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*Is Bill Cosby Right? Review*

On the fiftieth anniversary of the crucial *Brown vs. Board of Education,* Bill Cosby came to a racial forefront when in front of world renowned civil rights warriors, he took up a diatribe against poor black people. Cosby attacks the stereotypical poor black person’s appearance, speech, morals, and even their academic work ethic. As a rich successful black man he felt compelled to point his embarrassed, scolding finger where he believes it belongs, at the poor black youth and their parents, whom he has deemed failures. Michael Eric Dyson’s *Is Bill Cosby Right?: Or Has the Black Middle Class Lost Its Mind?* is a compelling rebuttal in which the author engages and refutes Cosby’s obviously naïve, detrimental remarks. Dyson, who believes that the famous black comedian has “made tragic use of his capital,” does a remarkable job dispelling Cosby’s logic.[[1]](#footnote-1) Dyson seems to spend an immense amount of time making personal attacks against Bill Cosby, which would hurt the author’s credibility if not founded on such solid evidence. “It is tempting to dismiss Cosby as a crotchety, self-loathing hypocrite… But that would be too easy and in some ways unfair,” writes Dyson, yet he seems to devote a large part of his book to proving that he is a cantankerous, backward man who has committed the very crimes that he rails against.[[2]](#footnote-2) However, it becomes obvious that the attacks leveled against Bill Cosby are an attempt to discredit the man so that he will not continue to be a relevant spokesman for the black “Afrostacracy.” Cosby’s assault on lower-income black folks is neither original nor true, and is merely part of two centuries of splintering amongst the black minority society. Dyson coins the historical internal divisions as the “Ghettocracy” which is made up primarily of poor blacks and the Afrostacracy which contains upper middle class or elite blacks. This division between the two groups has widened or narrowed at various times, but they continue to have profound implications to this very day. Cosby has merely made himself spokesman for the Afrostacracy and one must explore the origins and complex nature of the black divide to fully understand the logic behind Cosby’s remarks.

In speaking about poor black parents, Cosby says that they are buying “$500 dollar sneakers,” yet won’t spend “$250 dollars on hooked on phonics.” He continues with, “All they know how to do is beg.”[[3]](#footnote-3) This speech is described by Dyson as “flat, univocal, literal” and “marred by dreadful analysis and wailing monotones.”[[4]](#footnote-4) In response to Bill Cosby’s remarks Dyson immediately brings into question Cosby’s own educational background, and even questions the legitimacy of not only his speech, but even his degree from Temple University. Perhaps Cosby’s traditional garb of a Temple sweater and black track pants is his attempt to pay homage to the university for accrediting him with what one perceives as an honorary bachelor degree. Dyson cites Cosby’s failure of the tenth grade three times, and the fact that he had to get his GED in the Navy due to his poor academic performance. While his analysis of Cosby’s own academic record is quite comprehensive and accurate, Dyson should have defended black parents’ educational records first instead of attacking Cosby’s. That being said, one must realize that Cosby is merely part of a long Afrostacracy tradition. Moving slightly away from the direct personal assault on Cosby, Dyson goes on to cite very important statistics that relate to the obvious institutional racism that plagues society. Not only has black education and income increased greatly since the days prior to *Brown vs. Board of Education,* whose main proponents Cosby said were being let down by poor young blacks, but also there is no evidence to suggest that, as a whole, blacks are falling short of their obligations to educate and care for their youth. In fact, statistics have shown that blacks, more notably black children who come from low income households are staying in school longer and the racial gap is narrowing.[[5]](#footnote-5) “Why you ain’t, where you is go, ra. I don’t know who these people are,” says Cosby. “And I blamed the kid until I heard the mother talk.”[[6]](#footnote-6) Employing an ignorant mimicking of Ebonics, Cosby attacks “black English” and urban Ebonics, which one finds ironic considering Dyson attributes the popularization of unique black speech to Cosby’s *Fat Albert*. Dyson makes his point that Cosby blames the mother, yet it was the mother who probably heard the very same linguistic styles that the author associates with poor blacks’ attempt at independence and creativity come out of Cosby’s mouth during the airing of his show.

One must remember that Cosby’s remarks are not the grumblings of a cranky old-fashioned man, but part of a carefully orchestrated move by the Afrostacracy. Ebonics, initially born out of the ashes of a repressed yet aspiring Ghettocracy’s ambition to express themselves without betraying their words to a domineering Anglo-Saxon society. Both Ebonics and rap music associated with the Ghettocracy, were born out of a cultural need for self-expression and a desire to relay personal hardship in a way that is relevant to the culture. Cosby’s Fat Albert show successfully capitalized on a linguistic tradition that was paramount to a physical and cultural struggle by the Ghettocracy.

Showing vile disgust when speaking about the poor blacks’ clothing and body art styling, along with the unique names given to African Americans, Cosby proves himself to be both ignorant and unforgiving. While one can eagerly agree with Cosby that the pants below the waist fashion and baggy styles of today’s typically urban poor may be unsightly, his sheer ignorance about where the styles and body art come from, along with the accompanying names, is rather embarrassing. Dyson writes that “human beings use clothing to create and control their identities. That’s especially true for poor youth, who often feel powerless to influence the world around them.”[[7]](#footnote-7) The author is absolutely correct in this instance. Tracing unique, and at times outlandish, dress amongst African Americans since the times of slavery as a way to conceptualize black freedom, Dyson makes an effective argument. Expressing newfound freedom through fashion style has been used by the Ghettocracy. The Afrostacracy has always looked down on poor black people since the 1800’s for their dress, but this is merely an attempt by rich blacks to assimilate into white culture and distance themselves from their perceived, less aesthetically pleasing roots. For the Afrostacracy the sometimes outlandish dress of the Ghettocracy, threatened to define the black race, and to a race that thrives off Anglo-Saxon support, this notion is particularly scary. Although Dyson focuses on blacks, one can easily believe that the artistic freedom of expression that becomes displayed on one’s body or clothing is quite common across all racial lines. The same holds true for unique black names. Dyson masterfully outlines the former slaves shedding their former names forced upon them by their slave masters, in exchange for more Africanized matchless names that were meant to display freedom and independence. Cosby says, “They don’t know a damned thing about Africa. Wit’ names like Shaniqua, Taliqua, and Muhammad and all that crap, and all of ‘em in jail.”[[8]](#footnote-8) One would be willing to shovel over great heaps of money to witness Cosby going back to 1967 and telling the man formally known as Cassius Clay how he feels about his future name. For many blacks their name is a show of autonomy free from the grasp of the ever-present white racism. Viewing the white institutional racism as overbearing and a continuance of slavery, some poor black people reject the Afrostacracy’s embarrassment and still embrace unique names as a mark of personal freedom. The Afrostacracy did not want names so far removed from traditional names to be a traditional marker of black skin as they focused on assimilating into white culture.

Despite making very good points in his crucial defense of urban and poor black youth, Dyson falls short against Cosby’s attack on family values. Cosby’s speech that reflected his sentiment that most black children have broken homes with absentee fathers who do not care about or respect their family, is irrevocably false. His many claims, including that “50 percent drop out,” are false, yet still reflect a real concern about black education. Due to high schools retaining poor black students until graduation, math and science test scores show an increase amongst blacks.[[9]](#footnote-9) This is where, as one who has grown up with a very loving and at the same time domineering family, I wish that Dyson had spent less time attacking Bill Cosby himself and spent more time addressing the issue that he is defending. The information about Cosby’s allegedly illegitimate child and his troubles with his own daughter, Erinn, is important because they both accuse him of doing the same thing that he attacks with vigor. While it is obvious that the author is using Cosby’s personal information to diminish his legitimacy, one can easily find it borderline immature that Dyson spends 22 pages dissecting and tearing apart Cosby’s personal life, yet only spends 13 pages resisting the attack on poor black family values. For Dyson, the battle against poor black parenting has been an integral part of the Afrostacracy psyche, which is embarrassed by the lower class, and views them as what is attracting hatred by white people. This is “a result of the incredible demand for black folk to prove our ethical worth,” and leads to black parents actually being far stricter and more involved in their children’s lives. One does not find his state-by-state analysis of people’s perceptions of family upbringing to be compelling, but he does make the point that this animosity by the Afrostacracy leveled against the Ghettocracy is not new. He also clearly illustrates that this same anger is leveled against almost every younger generation by its elders, who usually blame the influence of pop culture for the youth’s moral corruption.[[10]](#footnote-10) Dyson both destroys Cosby’s credibility to speak of such matters, and accurately explains that Cosby is not an original renegade, but a useful cog in an Afrostacracy machine.

Born out of paternalism, the notion of “racial uplift” has been around since before the collapse of slavery as a way in which black elites attempt to change poor black people, so that the elites are not lumped together with the poor and criticized by the whites that they so eagerly wish to integrate with.[[11]](#footnote-11) Cosby’s claim that black people are merely hurting themselves and cannot blame whites is barely racial uplift. Dyson is right in saying that black leaders that are members of the Afrostacracy, are letting white people off of the hook in return for praise and privilege, by denying the institutional racism that is obvious and all encompassing. Cosby and the Afrostacracy leaders before him have attempted to show that black people are human by appealing to racial uplift. Yet, as Dyson writes, the black elites have transformed themselves into “moral cops.”[[12]](#footnote-12) While believing that respectable behavior would gain the whole race of black people admiration by white people, Cosby is ignoring the fact that ideas about what “respectful behavior” even consists of are based on white Anglo-Saxon culture.

After examining the many different facets of shame the Afrostacracy sees in the Ghettocracy, it becomes apparent that the public scolding is a practical tool utilized by the Afrostacracy. Although there have brief historical moments where a strong sense of black solidarity must be noted, as a whole, the black race has been split much to the detriment to the Ghettocracy. Due to its closeness with whites and their apparent success, the Afrostacracy feels that white values are universal and at the same time feel that the Afrostacracy needs to be racial representatives of black people to promote the assimilation of the race into white Anglo-Saxon society. Dyson acknowledges that the Afrostacracy is made up mostly of “incidental or accidental” blackness. This means that most of the members in this group either do not believe in the difference between races, or they see their black skin as a total accident. The incidentals, on the other hand, do not stress their blackness, but are still somewhat proud of their heritage. Due to the incidental and accidental black style of the Afrostacracy, they feel that when the Ghettocracy receives attention, they must propagate Afrostacracy ideals with even greater fervor.

The splintering of the black race along cultural, economics, and social lines originates from the white Anglo-Saxon domination of western values pervasive since the founding of the United States of America. Afrostac’s see the white wealth and privilege and attempt to conform to the seemingly “universal” white values and lifestyle, in order to gain the same wealth and status. The Anglo-Saxon power structure, initially seeing the image of their cultural dominance to be the key to its power, retains a small fraction of the black population and suspends them in a position of privilege and concurrent subordination. Afro’s bend over backwards to act in conformity with Anglo-Saxon values, but are also aware of their own subjugation, and therefore are hyper-conscious of their identity. Due to this extreme awareness of their own lucrative yet fragile position, Afro’s seek to keep a tight grasp on the black identity in order to keep the black identity within boundaries acceptable to ruling Anglos. When the black identity is seized by the Ghettocracy and becomes displeasing or threatening to whites, the Afro’s act as a bulwark against the Ghettocracy while concurrently attempting to emphasize and promote the integration of the Ghettocracy into mainstream Anglo-Saxon society. Dyson details the rich history of this cycle beginning with the black elites after the end of slavery. Cosby continues this tradition to this very day with his attack against Ebonics and rap music.

Prior to Cosby’s regression into a backward puppet for the black elites, Cosby relays, as highlighted by Dyson, that when Bill Cosby was in school he found that “our”, as in black music, is something to be proud of and that it was difficult to throw off “the brainwashing” as it relates to music.[[13]](#footnote-13) Ebonics has a heavy presence within the beats and rhythms of rap music, a lucrative product of the Ghettocracy. The linguistic and rhythmic styles of rap music have been captured and marketed by the Ghettocracy which has found unprecedented success in mainstream music. Ebonics is used in rap music often as a way to celebrate or recall the vivid hardship and struggle of inner urban black youth. The wildly popular rap music is a way for the ghetto to get its story heard by an otherwise disengaged world.

Although once forced to push through the institutional societal racism to have the courage to enjoy and share music with a distinct black identity, the Afrostacracy is now embarrassed by and deplores urban black musical expression. Cosby’s vile attack on rap music can be attributed to a generational divide as Dyson points out, however it may also have larger implications. Rap music being one of the few Ghettocracy products to reach a white audience, especially white youth, begins to represent the black identity in the eyes of whites. Urban rap music and its confrontation with violent struggle, illegal undertakings, and gang life as a means to survive in a forgotten and repressed world, is viewed as filthy and dangerous by strict adherents to Anglo-Saxon values. Because these values are seen as inherently universal to the Afrostacracy, Cosby and others rail against the music with contempt. The Ghettocracy values, symbols, language, people, and clothing come to represent the black race due to its extreme popularity. The components of this identity such as gang signs, Ebonics, baggy pants and hoodies, are not compatible with Anglo-Saxon identity. Furthermore, as these features have become popular among both white and black youth, but are so divergent from established Anglo-Saxon norms, they are viewed with suspicion and disgust.   
  
 When black urban youth begin replicating the Ghettocracy style, the styles themselves begin to represent the black race. This is accepted and even comforting to Anglo-Saxon society because the different styles create a distinction between black and whites. The visible distinction then turns into an “us vs. them” mentality for both the Ghettocracy and the dominating white elites. Being at most “incidentally” black, the Afro’s and Cosby find themselves stuck between two cultures and identities that are seemingly at odds. Most of the Afro’s want to maintain their lucrative status and respect amongst their white benefactors, but considering these blacks were once at the forefront of the fight for racial equality, they still want to retain their black identity. Therefore the Afrostacracy must publicly denounce the new urban music and associated styles prevalent amongst the youth, which are alien to older generations. Due to what Derek Bell coins “special racial rules”, the Afro’s public denouncement receives extra credibility and authority in their attempt to claim that the new rap music and style is not black but merely alien to all civilized society. The Afro’s then designate some music and styles that are more culturally aligned with the mainstream Anglo-Saxon values. Newly reaffirmed as representatives of their race, the Afro’s scold the Ghetto’s to become more in-line with universal values. One suspects however, that the Afro’s ability to be representatives of a distinctly black identity is slowly eroding.

The music and styles born out of necessity against cruel injustice and repression at the hands of brutal white society, is now being curtailed and disrespected by the Afro’s. This is met with anger and resentment by the Ghetto’s who in turn identify Afro’s not as successful blacks, but as uncle Toms. Seeing their expression of hardship, something many have done to achieve great wealth, becoming denied and suppressed by fellow blacks, Ghetto’s begin to associate Afro’s with a distinct white identity, and furthermore the Ghettoes come to despise and reject the Afro Anglo-Saxon values.

As in the case of Bill Cosby’s ongoing diatribe, Afro’s scold the Ghettocracy for certain traits that Ghettocracy are seen to embody, these negative values they crusade against to keep Ghettocracy traits from representing the black community in the eyes of the Anglo-Saxon power structure. These public shamings are utilized by Afro’s to show the Anglo-Saxon world that they do not have “ghetto” characteristics and therefore can maintain a good standing in the eyes of whites. Through Cosby’s public show of paternalism and “tough love”, Afro’s can save face with whites while regaining a bronze grip on the black identity.

Dyson’s powerful examination of Bill Cosby’s backward and counter-productive rhetoric is a convincing defense of poor black people against black elites. One can agree that Cosby’s message may have had good intentions—‘may’ being the key word—but his words can also be used by white conservatives to their own advantage. Dyson has made a fabulous case showing that Cosby cannot speak for the black community now, after a lifetime of near-race denial. He has also shown that Cosby himself is ignorant on most of the issues that he now takes up. Despite his powerful examination of Cosby’s rhetoric and the reality of the racial situation, Dyson spends far too much time attacking Cosby directly. At times the author seems to be on the verge of losing moral credibility. One can only hope that other readers look past the personal attacks and adhere to the truth about racial problems in this country, in order to gain a better perspective on what must be done to correct black inequality.

The powerful force of black-on-black public denouncement spearheaded by Cosby is slowly decreasing in influence and losing its moral and social credibility. The two centuries old tradition of talking down to the Ghettocracy and its trailblazing survivalist spirit, no longer hold the same weight as the Ghettocracy has realized their potential as the most imitated group in America. As the Ghettocracy continues to be empowered, the status of the Afrostacracy continues to be put in question. One may suspect that the virulent attacks by Cosby may be a supreme last ditch effort to prove its relevance to the Anglo-Saxon establishment, while trying to bring the Ghettocracy back into line. Nonetheless, the divide amongst blacks renders the race incapable of advancing its wishes as a unified front. If the black race as a whole is to overcome the debilitating poverty and inherent institutional racism they must unite. If the Afrostacracy embraces the black identity regardless of the accompanying symbols and values, they can remove themselves from a racial ‘no man’s land’ and. By joining hand-in-hand in solidarity with the Ghettocracy the Afrostacracy can play a crucial and more effective role in elevating the black race to new unfathomable levels of achievement.

1. Dyson, 52 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Dyson, 53 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Dyson, 59 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Dyson, 54 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Klass, M Gary, Just Plain Data Analysis, page 144 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Dyson, 57 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Dyson, 104 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Dyson, 103 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Klass, M Gary, Just Plain Data Analysis, page 144 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Dyson, 172 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Dyson, 198 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Dyson, 197 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Dyson, 78 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)