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From left to right – **Oprah Winfrey, Bill Cosby** and **Patti LaBelle**

Race Relations

The Crossover Phenomenon

Russell Adams

By **Russell L. Adams**

In years past, in Black America, the word "breakthrough" was used to indicate positive change, especially when the change involved a single individual. Of the many compilations of Black firsts, one can usually find entries such as: "The first Black college graduate was Edward A. Jones, who received a B.A. degree from Amherst College on August 23, 1826," or "The first Black to receive a Ph.D. degree was Patrick Francis Healy, who passed the final examinations at Louvain in Belgium on July 26, 1865," (His brother, Patrick F. Healy, was president of Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. from 1872 to 1883). Or the first Black justice of the Supreme Court, Thurgood Marshall, who was confirmed on August 30, 1967, or the first Black four-star general, Daniel "Chappie" James, the late commander-in-chief of the North American Air Defense Command, who began serving in that position on September 1, 1975, or the first Black in the major leagues of baseball, Jackie Robinson, who became a Brooklyn Dodger on April 10, 1947, or George Dixon, the first Black world champion in the bantamweight division of professional boxing after he defeated one Nunc Walker on June 27, 1890. "Firsts" have been and still are important in Black America because they set precedents.

It should be noted that the "firsts" on this list represent individual accomplishments in situations where either exceptions were made or the ground rules changed to include Black participation. We need only to be reminded that Satchel Paige, often considered America's greatest baseball pitcher, got to the major leagues in his old age — as did America's greatest contralto, Marian Anderson, who was allowed to sing at the Metropolitan Opera House when her voice was past its prime. One of the great costs to the quality of American life has been the loss of a host of "mute inglorious Miltons" whose talents never crossed the distressingly persistent color line.

Even though the color line still persists in entertainment, especially at the purely business end, the crossover phenomenon takes a different shape and function under a different set of conditions. Here the anonymous public makes its choice by the voluntary allocation of its time and money to given individuals or programs, especially in television. While it is often difficult to tell which moves first in matters of race — the power elite or the mass populace — in television ratings tend to be the arbiter of what merely survives a given period.

Commentary on the "The Cosby Show" has been voluminous; much has been made of the universality of many of the domestic situations often portrayed. The show does have an infectious appeal, but Bill Cosby had such an appeal long before his current top-rated show. He is the brightest of a long line of smiling Black entertainers, stretching back beyond Bert Williams, who crossed over from minstrel shows bearing names such as "Bandana Land," "Abyssinia" and "Mr. Lode of Koal" to the "Ziegfield Follies," where he remained a favorite of white theatergoers for 10 years. Bill Cosby is *not* a minstrel but he has a gleeful playfulness in his manner, mixed with enthusiastic sincerity, all of which come across as a mixture of Bert Lahr and Red Skelton.

> Black and white increasingly remain in place on the social chessboard of this society.

The American public will accept a non-smiling Clint Eastwood, or Charles Bronson, or John Wayne and make of them cult heroes. Non-smiling Blacks rarely last very long; nor is America comfortable with them. A Sidney Poitier could, for a while experience a crossover, but only in a reversal of the image and values which America applauds in males. Can one imagine a Black Sylvester "Rambo" Stallone, or an Arnold "The Terminator" Schwartzenegger? One does not have to think very hard for the answers to the questions of why no major motion picture has ever been made of the heroes of the Haitian Revolution, who had far more reason to revolt than the North American colonials in the 1770s, or even a motion picture of the Nat Turner and Denmark Vesey insurrections in Virginia and South Carolina, respectively.

During the era of the so-called "Blaxploitation" movies of the 1970s, the Fred Williamsons and the Jim Browns had their macho day, but it was a day spent mainly entertaining other Blacks. As quintessential Black macho icons, neither of these artists would last long on television, a medium more intimate than a movie house. It is to be wondered if Cosby's Huxtables, in real life, would be as affectionately regarded in a proper upscale white suburb, especially when receiving some of their kindred who may be a little rough around the social edges. By and large, studies of Blacks in suburbia suggests that the Huxtables in all probability would be treated with about the same polite indifference which greets Black families akin to them.

Television shows such as "Goodtimes," "Sanford and Son," and "The Jeffersons" were intended to make America laugh, particularly white America. The same was true of "Benson" and a number of other shows featuring Black leading characters. When these shows wear out their popularity, as all television shows eventually do, these gifted actors appear to have an unusually difficult time landing other roles, or are offered stereotypical negative parts. Other serious Black actors, such as William Marshall and Roscoe Lee Browne, are intermittently employed. They are not America's idea of acceptable crossovers.

Howard Rollins, who impressed moviegoers in "Ragtime," is yet another actor who is underemployed; he too is not a crossover type. In short, the successful crossover Black actors are those helping America to relax. They hold up to white Americans their images in a fun-house mirror. This is true even in those television shows featuring whites who adopt Black urchins, as in "Different Strokes" and "Webster." It is doubtful if Hollywood can deal with a family crossover situation in which the Black juvenile lead is teenaged and serious.

In daytime television, the participation of Blacks in the "soaps" was long in coming, in part due to the intimacy of the subject matter and relations which make soaps the favorite of many whites who generally are respectable lower middle and low-income viewers.

In the area of talk shows, the "Oprah Winfrey Show" is a fascinating example of the crossover phenomenon. Just as Bill Cosby's smile has a long history, so does Winfrey's "amplitude" and perennial good cheer. The overhefty Black female image dates back past Hattie McDaniel of "Gone with the Wind" to the antebellum wetnurse for the Scarlet O'Haras and Melanies of that era. The "fat" Black has always soothed white America, perhaps as a mistaken symbol that all is well. Certainly things have changed; it is indeed a long way from the Aunt Jemimas to Diahann Carroll as Dominique Devereux of "Dynasty," a novelty crossover carried by a television series befitting a declining era of celebrated greed.

When one recalls the outrage of some Southerners over the reaction of fellow whites to the songs of the late Nat "King" Cole years ago, or the apprehensions surrounding Harry Belafonte and Petula Clark when she touched his arm during a televised show, again years ago, one has to conclude that television has come a long way but yet has more to go.

What may one conclude about the deeper significance of this sort of analysis? Why does the crossover phenomenon appear to be increasingly common in mass entertainment, especially in television? Perhaps part of the answer is to be found in the nature of television viewing. It is an essentially private activity. It is true that television characters are visitors to the home, but they are visitors who show only when invited and the hosts can remain anonymous. Further, the hosts do not have to visit the program characters nor live near or with them. The same is true of the movies where one finds a type of collective anonymity in the darkness and in the size of the crowd. While the screen may feature a crossover situation, the audience is defined by racial groups which do not interact with one another. Movie-going is a form of socializing and the behavior of the viewers is a truer measure of the status of race relations than anything occurring on the screen, which, after all, is primarily make-believe *acting*.

Americans do not cross over very much in the voluntary social realm. As a matter of fact, most "crossing over" in entertainment, particularly the movies and television, takes place through the peculiarities of these media. In both, it is possible to maintain social distance.

What is said of the movies and television also applies to the legitimate theater, even when allowance is made for the brute fact that live persons are on both sides of the lights. And even more than the movies, the legitimate theater has audiences which are mainly of one race, depending on the nature of the production. After-theater parties are seldom integrated, again because the ending of the presentation brings the audience back to its social role, and its concomitant social separation along the axis of color.

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When one looks at other forms of live mass entertainment, such as football, basketball and boxing, for example, one becomes aware that racial segregation is not anymore the American way. Black performers in spectator sports are accepted mainly and almost solely for what they do in the sports arenas. Again, a long tradition has legitimized Blacks as athletes — a tradition rooted in American culture and a centuries-old image of Blacks as physical producers of satisfactions for others. Boxing, footracing, jockeying and weightlifting were open to Blacks even during the era of slavery.

In terms of crossover acceptance of athletes, as a general rule, Blacks are "distant" heroes, unless they also fit some expected pattern of conduct and demeanor sanctioned by the dominant group. Jack Johnson, though a formidable boxer, did not fit the mold and consequently was harassed as heavyweight champion early in this century. Joe Louis, on the other hand, as a "tiger" in the ring and a "tabby cat" out of it, did satisfy to perfection white America's hopes and desires about a Black man of extraordinary physical prowess. Muhammed Ali encountered trouble when he attempted to assert himself outside the ring.

In track, Jesse Owens was rewarded mainly for his deeds on the oval but not away from it, even though he had a most pleasant off-track persona. Edwin Moses and Carl Lewis remain very distant track stars to majority group Americans, the former for being indiscreet during his free time, the latter for being true to his own feelings on the track.

In football, a William "Refrigerator" Perry literally fills the bill of white America's image of the fat Black of great gentleness when off the field. Corporate America has applauded him with endorsements reputedly amounting to millions of dollars, just as it has Bill Cosby with his happy face.

Allowing for comparable on-the-field talent, a few Black athletes have approached white athletes in receiving endorsement contracts — another indication of "crossover" appeal. No Black female athlete, however accomplished in her sport, has ever remotely matched her white counterpart. Indeed, the real activities of Black athletes, in contrast to playacting, is clear beyond doubt. Yet this does not significantly reduce the various types of distances between them and mainstream society. It is true that whites will often seek autographs of many of the Black sports heroes and even purchase likenesses of them, but they are prized only as performers and nothing more.

Despite the relative high degree of crossover in sports and entertainment, the crossover phenomenon is less pronounced away from the leisure world of white Americans. Perhaps one major reason entertainment and sports became the major areas of voluntary "acceptance" of Blacks is that Americans as a group still perceive sports as non-serious activity in the social sense. Sports and entertainment are to be enjoyed when one is not about the serious business of maintaining self and society.

These two areas represent America at play, not at work.

The penalties for crossover expression are virtually nonexistent, except in music occasionally when the crossover projection of eroticism generates concern and tension. The play of sexual fantasy in music is more acceptable when it is color-compatible, that is, the singer and the song are of the same race as the admiring public. Elvis Presley, the Beatles and the Rolling Stones all have admitted their debt to Black creators of the foundations of rock and roll. It is significant that only in October (1986) that the dual crossover role of Chuck Berry was acknowledged in a concert attended by 10,000 people—a dual role as the first Black openly accepted as a rock and roller and the translator of the original Black music to a form acceptable to young audiences (which now remain primarily white, inasmuch as Blacks are not nearly as interested in this transmuted form of music having its genesis in the Black community). Chuck Berry, the translator, makes thousands while Bruce "The Boss" Springsteen garners millions.

Patti LaBelle and the Pointer sisters may be seen as partial crossovers, attracting a larger than usual number of whites at their concerts, but the likes of Johnny Mathis and Tina Turner are complete crossovers, the former helped — like Michael Jackson — by an absence of sexual aura; the latter by its presence and by being female. Preserving the musical "beat" from Africa, Blacks in America supplied its crossover to white popular music for the young of our time, just as Blacks in South America gave the African "beat" to the Tango and the Cha Cha Cha.

Along with television, the movies and sports, music too is a part of leisure life that allows white Americans to interact with the presenters only as performers.

While Black "firsts" and follow-throughs were achieved in the area of leisure activity and have received the greatest media attention in recent times, it should be noted that in areas such as education, employment, housing and public facilities, Blacks required the help of the government, coupled with collective Black protest.

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The history of early crossover interaction in the leisure world is not filled with legislation or with court orders. Perhaps the rejection of Marian Anderson's request in 1939 to perform in Constitition Hall by the Daughters of the American Revolution was the only situation in the entertainment field which attracted tens of thousands of people to hear her sing at the Lincoln Memorial. Litigation and legislation generally have been supported by Blacks as patrons seeking entry into places of public accommodation, including leisure halls and arenas. In the non-leisure areas of American life, Afro-Americans have had to initiate their struggle for entrance.

Some social commentators have asserted that leisure activity crossovers led the way toward the beginning of white acceptance of Blacks in non-leisure areas. But only a tenuous connection can be attributed to such commentary. In the 1920s, for example, when Black theatrical creativity was at an all time high, segregation remained a legal reality in the South and an informal one in the North. The famed Cotton Club in Harlem, where Black entertainment greats such as Cab Calloway and Lena Horne performed, was off-limits to Black patrons. The exploits of Joe Louis in the late 1930s and early 1940s did not change racial habits in non-leisure activity.

To initiate the drive for non-leisure activity/crossovers, a number of interacting developments occurred. World War II uprooted many Southern Blacks who headed toward Northern cities; the elimination of the "white primary" barrier to Black electoral participation in 1944 gave renewed energy to the drive by the NAACP for full voter representation; the emergence of politically independent African states in the 1950s; and the American reaction to the excesses of racist claims of the Third Reich in Germany contributed to a situation challenging the old patterns of racial segregation and discrimination.

Prior to 1954, few Blacks had entered certain parts of the occupational mainstream in the areas of education, medicine and — because the New Deal's conception of economic recovery included relief for Blacks — the federal government. Black military participation and the technical ending of racial discrimination within the armed forces were additional factors setting the stage for wider cross over possibilities.

The most striking fact of major institutional response to cross over pressures involved two key branches of the federal government — the courts and the presidency. The former exercised its perogatives in declaring the law of the land; the latter exercised the privilege of discretion over administrative agencies. For example, the Supreme Court declared racial segregation in public education to be unconstitutional; a President during World War II issued an Executive Order that technically banned discrimination in defense plants; in the early 1950s, the Interstate Commerce Commission directed that racial discrimination be ended on common carriers. But only in 1957 did Congress enact a civil rights law giving federal protection to persons unconstitutionally denied the right to vote.

Between the first major court decision,

Smith v. Allright (1948), affirming the right of Blacks to participate in all aspects of the electoral process, and the Civil Rights Act of 1957, nearly a million Blacks had registered to vote. They were to be a critical element in the victory of John F. Kennedy over Richard M. Nixon in the presidential election of 1960. Thus out of a complex of forces, the stage was set for the largest inclusion drive by Blacks in history. For the first time since Reconstruction, the Black masses were to be an element in the political calculus of both major national parties.

Blacks had become a political force of national significance before the general media knew it. Only when the courts began handing down decisions supportive of claims by Blacks, and the protest organizations went to the grassroots — as in the Montgomery bus boycott of 1955-56 — did the national media begin including non-leisure items and stories on race issues. As the instructive service that it is, the media both covered and stimulated the politicization of Black America and the intellectual cross over from thinking of Blacks either as menace or as entertainment.

As the civil rights campaign became a national crusade, media coverage intensified. Before this period, racial unrest would be treated by local media, if at all, and sections of the nation with few Black residents would remain totally unaware of any racial problems elsewhere. Certainly, the national educational system did not deal with matters as controversial as justice for the minorities. The media, to its credit, educated white America, albeit unevenly. Without this education, the March on Washington in 1963 would have been a significantly different event. As far as mass awareness is concerned, that march was the biggest "cross over" phenomenon of this century, a massive perception of the potential of a true "rainbow" coalition.

The media assisted the nation in perceiving its most visible "invisible" group and, for a time, facilitated the effort to cross over the gap between principle and performance. What had once been called "the Negro problem" became the nation's problem. Black became beautiful; Black Power became a slogan; the song, "We Shall Overcome," became an anthem. In the occupational world, where zero had been the standard quota for Blacks, slightly higher digits became the rule.

John Hope Franklin, the historian, called the inclusion of Blacks in once "white-only" pursuits "massive tokenism," at a time when Blacks were crossing over a bit in education, in the health professions, in business, in the arts and even the media. Hopes were raised, along with income, within the Black community. A feeling of imminent success filled the air for about a decade. Some individuals made a living recording the "gains" made by Blacks during this era. White Americans talked of Camelot; Black Americans of the Promised Land. Little did they know that, in the words of the poet Matthew Arnold, they were headed for "a darkling plain where ignorant armies clash by night."

For virtually every civil rights victory, a new cadre of opponents was created. Public accommodation legislation made some people angry; open housing led some people to seek the suburbs; Black voter participation made Republicans out of some hereditary Democrats; school desegregation sent many people to the private sector for education in "seg" academies. The result was a rejection by many of the actual crossovers. The accumulated discontent, along with the collapse of the myth of perpetual growth and of moral innocence, set the stage for the resurgence of the conservative strain in American life. Environmental explanations for inequality slowly gave way to genetic explanations and to a theory of limited effects in the area of social change. From the mid-1970s, Blacks began to lose ground. Since 1980, Black America has felt abandoned, its goals again obscured, its dream again deferred.

One of the first general treatments of this change was noted by Howard University Professor Faustine Jones in her 1977 book, *The Changing Mood in America: Eroding Commitment?* (Howard University Press). She correctly assessed the negativism of the national mood toward the goals of inclusion and equality. The commitment to fulfilling the constitutional promises indeed has eroded, accentuated by some officials deliberately failing to enforce certain civil rights laws, by others rejecting the principle of "class action" in civil rights matters, by massive and continuing cuts in domestic spending, by a de-federalizing of concern over America's unfinished business of racial fairness and justice.

Now crossover is on hold in non-leisure areas of American life. Black and white increasingly remain in place on the social chessboard of this society.

America's failure with regard to the drive for elimination of color barriers and gross economic inequities impacts on the vision of the well-intentioned. The need for white America to know Black America still exists, and the media is one of the best vehicles to supply that knowledge. It remains the umbilical cord linking the two social and economic worlds of race. ☐

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