightened racist ideology (“Dr. Bill Cosby speaks at the 50th Anniversary Commemoration of Brown vs. Topeka Board of Education Supreme Court Decision, n.d.).

[4] Interestingly, while authoring this essay, a third reality sitcom featuring a Black father/family appeared on the Oxygen Channel: Deion & Pilar: Prime Time Love. This show features a
window into the world of professional football celebrity Deion Saunders, his wife Pilar, and their five children.

References


