Good times in race relations? CBS's *Good Times* and the legacy of civil rights in 1970s prime-time television

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On 1 February 1974, a new black situation comedy joined CBS's prime-time line-up. *Good Times* (tx 1974–79) was not the first television series to portray an African–American family. It was not even the first series set in the poverty-stricken American inner city. It was, however, the first attempt to represent a black family with the father present. Springing from producer Norman Lear's hugely successful stable of mid 1970s hits and spin-offs, *Good Times* shared with its prime-time siblings *All in the Family* (CBS, tx 1971–79) and *Maude* (CBS, tx 1972–78) a concern with socially relevant subject matter that transcended traditional sitcom fare. Because of its approach to questions of representation and its attempt to address social and political issues related to black poverty and racism, *Good Times* quickly developed into an important site of contestation and struggle over questions of 'blackness', the black family, 'authenticity', and black-versus-white control in the immediate aftermath of the civil rights movement. Was *Good Times* a victory for African–Americans in the struggle for 'positive images' or was it a particularly galling defeat – or both? What did it mean for post-civil rights race politics that the series provided viewers with the first black family with a strong male patriarch? What did it mean that they were poor and that the Chicago projects setting was an important aspect of the production? This essay will examine the frequently heated and very public debates about the image politics of *Good Times* as they circulated in both the mainstream press and the African–American press, as well as how fans of the show

participated in these debates. I shall also examine the textual mechanisms employed by the show, exploring the particular uses of popular polysemy in the show's strategy to pursue divisive or difficult subject matter, yet also to undercut that material. In order to understand how and why *Good Times* operated as it did, we need to see the series in dialogue with a long history of concerns about African–American representations on US television, especially in the wake of the civil rights movement. We need to resituate the show in its production and reception context. We also need to interrogate the trope of 'authenticity' that bedeviled this example of media culture as it did most representations of blackness in the wake of the black freedom movements of the 1960s.

As a comedy and as an example of media culture reaching a diverse audience, the show worked gingerly to negotiate its representations in order to circulate empowering messages about African–Americans while not unduly discomforting more conservative white viewers. In the following section, I shall explore in depth one particular episode that provides an instructive example of both the possibilities of prime-time programming as a venue for pursuing genuinely progressive racial politics, as well as the inevitable limitations on popular culture providing anything but the most compromised and defused images of such politics.

'Bussing ain't nothing but a bunch of honky four-wheel jive': negotiating the bussing crisis in prime time

On 12 September 1974, the first day of school for the Boston public school system, yellow buses rolled out from the black ghetto, Roxbury, ferrying poor black students to white, working-class South Boston in order to integrate the stubbornly segregated schools of the 'cradle of liberty'. According to the court order handed down over the summer, students, both black and white, were to be forcibly bussed all over the city in order to comply with the now twenty-year-old Brown v. Topeka Board of Education Supreme Court ruling mandating school integration 'with all deliberate speed'. As one bus drove to 'Southie's' previously all-white high school, the twenty black riders were greeted with signs reading 'Niggers Go Home', then with thrown bottles, and with young whites yelling, 'Die, niggers, die!' Masses of police had to intervene to protect the schoolchildren. Thus began the violent and ugly Boston bussing crisis.[1]

Three weeks later on 1 October, *Good Times*, into its second season and a top-ten-rated series, just happened to have ten-year-old Michael Evans, the academically talented and politically militant youngest son of the Evans family, grapple with the bussing dilemma.[2] The timing was probably coincidental, the final draft script having been written in July.[3] School desegregation in the north was increasingly a focal point of civil rights attention, but certainly the producers of *Good Times*

1 George R. Metcalf, *From Little Rock to Boston: the History of School Desegregation* (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 1983), p. 206.

2 *Good Times*' yearly Nielsen ranking for September 1974–75 was seventh, with a 25.8 share of audiences. See Tim Brooks and Earle Marsh, *The Complete Directory to Prime Time Network TV Shows 1946-Present* (New York, NY: Ballantine, 1981), p. 929.

3 See Allan Manings Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming, final draft script, 'Crosstown Buses Run All Day', by John Baskin and Roger Shulman, dated 24 July 1974, Box 6.

could not have imagined that their episode would coincide with news imagery of yellow school buses surrounded by hordes of angry whites. Wittingly or not, the show found itself in direct dialogue with a raging, anguished, convulsive crisis in urban, northern American race relations at the close of the civil rights era.

After establishing that the schools in the Evans family's ghetto neighbourhood are the worst in the city: 'Our hardest math problem was how to divide forty students into twenty books', Michael is given the opportunity to be *voluntarily* bussed to one of the city's best schools in an upscale white area (figure 1). The narrative emphasizes a number of times that this particular bussing scheme is not forced. In the controversy that convulsed Boston, as well as other school districts, the mandatory aspect of the situation served as one of the key flashpoints of anger for whites. The bussing controversy also revealed the limits of white Americans' (especially northern white Americans') tolerance for desegregation. In arenas of casual contact like restaurants and waiting rooms, integration was acceptable, but in more intimate surroundings such as housing and schooling the situation was quite different. As John Lewis, former head of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), one of the most important organizations of the civil rights movement, observed in 1974: 'When it got to hard things, and when the problem started to touch the north, the whites turned around'.[4] By emphasizing the voluntary nature of bussing, the *Good Times* episode skirts the more painful dilemma of the need for mandatory programmes to counter deeply entrenched patterns of racial segregation – whether in the south or the north. White viewers watching the episode would be more likely to feel good about their racial magnanimity if they could imagine themselves voluntarily

4 Quoted in Peter N. Carroll, *It Seemed Like Nothing Happened: the Tragedy and Promise of America in the 1970s* (New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1982), p. 110.

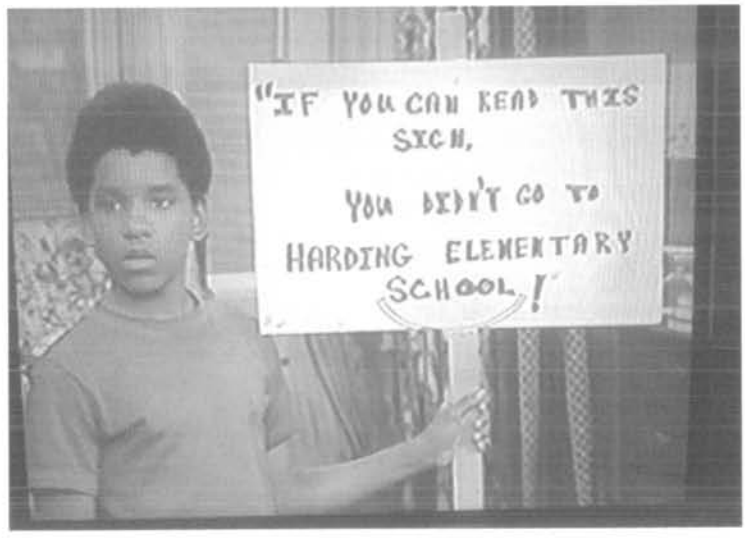

Figure 1

welcoming little Michael into their schools rather than having Michael thrust upon them.

Although the vast majority of opposition to bussing came from whites, in the episode it is Michael who speaks out against bussing. If it is a voluntary programme – he does not volunteer! This strategy also neatly deflects attention away from the implications of white communities' opposition to bussing and what that suggests about the possibilities of true integration in the urban north in 1974. The episode defuses that particular theme in an almost over-determined way, by insisting on Michael's refusal to go along with the programme. From the series' first episode, Michael was established as the family's 'militant midget', mouthing Black Power sentiments that might be too threatening coming from an adult male character. Michael pens slogans such as 'Bussing ain't nothing but a bunch of honky four-wheel jive' and 'Black ain't beautiful on a yellow bus', which are played out solely for laughs rather than serving as serious afrocentric critiques of school integration (figure 2).

Nevertheless, despite these strategies to temper and lighten the threat associated with portraying the bussing controversy, the episode, in a number of scenes played in a more serious tone, grapples forthrightly with the need for bussing. In one scene, Michael and parents Florida and James argue the politics of bussing. The scene is noteworthy for the absence of JJ, the skinny, rubber-faced, clownish teen who typically functioned to goose up the laughs and divert attention from more thought-provoking themes. As I shall show, the phenomenal popularity of this character served as a major flashpoint of controversy over the politics of 'good role models' and 'authenticity'. With JJ absent, the scene provides viewers with a few minutes to reflect meaningfully

Figure 2

about the issue and its social context, with only a minimum of humour that arises directly from the situation. Standing between Florida and James, who tell him it would be a shame to waste his talent in a bad school, Michael, asserting a Black Power stance, proclaims, 'If God gave me talent, it was meant to be used in my own neighbourhood with my own people!' He goes on to assert, 'Mama, bussing is just a way of buying us off', and to ask James why he supports bussing (figure 3).

Michael: You were never bussed.
James: Yes, I was, too. When I was a kid in Mississippi, I was bussed – by foot. Passed three beautiful white schools to one crummy black one.

James's dialogue here is significant for a number of reasons. Firstly, throughout the series James's lack of education (he never went beyond the sixth grade) is made narratively significant. Always striving to find better work to raise his family out of poverty, James is often shown to be crippled by his lack of education. His dialogue here links his lack of opportunity to the history of Jim Crow schooling and contextualizes bussing to this history. His words are also significant in that they indict white power and privilege. Throughout the episode characters point to racism and white power as oppressive agents against which they must struggle. The school district to which Michael will be bussed is nicknamed the 'detergent district' by Florida, who quips, 'Everything there is whiter than white'. Responding to sister Thelma's comment that she's never heard of any racial trouble there, JJ responds, 'That's 'cause they ain't got no racials there. Only colour problem they have there is matching the carpet to the drapes.' The most significant indictment of white racism, however, is again given to James, whose stance throughout the show is privileged and typically provides viewers

Figure 3

with the preferred reading. In response to Florida's and Thelma's sudden qualms about sending Michael so far away from home and separating him from his friends, James explodes: 'Y'all talking just like white people do about bussing. The only reason they talk that way is to cover up for the fact that they don't want to go to school with us.' Throughout this episode and numerous episodes throughout the run of the series, white people and white power are the Other against which the Evans family struggles. But unlike the case in previous black-oriented television series, such as *Julia* (NBC, tx 1968–71), this white Other is not merely a misguided, prejudiced individual;[5] in *Good Times* the Other is the white power structure.[6]

Inevitably, the show had to temper this material with straight comedy. While the bussing issue was the show's major theme, a significant proportion of its twenty-two minutes of screen time focused on matters that had nothing to do with material that was potentially uncomfortable for white viewers. In order to defuse the more serious subject matter, the episode sprinkled in generous helpings of JJ and Thelma each joking about how ugly and dumb the other was. But mostly the episode served up JJ doing comic routines and prancing about in red longjohns (figure 4). Viewers disinclined to grapple with the real-world issues of bussing never had to wait long for the episode to fall back on more familiar black comedy forms.

As we can see from this analysis of one early episode of *Good Times*, the series negotiated a minefield of dilemmas in dealing with racial politics, socially engaged subject matter versus traditional sitcom fare, and the problem of black representation. This latter is inextricably connected with a concern over 'authenticity', and the question of

Figure 4

5 See Aniko Bodroghkozy, 'Is this what you mean by color TV?' race, gender, and contested meanings in NBC's *Julia*', in Lynn Spigel and Denise Mann (eds), *Private Screenings: Television and the Female Consume* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), pp. 143–67.

6 In a scholarly article written about *Good Times* during its first year, Eugenia Collier contrasts *Good Times* with *Sanford and Son*, and argues that the latter gives no indication that the difficulties of the black characters have anything to do with racism or white power. In *Good Times*, however, 'the characters constantly do battle ... the struggle against oppression, which is so deeply human and so indigenous to black art, is never totally absent [from *Good Times*]'. See '"Black" shows for white viewers', *Freedomways: a Quarterly Review of the Freedom Movement*, vol. 14, no. 3 (1974), p. 214.

'authentic' black representation has historically been a central theme in popular discourse about the portrayal of blacks on US television. From fully assimilated 'white Negroes' of the 1960s like Bill Cosby in *I Spy* (NBC, tx 1965–68) to Diahann Carroll in *Julia*, through 1970s ghetto blacks in *Sanford and Son* (NBC, tx 1972–77) and *What's Happening!!* (ABC, tx 1976–79), to 1970s and 1980s upper-crust black professionals in *The Jeffersons* (CBS, tx 1975–85) and *The Cosby Show* (NBC, tx 1984–92), popular press critics and audience members have obsessively interrogated the degree to which these images were 'realistic'.

Both Herman Gray and Stuart Hall have questioned this preoccupation with 'authenticity' and the 'realistic'. Gray asserts, 'No longer can our analyses be burdened unnecessarily by the weight of an eternal search for either "authentic" media representations of "blackness" or accurate reflections of African American social and cultural life'.[7] Hall also problematizes the quest for an authentic black popular culture, arguing that black representations are dialogic and hybridized; black life and experience themselves are imbricated in representation. 'It's in how blacks represent and imagine themselves that they are constituted. "Real life" is not a test against which cultural strategies or texts can be measured.'[8] Calls for the 'authentic' smack of essentialism and also suggest a unitary and singular approach to blackness. But if black popular culture (if we can speak of such a thing) is a contradictory space, inevitably contaminated by previous representations that are themselves built on representations and are always in dialogue with generations of imagery produced in a racist environment, how can we interrogate more or less useful and empowering representations? Hall suggests a useful way to approach this endeavour:

> However deformed, incorporated and inauthentic are the forms in which black people and black communities and traditions appear and are represented in popular culture, we continue to see, in the figure and the repertoire on which popular culture draws, the experience that stands behind them ... black popular culture has enabled the surfacing, inside the mixed and contradictory modes even of mainstream popular culture, of elements of a discourse that is different other forms of life, other traditions of representations.[9]

7 Herman Gray, *Watching Race Television and the Struggle for Blackness* (Minneapolis, MN University of Minnesota Press, 1995), p. 3

8 Stuart Hall, 'What is this "black" in black popular culture?', in Gina Dent (ed.), *Black Popular Culture a Project by Michele Wallace* (Seattle, WA Bay Press, 1992), p. 30

9 Ibid. p. 27

Producing 'a discourse that is different'

As a family sitcom, one of network television's most familiar and longstanding genres, *Good Times* provides a useful example of how black experience and traditions are both incorporated by a genre and also change it. The sitcom was the product of two African–Americans, actor Mike Evans, best-known as Lionel Jefferson in Lear's *All in the Family*, and writer Eric Monte. In the show's early publicity, more attention was given to Evans and Monte than to Lear, executive

producer of the series. *Ebony*, the slick monthly magazine targeted at a middle-class black readership, promoted the two and proclaimed, 'The "soul" in *Good Times* is authentic'.[10] The black weekly *Jet* suggested the importance of Monte's lived experience. He was a 'bonified [sic] ex-hobo, cab driver, dish washer and tenant of Chicago's Cabrini-Green housing project. His name is no tip-off to his racial identity. "But you know good and well there's no way a white cat could survive Cabrini-Green", chuckles Monte.'[11] *Newsweek* suggested, 'There are many who will see racial stereotyping in "Good Times", but they won't be able to quibble with the ancestry of its creators'.[12]

This discourse of authenticity was in dialogue with discourses of inauthenticity that swirled around the previous (and first) high-profile black family sitcom *Julia*. That series was the well-publicized handiwork of veteran television writer–producer and white liberal, Hal Kanter. If *Julia* was a white man's vision of black family, then *Good Times* was a vision of black family by soul brothers. If *Julia* gave television viewers a fantasy 'white Negro', thoroughly and effortlessly integrated into white middle-class life, then *Good Times* countered by giving viewers a poor family struggling to survive in a largely segregated grimy housing project. Therefore, as the first US television series created by African–Americans, *Good Times* attempted to intervene in the history of black representations in popular culture and present something new, something presumably based on 'reality'.

The most significant way that the show's creators attempted to negotiate black representation was with the figure of James Evans, Sr. During development meetings with Lear's company, Monte was told over and over again to get rid of the father: 'A strong black man is not funny in a sitcom'.[13] Esther Rolle, for whom the series was created, adamantly refused to do the show if she did not have a strong husband for her character's three children. In the discourse circulated around the show, especially in the black press, this struggle by the show's black talent to insist on the presence of a black father, served as a counter to white hegemonic representations of a black family.

Herman Gray has argued:

> Television representations of blackness work largely to legitimate and secure the terms of the dominant cultural and social order by circulating within and remaining structured by them. . . . Just as often, however, there are alternative (and occasional oppositional) moments in American commercial television representations of race, especially in its fragmented and contradictory character. In some cases, television representations of blackness explode and reveal the deeply rooted terms of this hierarchy.[14]

In the early 1970s the dominant cultural image of the poor black family was that of a 'black matriarchy'. The term had been coined in the much-publicized 1965 Moynihan Report on the state of the black family. The federal government report argued that a 'tangle of

10 Bob Lucas, 'A "salt pork and collard greens" TV show', *Ebony*, June 1974, p. 51

11 Ronald E. Kisner, 'New comedy brings good times to TV', *Jet*, 23 May 1974, p. 58–60

12 Harry F. Waters, 'Good apples and bad', *Newsweek*, 25 February 1974, p. 67

13 Eric Monte interview, *The Making of Good Times* (E! Entertainment, 2000)

14 Gray, *Watching Race*, p. 10

pathologies' was to blame for the deterioration of black families, including overly independent and dominant women, drop-out and delinquent youth, and socially alienated black men who withdrew from family life.[15] Therefore female-headed households in the ghettos were deemed both the cause and the effect of perpetual cycles of poverty. By the early 1970s, this controversial report had become hegemonic common sense in social discourse about the problems of the ghetto, alleviating pressure on policymakers to address a problem that appeared to arise from blacks' own lifestyle choices. Thus in 1970 Daniel Patrick Moynihan, working for the Nixon Administration, advocated a policy of 'benign neglect'. Within this representational context, Monte's and Rolle's demand for a strong black patriarch functioned as a powerful oppositional strategy, and also countered popular cultural images of fatherless black families such as the Bakers in *Julia*.

In this strategy, Monte and Rolle were employing the politics of 'good role models', trying to use popular culture to circulate alternative representations of poor black families (figure 5). But this mobilization of 'good role models' had less to do with social reality and more to do with an oppositional politics of representation. *Julia* gave US viewers an anomalous middle-class family headed by a single (actually widowed) black mother and became a target for criticism by white liberals and many African–American critics. *Good Times* offered an equally anomalous ghetto family with a male as head, an image which won kudos from black and white commentators when the show was first aired, but which soon found itself in tension with governmental and social science discourses suggesting a crisis among black families in the inner cities.

The 1970s saw a huge increase both in black families living in

Figure 5

15 Lee Rainwater and William Y Yancy, *The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1967), pp. 5–6. See also Donna L. Franklin, *Ensuring Inequality: the Structural Transformation of the African-American Family* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1997).

poverty and black families headed by single mothers as the post-World War II economic boom finally came to an end. Even as civil rights movement victories helped foster a new class of black middle-class professionals, increasing numbers of poorer blacks entered a frightening downward spiral of unemployment and misery. Welfare rolls exploded, but Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) discriminated against families where husbands were present, often forcing black women to become heads of households as few jobs for black men existed in the ghetto. As historian William Chafe has noted, 'For its victims, the social changes of the 1960s meant nothing. Instead, they found themselves more buffeted than ever by the triple whammy of race, class and gender oppression'.[16] By 1972, two-thirds of all black families in poverty were headed by females.[17] So while families like the Evanses did exist in the inner city, their numbers appeared to be diminishing alarmingly quickly, as moral panic focused on female-headed ghetto families.

16 William Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey: America Since World War II* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 439.

17 Carroll, *It Seemed Like Nothing Happened*, p. 111.

By the early to mid 1970s, 'culture of poverty', 'feminization of poverty' and 'permanent underclass' functioned as ominous new terms with which to label the urban black phenomenon. These labels were frightening for many whites, such as the working-class ethnics of the Boston bussing controversy. *Good Times* had to negotiate this new post-civil rights terrain that had none of the optimism and hope of 1960s racial politics. While the representation of the black father would have particular political salience for many African–American viewers, for whites an intact sitcom family, rather than being a political statement, may merely have been another in a long line of comfortable, familiar images of the family unit. In significant ways, the Evans family recirculated the notion of the traditional sitcom family where warmth, humour, and good moral lessons prevail, where children are cute and cheeky but ultimately submit to parental wisdom, and where wives are domestic and recognize that Father Knows Best. *Good Times* did not violate any of these conventions. In order to negotiate its 'authentic' representation of black inner-city poverty and the attending white racism, the series had to soften the representation, making it more palatable to white, middle-class viewers by giving them a familiar family image. For African–American commentators, always aware of the disproportionate importance of black media imagery to the cause of black political and social advancement in a racist America, this negotiation was useful: the familiar patriarchal family was novel in the repertoire of black media images and thus played into the 'good role model' approach to black representation.

Good Times emphasized over and over again the importance of the patriarchal family. In an early episode, for instance, sixteen-year-old Thelma is dating a graduate student, Eddie, who has written a thesis entitled 'Sexual behavior in the ghetto'.[18] The unexplained appearance of the report on the Evans family's couch causes consternation for both parents, but especially James who, not having read it, rails about its

18 Titled 'Sex and the Evans Family', it aired 15 March 1974.

'filth'. When the nerdish-looking twenty-one-year-old presents himself to James and Florida and tells them that he wrote the thesis, James erupts and has to be placated by Florida (figure 6). He gets particularly exercised when Eddie reveals that he interviewed Thelma in his research. The conflict resolves itself when Eddie further explains that Thelma's interview on page twenty-five supported a strong theory he was pursuing:

Eddie: In broken homes with just one parent, there's high percentage of loose attitudes towards sex.

Florida: (Reading from page twenty-five of the report) But in homes with a solid family foundation, especially a strong father figure, the incidence of unwanted pregnancy is almost non-existent.

James: You mean page twenty-five is clean?

Florida: It sure is!

Eddie: And that's all Thelma's interview was about.

Florida: It makes real nice reading, too.

James then asks Florida to repeat the part about the strong father figure. This is followed by a cut to a closeup of James's self-satisfied grin as he listens again to the description of the importance of his strong parenting (figure 7).

The sociopolitical ramifications of this form of representation are contradictory. On the one hand, it emphatically and even didactically presents viewers with the 'good role model'. A successful black family depends on a patriarchal structure, and *Good Times* attempts to model that structure for its presumably impressionable younger black viewers. Impressionable white viewers could also perhaps have some of their

Figure 6

Figure 7

prejudice lessened by seeing an alternative image of black family. On the other hand, this form of representation perpetuates the same discourse circulated by the Moynihan Report. Non-patriarchal families, female-headed families and non-traditional families are abnormal, deviant and inevitably lead to out-of-control sexuality.

Good Times was also noteworthy for the way it portrayed James and Florida's marriage. Along with being strong parents, they were frequently shown as strong romantic and sexual partners. Episodes often featured the two hugging and kissing, with James saying 'Gimme some sugar, baby' (figure 8). Viewers were often reminded that the two enjoyed an active sex life, despite the cramped quarters of their two-bedroom, one-bathroom apartment. In one episode with a 'Women's Lib' theme, Florida feels that she is being taken for granted by her family.[19] She confronts James, asking whether he thinks of her merely as someone to sew on his buttons. She asks when the last time was that he made her feel like a woman. With a devilish look in his eye, he replies, 'How 'bout night before last?' In answer to her question of whether he really loves her or whether she's just a habit, James sweeps her back in a big kiss. As she whistles the children in from the bedroom where they've been banished for the scene, Florida, with her own devilish look, says they should give them their dinner – and get rid of them as fast as possible. 'Have mercy', replies James, and orders the kids in ('Move it! Move it! Move it!') with the enthusiasm of a football coach on a winning streak.

Respectful and affirming representations of sexuality between African–Americans, as many critics have pointed out, have historically been rare in US popular culture. *Good Times* broke important ground here, but remained the only television programme to do so until *The*

19 Titled 'Florida the Woman', it aired 17 February 1976

Figure 8

Cosby Show's Claire and Cliff Huxtable a decade later. But even in its portrayal of black sexuality the series was not without its contradictions. Balancing Florida and James's progressive images of sexuality was the clownish portrayal of JJ's sex life. A ludicrous 'ladies man', JJ's sexuality was grotesque, laughable and unbelievable. Preparing for dates, he would prance about the apartment in over-the-top outfits that ridiculed any notion of his attractiveness to the opposite sex. The clownishness of JJ's 'sex appeal' also neatly defused and calmed any underlying fears about black male phallic power. The mostly unseen girlfriends that JJ rhapsodized about were often also represented as grotesques: obese, ugly, stupid.

In attempting to circulate new, progressive and 'educational' representations of African–Americans, *Good Times* constantly had to negotiate the new and progressive with the old, familiar and regressive. Popular polysemy proved particularly tortuous for the show as it tried to navigate its representational minefield.

Viewers respond

Letters written by audience members suggest that in the show's early years issues of representation were highly significant.[20] Self-identifying black and white viewers encountering these images of black family, poverty and ghetto life attempted to make sense of them in various ways. As I shall show, both blacks and whites often focused on the show's educational value, but each group differed in what it found to be 'educational'.

One self-described twenty-two-year-old white, suburban, Pentecostal Christian wrote to say that *Good Times* was 'a show I can believe in. It is telling the truth about life in the projects, human nature, the social

20 Most of the letters discussed here are collected in the Allan Manings Collection. There are approximately seventy letters dated between February 1974 (when the series first aired) and February 1975. All the letters have replies signed by Mr Manings. I have supplemented these with letters published in *Ebony*. While I do not see these letters as unproblematically representative of the larger *Good Times* audience, I do feel these letters provide clues about historical reception practices and can be valuable in suggesting some of the reception strategies used by viewers. Along with cultural historians of television such as Lynn Spigel, I am employing a 'conjectural' method of historical detection here. For more on this approach, see Carlo Ginzburg, 'Morelli, Freud and Sherlock Holmes: clues and scientific method', *History Workshop*, no. 9 (Spring 1980), pp. 5–36.

problems of our day, religion in the home, etc. ... I don't think I've ever been very prejudiced but each week I think I get to understand black people better than I did before.'[21] A self-described white schoolteacher asserted that the show was 'absolutely *educational*. I recommend it to *all* my students and their parents (mind you, I'm in an upper-class white area.) I think we all have a lot to learn from the Evans family.'[22] These white viewers emphasized not only their racial difference from the Evans family in making sense of the show's utility, but also their class difference. The white Christian in the suburbs of New York and the white teacher in a privileged enclave near San Francisco used the show's representation of black poverty as a marker of authenticity. Their racial and class distance from the Evans family worked together to mark the representation as truthful and real – perhaps largely *because* the distance was a dual one.

Good Times' white producer, Allan Manings, also circulated discourse about the educational nature of the series. To a letter asking about the show's philosophy, Manings replied: 'We believe that the presentation of a complete Black family on television has done a great deal to educate people about Blacks.... Although the show is not a "crusade" by nature, it is certainly hoped that understanding of minority people and their problems will result.'[23] The obvious assumption here is that white viewers are to be the targets of this education, and also that seeing a representation of an intact black family is inherently educational.

While middle-class white viewers appeared to be the target of this 'educational' mandate, a number of self-identifying black teachers also wrote to Manings about the show. Most mentioned how much their predominantly black students enjoyed the series and how they discussed it in class. One teacher in San Francisco noted: 'It is certainly opening up a wholesome channel of communication between my students and I. Please keep it going. The positive self-image we need is coming through this program not just for blacks but for human beings.'[24] Another black educator, a sociologist at New York University, also pointed out the importance of positive images: 'As a teacher of a course called Black Life Styles ... the program does capture an authentic strand of Black Life. For one thing, it is [the] first program on television that recognizes the Black 'family'– with a mother *and* a father. It also carries the spirit of Black life style; the desire for education; the take-off on the White power structure; the dignity; the tolerance; the love, of Black people.'[25] Another viewer noted: 'There is no "Typical" black family, but this family has a mother and father struggling to make it economically, and doing pretty well at instilling into their children appreciation of education, morality and common decency. Many families can relate to it, or maybe learn something from it.'[26] While the documentation of ghetto life and the vicissitudes of poverty helped to authenticate the series for numerous whites, black supporters focused on family structure as the educational

21 Letter from Charles Holster, Wantagh, NY, Manings Collection, Box 1. All viewer mail is located in this box.

22 Letter from Louise D. Kleinsorge, Tiburon, CA, Manings Collection.

23 Letter from Manings to Ms. Teresa Green, Gary, MN, Manings Collection.

24 Letter from Diane Bennett, San Francisco, CA, Manings Collection.

25 Letter from Ms. Aldena B. Runnels, Assistant Professor, NYU, Manings Collection.

26 Letter from L. Boyce, Bronx, NY, Manings Collection. A similarly worded letter by this writer also appeared in *Ebony*. See 'Letters to the editor', *Ebony*, November 1975, p. 10.

aspect of the series for black viewers. Black inner-city schoolchildren and their families presumably did not need *Good Times* to instruct them about being poor, but, according to these letter writers, the series was useful in instructing them about the nuclear family unit and the desirability of two-parent households.

While the representation of a poor ghetto family was at the heart of the show's presumptions to black 'authenticity', a small but significant number of letter writers were uncomfortable with this image of blackness. Responding to *Ebony*'s first profile of the new series in which the magazine described the show as 'a slice of ghetto life as thick and juicy as a slab of salt pork simmering in a pot of collard greens', a number of letters subsequently published in the magazine questioned the image politics of depicting a poor black family.[27] One letter writer suggested that such a representation 'was quite encouraging to the white race and discouraging to the brothers and sisters'. Another letter asked, 'Why can't we have a program featuring a middle-class black family headed by a professional father? We know too well about lower-class living.... We need an ideal that we can strive toward rather than a show to cheer us up and make us content to laugh at the present predicament of our people.'[28] These sentiments were echoed by a number of letters written to Manings. One black viewer criticized the fact that the Evanses never seemed to rise above their current station. 'Why must the father be out of a steady job no matter how willing he is to work? Why can't he have some semblance of education, be it self-taught or acquired from institutions of learning? Why is the mother constantly looking for the picture of Jesus Christ to have mercy instead of arming herself with the strength of her faith and getting up and dealing with the problems at hand?' The writer also criticized JJ's stealing and Thelma's preoccupation with her looks. The writer goes on to say, 'The show does importantly portrait [sic] a black family that is pulling together. But that family is too stereotyped and more should be shown of them improving their situation.'[29] These viewers, unfortunately, would have a decade-long wait for the show they were calling for. In 1984, *The Cosby Show* did indeed give US viewers a black family that was middle class (actually upper class) with a professional father (and mother) that was in no way 'stereotyped'. In the politics of 'good role models', the representation of a poor black family that was not obviously 'movin' on up' would have little political utility to black audiences who, according to these viewers, needed lessons on how to rise above their situations.

Here we see a tension between the show's impulses towards 'realism' and its impulses towards 'positive role models'. It was far more 'realistic' to show how institutional racism and the vicissitudes of poverty trap families in a prison of disadvantage. On the other hand, such representations might not appear particularly empowering – at least not to black viewers with more middle-class sensibilities.

27 Lucas 'A "salt pork and collard greens" TV show' p 51

28 'Letters to the editor', *Ebony*, August 1974 pp 16–17

29 Letter from Norma Jean Ellis, St Louis, MO. Manings Collection. Manings agrees with many of Ms Ellis's criticisms and points out that JJ will no longer steal, Thelma will become a more rounded character, both Florida and James will be pursuing their high-school equivalency diplomas, and that Florida will spend less time with the portrait of Christ. 'In the next 21 weeks I think we will be covering many topics that will, I believe, meet with your approval.'

Kid Dyn-O-Mite: new minstrelsy?

Good Times was originally developed as a vehicle for Rolle, who had achieved great popularity as the tough-talking maid in Norman Lear's *All in the Family* spin-off hit, *Maude*. Having battled to secure a husband, Rolle's new series was supposed to focus on her character and John Amos as James Evans, Sr. According to producer Manings, if the show were to have a breakout star he initially thought it would be Ralph Carter as Michael.[30] However, early in the first season, popular attention shifted to the eldest son, jokester, jive-talker and aspiring artist, JJ. Jimmie Walker, who took the role, had never acted before, having made his career as a standup comic. His performance style thus differed markedly from the stage and screen-trained Rolle, Amos and Carter.[31] He used his impossibly skinny and pointy body in much of his comedy, frequently sauntering across the set, elbows at odd angles, and long fingers jutting out. His famous catchphrase was inserted in an almost obligatory manner into each episode. For instance, in an episode where James completes a course in heavy equipment operation to qualify him for higher paying work, JJ proclaims: 'Hail to King James! A man of courage. A man of might. And the proud father of Kid [hand clap] DYN-O-MITE!'[32] The studio audience explodes. These moments were clearly privileged ones in the series and played to guaranteed audience response. His face, with big, rubbery lips and bug eyes, was used to comic effect with regular use of extreme closeups to accentuate his grinning, pop-eyed mugging (figure 9). No other cast member on the show engaged in this form of extreme, exaggerated physical comedy.

J. Fred MacDonald, in his historical look at blacks in US television, places JJ firmly within what he calls 'the age of new minstrelsy' of

Figure 9

30 Allan Manings interview, *The Making of Good Times*

31 BernNadette Stanis as Thelma was also a newcomer to acting. Ja'net Dubois, as wisecracking neighbour Willona, had extensive theatrical acting experience

32 Episode titled 'A Really Cool Job', it aired 23 September 1975

1970s black comedies. MacDonald describes JJ as 'ultimately related to Mr Tambo and Mr Bones, those demeaning coons of another century'.[33] Marlon Riggs, in his documentary exploration of the same subject matter, comes to similar conclusions. He superimposes images of nineteenth-century minstrel figures over a slow-motion compilation of shots of JJ prancing, and the similarity in bodily representation between the original and this latter-day minstrel is undeniable.[34]

JJ is a troubling figure in this example of popular television because the show appeared to take seriously a mandate to present 'good role models' and to function as a force for racial amelioration and consciousness-raising among audiences. How could a project with such obviously liberal and racially aware intentions circulate such a retrograde and demeaning image of blackness? John Fiske's theories of popular culture are useful here. He argues that television can be progressive, but not radical. He points out that 'however we might wish to change the social meanings and textual representations of, say, women or nonwhite races, such change can only be slow and evolutionary, not radical and revolutionary, if the texts are to remain popular'.[35] Popular texts cannot be free of the power structures and racial regimes that dominate the social order and that attempt to privilege particular meanings. *Good Times* took a progressive step forward in circulating representations of an inner-city, intact black family, but negotiated that progressiveness in racial imagery with, as I have already noted, a familiar sitcom family of warmth and good humour, but also a more reactionary 'coonish' image traditionally associated in the white American imagination with 'black humour'. The show's white producers were most likely unaware of the minstrel lineage of their creation (and, as we will see below, Manings could get quite defensive on the subject), but they did know that many audiences found him funny. The familiarity of JJ's comedy and of his visual image may have made him comforting to viewers in the same way that the representations of familial warmth reassured them that this show really was about an evening of 'good times' rather than an evening of white guilt. *Good Times* without JJ might have been too radical, too different, to achieve the popular relevancy and polysemy necessary to allow 1970s heterogenous audiences to find narrative purchase in this text.

In a reception context, the figure of JJ provided a great deal of productive and contentious discourse about the politics of racial imagery. Especially within the African–American press, Rolle and Walker circulated contesting analyses about the social and political significance of their show. In a major expose published in *Ebony* at the beginning of the show's second season that documented trouble on the set and discontent among the cast about the direction the series appeared to be taking, Rolle's and Walker's differing attitudes to the politics of black representation were on display. Rolle was quoted as complaining:

33 J. Fred MacDonald, *Blacks and White TV: Afro-Americans in Television Since 1948* (Chicago, IL: Nelson-Hall, 1983), p. 186. For a more recent overview of this subject, see Donald Bogle, *Prime Time Blues: African Americans on Network Television* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001).

34 Marlon T. Riggs was director, producer and writer of *Color Adjustment* (1991). Two of the scholars who provide commentary about *Good Times* in the documentary are Henry Louis Gates and Herman Gray.

35 John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture* (Boston, MA: Unwin Hyman, 1989), p. 133.

He's eighteen and he doesn't work. He can't read and write. He doesn't think. The show didn't start out to be that. Michael's role of a bright, thinking child has been subtly reduced. Little by little – with the help of the artist, I suppose, because they couldn't do that to me – they have made him [JJ] more stupid and enlarged the role. [Negative images] have been quietly slipped in on us through the character of the oldest child. I resent the imagery that says to black kids that you can make it by standing on the corner saying 'Dyn-o-mite'![36]

Here and in her many other press interviews, Rolle speaks within the discourse of civil rights and, to some extent, black power and afrocentricity. Rolle emphasizes over and over again the impact on black children of stereotyped black representations. This is much more her concern than responses from white viewers. Rolle clearly felt that the struggle over black images was a political one, and one that had significant repercussions for the African–American community. In another story in *Ebony* during the show's first season, she said: 'I've always been selective about my roles ... still am ... I couldn't like me if I depicted crap that made a black child hang its head. I feel an obligation to do something that will make him stick his little chest out and say, "Did you see *that*!?" My goal is to give black women dignity.'[37] Rolle's discourse connects her acting to the black community and its empowerment. Her series was a part of that community and needed to be responsive to it. *Good Times* thus had 'extra-special effects', a term Phillip Brian Harper has coined to describe this view of the role played by representation in the black community. According to Harper, these representations have been the focus of so much attention and debate because they are 'seen as having effects that extend beyond the domain of signs as such and into the realm of African–Americans' material well-being, which comprises, among other factors, the social relations through which black people's status in this country is conditioned'.[38]

Walker's discourse, on the other hand, was almost wholly apolitical, reflecting no sense that black representations mattered, or that *Good Times* as a television series was in any way pursuing a black empowerment agenda, or had any effects on black material conditions at all. In the *Ebony* article, Walker responded to questions about positive black images, by declaring, 'I don't think any TV show can put out an image to save people'.[39] In *Jet*, Walker argued, 'It's a tough situation, having kids.... So parents sit them down in front of a TV and they want me to be a babysitter. That's not my job.... Kids need parental guidance – they shouldn't look to me or the TV for that.'[40] Walker's public persona repeatedly stressed individuality: the emphasis was always on his own career, his hard work and his drive to succeed. His discourse never suggested any connection to the black community

36 Louie Robinson, 'Bad times on the "Good Times" set', *Ebony*, September 1975, p. 35.

37 Lucas, 'A "salt pork and collard greens" TV show', p. 53.

38 Phillip Brian Harper, 'Extra-special effects: televisual representation and the claims of "the black experience"', in Sasha Torres (ed.), *Living Color: Race and Television in the United States*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), p. 62.

39 Robinson, 'Bad times on the "Good Times" set', p. 38.

40 'Television's new season unveils JJ in new role', *Jet*, 9 September 1976, p. 62.

or its needs. For the twentysomething Walker, the struggles of the civil rights and black power movements seemed irrelevant. JJ and his creator emphatically refused to participate in the 'struggle for blackness', refused to acknowledge racial power issues that structured representation: 'All I do is deliver the lines the writers [by now mostly white] turn out for the series'.[41]

Executive producer Manings also weighed into the debate about JJ. While very few letters in the producer's collected papers deal with the controversy, Manings's responses to the handful of letters that did raise questions about the character are telling in their extreme defensiveness.[42] One gets the sense that Manings was very touchy about any suggestion that his series was less than exemplary in its approach to black images. His stock response to critical letters was to accuse the letter writer of racism. One viewer, operating within the same discursive frame as Rolle, complained about JJ as a negative role model:

> As you know racism is directed most virulently at black males in this age group and I dare say that most of the appeal of the character to white viewers lies in the fact that you have decided to portray JJ as a poor student who is quite silly. Art ability as attached to the portrayal has some ameliorative effect but the stereotype of an anti-intellectual clown feeds white racism and is hurting efforts to develop black youth.[43]

To this not unreasonable critique, Manings replied:

> Forgive me if I detect a note of racism in your letter when you indicate the appeal of JJ to white viewers is based on his being silly and a poor student. Rather than being silly, the character is that of a clown who sees things a little bit different than other members of his family and he is a very serious student of his art. I must point out to you that JJ is not only liked by whites but our mail indicates that he is equally or more loved by black viewers and quite often for his artistic aspirations.[44]

While Rolle, along with this viewer, emphasized JJ's detrimental image for black youth, Manings, perhaps suffering a bout of sublimated white liberal guilt, tried to convince his correspondent (and perhaps himself) that JJ was actually a positive role model. Downplaying the buffoonish aspects of the character that were JJ's main claim to fame, Manings insisted on overemphasizing his artistic abilities (figure 10). Proclaimed Manings: 'We have in many episodes indicated JJ referring to art books and art history books. He has been and will be involved in art shows. He will study in art school and work to support himself.' JJ's art career was, of course, only a rather artificial add-on. As Donald Bogle has noted, 'Nothing about JJ ever suggested he had any artistic impulse or temperament'.[45] For a liberal like Manings (and likely his white writers, too) obviously moulded by the political ideals of the civil

41 Bob Williams, 'Jimmy [sic] Walker defends JJ'. *New York Post*, 1 November 1977, p. 46.

42 The letters are dated no later than February 1975. Public controversy about the series did not really hit until the beginning of the 1975–76 season, after the *Ebony* expose was published in September 1975.

43 Letter from William F. Brazziel, Mansfield Center, CT, Manings Collection.

44 There is no evidence in the letters in Manings's collected papers for the assertion that black viewers loved JJ particularly for his artistic ambitions. While such letters may well have existed, they did not make it into this collection.

45 Bogle, *Primetime Blues*, p. 203.

Figure 10

rights movement, the unexpected pop culture phenomenon of JJ could only have been a mixed blessing. In his letters to viewers, Manings speaks the discourse of colour-blind integrationism, but also the discourse of good role models. In one letter Manings explains the problem of getting the right stories and 'the added [problem] of being as positive as possible that nothing we do will be derogatory to Blacks ... or to anyone'.[46] Manings found himself with a minstrel coon on his hands, a representation that was utterly at odds with his discourse of positive images. On the other hand, this minstrel coon had helped shoot Manings's series into the Nielsen top ten. Unlike Rolle, Manings could not separate himself from the phenomenon of JJ. Manings thus had to negotiate the representation and find a race-positive reading strategy for decoding the character. Over-privileging JJ's artistic aspirations and his presumed appeal to black viewers may have assuaged Manings's liberal guilt that a television series premissed on 'authenticity' and 'good role models' had, at its centre, a figure that undercut all these representational ideals. Manings also attempted to find solace in the argument that JJ was not, in fact, the creation of whites after all. Responding to the letter writer who criticized JJ and made a point about the ludicrous costuming of black performers, Manings wrote: 'It is somewhat arrogant of you to assume that white writers and white directors and not a black actor put that hat on JJ'. If a black performer created this representation then it could not be detrimental: it was 'authentically' black. And the white production personnel who amplified and profited from this creation were in no way culpable for its circulation.

46 Letter from Alan Manings to Teresa Green. Manings Collection.

The increasingly centrality of JJ did have some fans, however. A visiting scholar at the rightwing American Enterprise Institute had this to say in the pages of the *Wall Street Journal*: '"Good Times" is now

essentially a showcase for Jimmy [sic] Walker.... The new format puts JJ at the center where he has room to operate. The action is fast-paced – some of the vignettes aren't much more than thirty seconds long. Basically the script tries not to fight the character, to allow JJ to bring things to a halt every few minutes. No one is much interested in the plot anyhow, which is characteristic of good comedy.'[47] This writer appears uncomfortable with socially and politically engaged approaches to comedy – the social relevance that was a trademark of the comedies associated with Norman Lear. Black and white supporters of *Good Times* in its early incarnation lauded the series precisely *because* it constructed its plots around African–American social problems: for instance, hypertension in black men, the problems of youth gangs, the high cost of uninsured medical care, price fixing at ghetto grocery stores. Plots like these that circulated discourses from a black perspective may indeed have been uncomfortable for conservative whites like the *Wall Street Journal* columnist. JJ's rise to centrality tended to shunt such narrative preoccupations into the margins, and with them any pretence to a liberal, educational mandate. The rise of Kid Dyn-O-Mite indicates just how difficult it was to sustain discourses about African–American poverty, 'positive images', and empowering representations of 'blackness' in prime time. The *Wall Street Journal* piece gives some clue to the kind of white resistance such socially engaged representations could face.

47 Ronald Berman, 'JJ and the limits of human nature', *Wall Street Journal*, 15 April 1977, p. 14. This commentary was written about the series after John Amos as James Evans, Sr had left the series. See following section for more on this.

The return of a 'black matriarchy': killing off James Evans, Sr

Following the rise of JJ as star, the next major blow to the politics of authenticity for *Good Times* was the departure of Amos after the third season. Press accounts differed over whether Amos had asked to be released from his contract or whether he had been fired. The African–American press, privileging the discourse of Amos and the people around him, presented the correct version of events. Amos had been extremely and uncompromisingly critical of scripts and of the elevation of JJ, and he had a generally abrasive relationship with Lear. New York's black newspaper, the *Amsterdam News*, put the situation into a context of black–white power relations, suggesting a master–slave dynamic: 'Here was ol' Norm giving all these spooks new sacks to pick cotton and there they were complainin' about the plantation'.[48] In 1974 *Good Times* had been touted in the African–American press as Evans's and Monte's show and thus, implicitly, the property of black creators. Now, in 1976, it was Lear's plantation. White power was now in control and blacks were back in their familiar, disempowered positions. The article pointed out that Evans and Monte were no longer involved and that the series had almost no black writers. All the markers of black 'authenticity' were now gone. The St Louis *Sentinel* mourned: 'What started as a promising comedy series about a struggling black family in a Chicago slum has degenerated into a slap

48 Mel Tapley, 'Is "Good Times" a fatherless family', *Amsterdam News*, 22 May 1976, p. D2.

happy showcase of bellylaughs starring a 1976 adolescent version of Stepin Fetchit'.[49]

The most tragic and ironic aspect of Amos's departure was that the first black television family with a strong male head was now suddenly fatherless. Like Julia Baker before her, Rolle's Florida would now be in exactly the situation the actress had resisted so vehemently when the series was in development: Florida was to be a single mother after all. Manings, who had proudly emphasized in letters to viewers the importance of portraying an intact black family, was quoted saying: 'There are other realities that deserve exploration – the fatherless family does exist in the ghetto'.[50] It certainly would be more 'realistic' to portray the Evans family as fatherless. However, only Amos's powerful presence as a counter to JJ gave legitimacy to the claim that the series was portraying good role models. With James's disappearance, the show descended into a crisis of black representation.

The National Black Media Coalition, a Washington, DC-based lobbying group, immediately sprang into action. The group was convinced of the show's 'extra-special effects' for the black community and the negative ramifications for African–Americans' material circumstances in this decision. The Coalition launched a letter-writing campaign to the show's producers demanding an immediate replacement for Amos.[51] Coalition chairman Pluria Marshall, quoted in the *New York Times*, argued that black children, who watched a great deal of television, 'desperately need positive black male images'. He quoted from a recent Howard University study about the meanings black youngsters made of televised black images. According to the study's examination of *Good Times*, the children perceived James as a weak provider; however, 'he was clearly seen as a strong father figure by black children viewing the show'.[52] Killing off James would be akin to depriving these children of a virtual father, and the impact would be not unlike the loss of a flesh-and-blood patriarch.

Mark Anthony Neal in his recent book about black popular culture, *Soul Babies*, discusses at length the significance of both James's presence in, and disappearance from, the Evans family. He argues that, within the white liberal imagination, the Evanses were portrayed in 'an old "Negro" paradigm that was destined to die off as more blacks were afforded the educational opportunities that would better prepare them for what was being touted, at least within popular culture and liberal political rhetoric, as post-race America'.[53] The only hope of survival was in the presence of the strong, stabilizing patriarch. The viewer letters that criticized the Evanses as a poor family that never rose above its situation were responding to this paradigm. With James's death, the show and its black audiences suddenly had to grapple with the anguish of 'a cultural situation that is father-lacking'.[54] Neal argues that the fictional death of James 'has become a metaphor for the absence of black men in the black community, and that this absence represents a kind of trauma for the community'.[55] He points to a number of recent

49 'John Amos tired of J.J., so he's leaving "Good Times"', *St. Louis Sentinel*, 13 May 1976, p. 1.

50 Les Brown, '"Good Times" will drop male parent, Black Media Coalition protests move', *New York Times*, 7 June 1976, p. 59.

51 Jacqueline Trescott, 'Good times and hard times', *Washington Post*, 2 November 1976, p. C1.

52 Brown, '"Good Times" will drop male parent', p. 59.

53 Mark Anthony Neal, *Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post-Soul Aesthetic* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2002), p. 65.

54 Ibid., p. 67. Neal is quoting here from Hortense Spillers, 'Mama's baby, papa's maybe: an American grammar book', in Winston Napier (ed.), *African American Literary Theory: a Reader* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2000), p. 277.

55 Ibid., p. 65.

black popular cultural references to James's death in hip hop lyrics and in television programmes produced by African–Americans. Why are these members of the post-civil rights/black power-era generation recovering this particular moment in popular culture? Neal suggests that it is 'lodged in [the generation's] collective memory' as loss and trauma.[56]

56 Ibid

The death of James also appeared to be intensely painful to the African–American creative personnel who worked on the series. In a documentary about the making of *Good Times*, Judy Ann Mason, one of the show's very few black writers, speaks in rather anguished tones about the situation: 'They killed that family when they killed that father. The show died when James Evans died.' Carter, the actor who played Michael, recalled that the show was no longer the same and that he no longer enjoyed the work after Amos left.[57] A year later, Rolle also left the series, telling the *New York Daily News*, 'They're not interested in the poor images that are being put across to the young viewers'.[58] Irma Kalish, one of the show's principal writers, recalls Lear coming to her and the other writers to ask if they could do a show without the mother or the father: 'We said we could. We could deal with it.'[59] In the struggle for 'blackness', authenticity and ownership, white power prevailed over black sociocultural needs. White creative personnel may have been able to 'deal with' the amputation of the Evans family, treating it as merely another writing problem to solve on just another television sitcom that was beginning to lose its vitality. For black creative personnel and for black audiences, the stakes appeared to be much higher.

57 Judy Ann Mason and Ralph Carter interviews, *The Making of Good Times*

58 George Maksian, 'Esther "Good Times" going bad', *New York Daily News*, 26 October 1977, p. 102

59 Irma Kalish interview, *The Making of Good Times*

The end of good times

After Amos's departure the series limped along for three more years, descending steadily in the ratings each season. The producers and writers tried to give Florida a new man to fill the empty space, but the attempt was not successful. JJ began finally to 'grow up', taking a job in an advertising agency and becoming less overtly buffoonish – but also less funny. New characters were introduced in a vain attempt to revitalize the show. The series tried to reconnect with its socially relevant origins by having the Evans family's wisecracking neighbour Willona adopt an abused child. After bowing out in the fifth season, Rolle agreed to return in the sixth, and ultimately final, season, telling the *Amsterdam News* that 'she feels it isn't her right to withhold from the public anything that would help the imagery'. In a final attempt to assert a measure of black cultural ownership over the representations, Rolle proclaimed to the paper's black readership that she could do something to assert a higher quality in the scripts. She pointed out a problem with the writers scripting Willona as constantly going out, leaving little Penny, her adopted daughter, with the Evans family: 'This is a lack of supervision and it couldn't happen with me in the show. I'd

refuse to do it. They can't be that loose in my house!'[60] From 'ole Norm's plantation' the discourse of cultural ownership now tried to turn *Good Times* into 'Mama Florida's house'.

CBS cancelled the series during the 1978–79 season, but perhaps attempting to appease those viewers who wanted the Evanses to transcend their situation, the final episode, in a *deus ex machina*, finally moves them and their neighbour Willona out of the projects. JJ announces that he has sold his comic strip idea to a newspaper syndicate, Thelma's football-playing husband announces that he has finally received a pro-ball contract, and Willona announces that she has been promoted to head buyer for her clothing store. After five years of toiling within the permanent underclass, suddenly the Evanses were to be vaulted into the black middle class. Viewers, of course, would never get to see them assume their upwardly mobile positions.

Although *Good Times* left prime time in August 1979, the show's cultural half-life has continued in the recovery activity that Neal discusses, and in its influence on latter-day black representations, such as the 1990s black family sitcom, *Family Matters* (ABC, tx 1989–98). That show's breakout star, Jaleel White as Steve Urkel, while more intellectually equipped than JJ Evans, recirculated the clownish, physically grotesque characteristics of Kid Dyn-O-Mite.

Unresolved questions remain about the cultural legacy of the show's racial imagery. What can we say about the show's effort to circulate 'positive images', and for whom might those images be 'positive'? Conflicting testimony from two of *Good Times*' creative personnel suggest the complex and racially charged nature of such questions. The documentary on the making of *Good Times* juxtaposes the assessments of Mason, a black writer for the series, and Austin Kalish, a white writer-producer for the show. Mason, in an emotional and personally troubled tone states, 'I left that show very ashamed of the fact that I had worked on the show.... There was so much pain ... in realizing that maybe we had done something wrong. The attempt to present realistic black life had failed and we'd failed miserably because nobody wanted us around anymore.' In a more neutral and impersonal tone, Kalish observes, '[*Good Times* will] always be relevant because it's about a family, and it has to do with a family hanging together'.[61]

Like Rolle, Mason takes personal responsibility as an African–American for the show and its representations. She emphasizes the ramifications to the black community of these 'failed' images. To have failed in circulating 'realistic' images of black life has its costs. Kalish, on the other hand, evacuates any sign of blackness from his discourse – *Good Times* is not ultimately about blackness or positive black representations, it is merely about positive families. By not assessing the show on its struggle over the representation of blackness, Kalish can deem the show a success for his colourless audience. Mason, on the other hand, bogged down by an unrealizable quest for the authentic,

60 Martie Evans, 'Florida will tighten some loose screws in the Evans household', *Amsterdam News*, 10 June 1978, p. D-8

61 Interviews with Judy Ann Mason, Austin Kalish, *The Making of Good Times*

could see the show as nothing but a tragic failure for black audiences and the wider black community.

Ultimately the show was both a success and a failure. Its groundbreaking attempts to circulate progressive and empowering images of African–Americans along with socially relevant representations of poverty and racism inevitably needed to be harnessed to older, regressive images so as not to alienate and alarm white audiences. The saga of *Good Times* reveals that prime-time television could indeed provide a venue for the exploration of hitherto unrepresented aspects of African–American life in the wake of the 1960s revolution in race relations. However, such representations could only be compromised ones. As a popular cultural institution, prime-time television could no more transcend power structures of white dominance and meaning construction than could other social, cultural or political institutions. That prime-time television served as a venue for negotiating new and potentially empowering representations for African–Americans during this period is, however, a testament to the cultural effectiveness of the movement for black empowerment. For a short period, black cultural producers with their liberal white allies (albeit soon-to-be-adversaries) managed to circulate a discourse that was different, grounded in the particularities of inner-city black life, and did so from at least the semblance of a black point of view.