WHAT'S SO FUNNY?: SATIRE AND AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE AND CULTURE IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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WHAT'S SO FUNNY?: SATIRE AND AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE AND CULTURE IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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This dissertation analyzes the use of satire in African American literature and culture in forming a new understanding of racialization in the 1980s through the 2010s. This "post-soul" moment, defined by authors who came of age post-Civil Rights Movement, in particular necessitates humor and the satirical as it opens up a space for play to accentuate the inherent instability and absurdity in racial categorization. By placing in conversation texts and performers as diverse as Jourdan Anderson's "To My Old Master;" damali ayo's *How to Rent a Negro*; Adam Mansbach's *Angry Black White Boy*; Percival Everett's *Erasure*; Lynn Nottage's *By the Way, Meet Vera Stark*; Mat Johnson's *Incognegro* and *Loving Day*; Chris Rock, Dave Chappelle, and Leslie Jones, it becomes possible to document the insistent satirical inclination in African American literature and to examine its trajectory from the 19th century to the 21st century. The historical trajectory of satire within African American literary resistance calls for a shift in an understanding of humor as potentially frivolous and stress that the political and social import of African American humor must not be disassociated from the laughter it inspires today. By reading these satirical texts in the contexts of historicity, postmodernism, and African American literary theory, it becomes possible and necessary to examine the evolution of African American humor as the position of African Americans to power shifts and simultaneously remains the same and as depictions of race and its significance have changed with the intent of the portrayals.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

In 2005, Danielle Fuentes Morgan received her B.A. in English with a minor in African American studies from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She completed her M.A.T., with a specialization in secondary English education, at Duke University in 2006 and taught high school English and African American studies for three years before returning to school and earning her M.A. in English from North Carolina State University in 2011. She completed her Ph.D. in English at Cornell University in 2016. In 2014, she received an American Studies Research Grant that allowed her to do archival research at the Schomburg Center in Harlem, New York. In 2015, she was awarded the Deanne Gebell Gitner ’66 and Family Annual Award for Teaching Assistants. She is also a Bouchet Scholar in the Cornell University chapter of the Edward A. Bouchet Graduate Honor Society. Her writing has been published on *Racialicious* and an abbreviated, early version of the second chapter of this dissertation can be found in *Post-Soul Satire: Black Identity after Civil Rights.* She hails from Durham, North Carolina.

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Introduction

A Generation of "Postlattos": The Post-Soul Moment in the 21st Century

> Before all of this radical ambiguity, I considered myself a black girl. Not your ordinary black girl, if such a thing exists. But rather, a black girl with a WASP mother and black-Mexican father, and a face that harks back to Andalusia, not Africa. I was born in 1970, when *black* described a people bonded not by shared complexion or hair texture but by shared history.
>
> —Danzy Senna, "The Mulatto Millennium"

There are a multitude of difficulties assumed in any conversation about the "post-soul" and the "post-black," but perhaps the most immediately pressing is associated with a presumed necessity in the ascription of chronological parameters. Without the benefit of hindsight, it is difficult to gain the critical distance and perspective needed to determine if an artistic "movement"—or perhaps mode, or genre, or affiliation—has ended or if it remains in motion, let alone articulate a satisfying and comprehensive definition while the terms themselves are still in flux. It may be too bold to attempt a concrete definition of "post-soul" and "post-black" at present. These terms, it would seem, remain malleable and may not achieve stasis until their movements come to a more unanimously-identified end—and indeed, there may be no such thing as an "end." Instead, it is useful and timely to consider possibilities in thinking about the *aesthetic* rather than *chronologic* intentionality behind these terms—who chooses to identify with what term and to what end—and if the present artistic moment may benefit from or even *necessitate* the existence of both the post-soul and the post-black. These terms both attempt to dismantle a normative form that implies racial permanence and instead gesture to an idea of racial malleability as context for an African American literary movement in the 21st century. A

contemporary understanding of race in the United States can only occur through the analysis of 21st-century spins on black performativity. Where the post-soul and post-black are presented, and often synonymously, as frames for contemporary articulations of blackness, they offer a reorientation of history that departs from traditional fictional depictions of the historical. Much of African American literature demonstrates a deep, critical engagement with the historical past of black bodies in the United States and the ways this historicization informs contemporary identity formation. However, the post-soul and post-black mark a shift from this historical realism—and even from strict periodization—which, although these moments can be found throughout the African American literary tradition, perhaps has not existed so ostentatiously, so insistently, or in such numbers prior. In this way, I have found that the post-soul and post-black reanimate the tropes of oral storytelling by using shared historical knowledge as a starting point for a more dynamic approach to an understanding of the past and its relationship to the present. Instead, through this lens, supposed *historical realism* is not assumed to be an incontrovertible articulation of the truth. To this end, traditional realism may not be the most accurate, compelling, or precise way to describe or evaluate the fundamental experiences of African-descended people in the United States.

Toward a Critical Understanding of Race and Identity

In his critical work, *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness,* Darby English succinctly explains the difficulty in defining contemporary African American literature, saying, "It is an unfortunate fact that in this country, black artists' work seldom serves as the basis of rigorous, object-based debate. Instead, it is almost uniformly generalized, endlessly summoned to prove its representativeness (or defend its lack of same) and contracted to show-and-tell on behalf of an abstract and unchanging 'culture of origin'" (7). It is this tendency toward

essentialism that is particularly problematic in a comprehensive discussion of African American literature and culture. As English notes, African American literature is often expected to represent a purported universality of black cultural experience. The result is a limited scope of acceptance for what the black experience is allowed to represent from both writerly and readerly vantage points as authenticity is defined by adherence to expectations. In recent years new, historicized terms have arisen within African American literature specifically to push back against this prior generic contextualization. I argue that the post-soul and the post-black are two that work with intentionality to dismantle expectations of black stasis and instead create a space of black liminality. While these two terms are often used interchangeably in the public sphere, that there is difference in their meaning is evident in the significant connotations attached to both when a writer or speaker chooses one term over the other. I believe that while the post-black, in its effort to move consciously away from expectations of blackness, ironically works in the realm of blackness—setting itself as a sort of diametric opposition to blackness—the post-soul does not rely on conjuring stereotypical blackness into being to support and explain its own existence. Even when the difference is unarticulated by a writer or performer, it is critical that we understand that the decision to use one term or the other is a politically-significant one.

Within this interest in racial identity formation, this project has an intentional focus on satire and the satirical for a few reasons. It is the inherent malleability of the satirical that makes it an especially useful frame in consideration of a 21st century understanding of race and racialization. If satire is predicated on recognition on the always, already absurd, and the 21st century self-consciously announces racial absurdity, there may be a special utility in a satirical contemporary assessment of race. Indeed, this speaks to the 21st century connection to the post-racial. While the beginning of the 21st century seemed to articulate visible post-raciality as an

admirable social goal, perhaps best exemplified by the exoticization of "identifiably" mixed-race people as exemplar of a new age—what Danzy Senna describes as the Mulatto Millennium—post-Obama conversations about raciality and desires for the post-racial have shifted, although they retain the same sense of social self-satisfaction. Instead, articulations that the presidency of Barack Obama demonstrates racial brotherhood, or even the hearkening to his campaign as indication of a racially-unified utopia, lend themselves to a sense of "post-racial as ideal," even as the term itself is fraught and derided. In this sense, this project works to expand our understanding of and definition of the satirical impulse in the African American literary and performance tradition. The racial absurdity expressed in African American satirical output does not necessarily inspire laughter but instead acute acknowledgment of the inherent irony of the subject being satirized. There is not necessarily a clear lesson to be learned, but this lack of didacticism does not negate intentionality. In opening up this space for play through satire, these authors turn the mirror on the audience themselves, underscoring not only audience preconceptions but also participation in the societal aspect under critique. For this reason, it is important to distinguish between the terms of comedy and satire as I use them. The comedies are those which place eliciting cathartic laughter as the primary or most salient goal; the satires are those works that instead underscore a philosophical understanding of the absurdity of race and its ironic situatedness in contemporary society—where race is meaningful and meaningless and both of these conditions exist simultaneously and weigh on identity formation in significant ways. In this way, quite importantly, when we consider the satirical as an inherent part of the African American cultural tradition, we disabuse ourselves of the notion that black artistic output is always necessarily tethered to humor as entertainment—an idea that has ultimately harmed

African American identity formation in its oversimplification and damaging conflation of intentionality and play.

Post What? The Liminality of Black Identity

Both post-soul and post-black signal a departure from what is past to something explicitly new, if not necessarily revolutionary. It is this departure—a feeling that perhaps the characteristics of African American literature are transient—that is especially significant. Even within this similar aim of revising the expectations of African American experience, the terms are not necessarily synonymous. Paul Taylor further explains,

> However one understands the ideas of post-soul culture, post-civil rights politics, and post-black identity and aesthetics, there is considerable overlap between them. We might take these expressions as synonyms, as different names for the same complex reality. It seems more productive, though, and a more efficient use of the linguistic resources that we happen to have available, to insist on the differences of emphasis that have produced these terms (625).

It is helpful to think of the post-soul and the post-black within the frame that Taylor provides—even as Taylor allows for the possibility of sameness, he acknowledges that perhaps post-soul speaks to a broader cultural sensibility while post-black is a more specific aesthetic within the culture. Certainly, even within this frame, it becomes evident that the terms should not be implicitly interchangeable. Taylor's thinking is incisive when he wonders, "If post-black *can* be the new black, in what sense is it really "post" blackness at all?" (627) indicating that these post-movements may simply be the multitudinous capacity of the old black finally addressed in the mainstream. It might be useful here to flesh out what constitutes "the mainstream" in a 21st-century context. Indeed, perhaps in part due to the advent of social media and the associated

multitude and simultaneity of voices and venues for information dissemination, the mainstream is a complicated concept to persuasively argue. In some ways it seems to have disintegrated from its more monolithic form pre-1960s, certainly before youth cultures were a targeted audience of marketing and recognized for their consumerist and capitalist buying power. In this dissertation, when I reference the mainstream, what I mean to connote is the specific to the African American literary tradition—I mean to evoke those spaces which articulate the usually limited narratives of others and otherness. This project seeks to situate a post-soul aesthetic of black identity as juxtaposed against these dismissive narratives.

Still, Taylor's articulation of the important difference between the post-soul and post-black does beg the question of whether or not the post-soul can be simultaneously post-black. Here, it is important not to become too essentialist in eschewing *essentialism* as the two terms converge and depart. Indeed, it is as Kwame Anthony Appiah argues that "the *post-* in postcolonial, like the *post-* in postmodern, is the *post-* of the space clearing gesture" (348). While the connotations of the post- movements are critical, it is equally as important to note the intentionality behind both terms, as both signal this shift away from a limited, previously-accepted definition of African American literature—and by crucial extension, of blackness itself—as they work to disrupt the genre. The *post* in post-soul and post-black could then linguistically signal a move beyond rather than necessarily chronologically after—*beyond* soul and *beyond* black. While this may not necessarily be the way the terms are commonly used, it is important to consider what this move beyond connotes in a comprehensive analysis of both.

The effort to define the post-soul is nothing new. Nelson George defines the post-soul as "the twisting, troubling, turmoil-filled, and often terrific years since the mid-seventies when black America moved into a new phase of its history" (ix). His efforts to historicize the

emergence of the post-soul are particularly useful in considering this posturizing gesture. The post-soul, specifically, seems to evoke a movement into a "new phase," rather than an entire dismissal of the previous phase. Bertram Ashe articulates it as an artistic principle: "The post-soul aesthetic explores and addresses a set of *non*traditional black expectations on the part of the generation(s) who are now aging into their maturity" (617). If so, I find it especially useful, then to consider these ideas in the context of postmodernism, to think about a post-soul movement that, like postmodernism, exists only in its understanding of its predecessor. David Harvey writes "postmodernism sees itself… for the most part as a wilful [sic] and rather chaotic movement to overcome all the supposed ills of modernism" (115). Although the post-soul does not seek to actively overturn its predecessor, the question is how much it breaks with an African American literary tradition and how much it places the blame on the literature itself or on its problematic mainstream interpretation.

While the post-soul isn't necessarily postmodern, there does seem to be a relationship to a loosely-defined soul, which seems analogous to the formal and structural elements of the postmodern to modernity. Frederic Jameson explains,

> Modernism… thought compulsively about the New and tried to watch its coming into being (inventing for that purpose the registering and inscription devices akin to historical time-lapse photography), but the postmodern looks for breaks, for events rather than new worlds, for the telltale instant after which it is no longer the same; for the 'When-it-all-changed,' as [William] Gibson puts it, or, better still, for shifts and irrevocable changes in the representation of things and the way they change (ix).

If modernism thinks compulsively about the New, then does the post-soul imply that the "soul" thinks compulsively about blackness, awaiting "breaks" and opportunities to revise a widely-accepted historical standard? Is it, as Appiah describes the logical groundwork for the postmodern, "The rejection of the claim to exclusivity, a rejection that is almost always *more playful, though not less serious,* than the practice it aims to replace" (342 emphasis mine)? Is this post-soul impulse marked by a broadening space for play? This hypothesis particularly takes hold if we accept George's parameters that the post-soul era emerged post civil rights and if we consider what it means to think compulsively about blackness *without articulating that one is thinking about blackness necessarily at all*. Here, it seems that it is useful to consider what it might mean to think of the post-soul impulse as acknowledging blackness as salient while not simultaneously the preeminent factor in self-identity formation. To this end, the post-civil rights era offers a useful historical moment to consider—a time when the aims of black communities became decentralized, or certainly less unified, in interesting ways after the acquisition of de jure rights. While chronology may not be the supreme factor—arguably, there were artists expressing this dissatisfaction with the limitations of expected African American cultural expression before this period as there are surely those who subscribe to a more traditional portrayal of blackness after or who have other literary or artistic aims entirely—it is helpful to consider it as an identifiable point on the continuum of African American literature and culture.

Furthermore, as Jameson posits, postmodernism emerges as "…a reworking and rewriting of an older system. That ensures novelty and gives intellectuals and ideologues fresh and socially useful tasks… in other words, a very modest or mild apocalypse, the merest sea breeze (that has the additional advantage of having already taken place)" (xiv). In this way, the post-soul may at times be postmodern, although the general public may not readily note sub-

categories of African American literature, which is, of course, one of the reasons why the treatment of the post-soul and post-black by the mainstream is compelling. This fact is not meant to imply that this differentiation does not matter outside of the realm of academia. Instead, it further illuminates the stakes of the discussion of the post-soul and post-black as those terms integrate the popular realm. Still, if David Harvey's assertion is correct that, "There is much more continuity than difference between the broad history of modernism and the movement called postmodernism" (116), this can be transcribed to the soul—pre-civil rights African American literature—and the post-soul. This distinction is particularly important because the trouble with the labels of the post-soul and the post-black is that they have context and connotations outside of the realm of the aesthetic. If we can begin to accept the post as that "space-clearing gesture" that doesn't negate that which came before but instead opens up a venue for new play, we can move toward a more useful understanding of the term without implying that African American literature and culture more broadly have reached some critical end.

The need to distinguish between a problematic definition of the post-soul as a departure from African American literature and a more optimistic view of it as a logical point along the trajectory is clearly elucidated by Houston A. Baker, Jr., who explains, "The anxiety of modernist influence is produced, in the first instance, by the black spokesperson's necessary task of employing audible extant forms in ways that move clearly *up*, masterfully and re-soundingly away from slavery" (110). This idea, to take a turn from Booker T. Washington, that African Americans need to move *up from slavery* is prevalent in much literary output. However, the post-soul treatment of blackness may exist with more nuance than Baker anticipates while writing about the Harlem Renaissance. Rather than moving directly away from slavery, although this certainly does take place, most postmodernist African American literary output seems primarily

focused on moving up and *away* from respectability politics, while possibly retaining the same thematic elements as before. This may then be the difference between the black respectability politics of uplift literature and a contemporary satirical mode that seeks to offer a way *out* of the conversation surrounding personal behaviors and presentation as related to race. Even within the Harlem Renaissance, as Baker notes, when slavery was not directly addressed, the arc of African American literature was constructed with clear intentionality to prove the humanity of its African American subjects. Post-soul satire maintains an affect of refusing to speak for or about the black imaginary, even when in instances where overtly does.

There are a number of texts worth momentarily considering for the broader context they provide about complicated humanity within the post-soul imagination. For instance, if read through a post-soul frame, it is no surprise then that Danzy Senna's *Caucasia* (1998), a novel about both willful and unintentional transgressions of the color line, takes place as the Black Power movement seems to be coming to an end—the protagonist's story emerges as the post-soul is beginning to take form and the children of the Black Power Movement are beginning to speak. In this novel, readers are introduced to Birdie, her African American father, Deck, her white mother, Sandy, and her older sister, Cole. Birdie is light enough to pass—and in fact, passes even without and against her own consent as she appears phenotypically white; her sister, Cole, is phenotypically black. The novel starts out with the sisters inseparable and close, their own secret language borrowed from an imaginary people, the Elemenos. Birdie narrates, "The Elemenos… could turn not just from black to white, but from brown to yellow to purple to green, and back again. She said they were *a shifting people*, constantly changing their form, color, pattern *in a quest for invisibility*" (7 emphasis mine). Birdie and Cole refuse a racial dichotomy as the Elemenos—they themselves as they speak the Elemeno language—are able to negotiate an

entire spectrum of colors. Indeed, like Birdie and Cole's understanding of their own existence, this ability to shift and change, this desire to make meaning out of the seemingly illegible or unintelligible, gets to the heart of a post-soul refusal of racial essentialism. Instead, the Elemenos shift toward invisibility or a muted racial understanding, where race is not the preeminent factor in personhood.

Birdie's father unknowingly corroborates her understanding of the Elemenos when he argues that "white people find their power in invisibility, while the rest of us remain bodies for them to study and watch" (72). Birdie is in a figurative middle ground as she appears white but initially attempts to perform the blackness both parents expect. When the parents split up, Birdie is sent off with her mother and Cole eventually goes with their father. Birdie explains, "My body was the key to our going incognito," (128) as together they appeared as a typical white mother and daughter. That it is corporeality that ultimately spurs the separation of the sisters and serves to characterize Birdie—corporeality, rather than Birdie's active choosing—demonstrates the post-soul understanding of race as a social construct that simultaneously is unimportant and maintains an affective quality.

Danzy Senna's *Caucasia* takes a presumption of blackness as inexorable even further as blackness exists even where it may physically appears *not* to exist, even where it is denied. "'Maybe you need to cut this naïve, color-blind posturing," Deck announces to Sandy, "In a country as racist as this, you're either black or you're white. *And no daughter of mine is going to pass*" (27, emphasis mine). Birdie's father's meaning here is two-fold. It is his desire, of course, that Birdie choose not to pass, but also, he implies her ultimate inability to pass. His presence in her life would always prevent her from passing—the existence of a black father serving as more than enough proof even in the face of white phenotypic features. The color-blind ideology is a

mythology. Of course, Deck is ultimately proven wrong on both counts because racial understanding remains based around visualization—not only what the viewer sees, but what the viewer *expects* to see.

Within the realm of the post-soul, naming is of the utmost importance, and each of the primary characters is symbolically rendered through this naming. Birdie herself has three names—Patrice, given to her by her father, Jesse, by her mother, and Birdie, by Cole. She tells readers that "For a while, I answered to all three names with a schizophrenic zeal. But in the end, even my parents grew tired of the confusion and called me Birdie, though my birth certificate still reads, 'Baby Lee,' like the gravestone of some stillborn child" (19). That Birdie is eventually branded by her sister's naming, the only other individual who can occupy her in-between space, is no mere coincidence. Moreover, that she is given the name of a thing is likewise significant. In fact, her entire family is marked by this thingness—Birdie (bird); Sandy (sand); Cole (coal); Deck. The Lee family is not so flat as to become simple types, but this thingness takes on important representationality. Her mother, Sandy, despite her blueblood breeding, is identified as sand—not quite white, a tan made up of multiple pieces. Cole, however, despite her ethnic biraciality, is seen as wholly black—she is coal. Deck Lee's naming is more complicated, but it seems to allude to that paragon of black masculinity, the mythical Stacker (Stagger) Lee. While Stacker's name implies autonomy—he is the one who stacks the deck, it would seem—Deck's name connotes objectification. Deck is the object upon which the force is exerted. He has less control than he thinks, proven perhaps in Birdie's phenotypic presentation. And Birdie is, of course, above the fray, passively watching. That she likens her birth certificate to "the gravestone of some stillborn child" is her own acknowledgement of her inability to actualize and her disassociation from who she really is. Even the name of the Elemenos is taken from the

confusion already known and always present—the name derived from the mixed up, muddled, middle portion of the alphabet often combined and jumbled as children learn their letters. T— seems to gesture to this transient space in which Birdie exists. These issues of naming work to undermine the idea that a person's name can call them into being. It seems instead to gesture to a more comprehensive and complicated understanding of personhood. Here is the challenge of the post-soul era: while Senna is addressing issues of race and racism, she refuses to venture into the didactic. Readers do not leave either *Caucasia* feeling their own racial anxieties absolved, nor are they able to place themselves on the side of a dichotomous good against the evil of racism. Instead, readers are made to sit uncomfortably with the realization that racial tension still exists without reprieve or a sense of any comparative, historical victory.

To this end, when Birdie is sent to Nkrumah, the Black Power school, she finds her personhood in question as related to ambiguity. The day at Nkrumah ends with each student affirming "Black is beautiful," but Birdie is unsure, explaining, "When it was my turn I stood. My fingers clenched the cloth of my skirt, and my voice quavered: 'Black is beautiful?' It had come out more like a question" (Senna 44). Here it is not necessarily just that Birdie is nervous in her uncertainty surrounding the phrase itself, but in her ability to take ownership of it for herself and in the eyes of others. Indeed, the response is swift and reifies her concern as Birdie narrates, "I heard one boy—the same one who had thrown the spitball at me—say into his cupped hands, 'Guess you must be ugly'" (Senna 44). Is it possible for Birdie to affirm blackness while simultaneously recognizing her own ambiguous connection to it? Importantly, it is not merely Birdie's own discomfort with the phrase but her sense of placelessness within blackness—the students refuse to accept her as black on sight because she seems ill-matched to it. Indeed, as *Caucasia* takes place at the start of this post-soul moment, it grapples with the

nuances of racialization after the end of the Civil Rights Movement and seems to allow for a complicated understanding of self that may be both mixed-race *and* black simultaneously.

Like *Caucasia*, Colson Whitehead's *Apex Hides the Hurt* addresses the importance of names, particularly through its absence of one critical name. The protagonist, a man who is defined by his talent in nomenclature, is himself nameless. Certainly this functions to render him as Everyman, but also the protagonist's namelessness, coupled with Whitehead's use of third person, creates a feeling of disidentification—it is impossible for him to be fully dynamic. Interestingly, the impact of his namelessness parallels a refusal of racial essentialism. His name is ineffable perhaps because the naming could not be precise enough to fully convey the man. Like Birdie, who is never referred to by her legal name, the still recorded "Baby Lee," these issues of naming work to undermine the idea that a person's name can call them into being. It seems instead to gesture to a more comprehensive and complicated understanding of personhood.

However, as the protagonist is in the naming business, he works specifically to pin down objects and places with a single word or phrase. He discusses the Apex brand bandages he's named, a brand whose slogan, "Apex Hides the Hurt," seems foreboding. The appeal of the Apex bandage is that it comes in a wide variety of colors to match the skin tone of the buyer. The narrator recounts, "They devised thirty hues originally, later knocked them down to twenty after research determined a zone of comfort. It didn't have to be perfect, just not too insulting. What they wanted was not perfect camouflage but something that would not add insult to injury" (Whitehead 89). This moment seems to gesture toward some writerly aims before the post-soul, when characterization wasn't meant to represent the individual but instead was intended for broad collective representationality—to indicate something identifiably racialized. What

Tommie Shelby refers to as the distinction between the thinness or thickness of black identity—thinness being an outward identification with blackness and thickness as a deeper association to black identity and black political interests—here manifests itself as a desire to adhere, quite literally as a bandaged covering, to blackness and racial identity.

Yet what is especially worth consideration is that when the protagonist himself begins to wear the Apex bandage to cover his own stubbed toe, Apex works all too well to *hide* the hurt and his toe worsens and succumbs to necrosis. He recalls that "He never got to the heart of the thing, he just slapped a bandage on it to keep the pus in" (Whitehead 183). This protagonist's body itself serves as one answer to Langston Hughes' question on a dream deferred as it festers like a sore and then runs. Here is the challenge of the post-soul era: while Whitehead is addressing issues of race and racism, like Senna he refuses to venture into the didactic. Racism exists, he notes, and the history of chattel slavery still affects the present, but there seems to be no lesson to be learned. Like Birdie, a racialized other can be forced into isolation. Or, like the protagonist of *Apex,* even when the racial wound has been identified and treatment begins the pain remains.

Fear of a Black Aesthetic

If "the unstable, wobbly interstices of [the categories of blackness and whiteness] is where the post-soul aesthetic lives" (Ashe 611) then it is useful to think of the post-black as associated with an idea of performative blackness within a post-soul context. Paul Taylor defines the "post-black" as "blackness emancipated from its historical burdens and empowered by self-knowledge—the knowledge that race-thinking has helped create the world with which critical race theory and liberatory notions of blackness have to contend" (640). Indeed, Taylor's definition covers a great deal of ground in distinguishing the post-black within the post-soul and

potentially differentiating the *post*-black from the *anti*-black. Where the post-black is really problematized, though, is in the popular realm. Perhaps nowhere is this term more colluded with blackness as negative in the public sphere than in Touré's *Who's Afraid of Post-Blackness* (2011). Here, Touré appears as a self-appointed poster child for the post-black, interviewing other black intellectuals and popular figures to work out what the post-black actually means. As author, Touré naturally provides the lens through which the text is read, and he makes no pretense of subjectivity. He overtly dedicates his book "to everyone who was ever made to feel 'not Black enough.' Whatever that means," (n.p.) later going so far as to note, "a special thanks to the guy who long ago told me to my face, 'You ain't Black.' You started me down the path that would become this book" (243). Audre Lorde has noted that anger has its own usefulness, but it is difficult to view Touré's particular voicing of anger as much more than venting.[1] He continues by explaining, "There is no dogmatically narrow, authentic Blackness because the possibilities for Black identity are infinite. To say something or someone is not Black—or is inauthentically Black—is to sell Blackness short. To limit the potential of Blackness. To be a child of a lesser Blackness" (5). One is left to wonder who would pick up a book titled *Who's Afraid of Post-Blackness?* without already being inclined to agree. And so, Touré's rhetoric seems to imply that he needs to convince readers of something they are already ostensibly predisposed to believe. It is challenging to compellingly articulate the problem with Touré's appropriation[2] of the post-black for mainstream consumption because it seems to be trapped

[1] This is, of course, the same Touré who, as Daphne Brooks rightly reminds us, called The Rolling Stones' "Brown Sugar," a song on both literal and figurative levels about white masters having sex with black slave women, "one of the great love songs written to black women" (106)—he does seem prone to incendiary comments to sensationalize his arguments.

[2] I am calling this appropriation because I think Touré is intentionally muddling his intent behind the construction of the term. As his book continues, it becomes clear that he is the primary voice in the text who articulates such displeasure over representational blackness outside of

somewhere in what he *is not* saying about blackness. It may be that, because Touré defines blackness by its negative space—indeed, blackness seems here to be marked specifically by the intraracial trauma of being told that one cannot be black enough, that blackness is defined *by other black people* in such strict parameters that Touré himself could never achieve it—the post-black seems to inherently make the value judgment that it is blackness that is problematic and the post-black is the *only* way to successfully survive blackness. While this definition of the post-black is not the most precise, Touré's book has been so widespread and he has positioned himself as the spokesperson for a post-black sensibility, that this understanding of the post-black is perhaps the most commonly known and accepted. As Margo Natalie Crawford explains, "Now 'post-black' (unlike the earlier murmurs) begins to sound like 'post-race' as public intellectuals such as Touré use their personal anecdotes about black exceptionalism to celebrate an Obama-inspired post-racial terror mood. Touré's title, *Who's Afraid of Post-Blackness*?, is disingenuous; 'post-black' often sounds comforting compared to the tension tied to 'Black'"(28).

In fact, Touré's co-collaborators express a more nuanced understanding of blackness. He writes that "Wahneema Lubiano said, 'Post-Black is what it looks like when you're no longer caught by your own trauma about racism and the history of Black people in the United States. Then everything is up for grabs as a possibility" (21-2). Substantively, this is much the same idea as earlier articulations of post-soul. One wonders what it might look like if Lubiano were permitted the space to differentiate between the post-black and post-soul here. Her articulation of the post-black, while expressing some of the same concerns as Touré, does not hold the implication of blackness as so problematic. In fact, by bringing systemic racism into the

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the confines of even respectability politics. His use stands in clear conflict with the use in *The Methuen Drama Book of Post-Black Plays*, addressed in both this introduction and chapter three, where the phrase is meant to indicate a broadening of possibilities without value judgments for either blackness or the posturizing gestures.

conversation, Lubiano refuses to place the blame of any negative associations with blackness as stemming from black people. Likewise, Kara Walker says, "I think it was that I was just so ambivalent about learning how to be *devout about Blackness*. I just had like this churning sense of anxiety and ambivalence and disappointment and a kind of individualism" (37 emphasis mine). Walker seems to explain that the burden of blackness then comes not from anything inherent in blackness, but instead in the idea that blackness must be handled delicately or that blackness remains wrapped in respectability politics. Walker doesn't seem to want to replace blackness *with* the post-black, but instead to think about blackness *through* the post-black. Later, Touré quotes Santigold who says, "I'm Black and I'm making it, so it's Black music"(54). All of these ideas of post-blackness could likewise be attributed to the post-soul. However, the linguistic sensibility of the post-black means that when it is used carelessly or inconsistently it may indicate that it is a moving away from a separate drive of blackness—here, post-black leaves blackness behind. Because the "soul" is rather ineffable and carries with it less intrinsic, socialized baggage, it may not have these connotations.[3]

Interestingly Touré only brings one person into conversation who raises the question of the term itself. Robert Farris Thompson wrote to Touré via email, "[I] am not big on 'post-Blackness' because to me Black culture is forever and therefore never 'post'"(215). This comment is so salient, and yet Touré relegates it to the end of the book in a section reserved specifically for interesting but inconsequential tidbits that fit nowhere else in the book. Touré's

[3] In "You Touch My Black Aesthetic and I'll Touch Yours," Julian Mayfield works to articulate the reality of a black aesthetic sensibility. He explains, "There is a Black Aesthetic which cannot be stolen from us, and it rests on something much more substantial than hip talk, African dress, natural hair, and endless, fruitless discussions of 'soul.' It is in our racial memory, and the unshakable knowledge of who we are, where we have been and, springing from this, where we are going" (27). Despite its turn away from the abstraction of "soul," this definition seems to operate as a primary impulse behind the post-soul.

refusal to fully address Thompson's valid concern gives even greater credence to the worry that "post-black advocates fail to understand black abstraction, black improvisation, and, even, *black* post-blackness" (Crawford 22). There is something unseemly in Touré's use of the phrase post-black because it appears to mean that blackness has ended or that it was a phase that *needs passing*, with all the connotations of the word *pass.* As Crawford muses in reference to the ubiquitous Black Power question of *what time is it?,* "The only answer to this question may not be 'Nation Time,' it may be simply, 'time to fix the clocks in the neighborhood,' but it is hard to imagine that the answer should ever be 'It's Post-Black time.' These words sound like a shutdown of earlier flows"(34-5). It feels troublingly like Touré's own traumatic experiences within blackness have left him desirous of this shutdown.

Perhaps some of the most precise definitions surrounding the potentiality of post-blackness can be found in the collection of *The Methuen Drama Book of Post-Black Plays* (2013). The editors explain that the phrase "post-black" is specifically chosen "to emphasize the dichotomous ways in which these works incorporate but also diverge from what have become normative dramaturgical formations of black drama"(Elam and Jones xi). This definition is so useful because it does not rely on a specific sense of thematic unity or textual synonymity or even chronology—the burden is on an aesthetic notion of black performance and black performativity. The post-black takes the groundwork established by the post-soul and makes it even more precise in its expression—it can perhaps be thought of as a possible form of the post-soul. As Taylor argues,

> Post-blackness, then, is not something only artists can have. *It is a feature of the post-soul condition* that, as it happens, artists can typically put to better use than the rest of us. We might say that to be post-black is to experience the contingency

> and fluidity of black identity, to have to wrestle with the question of how to orient one's self to the various options for black self-consciousness, and to do all of this while relating one's self to the similarly fluid meanings and practices of the wider society" (627 emphasis mine).

Ultimately, the terms "post-soul" and "post-black" must be understood as not synonymous but surely related. The post-soul might best gesture to the overarching cultural moment and the post-black to one possible way to understand blackness in a new context—indeed, even the term itself points to a multitude of ways to perform blackness if the post is thought of as a move beyond. The problem arises, of course, because the post-black is often conjured as a way to allay anxieties surrounding blackness. The distinction between what these terms are meant to convey and how they are occasionally erroneously used—often to imply "post-race" with all of its negative connotations—is necessary both within and outside of academia. As Robert Reid-Pharr discusses,

> Thomas Holt reminds us that it is now commonplace for American intellectuals to stress the socially constructed nature of all manner of identity formations, particularly race. The problem that Holt rightly points to, however, is that though this constructivist mode is universally recognized as correct inside American universities, it is rather embarrassingly absent from the discussions of 'race' that take place outside of academia, including those that significantly affect social policy (10).

Indeed, just because race, in its definition as a social construct, does not substantively exist, that does not mean that the *effects* of racism are not real and tangible. The terms and their usage outside of academia matter because these are the spaces in which our national and cultural

consciousness is formed—laws are created and enacted in the public realm. As a result, it is important to use the post-race and the post-black with intentionality—to not imply, as Robert Farris Thompson worries, that this means leaving blackness behind or, even worse, that there is something inherently negative about blackness. Instead, the terms must be seen as that "space-clearing gesture" that opens up new possibilities in the articulation of blackness. Through this desire to disambiguate between the intentionality of and widespread usage of these terms, I rely on "post-soul" to signal those post-Civil Rights Movement texts and performances under consideration in this dissertation.

What's So Funny?

Within this frame that acknowledges the importance of naming and articulations of identity, a comprehensive understanding of race in the 21st century can only occur through the analysis of 21st-century spins on black performativity. Ultimately, the idea of racial performance, and thereby racial malleability, begins to contextualize the African American literary movement in the 21st century. Traditionally, black texts have been rather casually and simplistically defined as any of those written by African Americans, but the idea of the post-1980s[4] as "post-soul" complicates that racialized narrative. Instead, within the frame of the post-soul, black texts are perhaps better defined as those that refuse the primacy of white privilege and instead center the margins by bearing witness through a kaleidoscopic lens of blackness and implicitly focus on a potential black readership. Although this refusal has existed throughout the African American literary tradition, the post-soul distinguishes itself from other literary eras such as the Black Arts Movement by, in its disavowal of white supremacy, simultaneously, in the main, refusing a sense

[4] Although I use the 1980s as a potential chronological starting point for a "post-soul" era, I do not want to conflate chronology and aesthetics. Instead, throughout this project, I am much more interested in the aesthetics of the post-soul and the ways they are utilized and highlighted by a 21st-century satiric impulse.

of blackness as necessarily beautiful. Throughout this dissertation, I present African American literature as a field unified by a collective identity in a much more complicated way by marking thematic intent, mode, and genre rather than authorial skin color. I believe that humor, and especially the satiric, is writ large in these literary works and performances and operates as intertextual glue that fosters existential likeness even within the surface dissimilarities between these texts. This active, outspoken refusal of monolithic definitions especially defines the post-soul moment: this clear belief that blackness cannot be just one thing—and that it never has been. There is utility in examining racial malleability in the satiric mode as it allows the amorphous nature of race to be imagined out to an absurd conclusion.

Chapter one, "'I Have Often Felt Uneasy About You': Living Satire," specifically addresses the satiric as a foundational and continuing critical aspect of the African American literary, political, and social impulse. In examining the satiric implications of Jourdon Anderson's letter, "To My Old Master," (1865) it becomes clear that the satirical gestures in slavery were not used as a break from the severity of the subject matter but were necessary for day-to-day survival as it reinforced the humanity of both the joke teller and listener while secretly, simultaneously constructing an in-group positioned with more knowledge than their oppressor—a sense of the African American trope of "laughing to keep from crying" heightened to what I term "laughing to keep from *dying*." It is important to acknowledge these satirical instances in slave narration because these identifiable moments are often overlooked or refused as they require a more nuanced understanding of the ways that humor played into the slave experiences—that there are no sustained satirical first-hand meditations on slavery because the stakes were too high does not discount the utility of humor as cunning and survival in moments. I place Anderson's letter in conversation with damali ayo's *How to Rent a Negro* (2005) and

contemporary events to demonstrate the ways that slavery may operate as an overdetermining aspect of black identity formation even in the 21st century, with a particular focus on the insistent articulation and quantification of their own unpaid labor and the knowledge these amounts will remain in arrears.

In chapter two, "'*I* Am Telling the Story': Percival Everett, Adam Mansbach, and Racial Absurdity," I argue that what Frederic Jameson calls "contrived depthlessness" informs a post-soul treatment of race: the post-soul pretends disinterest in race, but race—or racial uplift—remains at the forefront. To this end, I analyze two novels, Percival Everett's *Erasure* (2001) and Adam Mansbach's *Angry Black White Boy* (2005) in which race is made to be *active* both in its presence and absence. Moreover, I consider what it means that Mansbach, a white Jewish American, can so neatly be included in African American literature based on the clear thematic significance and authorial intention in his work. Chapter three, "'Assimilation as Revolution': Passing Reclamations in Lynn Nottage and Mat Johnson," analyzes the reanimation of passing narratives in the 21st century. I focus on Mat Johnson's graphic novel, *Incognegro* (2009), and Lynn Nottage's satirical play, *By the Way, Meet Vera Stark* (2013), placing them in conversation with historic accounts of passing. By tracing the trajectory of the passing narratives, I find that passing has *always* been discussed as a complicated endeavor although its complexity is often ignored for easier understandings that support white supremacy. This is an important shift from an understanding of passing that, in its insistence on unidirectionality, serves to reify the racial hierarchy. When passing occurs not on an impenetrable or unidirectional binary but as a more fluid, multidirectional result of choosing, these 21st-century texts disrupt the notion of a static past and bring the historical into conversation with the present. They highlight the ways that

racial malleability, arbitrariness, and absurdity have ultimately always existed, albeit as critical pieces of a comprehensive, complicated, and often-denied national identity.

In chapter four, "'When Keeping It Real Goes Wrong': The Seriously Funny Chris Rock and Dave Chappelle," I address the issues that arise when satire misses its intended mark. Every author has faced this problem to some degree, but perhaps most egregiously in the case of Dave Chappelle and his predecessor, Chris Rock. I argue that when the mode of humor is misconstrued the laughter may be heard as acceptance rather than disapprobation. If the purpose of the satirical mode is to imagine the object of ridicule out to an absurd conclusion, and if racism and racialization already verge on the inherently absurd, the distinction between the reality and the satire may be indistinguishable. This can be an especially damning prospect as African American satirical performance is meant to subvert the mainstream acceptance of and propagation of the racial status quo. I also address the attendant concerns about gender dynamics, both of audience and performer, in consideration of the reception of these jokes.

Perhaps even more than in years past African American humor is especially in need of greater analysis as a conscious and deliberate effort to examine not only the play of the satirical but of the dynamic reach and applicability of African American literature and culture more broadly. My conclusion, "Post-Soul Satire in a Post-Obama America," argues that the 21st century reveals the myth of post-raciality through its satiric production and through a limited and limiting understanding of identity formation. I focus on Mat Johnson's *Loving Day,* a text and forthcoming television show that examines the shifting self-identities of mixed-race individuals; the television series *Louie* and its limited perspective of blackness even as it purports racial insignificance; and the self-identification of Barack Obama as both black *and* mixed-race. I argue that these moments both describe and frame a modern understanding of race as

simultaneously meaningful and absurd without ultimately prescribing clear context for a future of race as connected to identity formation.

Chapter 1

"I Have Often Felt Uneasy About You": Living Satire

> For black Americans, humor has often functioned as a way of affirming their humanity in the face of its violent denial.
>
> —Glenda Carpio, *Laughing Mad*

> There is no place you or I can go, to think about or not think about, to summon the presences of, or recollect the absences of slaves; nothing that reminds us of the ones who made the journey and of those who did not make it. There is no suitable memorial or plaque or wreath or wall or skyscraper lobby. There's no 300-foot tower. There's no small bench by the road. There is not even a tree scored, an initial I can visit or you can visit in Charleston or Savannah or New York or Providence or, better still, on the banks of the Mississippi. And because such a place doesn't exist (that I know of) the book had to.
>
> —Toni Morrison, "A Bench by the Road"

There needs to be an emphasis on the nature of living history at the heart of any comprehensive inquiry into the trajectory of a literary or cultural field. Rather than locating discrete points on a line, it is useful to consider the evolution of the field—the ways the past, present, and future work in concert, and the way the present reclaims and reanimates the past and anticipates the future, to disabuse us of our idea of the historical as a notion grounded in memory and memorialization only. Manning Marable further elucidates the necessity of a more substantive application of history when he explains,

> We all "live history" every day. But history is more than the construction of collective experiences, or the knowledge drawn from catalogued and stored artifacts from the past. History is also the architecture of a people's memory, framed by our shared rituals, traditions, and notions of common sense. It can be a ragged bundle of hopes, especially for those who have been relegated beyond society's brutal boundaries… The oppressed tend to privilege myth over accuracy, romantic resistance over silent subordination (3).

Manning's definition, that history is "framed by our shared rituals, traditions, and notions of common sense," refuses the inclination to treat the past as something that has, in fact, *passed.* Yet even within this nuanced notion of a historical present Manning is right to express concern that as we move away from imagining the past as soundly lodged in the static historical, there is a risk of understanding the new relevance as tending toward the oversimplified—that a new context may breed euphemism, rather than human inquiry. The denial of the nuances of past articulations of a black self is a tacit and unconscious denial of humanity that has far-reaching implications on our understanding of present black personhood.

It is for this reason that a critical examination of post-soul humor and satire requires an inclusive analysis of its beginning at the start of the African American literature. The danger in ignoring this is that it may foster a belief in a post-soul that is only remarkable as a result of its own exceptionality, and a "pre-soul" era that is easily pathologized as lacking nuance and humanity—too stoic, too oppressed, too humorless to be recognizable or relatable for modern audiences. This does a disservice to the field of African American literary studies because, in fact, the satiric is a foundational part of the African American literary, political, and social tradition. In Jourdon Anderson's letter, "To My Old Master," (1865) the author utilizes in

moments intentional bursts of satire and ironic understatement throughout otherwise somber pieces. Author and performance artist damali ayo echoes Anderson's ironic framing of the slave experience as she imagines it in a 21st-century context, where African Americans may choose to actively participate in the selling of an oversimplified black experience in *How to Rent a Negro* (2005). The choice to use laughter as an offensive strike underscores the political and social importance of humor and the satirical as a rhetorical strategy in the African American literary tradition. In doing so, these authors assert their humanity as they use satire not as a break from the severity of the subject matter but as instead as a disarming technique. In this way, the literary use of understatement is both unexpected and deliberate, ultimately heightening audience awareness of the trauma experienced.

In the foundational work, *African-American Satire: The Sacredly Profane Novel*, Darryl Dickson-Carr explains, "satire is nothing if it does not aggressively defy the status quo" (1). In African American satire, this defiance of the status quo manifests as the opening up of the space of the black interior. Through this unlocking, the hidden and private inner realm of blackness may be revealed. Laughter and satire open up the power of the black interior, and this chapter seeks to demonstrate the ways that, to this end, humor has always been an intrinsic part of African American literature and culture. In addition, this chapter offers a significant examination of the ways the forms and functions of humor have shifted as the relationship of black people to power in the nation shifts as well. The relationship between humor during slavery, the period where black people are most overtly and legally disempowered, relates still to the humor during the period of Obama when this sort of quantifiable black disempowerment at the national leadership level, signaled by the need for Black Lives Matter, is denaturalized in important ways regarding racial performance, the occupation of space, and self-actualization. This juxtaposition

is significant in understanding why slavery is so often hearkened to in literature as a way to contextualize and describe the black experience in a post-soul era.

The post-soul is most succinctly defined as a literary and cultural period marked by authors, performers, and thinkers born in the late 1960s through the early1970s, children of the Civil Rights Movement who were too young to actually witness the movement proper and so they do not hold it as an experiential framework. Mark Anthony Neal further elaborates on the post-soul by saying,

> The post-soul imagination, if you will, has been fueled by three distinct critical desires, namely, the reconstitution of community, particularly one that is critically engaged with the cultural and political output of black communities; a rigorous form of self and communal critique; and the willingness to undermine or deconstruct the most negative symbols and stereotypes of black life via the use and distribution of those very same symbols and stereotypes (120).

Neal's incisive description establishes the post-soul not only as a way of demarcating a singular point on a linear trajectory of African American literature and performance through chronology and historical, communal experience but, even more importantly, through a sense of unification and goal orientation. This articulation is an important critical move away from an understanding of blackness after civil rights as marked by fragmentation, apathy, and a lack of focus. I would emphasize that within this frame there is a tangible sense of frustration with not only racism itself but also the ways that after civil rights African Americans are expected to discount and overlook a very real and present sense of trauma because of the gains of the movement. It is this implicit argument, that racism and racial trauma must be measured comparatively that is in itself a form of violence that the post-soul examines.

Prior to the post-soul, much literary and artistic output focused on an idea and an ideal of blackness, where "'Blackness' became a determining category in how African Americans understood themselves as agents, *and* the articulation of 'blackness' as a positive value became a means to defiantly challenge the state" (Glaude 6). As the post-soul emerged, there was a conscious effort to refuse *the* black experience in favor of *a* black experience with nothing to prove, save the uniqueness of that experience. It is evident then that the lack of comprehensive understanding of African American artistic output in the United States can be traced back to "a tendency to limit the significance of works assignable to black artists to what can be illuminated by reference to a work's purportedly racial character" (English 6). The post-soul often confounds this. While race is still frequently[5]—although not always—treated as thematic, it does not necessarily serve a didactic purpose. As Madhu Dubey posits, "The notion of community is thrown into crisis in postmodern black literature" (28). This is not, of course, to say that the post-soul tears the notion of the black community asunder. Instead, the crisis emerges as it troubles the idea of a monolithic black community or black experience, through the space-clearing gesture that makes room for the multitudinous possibilities of what black *communities* can be and represent.

Dubey continues by saying, "The question of how to build an antiracist politics that gives due weight to intra-racial differences forms the central challenge of the postmodern period in African-American studies" (31) Post-soul texts, like the African American literary tradition in which they are part, are of course concerned with racism. This point cannot be overstated. Even

[5] I say frequently because there are post-soul authors whose treatment of race varies within their oeuvre. Percival Everett immediately comes to mind, as some of his works overtly treat blackness and others do not. I wonder, then, if Everett could be classified as both post-soul and post-black, although perhaps not all at once—can the post-black be differentiated from the post-soul in this way?

experimental post-soul texts exist in a readerly sphere where racism is a real and present obstacle. Yet the post-soul, in its acknowledgement of racism, chooses not to use inherent goodness as a reason for antiracism. Here there are no overwhelmingly kind protagonists or doomed-to-be-martyred saints. There are complicated and troubled individuals looking out over their own universal existence through sable-tinted glasses.

Jourdon Anderson and Emancipatory Understatement

Daphne Brooks elaborates on lingering pain in consideration of the post-soul satiric mode,

> Irony allows for exposing incongruity in a particular situation, while the characters in that situation remain unaware of this incongruity. By extension, satire is a genre driven by irony. Rather than merely mimicking or imitating famous figures or re-creating well-known situations, satire works to expose the weaknesses or problematics of public figures and social and cultural situations. And black folks have been doing this sort of thing since the boat touched the soil in 1619 (107-8).

Brooks is right to locate the impulse of post-soul humor in history. Although much scholarship has acknowledged the existence of forms of humor in slave culture, few authors have currently noted the trajectory that connects slave humor and 21st-century African American comedy through a subversive and satiric impulse. Mel Watkins is most overt in this articulation of this erasure as he ponders in *On the Real Side: A History of African American Comedy*, "How could those early twentieth-century intellectuals and even some modern-day scholars suggest that African slaves' memory of their culture had simply disappeared along with nearly all vestiges of that culture after the trans-Atlantic journey?" (55) Indeed, although Watkins here addresses the retroactive dismissal of the cultural memory of the enslaved, it extends to his greater argument

about the utility of humor in slavery and that the humor was not defined by its pure American nature but by the fact that it was amalgamated—truly African and American. Watkins explains that "maintaining the *appearance* of the naïve was crucial as a survival technique, providing the perfect guise for aggressive humor and wit" (66), and it is this appearance of naiveté which lingers with significant ramifications in the reimagining of slavery in the satiric.

In "Teaching Race and Racism in the Twenty-First Century: Thematic Considerations," Howard Winant offers a theoretical lens for our understanding of the traditional treatment of the trajectory of blackness in the United States. He argues,

> As the U.S. underwent a transition from the fairly explicit white supremacism and racial domination of the pre-civil rights era to the reform-based and incorporative logic of "colorblindness," diversity, etc. that had become the new racial "common sense" sometime in the 1970s, racial studies had also to confront the newly emergent, hegemonic situation. To be sure, the old issues that had spawned the movement remained highly salient: discrimination and white privilege, structural and cultural racism, etc. But because reform had occurred, because the incorporation of movement demands (and persons) had taken place, racial studies were beset with a host of new challenges: pedagogical, empirical, and theoretical (15)

The post-soul then is particularly useful as a framework as it hones in on this shifting understanding not only of blackness more broadly but the way we discuss and study blackness in public and private spheres. The post-soul not only broadly reclaims taboo in an effort toward reappropriating negative or shameful tropes, but it reanimates the inherent humor in these unrelenting subjects that always existed from its inception. In "Pedagogy and the Philosophical

Anthropology of African-American Slave Culture," Stephen Nathan Haymes explains, "The absurdity of the African-American slaves' existential predicament was that they had to prove not only to others but also to themselves that they were human beings… Slaves were therefore compelled to respond to ontological questions regarding their existence as human beings" (Haymes 182). These ontological questions did naturally require, as Haymes articulates it, an understanding of selfhood in the face of its widespread refusal. However, a distinction must be emphasized here that while slaves did work to prove to white Americans their humanity, this need for self-proving was not because doubts were raised in the mind of the slave. Indeed, in 1848 when Frederick Douglass wrote to his former master, Thomas Auld, of his escape, "In leaving you, I took nothing but what belonged to me, and in no way lessened your means for obtaining an *honest* living. Your faculties remained yours, and mine became useful to their rightful owner" (104) it becomes clear that even before the chronological marker of Emancipation, African Americans knew they had a right to their own endowments. The expression of this ideal, however, was the complication. Because the possibility for self-actualization was so limited within the context of the chattel system, slaves worked to reify their own selfhood in ways that subtly positioned themselves as privileged against the usually privileged white and slaveholding individuals. Writing to Auld, "I am your fellow-man, but not your slave" (107), Douglass is able fully to articulate the chiasmic shift he first notes in his *Narrative* from the unnatural imposition of slave to his rightful humanity. Likewise, Sojourner Truth, in her famous "Ain't I a Woman?" speech delivered to the 1851 Women's Convention states,

> That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into

> carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man - when I could get it - and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman?

Here Truth dwells in the interstices of race, gender, and slave status and refuses a more simplistic notion that would deny her humanity due to her inability to fulfill any—or all—of the requisite frames. If then it can be assumed that slaves were aware of their own natural humanity—albeit stifled—articulating their humanity in real and substantive ways was the challenge.

It is within this context that the uses of humor in slave narratives should be examined. These moments of humor "began as a wrested freedom, the freedom to laugh at that which was unjust and cruel in order to create distance from what would otherwise obliterate a sense of self and community" (Carpio 4). Much work currently exists in consideration of humor in slavery, usually with a focus on apocryphal jokes of unknown origin attributed to nameless slaves and the retelling of these jokes on the minstrel stage during Reconstruction and how these performances typify the African American phenomenon of "laughing to keep from crying." Instead, I want to consider the ways that humor was utilized during slavery in subtle and significant ways. Most firsthand accounts of slavery are not traditionally considered as satirical—let alone *humorous*—and are analyzed instead for their political and social import. To analyze slave narratives in this way is important, but to *only* do so is a disservice—in a desire to remind modern audiences of the intelligence of slaves, it ultimately minimizes them, turning them from multi-faceted and

complex to having asceticism thrust upon them, unwillingly and so fully that any sense of dynamism is lost. Instead, it is useful to think of slaves as having practiced what I term "laughing to keep from dying,"[6] a coupling of intense sorrow that can only be described and rebutted through verbal play. It is a sense that without the outlet of satirical obfuscation death is imminent—killed either under the weight of an oppressed self or by the master's lash over unrestrained insolence. It is a sense that humor not only offered an opportunity to prove one's intelligence in the face of the oppressor but also instead triggers sorrow within the potential laughter as audiences witness joke telling that unexpectedly renders the mood somber, rather than light. The manifestation of these jokes does not imply that slavery was not harsh, but instead in their ironic existence demonstrates a critical survival technique.

With abolition, American society was structured to systematically marginalize blackness—indeed, both literally and figuratively moving black bodies to the margins—in new ways. Yet as society moves further away from the chattel system, the roots of this marginalization are lost and replaced by a comfortable, absolving cultural amnesia that instead suggests that distance and vague sympathy suffice in consideration of slavery. Yet sympathy is never enough—the post-soul seems to intentionally move past vague and generalized sympathy and a delicate treatment of slavery. Instead, empathy is required for modern American readers not only to understand the significance of the suffering attached to slavery, but how this suffering continues to contextualize the present. It is painful but necessary—it is not, as has been argued, needlessly opening the scars of the past but instead examining and medicating the still raw wounds. This effort toward empathy is elucidated in Jourdon Anderson's 1865 letter to his former master. In it, Anderson responds to his old master's post-bellum request that he return to

[6] I address the idea of "laughing to keep from dying" more comprehensively in chapter four, in consideration of the minstrel tradition and blackface performance.

the plantation to work by asking for payment for his previous unpaid labor and clarification of the terms of his potential employment. While the nature of the terms that the former master offers are unclear, Anderson's unequivocal rejection of the offer weaves skillfully between the droll and the staid. Indeed, Anderson is able to negotiate this potentially dangerous territory through a reliance on understatement. These significant litotes throughout his letter, coupled with his presumed increased safety due to geographical distance and the abolishment of slavery in the United States, render his letter if not fully above reproach then surely retaining enough plausible deniability—this feigned naiveté—to insure greater safety than before. Although Anderson does not engage in a full text-length endeavor—his tone vacillates throughout as he negotiates his new freedom in view of his enslaved past—it must be one of the earliest, and grossly unexamined, pieces of African American literature containing clear moments of satire, or that at least lends itself to reading within a satiric frame.

Anderson remarks at the outset, "I have often felt uneasy about you." Considering his account of the relationship between the two men, this can only be understood as an intentional understatement. In Anderson's articulation, his master was consistently cruel to him, including their last moments together in which he attempted to shoot Anderson upon his leaving the plantation. After abolition, the status change of African Americans was in many ways more subsidiary than substantive. Emancipation afforded African Americans nominal freedom while blackness remained systematically marginalized and retained its abjection. Anderson expresses tacit knowledge of the subtle shift in his status by limiting the emotionality with which he speaks about their past relationship. By using the term "uneasy," he positions himself as rejecting the request of his former master in unspecific terms. In doing so, he protects himself by veiling his meaning through seemingly vague language—the language appears, on the one hand, weak and

indirect, but it simultaneously refuses his former master's entrance or ownership of him or his labor any longer. In fact, the use of this obfuscation only ironically highlights the reality of his experience—it is what he *does not* say that is satirically underscored by its conspicuous absence. As a result, he seems to dismiss the need for any white-authored preface to serve as validation. Anderson continues, "I thought the Yankees would have hung you long before this, for harboring Rebs they found at your house. I suppose they never heard about your going to Colonel Martin's to kill the Union soldier that was left by his company in their stable. Although you shot at me twice before I left you, I did not want to hear of your being hurt, and am glad you are still living." His assertion that he assumes the man's death while presumably—and perhaps disingenuously and *sarcastically*—expressing pleasure that his former master still lives may elicit the wry laughter that Glenda Carpio describes in the tragicomic. In this moment, Anderson makes clear his new positioning as autonomous from his former master. He is unwilling to protect his former master with his silence. This silence was considered tantamount to the slave system, as the presumed allegiance of the slaves to their master was necessary for survival. Anderson, in stating his concern for his master, makes clear *in writing* his former master's treachery and treason. Once again, the vacillation between tones provides Anderson the opportunity to deny any ulterior motivation. Anderson places himself in the position of central power and lets his own narrative take primacy. Moreover, by having his response published in the newspaper, Anderson's narrative is tacitly validated without needing a frame of verbal acknowledgment—it is instead contextually-validated. In this way, it not only reaches a more immediate audience but also publicly denounces the behavior of his former master while simultaneously positioning himself as benevolent in his forgiveness and in the absolution he extends the man. While this magnanimity may be exaggerated or feigned, Anderson articulates a

morality that his master seems to lack. There is a possible reading here of satiric intent—*was* Anderson glad to learn that his master was unharmed? This statement, following his exposure of Colonel Anderson's "harboring Rebs"—a treasonous act in the context of the newly-reunited nation—is filled with clear potentiality even as his language is ambiguous and offers plausible deniability. That he is willing to name his former master's war crimes while still positioning himself as sympathetic to Colonel Anderson's humanity is a feat that can only be accomplished through skillful circumlocution. The spaces between what Anderson says and means can be filled in through the insights provided by history into appropriate and expected behaviors of blackness. Is it possible, then, that Anderson is feigning ignorance when he announces within hesitation that his former master was unabashedly treasonous? Does he rely on the assumption of the docile, master-loving Sambo as he switches from naming these crimes and then expressing joy that his former master has been left unharmed—taken together, a subversive gesture on the part of Anderson, by reifying the negative trope to his advantage? Indeed, it is not that we can read this moment as unarguably comedic, but the comedic potential offers a valuable and new way to think about the pushback Anderson may be offering.

Without the letter of validation so necessitated from slave narratives—although publication in a newspaper does serve a significant role—and without the use of authorial pseudonym, Anderson is offered no implied protection by white abolitionists and so his writing needs to seem to be as specific as possible without endangering himself—even with the aid of an amanuensis, his engagement with his own understanding of his history reiterates his humanity in the terms of white citizenship. As Henry Louis Gates explains in *The Signifying Monkey,* "The slave wrote not primarily to demonstrate humane letters, but to demonstrate his or her own membership in the human community… Black people, the evidence suggests, had to represent

themselves as 'speaking subjects' before they could even begin to destroy their status as objects, as commodities, within Western culture" (128-9). To this end Anderson invents a new structure that seeks to solidify his own autonomy and position in the United States. He writes,

> I am doing tolerably well here. I get twenty-five dollars a month, with victuals and clothing; have a comfortable home for Mandy,—the folks call her Mrs. Anderson,—and the children—Milly, Jane, and Grundy—go to school and are learning well. The teacher says Grundy has a head for a preacher. They go to Sunday school, and Mandy and me attend church regularly. We are kindly treated.

Anderson's insistence on familial naming and honorifics, those that specifically seem to gesture toward more nuanced understandings of blackness and black humanity than are traditionally discussed in the context of identity formation in a chattel slave system, serve to authorize his humanity. His effort here is two-fold. By claiming it for himself, Anderson is able to reassert his personhood by placing himself in the context of other citizens without naming race—either his or theirs—as the most salient quality. He instead dwells in the interstices of respectability politics and the promises of citizenship to declare the legitimacy of his family. This positioning is so significant as it stakes a claim to those trappings of humanity that were so continuously denied African Americans, even by abolitionists who frequently fought for the end of slavery itself without advocating the equality of the races.

Yet it is the "tolerably well" that perhaps deserves the most attention within the frame of the satiric. What does it mean that Anderson, a former slave, views his freedom and the tantamount respectability politics to which he is beholden, as doing "tolerably well" in an antebellum society? And what must be made of his clear audience awareness—not only is this addressed to his former master, but this was published in a public newspaper. Anderson

demonstrates clear authorial intention by not bemoaning his past state or delighting in his present. Instead, it is an indictment of the present *without looking longingly at the past.* It is an awareness that freedom is quantifiably more appealing than slavery—in ways that he is too willing to quantify in his letter—but that is still leaves much to be desired. It is this sense that the content and context of *freedom* plays a great role in the broad African American experience that ultimately complicates the national memory of and epistemology of slavery. The distinction here is valuable for his intended audience, but even more for contemporary audiences today who are too eager to associate emancipation with autonomy or blind acceptance of a new status quo that was in many ways not demonstrably different than the old status quo. This may be a moment in which the satiric is expressly not defined by its association with comedy. It is the connection with exaggeration and irony that is most significant. When describing his own emotions, Anderson seems to *understate* their significance, saying he has felt "uneasy" or feels "tolerably well" to describe his pre- and post-bellum experiences. In doing so, he refuses and dismantles audience expectations of emotionality—even refuses the melodrama of the black experience both before and after emancipation. This move is subtle, but powerful. It is this clear use of ironic understatement that affiliates Anderson's writing with the satirical, even if our laughter remains up for debate.

In fact, it is Anderson's use of understatement throughout that ultimately highlights his forceful and unapologetic articulation of his concerns for his daughter's safety. Anderson writes,

> please state if there would be any safety for my Milly and Jane, who are now grown up, and both good-looking girls. You know how it was with poor Matilda and Catherine. *I would rather stay here and starve—and die, if it come to that—than have my girls brought to shame by the violence and wickedness of their*

> *young masters.* You will also please state if there has been any schools opened for the colored children in your neighborhood. The great desire of my life now is to give my children an education, and have them form virtuous habits (emphasis mine).

Anderson takes a somber tone as he refuses to name the danger his daughters would face, knowing that his audience—both the newspaper audience and his former master—would be aware of the rapes and abuses suffered by women under the plantation system, and that emancipation serves as no assurance that these traumas would be disrupted. In fact, it is the act of *not naming* that forms the great protest of this letter. His silence becomes the rhetorical crux of the letter. His shift from seeming joviality to stoicism in the silence highlights the grave potential of his return. In fact, it is ultimately his use of the comedic that works to highlight the seriousness of slavery—it is the seeming incongruence that resonates, and when he returns to the grim tone to which audiences are accustomed it reifies the impact of slavery on its living victims. This moment is brief but powerful. The humorous potentiality draws in his readers—and although the letter is ostensibly addressed to his former master, it is intended for a broader audience in the newspaper—but this serious move makes manifest his necessity in writing and reminds 21st-century audiences of the lasting significance of slavery *even after* emancipation.

An Unpaid Debt: *How to Rent a Negro* and the Selling of Blackness Today

Anderson works stealthily to refuse the assumption, even as early as 1865, that Emancipation resolved the particular dilemma of inequality for black populations in the United States. His use of humor negotiates the fraught territory of the past and the present as he considers the promise of emancipation while faced with every indication from history that its fullness will remain unfulfilled. This absurdity necessitates these extended meditations in the

satiric mode—if the satiric reaffirms the legitimacy of absurdity as a way to understand and contextualize life experiences, the satirical may be a particularly useful way to explain the actual experience of slavery to a diverse audience. Indeed, toward the end of his final autobiography, *The Life and Times,* Douglass remarks, "I have been greatly helped to bear up under unfriendly conditions, too, by a constitutional tendency to see the funny side of things" (470). Out of context, this statement may appear a pithy platitude, but its significance with regard to the satirical trajectory of African American literature cannot be understated. Douglass, like Anderson, indicates with concision that the natural absurdity of enslavement requires an analysis through the stoicism with which it is usually associated as well as the satirical mode, which continuously examines the ridiculous extended to the absurd.

Perhaps the most important takeaway from this closer examination of the humor present in slavery is in the acknowledgement that humor *did* exist, although there were no full-length engagements with it. Certainly the stakes were too high contemporarily to bear the risks of satire misunderstood.[7] Even in Anderson's letter, perhaps again, the earliest meditation on African Americanness that seems to lend itself to a satiric reading, he toes this line tentatively. Yet this endeavor is important for this reason as well, as the use of humor here is not meant to obscure the severity of slavery but instead to reclaim the humanity of the slave through the articulation of special knowledge about the slaver or a critical examination of absurdity of the system itself. It may be for this reason that the trope of slavery still seems to have particular resonance in the twenty-first century. In fact, satires have consistently used slavery as metaphoric trope after the

[7] In this case, however, it may have more directly been the risks of satire fully understood—the danger of the message being too clear and the foolishness of the oppressor made too plain.

Civil Rights Movement.[8] In "A Comic Routine: The Place of Slavery in Identity Formation for the Twenty-First Century," Laura Mae Lindo remarks, "Investigations into the use of comedy to aggressively resist racist discourses generally gloss over the regular inclusion of slavery as a topic within popular African American comedians' repertoire" (201). Much of this reluctance to engage with slavery in the comic comes in part from the national amnesia surrounding slavery—it is too shameful and surrounded by an intentional, absolving distance that it is not a subject for conversation—and in part from our unwillingness to discuss it both intelligently and with nuance. Jokes may resultantly fall flat[9] or be intentionally misunderstood to disallow a more complicated understanding of the continued relevance and impact of slavery. As a result, the humor in first-hand accounts of slavery is often ignored, and the use of slavery in today's humor is often rejected.

To account for a description of postmodernism as a discourse that "emphasizes the distinction between the real events of the past from our access to it through discursive representation" (Spaulding 3), it is useful to think of the relationship of the postmodern to history as Frederick Jameson describes it, "as an attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place… Postmodernism, postmodern consciousness, may then amount to not much more than theorizing its own condition of possibility, which consists primarily in the sheer enumeration of changes and modifications" (ix). In this sense, then, postmodernist expression dwells in the discovered potentiality of the past. It not only acknowledges the strands of historicity but also relies on the lack of singularity to make

[8] Although I begin with a discussion of the use of the sale of blackness or black identity as metaphor for black existence in the twenty-first century, I engage with slavery as broader trope before the twenty-first century proper later in this chapter in a discussion of black female self-reclamations through the use of slavery.

[9] I further elaborate on the risks of jokes surrounding slavery in my discussion of Leslie Jones and Whoopi Goldberg in chapter four.

meaning of the present. Slavery then is a particularly effective trope for this reclamation of history because of the melodrama inherent in its retelling. The acts of acknowledging and recounting enslavement require a nuanced portrayal that refuses to lessen the severity of the violence and injustice of the system itself. These post-soul satirical images of slavery and the post-soul reimaginings of historical slave narrations, then, revisit that which is always, already known about slavery and modify it by highlighting moments of unanticipated humor on these accounts.

In speaking on the revisiting of language and images of slavery in the 21st century, Glenda Carpio continues, "How can slavery, the sorrow and anger that it has signified for African Americans and the devastation that it caused Africa, serve as the subject of humor? It becomes such a subject only in the most piercing tragicomedy, one in which laughter is disassociated from gaiety and is, instead, a form of mourning" (Carpio 7). Indeed, the laughter is not intended to signal our agreement, but our understanding and discomfort within a tragicomic frame. It is this idea of tragicomedy, rather than overgeneralized melodrama, that must shape our understanding of the humor in slavery in the past and present. Mel Watkins elaborates,

> To maintain respect for themselves or preserve any remnants of their native culture, subterfuge and lying were absolutely necessary for the Africans brought to America's shores. In addition to the primary tasks of tilling the fields of cane, cotton, and tobacco plantations and providing domestic and skilled craft services, survival in the New World depended to a great extent upon appeasing slaveholders' demands for an ingratiating demeanor and the eradication of nearly all vestige of Africanisms (50-1).

Ultimately it was this duplicity that allowed a sense of selfhood in the context of slavery, the reification of the stereotypes of the docile and submissive slave, that allowed the space necessary—this opening of the black interior[10]—for actualization and the subtle articulation of humanity.

It may be for this reason that there seems to be a delayed reaction to the overt selling of blackness. While neo-slave narratives began to emerge in the 1960s and rose to prominence in the 1980s, in the twenty-first centuries these narratives take the form of first-person autobiography and lose the narrative frame of the 19th century.[11] By performatively extending the sale of blackness to the twenty-first century, these authors and performers refuse the smug supremacy of the modern age with regard to racial matters and instead focus on the legacy of slavery as an overdetermining factor of present black experiences.

One of the first public examples of this selling of blackness was Mendi and Keith Obadike's sale of Keith Obadike's "blackness" on the Internet auction site, eBay, in August 2001. Before ultimately being closed by the website for "inappropriateness," Obadike's blackness reached a bid of $152.20 from an initial opening bid of $10.00. Obadike described his blackness in essentialist, objectified terms, explaining, "This heirloom has been in the possession of the seller for twenty-eight years. Mr. Obadike's Blackness has been used primarily in the United States and its functionality outside of the US cannot be guaranteed. Buyer will receive a certificate of authenticity." What is interesting here is not necessarily the selling of the blackness

[10] This is not meant to imply that this is the only potential way to understand the "black interior," or the true sense of black selfhood. Instead, this arguments seeks to illuminate the limitations of expressing the black interior within the context of slavery.

[11] It is important here to mention Octavia Butler's *Kindred*, which does utilize slavery in a more modern sphere as her 1976 protagonist, Dana, time travels back and forth from the plantation south to the present day. However, even in this context, Dana's experiences remain primarily removed from her present life and the crux of her understanding of slavery takes place in the antebellum period.

itself in the twenty-first century, but rather the purchase of it. What were buyers hoping to gain? The entire exhibition seems to speak once again to a desire to commodify *blackness* in an effort to refuse the humanity of *black people*. If blackness is something able to be purchased—something quantifiable and eternally ownable—then what are the ramifications for black people? How does this expectation differ from the ability to purchase blackness in the antebellum era in substantive ways? Particularly in the twenty-first century, when the African American relationship to power is denaturalized in ways it hasn't been before, what are the ramifications?[12] Stephen Nathan Haymes explains,

> The human anxieties, which preoccupied the pedagogy of slave culture, emerged out of a specific historical reality in which the slave's humanity as a black was denied. Prompted by these anxieties, the slave culture's existential concerns struggled to affirm or assert the slave's recognition of his or her humanity, which was learned within the slave quarter community. However, in contrast to Western philosophy of education, it understood that being human is not something one becomes through education but, rather, is what one already is (191).

Indeed, what makes this selling of blackness satirical is that it interrogates the idea of black humanity by positing blackness as something essential to the human *and also* easily separated from a sense of self. When Obadike sells his blackness, he expressly is *not* selling himself. He is selling the part of himself that, in his articulation, seems most quantifiable, most collectible, and strangely, seems to have simultaneously the most capital and risk in the United States—his blackness renders him both cool and endangered; hip and abject.

[12] I address the implications of a post-Obama America on the post-soul in the conclusion.

However, in damali ayo's 2005 book *How To Rent a Negro*, she engages in the performance of the literal sale of black bodies, riffing on the national history by endowing the African American participants with autonomy in their own sale for personal profit and reparations for unpaid debts. She explains,

> As we all know, the purchase of African Americans was outlawed many years ago. Now, black people are once again a valued and popular commodity. These days those who boast of black friends and colleagues are on the cutting edge of social and political trends. The roles of owner and owned have evolved, preserving the spirit and sanctity of the old relationships without the hassles of long-term commitment, high prices, or their unpleasant features (2).

By framing these rentals in terms of what has changed, ayo ultimately highlights the ways that race relations have not—in her estimation, in the ways that blackness still signals commoditization and its value lies in its utility for white consumers—most performatively signified in her use of the word "negro" as identifier. In this way, ayo notes, the "spirit and sanctity" of the relationship remains the same. It is this merger of past and present that matters so much in the explication of black identity formation in the twenty-first century. As ayo notes, even if the roles have evolved, the trauma lingers and codes and colors interactions and expectations. While this may initially seem to verge on the hyperbolic, it is important not to discount ayo's meaning. What does the commodification of blackness—of black people—mean in a twenty-first century context? When black physicality is no longer legally sold and purchased in a chattel slave system, *what* then is the commodity?

For ayo, this commodification takes root as a performative black experience that is simultaneously mysterious and common. It is the appropriation of an oversimplified black

identity that is signaled in her articulation. To this end, ayo argues, if seeming characteristics of African American personhood are being used without permission as signifier, by playing into these expectations and desires African Americans are able to profit from their own marginalization. Indeed, even this idea has its origins in slave culture. As Mel Watkins explains, "At the same time that black slaves were furtively sowing the seeds of their own subculture, they were helping to establish a public image of the every merry, frivolous, happy-go-lucky 'Sambos' in the minds of the majority white population" (57). This duplicity was as necessary survival technique as it positioned African Americans to appear subservient while allowing the space for private self-actualization at the expense of their oppressor—African Americans playing a prescribed role to indulge in the fantasies of white populations. ayo's concern with "renting one's self" refuses to overtly articulate the psychological benefit to African Americans—other than the financial benefit—in part because the book is addressed both to white purchasers and black sellers. However, these intentionally-structured silences create the spaces that refuse subjugation and imply a way for active participation to deconstruct the expected racial hierarchy—it quite significantly allows African Americans to own a portion of the fantasy as well, by imagining a form of reparations for the unpaid debt not just of slavery but of the continued burden of representational expectations.

Yet responses to ayo's business-as-performance-art were uneven at best. In addition to praise for the inventiveness of the form or the potential profit to be made, there were also continuous slurs and threats made against ayo herself.[13] It is worth considering one particular exchange in total:

[13] I address this more fully in my conclusion, in the context of race relations after the election of President Barack Obama.

> Dear Rent-a-Negro:
>
> You should be ashamed of yourself! This is worse than slavery!
>
> Signed,
>
> I'm Ashamed of You
>
> Dear Ashamed:
>
> Now come on. It's not really worse than slavery. Wouldn't you rather be paid for the countless times you've been asked if your hair is real, or if you can give dance lessons? It's not quite the same as being chained, starved, and overworked while living in subhuman conditions and healing from your latest whipping. Really, when you compare the two, I doubt you'd choose slavery. But I'd bet you are being rented on a daily basis without suitable wages. Actually, now that you point it out, maybe your life is a little bit like slavery: working all those hours, for someone else's benefit, without pay or recognition. You might want to take a look at that (179).

It is in this comment that ayo makes most explicit the difference between slavery and current racialization and makes her most powerful statement surrounding the trajectory of race relations in the United States. By evoking the real, systematic violence experienced under the slave system, ayo highlights the act of choosing as a distinguishing factor of black performativity. It is this possibility of choice—the choosing of black identity formation and performance—that has such resonance in bridging the historical distance between slavery and the twenty-first century. In this way, slavery operates as an overdetermining factor of present black existence as it provides context for racialized expectations. However, as ayo argues, there may be the possibility of usurpation as this context is realized and deconstructed in ways that may begin to

invert the racial hierarchy in moments. While the post-soul is, in many ways, founded on the acknowledgment of the multitudinous ways of performing black identities, it is also couched on the shared experiences of being black in American and what the identity as monolith is assumed to represent. The historical frames of slavery and Jim Crow and the myriad traumas within offer a way to decipher the meaningfulness of blackness even as racial significance may be obscured in a present description as mere social construct and stratifying paradigm.

The Reimagining of Topsy and the Gendering of Slavery

Yet even as we consider the twenty-first century concerns with the reclamation of the tropes of blackness and the legacy of slavery, it is important to consider the ways that this interest has driven the development of a post-1960s, post-soul aesthetic. As Salamishah Tillet explains,

> While the post-civil rights contemporary narratives on slavery build on the Post-Soul emphasis of refusing thin tropes and redefining complex notions of blackness, they are distinguished by their preoccupation with the antebellum past to work through discourses of citizenship, democracy, and African American political identity in the present (14).

Nowhere perhaps is this interest more explicitly and performatively on display than in George C. Wolfe's play *The Colored Museum* (1986) and Robert Alexander's *I Ain't Yo Uncle: The New Jack Revisionist Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1996). Indeed, Wolfe begins this discourse of citizenship by naming this character Topsy Washington. In Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Topsy had no last name, seeming to validate her treatment as "thing" (Stowe 207) and her lack of personhood. This Topsy is more fully realized, and she not only has a last name, but shares it with the first president of the United States and the nation's capital, thereby seeming to further authenticate

her existence as citizen—as if, like the legacy of George Washington, Topsy has always existed—as well as reminding audiences of the founding father's often disregarded connection to slavery and slave ownership. Wolfe describes Topsy in the stage directions, writing, "*Her hair and dress are a series of stylistic contradictions which are hip, black, and unencumbered*" (50). One cannot help but to contrast this description to that of Harriet Beecher Stowe's original in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, where the "expression of her face was an odd mixture of shrewdness and cunning, over which was oddly drawn, like a kind of veil, an expression of the most doleful gravity and solemnity" (207). *Black* not withstanding, these descriptions are not so much incongruent as they look at Topsy from two different vantage points. While Stowe constructed her as a grotesque object to be both feared and pitied, Wolfe shows that in a post-civil rights context, Topsy is contradictory and unencumbered. As usual, he makes no value judgments; he simply points to Topsy's dynamic, complicated nature.

Topsy herself problematizes her known characterization and expresses a newfound ability to define herself. She mentions, "And whereas I used to jump into a rage anytime anybody tried to deny who I was, now all I got to do is give attitude, quicker than light, and then go on about the business of being me. 'Cause I'm dancing to the music of the madness in me" (51). Topsy states that she is, "dancing to the music of the madness in me" twice in her monologue, indicating that this madness is profound. However in Topsy's articulation, madness seems to lose its negative connotations. Instead it flourishes in liberating musicality. As a result of this madness, Topsy is no longer concerned with outside expectations or preconceptions. She warns her audience not to "waste [their] time trying to label or define [her]" (52). Indeed, while the Topsy of Stowe's imagination may be a thing, this Topsy solidly refuses her thingness, instead declaring that her "THERE'S MADNESS IN ME/ AND THAT MADNESS SETS ME FREE"

(53). Topsy repeatedly sings this line, turning it into a mantra. Ultimately she closes her monologue with an unequivocal declaration:

> TOPSY: My power is in my…
>
> EVERYBODY: *Madness!*
>
> TOPSY: And my colored contradictions (53).

That Topsy locates her power in her madness, fully refusing any idea of madness as negative is significant. Again, much like in "Cookin' with Aunt Ethel," there is a voicing of madness inherent in blackness—as if, it would seem, madness is tantamount to blackness. It raises the question, of course, of whether madness is a natural part of blackness or if it is part of the black *experience.* It could be that as madness is seldom a self-ascribed characteristic, Topsy's declaration feels especially peculiar. She claims to be freed of other's opinions, but she still defines herself in the provided terms. However, this can be read as Topsy's full effort in reclaiming herself—that she reappropriates the terms used to disparage her and instead makes the connotations positive. Moreover, as madness is confusing and may be frightening to those bearing witness, Topsy's madness empowers because spectators are unable to define her more clearly than in the use of that nonspecific term. Blackness becomes madness when whiteness is meant to evoke the sane.

But what does it mean to have colored contradictions? This is the last line Topsy speaks in the play and while an assortment of the play's characters shout "*Madness!"* onstage with her, she smilingly says "colored contradictions" alone. Sandra L. Richards offers some perspective when she argues, "Not only should we analyze what is 'there' on the page, that is, scrutinize those meanings we produce based upon the multiple discourses in which we and the script are

embedded, but we also need to imagine and to write into critical discourse *how these interpretations imply contradictory positions*" (72 emphasis mine).

Wolfe then places Topsy in the intersection of her rendering by Stowe and in the new post-civil rights context to examine the contradictions therein. To fully understand the meaning of these contradictions, we need to consider Topsy further in line with the trajectory of African Americans in the popular realm. Her vignette is called "The Party," and although Topsy is dancing alone on stage, she recounts a recent affair where she saw "Nat Turner sippin champagne out of Eartha Kitt's slipper" (51) and "Aunt Jemima and Angela Davis… sharing a plate of greens and just going off about South Africa" (51). She continues naming a wide variety of black figures in attendance, describing them as "dancing to the rhythm of one beat. Dancing to the rhythm of their own definition. Celebrating in their cultural madness" (52). That these ostensibly disparate black figures could share a plate of greens and dance to one beat—a beat that is simultaneously collective and individualized—speaks to the multiplicity of black existence—colored contradictions are those interstices which seem as though they are incompatible but actually create the wholeness of both individual and communal existence.
In addition to a concern surrounding Topsy, the appropriation of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* more broadly, is common throughout these post-Civil Rights explications of blackness. Robert Alexander, in fact, expands on this in his short play, *I Ain't Yo Uncle,* which reimagines *Uncle Tom's Cabin* staged in a 20th-century context in which Stowe is held accountable for her authorial choices and the characters are provided the opportunity to rewrite themselves as more dynamic, autonomous characters. Alexander's imagined Stowe begins by offering excuses for her offensive portrayals. As she speaks to Tom, she places the blame on his shoulders

Harriet: I wrote what you showed me.

Tom: You wrote what you wanted to see! (25)

Unlike the Tom of Stowe's creation, Alexander's Tom is unwilling to offer the salve of comfort. Instead, he refuses to be sacrificial. Tom's articulation of blame is especially important here because, like the Aunt Ethel of Wolfe's imagining, Alexander's Tom implicates the audience in subscribing to a cultural belief in pathological blackness. The characters in *I Ain't Yo Uncle* thereby problematize Stowe's purported purpose in writing, indicating that her intentions matter much less than the impact on actual black lives. Ultimately, even if the key plot points remain the same—and by and large they do in Alexander's rendering—the meaning changes when the characters self-actualize and make the choices for themselves.

In an interesting shift, in *I Ain't Yo Uncle*, Tom makes the active choice to die, rather than choosing not to defend himself, as in Stowe's telling. As Salamishah Tillet describes it, "Here, Tom recognizes that his act of self-sacrifice in and of itself is not problematic. Instead, the tragedy lies in Stowe's paternalism, for she depicts Tom's religious devotion and godliness as traits that disable him from physically defending himself from Legree's whips. By choosing to die, Tom is able to turn his victimization into agency and his ignorance into subjectivity" (70). Tillet's argument about the tragedy of Stowe's paternalism is particularly salient. Like Wolfe's *Colored Museum*, Alexander's *I Ain't Yo Uncle* does not seek to absolve any character of any negative associations. This is distinctly not a play in which the characters are reestablished and given wholly positive connotations in a post-civil rights context. Certainly characters are made more dynamic and even overtly pro-black—George, for example, appears as a near-militant revolutionary—but Alexander doesn't imply that these changes are what make the characters positive. Instead, it is that the characters are allowed to make their own decisions without those decisions necessarily being representative of some simplistically-quantifiable black experience.

It is the self-actualization that is worth noting. Both Wolfe and Alexander reclaim these black characters by allowing their faults and their strengths to symbolize nothing racially except the inability to broadly define a race.

However, much like in *The Colored Museum,* Topsy is thrust center stage. It is Topsy who appears most anachronistic by the play's end, as though she has fully embraced the autonomy of a post-civil rights era. Topsy announces,

> Dat's right. Topsy-Turvy in effect. This ain't no motherfucking play. I'm the governor of this bullshit story. Harriet didn't make me up. Well, well, well, look at all these crackers and peanut butter. We'se ready for a picnic. (*These two lines vary according to the racial mix of the audience*.) What you lookin' at?! You see something you like?! You wanna leave?! I oughta fuck you up! I see the way you look at me when I get on the bus… you sit there, scared… tensed… clutchin' yo' purse… hoping I don't sit next to you. Well, fuck you! I shot a bitch 'cause she looked at me wrong. I burned down Uncle Tom's condo with the nigger still in it. I love to hear glass break. I love to watch shit burn. I love to hear motherfuckers scream. Word!! (TOPSY *freezes*.)

Topsy here performatively asserts herself in the guise of a violent and self-determined gangsta rapper. She consciously plays into stereotypes surrounding blackness in an effort to express her newfound power. The shift from "Topsy as a pickaninny who remains loyal to her white owners, Eva and Miss Ophelia," to one who "murders Eva, leaves Miss Ophelia after gaining freedom, and wreaks havoc in her neighborhood…" (Tillet 69-70) is hugely impactful and further elucidates a post-civil rights satirical impulse. Again, it is not that the satirical dismantling of these troubling tropes of blackness serves simply to make positive that which is negative. Here

Topsy fully embraces her frightful portrayal and modernizes it for her audience. The difference here is that Topsy chooses how to perform what has been said. She is no longer the wretched object in need of saving. If the frightful associations surrounding her existence are true, it's because she is now leaning into them. When Tom asks at the play's end, "Any volunteers to take Topsy? Ya'll think she come from nowhere? Do ya 'spects she just growed?" (89-90), it certainly serves to indict audiences in their role in encouraging the Topsy characterization to flourish, but it also reminds that Topsy did not *just grow*. There was intentionality behind her creation and now, in Topsy's hands, there is intentionality in retaining these traits. The problem was, arguably, not in the portrayal itself, but instead in the implication that Topsy sprung forth, fully-formed, outside of the context of a creator.

Slavery and The Post-Soul Aesthetic

Cheryl Wall wisely notes, "One cannot embrace the future until one has confronted the past. The past in the United States means coming to terms with the history of slavery—not as an institution but as an experience that millions of people whose names we do not know lived through" (115). Her idea provides a great deal of insight as to what is at stake in these performances in a post-soul, post-civil rights era. Slavery serves as a useful satirical theme because there are certain factors a playwright can take for granted. The current national consciousness requires a certain amount of amnesia surrounding the humanity of those involved and so slaves tend to receive treatment that is so historically distant that they lose identifiable humanity—but either way any nuance surrounding the personhood or personality of the slaves as individuals, rather than slaves as a monolith, is disallowed. Blackness then may be in special need of an artistic reclamation because it has been traditionally appropriated and historically demeaned in the context of the United States. While the effort to refuse harmful stereotypes of

blackness is not new—indeed, it is integral to African American literature back through slave narratives—the post-civil rights era sees the specific emergence of the reappropriation of negative portrayals. As African American literature began to disavow the confines demanded by the politics of respectability, it opened up a space for play and innovation where stereotypes could be acknowledged and dismantled, rather than ignored and disproven. The post-civil rights satirical plays are important because in staking claim to the humanity of these disparaged African American types, they do not simply seek to uplift slaves by rewriting them all as positive characters. Instead, "they enlist satire to reclaim Stowe's Tom or Topsy, exaggerating stereotypes and turning the new negative affects of revenge, fear, or shame, into the basis of new democratic collectivities" (Tillet 58). These "democratic collectivities" demand that blackness be seen for the multitudes it contains—the multitudes that blackness always knew it contained. This is so meaningful because when someone appropriates your culture, the fitting response is not necessarily to try to correct their appropriation—instead, it seems that the most satisfying response is to take it right back from them and do with it what you will.

Chapter 2

"*I* Am Telling the Story": Percival Everett, Adam Mansbach, and Racial Absurdity

> White people need to learn to see themselves as white, to see their particularity. In other words, whiteness needs to be made strange.
>
> —Richard Dyer, *White*

In examinations of race and racial meaning, often times whiteness is conspicuously left out of the conversation. The silence surrounding whiteness indicates, either tacitly or explicitly, that race is synonymous to non-whiteness—only people of color are raced; whiteness is the absence of race and white people are simply people. This problematic interpretation leads to an understanding of race itself as inherently negative. If people of color—oppressed minorities—are the only people who have race, then it is race itself that is the cause of the attendant social ills. This simplification is rampant throughout American social understanding and works to absolve the culture itself of its calculated construction of race as a visual indicator of low status and place or placelessness. It is for this reason that whiteness studies are particularly relevant as a lens to view post-soul satire. Whiteness studies make a critical intervention that provides insights into the traditionally overlooked racialization of whiteness. In this way, as Phil Cohen explains,

> The new whiteness is in many respects the obverse of the old. It is self-conscious and critical, not taken for granted or disavowed; it is the visible focus of open conflict and debate, not the silent support of an invisible consensus of power; for those to whom it is primarily addressed it is a source of guilt and anxiety rather

> than of comfort or pride; above all, it issues from a perspective that privileges a certain black experience of racism and insists that racism is primarily a white, not a black problem (244).

This shift of perspective and privilege underscores the need for whiteness studies. The post-soul manifests in this perspective—by refusing the, no pun intended, near ghettoization of the racial, the post-soul opens up a frame in which conversations can occur where the social constructedness can be addressed, rather than only ultimately melodramatic portrayals of race as the mark of Cain.

Racial Absurdity and the Uses of Whiteness Studies

Although whiteness studies emerged in the late 20th century, these considerations surrounding the unequal treatment of race have always existed in the minds and conversations of people of color. This reality, however, has not been addressed as explicitly in the public sphere. bell hooks notes that

> Usually, white students respond with naïve amazement that black people critically assess white people from a standpoint where 'whiteness' is the privileged signifier. Their amazement that black people watch white people with a critical 'ethnographic' gaze, is itself an expression of racism. Often their rage erupts because they believe that all ways of looking that highlight difference subvert the liberal conviction that it is the assertion of universal subjectivity (we are all just people) that will make racism disappear. They have a deep emotional investment in the myth of 'sameness' even as their actions reflect the primacy of whiteness as a sign informing who they are and how they think (167-8).

This white rage, as hooks identifies it, exemplifies why a more complicated understanding of blackness and whiteness matters. This new perspective necessarily disrupts the traditional paradigm. By doing so, it allows new—and possibly uncomfortable—conversations about race. These conversations have to be difficult for them to be effective. What is most important here is that whiteness studies actually and ironically decenters whiteness from its traditional position in the narrative. By placing the expectation of unraced whiteness under erasure, it opens space for a close analysis of race in America.

This close analysis of race must include a discussion of the making of whiteness because an unfair emphasis has rested on non-whiteness as uncomplicated racialization. In her essay "What White Publishers Won't Print," Zora Neale Hurston remarks, "It is assumed that all non-Anglo-Saxons are uncomplicated stereotypes. Everybody knows all about them. They are lay figures mounted in the museum where all may take them in at a glance. They are made of bent wires without insides at all. So how could anybody write a book about the non-existent?" (118). Hurston's assessment is intriguing as it not only acknowledges the oversimplified understanding of the lives of people of color but also gestures to the recurrence of the imagery—the lives of people of color are seen as structured in ways that lack nuance and individualization, so much so that the possibility of variation in experience is viewed as preposterous.[14] While Hurston wrote this statement in 1950, the sentiment still reverberates today in the mainstream commodification

[14] This may be one of a few reasons why films starring African American actors rarely receive Academy consideration unless they are dealing with issues of slavery or civil rights. Even films that address racially non-specific themes have been labeled "race-themed" by virtue of the players, possibly in an effort to alert white potential viewers that the subject matter will be distant or somehow incomprehensible because of some inherent racial difference that need not be fully articulated—that "race" itself as theme is signifier enough.

of African-American experience.[15] The experiences of people of color are systematically simplified and consciously homogenized, as though the experiences of one cannot be distinguished from others, particularly if that experience is negative. Differences of class, education, and background are all dismissed in favor of a limiting, monolithic organization of non-whiteness wedged into categorical subculture—a subculture that, by its very nature, is defined by its status as subaltern, peculiar to and below the mainstream, and negative in its performance. It is for this reason that conversations surrounding the nature of blackness are often relegated to the realm of the superficial, lacking the critical insights reserved for conversations about an apparently dynamic majority cultural experience. It is as bell hooks keenly remarks, "Theorizing black experience in the United States is a difficult task. Socialized within white supremacist educational systems and by a racist mass media, many black people are convinced that our lives are not complex, and are therefore unworthy of sophisticated critical analysis and reflection" (2). Blackness is then defined within the parameters of its status only as a limitation. Within these confines, if it exists in any critical way at all, it only does so as the binary opposition to the mainstream understanding of a more complicated whiteness. Here, whiteness is complicated because it is expressly *not* one particular thing. It cannot be easily labeled or simply identified because its definition is only made manifest within the binary, as presented in

[15] Perhaps this commodification is most evident today in the prevalence of "the gangsta," "pimp," or "thug" tropes as they appear in mainstream culture. Notable examples include fictional characters, such as Nino Brown of *New Jack City,* and Huggy Bear, a character in the 1970s series *Starsky and Hutch* who has found resurgence in popularity after a movie remake and the subsequent use of his image on clothing marketed to teenage boys. In real life, these tropes figure in the popularity of rappers and the glamorization of a "thug life" sensibility as embodied by The Notorious B.I.G. and Snoop Dogg, who himself played Huggy Bear in the remake of *Starsky and Hutch*, seeming to blend the line between fact and fiction. Most recently and egregiously, it is worth considering the appearance of a hologram of deceased rapper Tupac Shakur at the 2012 Coachella Music Fest, seeming to gesture toward a desire to capitalize on the threatening performance of black masculinity even after the death of the fetishized black man.

opposition to blackness—its parameters shift as various ethnic groups may be absorbed into it because whiteness is only what blackness is *not.* Whiteness is afforded room for play and experimentation without the actions of individuals taken to be representative of the collective. Conversely, blackness becomes a static representation of life "without insides at all." Whiteness studies opens up a new vantage point by racing or coloring whiteness. This focus on the racialization of whiteness works to strip whiteness from of its primacy or its status as norm within the context of the post-soul.

It is an idea of complicated blackness and whiteness that is at the heart of Percival Everett's *Erasure* and Adam Mansbach's *Angry Black White Boy*. Within this frame, neither blackness nor whiteness can be easily defined as one thing. In his text, *White,* Richard Dyer explains

> The myriad minute decisions that constitute the practices of the world are at every point informed by judgements [sic] about people's capacities and worth, judgements based on what they look like, where they come from, how they speak, even what they eat, that is, racial judgements. *Race is not the only factor governing these things and people of goodwill everywhere struggle to overcome the prejudices and barriers of race, but it is never not a factor, never not in play.* And since race in itself—insofar as it is anything in itself—refers to some intrinsically insignificant geographical/physical differences between people, it is the imagery of race that is in play (1, emphasis mine).

Here is where the post-soul most intimately resides, in the understanding that race *does* matter just as much as it *doesn't* matter—we can realize that race holds no inborn significance and implies no identifiable biological difference while still acknowledging or even protesting the

weight race holds in our lives and interactions. Earlier iterations often dealt uncomfortably with this distinction, as it is challenging to articulate the ways that race can exist in both spaces at once. This acceptance of racial duality in the post-soul does not preclude the possibility of speaking about race without speaking *about* race. For this reason, these satires demand a move to post-blackness that simultaneously requires post-whiteness. Again, this gesture *post* should not, of course, imply a refusal to acknowledge the actual impact of blackness, whiteness, and racialization on lived experiences. Instead, it signals a more comprehensive understanding of the ways that race is performed both in consideration of and despite the attendant stereotypes. The satires acutely indicate that race matters, but that it matters in nontraditional ways. In this way, both blackness and whiteness are not only literal descriptors but operate as metaphors to demonstrate the insufficiency of race—or any characteristic taken as a self-evident indicator—to operate within a traditional schema in the 21st century. Race has always been an ineffective categorization, but particularly now it loses even more of its savor. In this way, to paraphrase performance artist William Pope.L's response to being asked if in a similar performative, context, he was still black, these novels are "Absolutely. Of course not," still about race. In this way, whiteness studies offers a useful critical lens, not only for thinking about Mansbach's work, in which the protagonist overtly announces his desire to render whiteness other, but also in Everett's work, in which the primary subject matter is explicitly *blackness.* When taken in the context of Everett's oeuvre, *Erasure* is notable for this articulation. Much of Everett's work, even those that deal with race, are framed in ways to imply that race is the problem of other people—protagonists either address their blackness flippantly, or not until it creates crisis for another character and must be put in relief in specific ways. In his reticence to highlight race even in texts that are/are not about race, Everett assumes the position of many white authors by

assuming the universality of the experiences he writes—race need not be incessantly emphasized because it is not the overweening influence on the character's self-actualization, nor does blackness need to be loudly announced where whiteness merely *is.* In *Erasure*, Everett thrusts black performativity and self-identity center stage and he entreats us to consider how it informs self-identity. As a result, reading *Erasure* through the lens of whiteness studies opens possibilities for understanding race as performed, thus placing the validity of both blackness and whiteness as identities in question.

The Fear of Blackness and Post-Soul Satirical Novels

The conventions of these satirical novels illuminate four critical elements of the post-soul more broadly: an awareness of the potential for misinterpretation, a large-scale consideration (if not full condemnation) of the public sphere, a critique on the reliance on racial performativity, and an emphasis on a lack of moralizing or lesson by the novel's end. These features work in concert not only to problematize a certain perception of fearsome blackness taken as universal but to indict both active participant and passive observer for its prevalence and continued iterations. In utilizing the satiric mode, *Erasure* and *Angry Black White Boy* address a particular and troubling desire to limit and confine blackness—and here, specifically, the black masculine—to the static, easily identifiable, and quantifiable. In *Erasure,* the presence of stereotypical black masculinity is figured through the projection of performative characteristics and onto physical black masculinity. In *Angry Black White Boy,* the fear of the black masculine becomes so insidious that its presumed characteristics erase white masculine physicality—the protagonist, despite being white, is assumed to be black because of public expectations of racialized rhetoric and performativity. Even in the presence of white maleness, black masculinity is so fearsome that it has the potential to subsume all other categorizations. Here racialization

centers on two truths as articulated by Thomas F. DeFrantz and Anita Gonzalez, that "black sensibilities emerge whether there are black bodies present or not; and that while black performance may certainly become manifest without black people, we might best recognize it as a circumstance enabled by black sensibilities, black expressive practices, and black people" (1). Although DeFrantz and Gonzalez do not specifically address the idea of potential fear, it is the fearsome nature surrounding even the idea of blackness that reinforces its seeming insidiousness—the fear of blackness does not require the presence of actual black people to exist because the idea of blackness is already so well-established and ever-present. Through this understanding of racialization, Everett and Mansbach demonstrate that the myth of the violent, criminal black male is so pervasive that it persists even in the absence of signifiers. In doing so, the authors dismantle the idea of racial essentialism by heightening its arbitrariness through the creation of protagonists who traverse the color line and disrupt the supposedly clean break of the black/white racial binary.

Broadly, this mythology surrounding blackness gestures toward what makes a text *black* and addresses the malleability of post-soul blackness as reflected in satire, particularly when held in context with a more comprehensive understanding of whiteness. In her introduction to *Displacing Whiteness,* Ruth Frankenberg explains, "The more one scrutinizes it, the more the notion of whiteness as unmarked norm is revealed to be a mirage, or at least a phenomenon delimited in time and space" (5). These novels reveal the myth of un-raced whiteness by forcing the idea of "race" itself to the forefront. Race is not a subject appropriate for literature—except, of course, when it overtly is, and then it is addressed in ways that mark race as inherently problematic, dangerous, or disturbing. In this post-soul centering of "race," blackness loses this stigma—and whiteness may take some of the stigma on—as the problems of race are not viewed

as inborn but are instead seen to stem from failures of society to move past an oversimplified, binary understanding of both race and racialization. Richard Dyer argues that "As long as race is something only applied to non-white peoples, as long as white people are not racially seen and named, they/we function as a human norm. Other people are raced, we are just people" (1). The post-soul actively refuses this obfuscation. Instead, the post-soul disallows this status of whiteness either by de-racializing all race broadly or by interrogating the ways in which whiteness signal racial performance. In these post-soul satiric novels, neither race nor discussions of race are an inherent evil, but they are not an inherent good either—nor need it be. It becomes one of many performative aspects of identity, and through the writing of these novels Everett and Mansbach demonstrate that there are many ways to perform one's identity—in the post-soul, it is as Kenneth Warren offers, "The burden of this new aesthetic, which again is simultaneously cause for complaint and celebration, is that one can be black anywhere, and one can be anywhere and still be black" (128). It is this burden that Everett and Mansbach closely examine by considering the potential successes of blackness performed both as it rebukes and conforms to traditional schema and expectations.

Erasure and *Angry Black White Boy* operate with a clear awareness of the calculated and conventional reticence around race, and so their satirical representations of race thrust the multitudinous possibilities of blackness to the forefront in non-traditional and important ways. If whiteness seems to exist in and to permeate American literature through its absence of signifiers—just, simply put, that which isn't black—then it is blackness that requires demarcation and introduction. This need for categorization is particularly important in consideration of the post-soul questioning of racialization and the subsequent rejection of racial quantifiability. Racial essentialism is eschewed, but this does not mean that race becomes

invisible. There is instead the acknowledgement of the failure of language to define race in satisfactory ways. In this way, race is not reliant merely on what can be seen. Instead, within the post-soul, race relies on virtuality—not what is physically present but what is *presumed* to be present. Ultimately, it is this idea of racial intangibility that begins to contextualize the post-soul literary moment. Instead, within the post-soul, race relies on virtuality—not what is physically present but what is *presumed* to be present. Ultimately, it is this idea of racial intangibility that begins to contextualize the post-soul literary moment. *Black* texts are traditionally identified simply by the author's race, but these post-soul novels may complicate that narrative, particularly in the satirical mode. Instead, they are reliant upon an authorial perspective that privileges non-whiteness without intentionally fetishizing it for mainstream consumption. It is for this reason that there are post-soul writers and performers who are not African American, and African American post-soul authors often claim some other aspect of their identity as most salient.[16]

In fact, both *Erasure* and *Angry Black White Boy* gain additional significance in the context of post-soul satire. Dustin Griffin explains more broadly concerning satire, "As rhetorical performance, satire is designed to win the admiration and applause of a reading audience not for the ardor or acuteness of its moral concern but for the brilliant wit and force of the satirist as rhetorician" (71). For both Everett and Mansbach, then, surely their own "brilliant wit and force… as rhetorician" is deserving of applause, but even more interesting is the way in which they closely interrogate their own near-doppelganger protagonists. These protagonists are

[16] *The Methuen Drama Book of Post-Black Plays,* edited by Douglas A. Jones, Jr. and Harry J. Elam, Jr., features two plays written by non-black playwrights. Similarly, one may be reminded of music producer and recording artist, Pharrell Williams, and his assertion that he is "New Black." Of course, the inclusion of non-black authors in African American literature could give pause, but I will address my rationale in greater detail as it pertains to Adam Mansbach later in this chapter.

ultimately punished for their hubris in believing their own understanding of racialization to be superior. What is compelling here is that this seeming self-indictment may indicate a need for a more comprehensive lens through which to view racialization—that it isn't simply enough to decry racial essentialism or racial inequality, but to do so in a way that sheds light on the structure of the system itself, rather than merely indicting individual participants. Everett is consistently concerned throughout his literature with the problems that lead to the seeming ineffability of blackness in both the public and private realms, and in *Erasure*, he utilizes metanarrative to fully examine the utility of satiric performance. In *Erasure,* Monk's created fictional persona, Stagg R. Leigh, is presumed to be black for the same reason as Macon—their convincing use of violence and heated language is tantamount to purportedly black rhetoric.[17]

Likewise, in *Angry Black White Boy* the protagonist, Macon Detournay, is initially identified by the public as black despite his phenotypically non-black characteristics, thus problematizing the reliance on simple stereotypes in racial essentialism. Even Mansbach's own situatedness in post-black literature demonstrates this new degree of racial fluidity implied by the post-soul. Gene Andrew Jarrett intriguingly posits that, "editing an African American anthology in a postracial era entails counterbalancing the idea that its readers might be 'hungry for texts about themselves' against the idea that they might also be awaiting their own disarticulation from the straightjacket of racial authenticity and representation in African American political history" (163). Henry Louis Gates argues, "The blackness of black literature is not an absolute or a metaphysical condition… nor is it some transcending essence that exists outside of its

[17] It is important to note here Everett's allusion to "Stagger" Lee Shelton. Stagger Lee was a known pimp convicted of murder in 1895. Both Stagger Lee and the murder have since been immortalized in song and popular culture as a symbol of fearsome black masculinity. These songs and images still circulate to this day and continue to shape widespread understanding of blackness and, specifically, the black male as criminal and frightening.

manifestations in text. Rather, the 'blackness' of black American literature can be discerned only through close readings. By 'blackness' here I mean specific uses of literary language that are shared, repeated, critiqued, and revised" (121). Given Gates's criteria, one that conspicuously does not mention phenotypical race—it is not difficult to imagine *Angry Black White Boy* as a work of African American literature. Certainly the text is not African American literature in the literal and easiest sense because it is not written by an African American author, but if hip hop can be used as a signifier of black cultural thought, then *lit hop*—one way to potentially classify the novel—functions as its literary equivalent. Lit hop, like hip hop, is defined if not by its authorial blackness then by its status as outside of the canonical and away from the acceptance of a society in which white supremacy is the norm. These lit hop texts refuse racial essentialism by instead illuminating the ways in which race can be performed and has always been performed—even when the performative aspect is denied and the idea of racial behavior as inherent is a given, there is emphasis placed on racial construction as at least partially chosen, as embraced or rejected to some degree. This of course does not inevitably mean that post-soul literature requires a hip hop aesthetic, or that lit hop is necessarily post-soul. Instead, for Mansbach, it seems that a hip hop sensibility becomes one possible way to articulate an affiliation with blackness in a post-soul context without appropriating tropes of blackness or performing an exaggerated, grotesque portrayal of blackness. Through this use of lit hop, the musicality of some African American vernacular is "shared, repeated, critiqued, and revised" in such a way that its literariness is heightened. It seems to gesture to "some preexisting encoded structure of agreements about what 'black' sounds like" (Dubey 3), without, I would argue, requiring an essentialist view of black sound. That is to say, there are multiple ways to make a black *sound* within the realm of black

performance and performativity that gesture to a black chant grounded in historicity. In this way, *Angry Black White Boy* can truly reside in the African American literary in a post-soul context. It is through this play within post-soul and the simultaneous engagement with the myth of quantifiable blackness that both Everett and Mansbach demonstrate the arbitrary yet significant nature of racialization in a 21st-century context. They reflect a satirical mode framed by "signifyin'" in which the characteristics of traditional African American literary production and performance are highlighted for the purpose of their reimagining and repetition through a post-soul lens. This satiric play underscores the peculiarities of the post-soul moment, which opens itself up for the inclusion on non-African American authors in the realm of African American literature. It is important to clarify that this is not an attempt to justify the inclusion of all the non-black authors who have been associated with the post-soul, but instead to specifically work to provide a rationale for the logic behind Adam Mansbach's singular inclusion. This provides a unique challenge because the reasons for excluding Mansbach—or any non-black artist or performer—are readily imagined and run deeper than mere skin color or ethnic identification.

Erasure and the Fearsome Black Masculine

In *Erasure,* the protagonist, Thelonious "Monk" Ellison, is a writer, but his writing isn't selling. His books, written with a decidedly academic flair, are suffering from the preconceptions of the readers and publishers alike—he's a black author, but where are his books about the black experience? It is out of this anger—an anger that, at least initially, is justified—that he adopts the pseudonym Stagg R. Leigh and writes *My Pafology,* later *Fuck*, a satirical novella focused on an over-the-top ghetto and its downtrodden residents. In doing so he imprecisely attempts to indict an often well-meaning public of their oversimplified and ultimately harmful construction of black masculinity. It is important to note that while Monk's creation of *My Pafology* erupts from

raw emotionality and frustration, Everett's construction of Monk's novella is for use in a more calculated and intentional satirical manner. The novella, in this larger dimension, critiques the market for literature and images that limit and box in a particular, often negative portrayal of blackness. Monk explains that the need to write the book suddenly consumes him, saying, "I remembered passages of *Native Son* and *The Color Purple* and *Amos and Andy* and my hands began to shake, the world opening around me, tree roots trembling on the ground outside, people in the street shouting *dint, ax, fo, screet* and *fahvre!* And I was screaming inside, complaining that I didn't sound like that…" (61). The juxtaposition of *Native Son* and *The Color Purple* with *Amos and Andy* is particularly significant in considering his disgust with the widespread acceptance of negative blackness. His work is ultimately not merely a broad condemnation of white America—otherwise Monk could claim inspiration from *Amos and Andy* and other white-authored parodic portrayals of blackness in isolation. But his inclusion of *Native Son* and *The Color Purple*—both critically-acclaimed, black authored, and beloved by racially-diverse audiences—indicates the presence of and his recollection of these belittling characteristics in unexpected spaces. Gillian Johns incisively notes

> Everett's satire reaches for more than a critique of such stories on their own terms, it bitingly extends to readers (and, moreover, writers like Monk) who would compartmentalize them and believe themselves above suspicion regarding their invention, display, and consumption. That is, if we have been duped into Monk's "readerly" approach to *Fuck*, his own "blindspots" allows us to miss the irony that the "ghetto" tale featuring a black male "other" who rapes women rolls off the tongue of the self-professed highly educated, thoughtful writer who has the

> interesting hobbies of fishing and woodworking and who has never felt comfortable with black English (91-92).

It would appear then that Everett is not only demonstrating the insidious nature of these negative portrayals, but also that all facets of society bear responsibility for their conception and promulgation—no one is without guilt. Not only are consumers at fault, but Monk himself is through his own immediate exploitation of black masculinity. The post-soul necessitates this kind of internal critique, not just for Monk for readers as well. This is such an important move because it shifts decisively away from the idea that racism is an inherent cultural ill or that it stems from individual behavior—the currently popular idea that racism will die out with "the old generation"—but instead that there is an interplay of a social dynamic fostered and even encouraged by personal acceptance.

Importantly, while *Native Son* and *The Color Purple* may have portrayed some aspects of blackness in troublingly stereotypical ways, both novels work actively to prove the humanity of African Americans within the frame of a white supremacist understanding of race. Kenneth Warren explains that prior to the post-soul, "no writer of this period could operate indifferently either to the expectation that African American literature ought to contribute demonstrably to some social end or to the belief that novels, poems, or plays constituted proxies for the status or the nature of the race as a whole" (13). While this claim seems to imply authorial acquiescence and, in that way, may not be entirely convincing, even in the more specific terms of the Harlem Renaissance—indeed one may need only consider Langston Hughes's Jesse B. Semple stories or the autobiographical writing of Zora Neale Hurston to see the ways much African American literature sought to examine the uniqueness of experience within the communal without an overt frame of respectability politics—Warren's point still has merit. Prior to the post-soul, authors

were certainly aware of the potential *responsibility* of being black while in the public sphere. Post-civil rights, when stereotypes surrounding blackness were no longer being used to justify overt legal restrictions, actively working to dismantle the beliefs did not necessarily seem as immediately critical. Nell Irvin Painter argues, "Although race may still seem overweening, without legal recognition it is less important than in the past" (389). Although "less important" may be a debatable term, certainly in view of the current upheaval in the United States surrounding race-based police brutality, without legal recognition racial categorization certainly may not seem as *immediate* a concern. Instead the impulse may now be toward depicting a substantial degree of self-actualization within and without racialization. Nevertheless, for Monk it would seem that in writing about race even these good intentions are problematic as, for him, they only serve to reinscribe racist notions of blackness. Monk's takeaway from these texts seems to be that they imply that African Americans are worthy of pity rather than fear, which although a shift from traditional racial essentialism, offers no substantively better outcome. While the catalyst for writing *My Pafology* is Monk's anger at the willingness of the public to accept these trite stereotypes of blackness, his ability to write this text occurs only because he has likewise internalized these characteristics. Monk remembers these tropes without any difficulty because even as he actively works to suppress his own limited notions of blackness, the very nature of these stereotypes is so insidious that he has already internalized them. Indeed, Monk demonstrates throughout the novel that he finds it difficult to refuse the easiest stereotypes of the world around him. It is ironic, then, that he has no response so damaging as his actual decision to write *My Pafology*.

It is his ability to instantly recall these stereotypes of blackness that significantly precipitates the creation of the novella. Certainly, if the stereotypes were not so easily

remembered, Monk may have been able to write a more measured text away from his most immediate feelings of anger and frustration—an actual satire, rather than a rant. Instead *My Pafology* bridges the gap between the real and the absurd as Everett makes common stereotypes of blackness personified and plays them out to an outlandish conclusion—so outlandish, it would seem that no one could possibly accept either *My Pafology* or Stagg R. Leigh as earnest. Yet the novella is taken at face value as audiences ignore or cannot identify any satirical elements and project the stereotypical black masculine on the pseudonymic author—an author ironically received as simultaneously mysterious and, to paraphrase Hurston, someone audiences already know all about. Resultantly, the text is well-received as a window into typical black life. In Monk's attempt to point out the ridiculousness of racialization, by adding no discernible commentary to these limiting portrayals of blackness, he ultimately highlights race—or the stereotypes surrounding race—and reinforces its status as inextricable from public consciousness.

The audience of Erasure acknowledges My Pafology as a satire-within-a-satire. Yet with Stagg as the author Monk inadvertently only *reestablishes* racial salience. The readerly audience for *My Pafology* in isolation—which exists only in the universe of *Erasure* itself—is unaware of the work's existence as a satire, and resultantly accepts Stagg's account as true. Yet Everett's own audience may be complicit as well. Everett may in fact be satirizing both mainstream American culture and the African American literary communities that allow these negative performances to stand in for blackness. Thus, while Everett effectively censures mainstream perception, Monk's very personal anger overwhelms his text and he consequently lacks the critical stance necessary for a full evaluation of race in American society. Monk explains to his agent, "Look at the shit that's published. I'm sick of it. This is an expression of my being sick of

it" (Everett 132). While Monk's frustrations are valid, to be sure, Everett structures them in such a way that audiences must see Monk's effort toward articulating his anger as problematic, to say the least, as he indicts the world around him but never himself as he performs black masculinity in expected ways. Ultimately, Monk achieves nothing more than momentary catharsis in his writing. His novella is rendered impotent as he furthers the Stagg R. Leigh charade. When an editor hopes to meet with Stagg, Monk asks his agent to "Tell her I'll call her… Tell her Stagg R. Leigh lives alone in the nation's capital. Tell her he's just two years out of prison, say he said 'joint,' and that he still hasn't adjusted to the outside. Tell her he's afraid he might *go off*. Tell her that he will only talk about the book, that if she asks any personal questions, he'll hang up" (Everett 153). Monk is far too cavalier about any ramifications of his portrayal. If his racialized frustrations stem from mainstream willingness to accept the basest stereotypes of blackness, Monk is only embracing them, rather than agitating against them. Additionally, *My Pafology* rapidly becomes Monk's most successful work as it is both consumed by the public and acclaimed by his critics. Monk, who is dealing with financial difficulties stemming from taking care of a sick mother, learns quickly that this degree of self-exploitation is lucrative, even if he is unwilling to articulate that fact to himself.

It is the agitation of the traditional schema that Monk's portrayals lack that prevents his audiences from accepting his half-hearted declaration that his work is satire. When considering the ways in which fearsome ideas of black masculinity exist regardless of the willing participation of the black male subject, this is particularly troubling. In *Constructing the Black Masculine*, Maurice O. Wallace argues that in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man,* "the black masculine virtuality obtains in the affective power of shadows" (35). This power of shadows is endemic to Monk's understanding of blackness and his ability to create and sustain Stagg R.

Leigh. Blackness is paradoxically situated within American culture as that which is quantifiable and commodifiable by all, yet simultaneously alien and hidden—something so outside of the norm that its motivations and behaviors become animalistic and can never be fully understood by the mainstream. The shadow then obscures a nuanced understanding of blackness while simultaneously seeming to represent blackness itself. In *Erasure*, this mythic Stagg R. Leigh is empowered by forced clandestinity—his persona is maintained through this power of shadows. Yet even this anticipated cover is fraudulent as Monk works to characterize Stagg according to his most easily-accessible notions of measurable blackness. Stagg then is most convincing not simply because Monk subconsciously believes and accepts the stereotypes, but because accepting these stereotypes requires the least amount of effort. In this way, it is significant that it is not only the general public that legitimizes Stagg's existence, but the educated elite, and *Monk himself*. While Monk works so diligently to absolve himself of his guilt for perpetuating these negative types, he is not willing to do the more difficult work required to refuse them with sincerity.

Ultimately it is for this reason that audiences of *Erasure* can determine that, despite his arguments otherwise, Monk isn't truly attempting to write a satire. A satire requires perhaps most of all clear intentionality, and Monk's has none. Even retroactively, Monk can only criticize his novella's poor reception by blaming audience stupidity and claiming they missed his point without ever articulating what that point is. The fact that Monk's "satire" is, in fact, no satire at all matters so much in understanding why his text can be so soundly problematized—it is not, after all, an issue of desiring a return to the politics of respectability or that his satiric aim has overshot its mark. The satiric mode here isn't simply muddled, but missing altogether. This fact is evident not only by his facile narration but also by his creation of a pseudonymic author.

Instead he has written a jumbled narrative that not only lacks the central focus required of the satiric mode but also contains a convincing and seemingly sincere author—*My Pafology* resultantly has all the signifiers of a work to be taken literally and seriously. Monk's narrative is bolstered only by grotesque, caricatured blackness and he smugly places the burdensome onus of discerning it as satire on the audience. In fact, without Stagg's performative blackness as the author, the novella would be far less compelling because it would lack autobiographical intrigue as textual propellant and verification of content.

Thus Monk's purported reliance on audience discernment is problematic for two important reasons. First, his text is unable to function as a fully-articulated satire because Monk is unable to establish any distance between himself and his narration—satire presumes authorial understanding of the situation being satirized while it provides space for simultaneous audience awareness of authorial distance from the actual plot as it occurs. Second, and even more troublingly, *My Pafology* never works as a satire quite simply because Monk did not truly write it as a satire—catharsis is not necessarily satire,[18] and in Monk's case it, shares none of the prerequisites for acceptance as satire. This aspect is easily overlooked—after all, audiences are reading the account of a protagonist who does claim the work to be satire—but it cannot be overemphasized in understanding why Monk's satire fails and, likewise, why Everett is able to so skillfully satirize Monk's behavior in the text. Monk wrote the narrative as a purgative rant, possessed by hideous, stereotypical blackness and nothing more. That Monk's caricatures of blackness are grotesque, although disturbing, is not necessarily problematic on its face. He is

[18] Taking this a step further, it is possible to argue that African American satire cannot be reduced to catharsis alone. While the literature is certainly enjoyable, the ultimate aim is resistance, rather than a pleasurable release—although there may be some individual instance where catharsis can be achieved, the endemic nature of race and racialization does not neatly lend itself to widespread catharsis. Even the trope of laughing to keep from crying, importantly, operates as a method of resistance rather than catharsis in isolation.

under no obligation as an African American writer to work toward literary racial uplift or the dismantling of hurtful racialization. After all, as Tommie Shelby plainly articulates, "One can come to firmly believe that he or she has no reason to be ashamed of being black without holding that blackness is something to be proud of. The fact of blackness—whether this fact is a matter of nature, social convention, or some combination thereof—would seem to have no bearing on the question of noteworthy achievement" (96). Certainly then, if Monk wants to wage a criticism against a certain performance of blackness, he is well within his rights to do so. The problem arises instead when Monk actively engages in this type of characterization and then accepts no responsibility for audience response to it—he is not criticizing the performance, he is criticizing the reception while guiding audiences to receive his work in the same way. Indeed, importantly, it is not until he decides the work is publishable that he retroactively announces (and only to his publisher) the work to be satirical and insists the title be changed from *My Pafology* to *Fuck*. This distinction is crucial. It is as if to absolve himself from wrongdoing in his addition to the canon of black-belittling literary exercises he must claim to have written the work as a satire, only with the hope of erasing personal, unspoken concerns that he may have internalized these damaging tropes—this effort is never about teaching the public or indicting them in a way to spur on widespread social change. It is doubtful that Monk even believes his own rationalization, as he is more diligent and meticulous in his creation of Stagg than his text itself. The impetus for his writing was that these simplistic stereotypes are so readily consumed, and yet he provides no indication to his readers that his work is not merely following in this tradition of quantifying blackness. He is, at best, incredibly careless with his handling of his emotions, not necessarily for feeling them at all but for packaging and distributing them so widely—and so smugly—without considering the ramifications. For the audience of *Erasure,* it is evident that Monk has

merged the frustrations of past aggressions with performative blackness and satirical inclinations—but even we remain unconvinced as Monk indicts everyone except himself. How could the readers of *My Pafology* without having information about Monk's purported intentions be cued to receive the work as satire, especially in the presence of so many other contemporary literary works that touch on the same themes and are presented and received in earnest? In this case, context is everything. Satire must contain forthright signifiers or else it fails—it must either overtly announce its satirical intent or engage in a portrayal so outlandish and out of step with the norm of behavior that it can be received in no other way—and Monk's is grossly unsuccessful as it teaches nothing, seems to emerge from nothing, and reinforces the stereotypes he sought to dismantle.

It is this lack of coding that ultimately harms not only the text but Monk himself. As a result, as Houston A. Baker, Jr. explains, "the ordinary reader might have a very difficult time empathizing with Monk as he proceeds, with creepy solipsistic self-certainty, through the world—believing he alone is capable of placing the contemporary culture industry *sous rature*" (136 emphasis in original). Here, Baker alludes not only to Jacques Derrida's concept of *sous rature* but also to his broad rejection of the binary between the written and spoken. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak explains it, *sous rature* means "under erasure," explained as "to write a word, cross it out, and then print both word and deletion. (Since the word is inaccurate, it is crossed out. Since it is necessary, it remains legible.)" (xiv). Aldon Lynn Nielsen echoes this idea in *Black Chant,* demonstrating that any present verbalization is built upon not only what literally came before but what is *perceived* to have come before. In this way, the word is simultaneously here and not here—significant but seemingly cast aside. Monk is poorly experimenting with this same idea—and it is, of course, no accident that Everett titled his novel

Erasure—as he changes the title of his novella from *My Pafology* to *Fuck,* and while he shifts and shatters his authorial frame for the writing while the content remains the same. Because Monk narcissistically assumes on one level mainstream audiences should share his perspective upon reading his text—despite his previous articulation that he *knows* they cannot, and despite his unwillingness to give them any signposts to guide them as they read—he distances himself from both the readerly and writerly audiences, ultimately disconnecting himself from reality and being absorbed into blackness as commodity. Finally, it is his emotionality that causes him to so fully miss the mark. Monk is so angry about what he perceives as reader apathy surrounding the portrayal of blackness that he is unable to channel his feeling into something productive, rather than explosive, simplistic racialization. In fact, Monk seems to imagine that somehow his writing should jar audiences out of their complacency, while disregarding his own inability to do so. While readers are guilty for so eagerly devouring Stagg's tale, Monk is even more culpable for writing a novella that is so far removed from the realm of satire that even the author himself can only label it so half-heartedly and retroactively.

Everett centers the satirical action squarely on Monk and examines the significant damage these preconceptions of black masculinity do to him as an individual. This is an important choice within the satirical mode as Monk begins unexpectedly to represent a microcosm of blackness. While Monk's own experiences may initially seem personalized, it is worth considering the fact that the negative effects on his life are socially constructed and that the damage done to individuals ultimately compounds to widespread social impact. It is the implied communality of fractured identity that gives the text its satirical significance as post-soul. Monk worked actively in both his early writing and his personal life to reject and refuse the stereotypes of blackness by shirking what he viewed as expected African-American scholarly

interests and instead involving himself in those traditionally associated with the white avant-garde and the white leisure class, but his efforts are ultimately futile as he becomes so immersed in quantifiable blackness that he cannot be distinguished from it. The monolithicism of the black masculine stereotype confines the individual black man into a duplicitous state of existing and not existing and it ultimately attempts to stifle black manhood, and Monk plays right into his own destruction.

This idea of being and not being is further illuminated in the complicatedly-titled *Percival Everett by Virgil Russell* (2013)*,* a novel by Percival Everett. The novel seems to recall Samuel Beckett's work with theatre of the absurd—most notably *Endgame*'s concern with speakerly knowledge and looming death—as the plot winds and tangles and the lines between life and death, black and white, spoken and written, and father and son blur and are then examined *sous rature.* In the novel, a son visits his dying father and the two attempt to tell a story together. Yet Everett's intentional lack of quotation marks or other typical speech notations and the sparse description and indecipherable difference in voice renders the speakers indistinguishable. In fact, at one point the speaker acknowledges this fact, announcing,

> Not to complicate matters, as if I give a fuck about that, but I'd be remiss if I did not make clear the complete absence of clarity regarding one pressing and nagging matter, that being: just who the fuck is telling this story? There are readers, dear readers, and I use the plural modestly as to really mean possibly only one reader, counted repeatedly on different days, that require a certain degree of specificity concerning the identity of the narrator. Is it an old man or the old man's son? Not that I am by nature disposed to behaving differentially to any

> reader, or anyone, but I will clear up the matter forthwith, directly, tout de suite. *I* am telling this story (Everett 107, emphasis in original).

This obfuscating pseudo-clarification gestures directly to the inability to determine who the speaker is, even as the speaker himself expresses his confusion and ostensibly tries to make the difference manifest. It is this idea of being and not being that is so impactful for Everett as he dismantles traditional binaries through his instance that all narration is, to some degree, metanarration. In *Percival Everett,* Everett creates characters that routinely directly address their audience, and the distinction between the readerly and writerly audiences are likewise blurred—readers may find it difficult to know if the speaker is addressing his prospective reader, his father, his son, the readers of *Percival Everett*, or some combination of both. Ultimately, the question of who is being addressed is less significant than that the story is being articulated.

Although the interest in the telling of stories is nothing new, the way it emerges prominently in the post-soul is particularly worth greater consideration. Everett's father-son speaker explains

> To a considerable degree, by the time we have reached a certain age, it varies for each of us, we have said all we meant to say. Everything else is either a reissue or an elucidation, a gloss. Some utterances might be reconstructions of some erased pages, palimpsest of sorts, but it's mere repetition. There might even be supplement here or there, but our questions will have nothing more to seek but the texture of our texts, the colors of our recollections, but there will be no new colors and there will be no new tastes or sensations. The only new thing will be cessation, suspension, conclusion, and besides that we will have nothing to play

> with but the play within the shadows or whatever metaphors loom or we choose to have loom (Everett 168).

It is this idea of repetition with a difference—even here, the idea itself is repeated throughout with difference—that is an intrinsic part of the post-soul. Not only does the post-soul dwell in the repetition and the inventive and intuitive spins on communal storytelling and experiences, but in Everett's articulation the self comprises these many repetitions, seemingly repeated ad infinitum. This explanation further illuminates the necessity of the rupture of a supposed singularity of identity—the "reissue or an elucidation, a gloss" indicate gradation and slight variance, rather than fixed points on a binary. Here again it becomes clear that the post-soul impulse to disrupt the binary is necessary. Aldon Lynn Nielsen further elucidates this need specifically in the realm of the literary when he writes in *Black Chant* that "[o]ne problem with the continued privileging of orality over the written in the study of African-American writing is that such privileging too often leads to a critique that inadequately listens to the relationships between script and performance" (21). Certainly, then by disallowing the primacy of the written word even as he is literally writing the speech patterns of his fictional characters, by forcing the orality of the narrative to an unexpected forefront in his novel, Everett demonstrates the inextricable nature of both forms.

During one brief moment of apparently deliberate character separation in *Percival Everett,* the father announces to his son, "Stay with me, son, there is no moral to this tale" (Everett 27). Within this self-effacement may reside the actual significance of this narrative. The emphasis here is on the command to stay. Rather than this moment serving to finally locate the son in juxtaposition to his father on opposite ends of a binary, his request for his son to "stay with [him]" ultimately demonstrates that the two should not rest on a binary but instead

converge, or if not converge then at least acknowledge the dismissal of the binary as evidenced by their overlapping planes of existence—they are not parallel lines or opposing ends on a spectrum; there is an intersection. A binary implies a diametric opposition of the two points. Everett refuses this binary of race, age, and even paternal relation as the son and father stay together and ultimately stay so *closely* together that they are indistinguishable. What does this represent outside of the world of *Percival Everett*? Is Everett hearkening to some sort of idealized world where differences don't matter? Given his oeuvre, this degree of optimism seems unlikely. It does, however, point again to his giving precedence to the telling of the story so much so that the plot of the story itself is indistinguishable from the articulation, and the listener indistinguishable from the players. Within the frame of the post-soul treatment of race as a refusal of the traditional binaries of black and white, shame and pride, and bad and good, in both *Erasure* and *Percival Everett*, Everett's metanarration reminds us of the inherent malleability of even seemingly clear, tangible characteristics. It is in this grey space of complicated subjectivities that the post-soul resides.

Angry Black White Boy and Black Virtuality

In *Angry Black White Boy*, Adam Mansbach further complicates the stereotypical notions of a racialized perspective as on a binary—where blackness is raced and whiteness is the absence of race. In this novel, a young white Columbia University student, Macon Detournay, begins robbing his white taxicab fares out of aggravation at what he perceives to be their willingness to accept the white-benefitting status quo tantamount to American race relations. He holds them at gunpoint and engages in racialized rhetoric, threatening to "bust a cap in your flabby white ass" and snarling that "you people are a fucking plague on this planet" (Mansbach 98). Later, his victims report having been robbed by a black man based on racist assumptions and inferred

racial performativity. It would be merely humorous—and Mansbach, like Everett, is at turns hilarious and somber throughout—perhaps, if the implications weren't so horrifying in reality. Mansbach himself, like Everett, is certainly familiar with the problematizing of racial identity as he and his protagonist share a number of characteristics—both are Columbia-educated Boston natives, both came from an upper middle class backgrounds, both embraced hip hop culture at an early age. In *Angry Black White Boy* Mansbach skillfully and satirically addresses the problem of the preconceptions of black masculinity by imagining it out to its absurd conclusion—what happens when a man seems to exhibit some of the basest stereotypes of black masculinity, but lacks black skin? Maurice Wallace believes, "It is the insufferability of the inescapable afterimage of the absent black antecedent that would seem to worry the effort, at least in the white imagination, to 'cover [one's] tracks and traces.' For the traces of black male visibility are retained in the white unconscious 'permanently'; they defy cover" (33-34). Black masculinity is defined then not by literal physicality but by an expectation of exotic degeneracy so present and pervasive that it need not physically be present for its threat to emerge in spectrality. It is then as Mansbach argues in his essay, "The Audacity of Post-Racism," that "white kids all over the country believe, based on the signifiers flashing on their TV screens, that blackness equals flashy wealth, supreme masculinity, and ultra-sexualized femininity—interrupted occasionally by bursts of glamorous violence, and situated in a thrilling ghetto that is both dangerous and host to a constant party" (73). Like Everett, Mansbach uses satire not simply to examine the stereotypes surrounding race, but even more importantly to dissect the damage these preconceptions do to individuals of all races and to society more broadly.

Mansbach dismantles race by significantly demonstrating its arbitrary nature without ever implying that race *doesn't matter* or that it is inherently negative. Instead, he shows the ways in

which racial primacy is a fallacious method for understanding identity and social interaction. The fact that Macon is white and, after being mistaken for black, becomes some sort of pseudo-black pseudo-Nationalist figurehead requires a suspension of disbelief merged with a simultaneous understanding of the reality inherent in the absurd that is always a characteristic of satire. Satire is absurd, to be sure, but never entirely unbelievable, and this distinction is especially important for literature dealing with and problematizing race. This is not to say, of course, that satire must be congruous with non-fiction. Instead, satire retains some critical gestures to the frustrations of actual lived experiences. Where the plot-driven deviations occur, they serve to elucidate the significance of actual social constructs on quotidian experience. For Everett and Mansbach, then, rather than merely indicting readers—although this occurs as well—these satirical representations force readers out of their comfort and complacency by demonstrating unchecked racialization in a familiar literary universe. Furthering this satirical inventiveness, Mansbach confounds racial expectation by, as in *My Pafology,* also aligning his text with Richard Wright's *Native Son.* Like *Native Son*, *Angry Black White Boy* is broken into triadic books, but the similarities extend beyond the superficial. Macon explains in the prologue that, "I was hoping someone would call me the white Bigger Thomas, but nobody had the nutsack even though it's an obvious comparison, what with Bigger being a chauffeur and me a cabbie. I talked a lot more shit than Bigger ever did, though. And I did what I did on purpose. And I got away" (Mansbach 2-3). Bigger's threat of black violence against whites is reimagined here as the threat of black violence against white *but perpetrated by white*, demonstrating the strange evolution of American racial politics through a lens of post-blackness—blackness has presumably become so post-black that even a sympathetic white kid from Boston may at least temporarily be wedged into it, with or without his full consent. Indeed, here even the figure of the black tragic, Bigger

Thomas, can be aligned with a privileged, white college student in the 21st century. The differences as Macon notes them, however, are critical for understanding the significance of his actions and the racialization of behavior that occurs even within the presumably "post-black"—Macon can get away with his crimes without publicly state-sanctioned punishment because once his identity is revealed readers find that the "post-black" may not necessarily mean post-whiteness. It is *because* Macon is not black, because he has the white privilege that he simultaneously loathes and needs, that his crimes are viewed as social activism. It appears that in public opinion, because he is no longer shrouded in black masculine virtuality, he was never truly capable of the horrendous misdeeds he threatened. Here it is the forced parallelization of black and white masculinity that holds a microscope to social understanding of racialized gender and allows *Angry Black White Boy* to agitate against public apathy and indifference. By demonstrating the ways that physical whiteness even without white performativity can become a salve for racial unrest—that physical whiteness *assumes* white performativity even if it resists it—Mansbach not only elucidates the significance of race and racialization but also how it maintains a foothold in a 21st century context that cannot be called post-racial in sincerity.

Certainly then the decision by Everett and Mansbach to use satire is not incidental. The use of satire permits the author a comparably narrow scope, allowing the close examination of the absurdity and significance of race in the 21st century. Moreover, if these works are concerned with demonstrating the fallacious reliance on the stereotype of quantifiable blackness, the conventions of satire permit this focus because they necessitate *acceptance* of the absurd. If racialization is by its very nature absurd—and, given its arbitrariness and its simultaneous rigidity and flexibility, it can be assumed that on some level it is—texts dealing explicitly with race may always be implicitly couched in the satirical. Traditional satire has a fictional element,

but by drawing direct and identifiable parallels to reality it necessitates audience belief and acceptance of the parameters it creates. Everett and Mansbach are able to further achieve this focus by overlapping themselves with their protagonists—a necessity inherent in some performative satire that ultimately becomes problematic for Monk as he is absorbed by Stagg R. Leigh finally without his consent because his portrayal is too convincing for the public, he becomes the literal manifestation of Seidel's description of the role of the satirist, where "The satirist is deeply implicated in satire's degenerative fictions precisely because he thrives as the chronicler of degenerative norms" (4). If these alignments of creator and creation are constructed with intentionality and deliberation, the protagonist and the author can be viewed as having enough characteristics in common for the work to be authentic without accidentally merging the otherwise discrete individuals. Monk, unfortunately, merges himself too closely with his fictitious author through his careless self-righteousness. Likewise, Macon's persona as de facto African American leader makes him too eager to prove himself ready for racial retribution without actually considering what forms this retribution could best take. It is for this reason that Everett and Mansbach are able to create such dynamic satires while Monk and Macon both fail in their execution. For instance, the inherent white privilege that Mansbach must experience, regardless of any chosen cultural background, could certainly problematize the inclusion of a white, male author. However, Mansbach articulates an acute awareness of his privilege—and the privilege of his protagonist—and writes from the perspective of an outsider to the actual experience of blackness. In discussing the reality of white privilege in "The Audacity of Post-Blackness," Mansbach writes

> I have no desire to belittle any aspect of your identity... but either you walk through this world with white-skin privilege or you don't. There's no such thing as

> being pulled over for driving while wanting to be black. Sometimes how you 'self-identify' is irrelevant. You could be a gay Irish dude from the heart of Washington Heights, with a Senegalese lover and a degree from Morehouse to boot. The cop and the judge and the loan officer and the potential employer are only going to check one mental box. And when they do, you're going to benefit from the way they see you, like it or not (76).

Mansbach then realizes that regardless of self-identification, racialization still benefits some to the detriment of others. In writing from this vantage point, Mansbach works to illuminate certain racialized experiences without silencing racialized voices. His voice then becomes another articulation of lived experiences through the lens of racialization, rather than seeming to take the place of the more direct experience of a person of color. Another concern could be a seeming lack of shared cultural experiences from a non-black post-soul author or artist. It is here that it is again important to note that not all cultural experiences are shared between members of the same race.[19] Mansbach works to engage with African American hip hop culture without appropriation—he works to comment without implying that his comments hold equal weight. In fact, perhaps only someone else can place a non-black author in the generic category of African American literature never the author him or herself. They can be only included because of the post-soul moment—the post-soul disrupts the racial rigidity of these categories.

So the fact that *Angry Black White Boy*—a narrative featuring a white male protagonist and written by a Jewish American author—seems to fall neatly into the 20th- and 21st-century African American literary tradition is perhaps the most significant aspect of its satirical bent.

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[19] When speaking to my brother about this very idea, he half-jokingly mentioned that perhaps our watching *Eyes on the Prize* at the age of five and viewing Emmett Till in his casket at the same age may not be a racially-specific experience, but instead a familial cultural experience stemmed by racialization.

Mansbach offers a unique perspective on race relations not only because of his decades-long engagement with hip hop culture as a fan, a spoken-word artist, and hip hop scholar but because he is a white Jewish American, thus a member of a group that has been systematically oppressed and only recently absorbed into monolithic whiteness.[20] Likewise, the title itself takes the idea of the "angry black man" and makes it racially ambiguous—*black-acting* but *white-looking*. Additionally, by shifting the focus from a "black man" to a "white boy," Mansbach satirically highlights the supposed incongruence between black and white masculinity. This is perhaps even the most overt way in which he makes whiteness visible and forces audiences to be conscious of the detrimental preconceptions of not only black masculinity but white masculinity as well. Mansbach aligns Macon with black cultural thought while demonstrating that Macon's interest and involvement should not be misconstrued, at least initially, as a sign of willing appropriation. It seems that Macon's engagement with aspects of African American cultural output is genuine, but even more, his belief in racial equality—misguided as his means may be—is true, seeming subtly to gesture to Tommie Shelby's assertion, "Those with whom blacks should seek solidarity… are not necessarily those who most exhibit a thick black identity, but those who stand firm in resistance to black oppression. Rather than being rooted in race, ethnicity, nationality, or culture, the group's self conception should be grounded in its antiracist politics and its commitment to racial justice" (247).[21] Macon then holds a precarious position because his ideals are indicated to be worthwhile but their execution is flawed. In this same way, Mansbach

[20] African Americans and Jewish Americans have a long, complicated history marked by cooperation as marginalized minorities within the United States—parallels were drawn through American chattel slavery and the enslavement of Jews in Egypt, ghettos in America and Europe, and aligned goals in civil rights movements. However, this relationship has been marked by tension as separatist tendencies emerged in Black Nationalist movements and as Jewishness began to signal whiteness in America.

[21] This idea emerges in the popular discourse as "everybody who's your skin folk ain't your kinfolk."

goes to lengths to validate Macon's role in hip hop culture while forcefully explaining that he can never fully claim the position within it that he desires. It is Macon's acknowledgement of his final inability to be absorbed by blackness—that his white privilege is perhaps as pervasive as the myth of the black masculine on some basic level—that ultimately allows him to move through the narrative arc without becoming a laughable or pathetic character. If African American satires already move through modes of discourses with great fluidity, then Mansbach's—and Macon's—additional voice is simply a new facet, particularly appropriate in an age preoccupied by the idea of post-raciality.

The Post-Soul and Satirical Intent

In her "Characteristics of Negro Expression," Zora Neale Hurston explains, "Mimicry is an art in itself. If it is not, then all art must fall by the same blow that strikes it down" (38). Perhaps there is no more concise statement that fully articulates the ultimate failure of Monk's and Macon's satirical and performative displays of blackness. Although Monk intends to approach the material satirically and Macon does not, both are engaging in stylistic mimicry not only with limited success but in ways that lead to their own destruction. Critically, *My Pafology* is indiscernible from the earnest and sincere. As Stagg R. Leigh, the author of *My Pafology* is initially an unknown, which is a quality difficult enough for identifying satirical writing—if the author is unknown, how can the audience be sure of the authorial stance as required for the acceptance of satire? It offers no touchstones. Yet Monk further problematizes *My Pafology* by ultimately allowing his pseudonymic Stagg R. Leigh to take on these expected characteristics of black masculinity without context. It is the difference between Stephen Colbert reporting right-wing news on Comedy Central or on Fox News. The frame through which the satire is viewed is

as important as the satire itself. In an interview, Mansbach touches on this complicated nature of satire in discussing his process of writing *Angry Black White Boy*,

> There were earlier platforms and iterations of this book that were much more earnest and it was revelatory for me to realize, "OK, what I need to do is take this over-the-top and go crazy with it and really use humor and be funny and be absurdist with it." It was really liberating and I really enjoyed that. But, you know, satire is tricky because the world is increasingly self-satirizing.

Indeed, it does seem that the line between the construct of "the real" and the satirical has been more substantially blurred in recent years.[22] Perhaps it is the move post-civil rights away from de jure racial categories and inequalities to de facto ones that highlight the inherent ridiculousness of race—conversations about race in the 21st century are underscored by a sense of bewilderment that the conversations still need to exist. In *The Obama Effect,* Seth K. Goldman and Diana C. Mutz write that Obama's campaign and election "changed white racial attitudes even as it was transpiring" (2) as though this assertion is a foregone conclusion. However, the impact of Obama's election on the racial tenor of the nation has been overstated here. Perhaps racial attitudes have changed as a result, or perhaps his election is an indication that racial attitudes were already shifting. However, what the election of Obama seems to show as his second term comes to a close is that some Americans—of all races—believe in the possibility of individual model minority exemplars in all races. However, this may ultimately harm individual non-

[22] Some recent examples include Neil Patrick Harris's comeback performance as an over-the-top version of himself in *Harold and Kumar Go to White Castle* (2004), Wayne Brady's appearance on *Chappelle Show* where the wholesome comedian is reimagined as a violent version of himself, famously uttering, "Is Wayne Brady gonna have to choke a bitch?"(2004), or Prince's album cover for *Breakfast Can Wait,* which features an image of Dave Chappelle dressed as Prince and holding pancakes from a 2004 sketch. Although not all of these moments can be strictly classified as post-soul, it is worth noting that they all occur during the post-soul (and are orchestrated for primarily post-soul audiences).

models whose shortcomings then are viewed as personal failings rather than responses to systematic stumbling blocks or choices in eschewing respectability politics. Still, while Obama is viewed as the catalyst for a wide-reaching shift in attitudes, he receives daily death threats comparable with—and, according to some sources, far exceeding—those of his predecessors, and has been the recipient of wide-reaching national political and social resistance. That we can imply by stating Obama signals a large-scale change in racial attitudes that these facts are irrelevant seems in itself to gesture to national self-satirization. It is perhaps this idea of the world as self-satirizing that closes in on the necessity of satire in the post-soul era. Mansbach, like Everett, demonstrates a clear understanding of racial absurdity necessary for effective post-soul satire. Race has *always* existed in the realm of the arbitrary and absurd, even as spectators assume racial essentialism or phenotypic specificity. Nevertheless, much popular understanding of race is connected to performativity—a person may *act* in concert with or against the racialized expectations in spite of or in tacit approval of his or her attributed race. Mansbach's construction of Macon then achieves this particular characteristic of the post-soul by taking his satire to the realm of the seemingly preposterous—a young white man is mistaken for black and becomes a de facto black leader—while firmly grounding the logic of the unbelievable in the problematic nature of racial essentialism and racialized expectations. In doing so, he is able to bridge the gap between the real and the fictitious by blurring the distinction.

Perhaps though it is *only* through audience knowledge of authorial intention and the subsequent acceptance of their protagonists that either Everett's or Mansbach's works can be regarded as satire—one of the surest ways to have a satire rejected is through audience inability or unwillingness to accept the material as satirized, which often comes from a lack of coding by author. This seems to stem from an erroneous belief that satire is a simple mode with which to

engage. Nothing could be further from reality, however, as Michael Seidel argues, "Satire is 'easy' because its subjects are so tantalizingly manifest, but it is difficult because its strategies are so deceivingly imitative of what it purports to attack. To put it another way, satire is easy because the satirist's impulse is to fight dirty, but it is difficult because the satirist's design is to play it smart" (10). Satire is not merely an attack on social ills or human evilness. It must be structured skillfully and with a specific target in mind not only for the generic precision of the satire itself, but for the audience to understand the purpose of the satire. For this reason, the impetus for reading a text as satire is often based on our knowledge of the author or the extra-textual framing of the book, even though there can be signposts in the text itself. Perhaps, though, satire need not always be extra-textually identified—we may not always need knowledge of the author, but the satire itself as presented must clearly demarcate the satiric mode throughout by adding an absurdist or identifiably-preposterous element to the aspect of society being examined or criticized. Due to the lack of these markers in any clear way, the efforts of Monk and Macon are misunderstood and viewed as ineffectual. Neither Monk nor Macon presents any new trope to complicate the mainstream understanding of fearsome blackness. Both men are simply raging, and while rage may have its uses, as framed by Monk and Macon, it provides nothing more than momentary and fleeting catharsis. Indeed, even their attempts at absurdism are mere rage, rather than satire or satirical critique. As Monk speaks to his publisher, this satiric ineffectuality is crystallized. His publisher asks, "'So what do you want me to do?' 'Send it out.' 'Straight or with some kind of qualification? Do you want me to tell them it's a parody?' 'Send it straight,' I said. 'If they can't see it's a parody, fuck them.'" (132). Perhaps Monk's disdain would be reasonable had he given any indication that the work was a satire. Again, the absurdity apparent to the audience of *Erasure* is not enough, because it does not resonate with readers of

My Pafology—particularly as readers of *Erasure* are aware of Monk's frustration with the glut of literature focused on an oversimplified portrayal of "ghetto life," where the readers of *My Pafology* instead are the sincere consumers of that same literature. Instead, for Monk, the joke is not his narrative—the joke is his reader.

Likewise, Macon's performance of blackness is ultimately securely couched in his own white privilege. He is no Bigger Thomas because Bigger is afforded no opportunity to explain himself and because Bigger is found guilty within and without the judicial system. Macon is granted the luxury of the benefit of the doubt, even from those who find his behavior suspect. Is it possible to imagine a world, even within the realm of satire, where Bigger receives such treatment? It is unlikely that such a suspension of disbelief could occur willingly. Still, it is important to note that the fluidity and absurdity of race does not absolve racialization of its significance in the lived experiences of racialized people. Monk's performance as Stagg and Macon's interactions with blackness never serve to prove that race is foolish or inconsequential. Ironically, these racial and performative misconstructions only prove that the ramifications of racialization are real and, in most cases unavoidable. It is a damning critique of a supposedly "post-racial" society. These texts offer up blackness as both a fact and fiction while ultimately determining that defining it is much less important than acknowledging its impact. These protagonists, in quite different ways and with varying levels of desire, become spokesmen for blackness, proving as Baratunde Thurston argues, "Often your *willingness* [to be spokesperson] isn't actually required. Your mere standing as a member of the group in question is taken as qualification enough" (89, emphasis in original). Indeed, even the *appearance* of group membership suffices.

Certainly then, *My Pafology* written by Thelonious "Monk" Ellison could be coded as satire. This same text written by Stagg R. Leigh—the unknown author whose name hearkens to the mythical Stacker Lee of black masculine lore—is at best unclear. Thus *Erasure* and *Angry Black White Boy* are received as satire because they are skilled and calculated depictions by authors who refuse simple stereotypes or performativity in favor of complicated characters existing in a recognizably-racialized society; Monk's *My Pafology* and Macon's efforts toward incongruous reparations cannot be accepted within satirical play—and whether they were ever meant to be remains in doubt. Despite efforts at shirking his privilege, it is ultimately Macon's whiteness that allows him a platform to speak on racial issues. He is initially permitted youthful naiveté and miscalculated efforts because his race is seemingly incongruous with his actions, ironically because he appears to have less at stake in a conversation about race his audience is more receptive to his perspective. His roommate, Andre, explains, "'I've decided to believe in you until you give me reason not to… Somebody's gotta light a fire under white people's asses. Every time a brother does it, somebody up and kills him, so it might as well be you'" (Mansbach 149). It isn't until Macon fully and articulately engages in the rhetoric of disabling white privilege that he endangers himself.

Mark Anthony Neal explains of the post-soul,

> This period also produces a post-soul intelligentsia, a generation of urban-bred black intellectuals born during the waning moments of the civil rights/Black Power movements, raised on the rhythms and harmonies of 1970s soul but having come to maturity during the mid-to late 1980s and embracing the oppositional possibilities of urban and hip-hop aesthetics, mass media, and popular culture as vehicles for mass social praxis. Though some of these thinkers can legitimately be

> called urbanites, a majority can more adequately be described as impacted by the urbanization of black popular culture (102).

Percival Everett seems thoroughly couched in the post-soul. As he came of age during the civil rights movement, but was perhaps too young to actively participate, even if he'd wanted, Everett's writing reflects the sense of trauma of the unrealized promise of the movement—that the end of separate but equal did not create a sense of together and contented. Adam Mansbach's writing, however, reflects the younger sensibility of someone who never witnessed de jure segregation, but still experiences the acute trauma of the inequity of race in America. As an "Afro-Millenial,"[23] a term I use to describe those writers and performers born in the mid-1970's and beyond, there is a more tangible sense of frustration, occurring simultaneously with trauma. Afro-Millenials experience the trauma of racism and racialization—specifically under exponential rates of incarceration coupled with police brutality and police killings. However, due to the prominence of successful African American "exceptions," most notably the presidency of Barack Obama, Afro-Millenials are often portrayed by media pundits as whiny and unappreciative of the gains made by the civil rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Derek Conrad Murray succinctly argues, "Post-blackness resonates because it articulates the frustrations of young African American artists (the post-civil rights generation) around notions of identity and belongingness that they perceived to be stifling, reductive, and exclusionary" (5). Indeed, for some Afro-Millenials, there may be a sense that at least the civil rights movement benefitted from precise and easily identified goals. Now, the struggle continues, but is accused of being fractured and hazy—the in-fighting of the Black Lives Matter movement often used as

[23] I use "Afro-Millennial" as a subcategory of the post-soul era to gesture to those individuals who were born (1981 and later) in the post-soul era but did not experience its inception and instead came of age during the 1990s and beyond.

apparent proof of their disorganization, rather than being read correctly as an indicator of the stakes of the movement itself. Indeed, all movements have suffered from (and benefitted from) the disagreements of their leaders and group members. Satire is especially effective in the present because this sense of frustration and cynicism[24] of the 21st century does not necessitate strict didacticism. Instead, the satiric writer, "like a prophetic Christ railing at the Pharisees, also denounces the time and the times, also reveals and uncovers the doubleness of action; but unlike Christ, the satirist possesses no certain promise, his fulminations are very much 'in' time" (Seidel 20-1). While this description is provocative, the use of the phrase "railing" may be misleading in both metaphoric and literal description of the satirist. Indeed, like Christ exposing the hypocrisy of the Pharisees, the satirist must be more delicate in his execution—even if the satirist rants and raves, it is not for mere catharsis but instead to reflect the absurdity of the extreme nature of the ranting, raving object of satirical attack.[25] Readers are unlikely to believe that the narrative can come to a neat conclusion by the novel's end and are not let down when it doesn't. The protagonists come to no good end and are casualties of racialization with ambiguous results. Instead, Everett and Mansbach anticipate the trajectory of society unaltered and imagined out to its absurd conclusion, spurring on critical self-reflection from readers rather

[24] I think much of this cynicism stems from a feeling of racial frustration. The reduction of de jure race-based oppression and an increase in visible members of black communities with power—culminating, of course, with the Obamas place in the White House—has served to offer encouragement but not full satisfaction. The frustration can perhaps be best described in the feeling of having a black man as Commander-in-Chief and yet still feeling acutely aware that your rights of citizenship are routinely ignored and disrespected.

[25] Certainly here Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal" comes to mind as an example of satire taken to its extreme, (il)logical conclusion. Yet even here, as Swift hyperbolically advocates the poor sell their children as food for the rich, his treatment of the proposition is treated with delicateness and care—the suggestion is ludicrous, but the approach and presentation is measured. Conversely, when Stephen Colbert satirically and impassionedly presents right-wing viewpoints on his *Colbert Report* on Comedy Central, his heightened emotionality is meant to reflect the same treatment the materials are given when presented earnestly on right-wing news channels. Neither response ultimately includes the unwieldy nature that railing connotes.

than their censure. This need for reflexivity is why satire can only be undertaken with skill and serious contemplation, "The moral 'ideas' in satire are often so elementary—one should avoid pride, avoid excess, control passion, use reason—as to be a kind of irreducible moral minimum for sentient beings… (The irony of course is that the satirists themselves often violate these very standards—in their righteous pride and their rage)" (Griffin 37). As a result, in Monk and Macon's articulation, it is the protagonist who suffers the most and, as the audience has already aligned themselves with the perspective of the author/protagonist, the audience likewise identifies with the suffering, rather than with the rest of society. However, as these performances of simplistic blackness demonstrate, not only is the performer harmed—although Monk and Macon are certainly the most damaged by the end of each novel, they have also created naïve performances that reinforce grotesque blackness in the American cultural imagination.

Erasure and *Angry Black White Boy* are satires about race, but in nontraditional ways juxtaposed against the African American literary canon. These novels tackle issues of post-civil rights movement significance—questions of definitional blackness, gendered race, and individual place in a society that confounds the person and the communal. Importantly, these are not satires that simply ridicule white, mainstream society, which would be a presumably easy target. They are examinations of the margins based on the idea that within the black experience the tragic is never wholly invented. Roger Rosenblatt explains, "When the central character is black, the abuses are authentic. No black American author has ever felt the need to invent a nightmare to make his point" (171). Even within the satirical, these "abuses" are only logically extended, rather than merely fabricated, and they are extended by necessity—to shun complacency. This is why satire is so significant in African American literature—because the tragic or frustrating elements of race are so expected and normalized that it is helpful to

dismantle them to disallow reader complacency. Satire jars audiences out of their traditional readings by virtue of a new absurdity within a familiar plot, forcing analysis and introspection. It is for this reason that there is a notable history of satire, or certainly at least some elements, in African American literature, even in texts that are not classified as strictly satires.[26] Humor is used frequently as a technique to disarm audiences when addressing serious cultural issues—the African American literary traditions of epideictic rhetoric and the resultant trope of laughing to keep from crying are recurrent.

In an interview with Anthony Stewart, Percival Everett remarked

> I don't pretend to represent anyone but myself. Now, does that mean I don't think I can possibly be a decent role model for a kid someplace? Well, no. That idea is thrilling to me. But I would think that if I were a really good carpenter, I could be the same role model for that kid. But a carpenter doesn't go to work thinking he's representing anyone when he builds those cabinets (303).

Everett, however, may be intentionally eliding the fact that a carpenter who claims to build cabinets must build a structure that is identifiably cabinet-like to continue to be seen as a carpenter. And much the same for an author—the stories they recount, even when they are specific to their own unique, personal experiences, must in some regard represent something identifiable to the reader. This identifiability is crucial in an interrogation of blackness. The takeaway seems to be that these individuals are a part of the community so much so that they retain their individuality while being indiscernible from the community itself. That is to say that these authors do not attempt to argue for a monolithic black community. Instead, they embrace

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[26] This trajectory includes George Schulyer's *Black No More* (1931), Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972), and Paul Beatty's *White Boy Shuffle* (1996). More recently, there is Issa Rae's web series *The Mis-Adventures of Awkward Black Girl* and the film *Dear White People* (2014).

the plurality of blackness as its most identifiable characteristic. Moreover, black representations that line up with previously held beliefs and stereotypes tend to be those viewed as having the most authenticity. These authors, then work against confirmation bias to effectively articulate the complicated nature of blackness as an indication of their own identity formation. As Gates argues, "A text becomes 'blacker'… to the extent that it serves as an index of repudiation" (36), and these works actively refuse an essentialist view of blackness.

In a 2004 interview with Rone Shavers, Everett explains, "I'm making fun of satire as well as satirizing social policies. I mean, I shouldn't even say this, but I write about satire." The idea of making fun of satire, or that satire itself is worth greater literary consideration, speaks to Everett's authorial attempts at refusing expectations and tropes—even the trope of generic convention and form. This characteristic metanarrative is found in the works of both authors, as Everett and Mansbach examine the effectiveness of their characters and simultaneously their own writing. That both protagonists—notably created by authors who are also professors—are dissatisfied with the rigmarole of assumed audience expectations is a compelling and often-overlooked feature of post-soul literature. These new writers seem to create in active defiance of Houston Baker's concern that "much of what passes for self-consciously 'scholarly' effort on the part of black men and women in the United States is often production self-consciously oriented to win approval from those who have a monopoly on definitions of SCHOLARSHIP" (xvii). While the post-soul does seem to cater to a certain market of the "intelligentsia" as Mark Anthony Neal describes it, it does appear in some ways to actively eschew the authority of traditional academia. Instead, they turn the lens back on the readers and the writers—even themselves—as they interrogate the role of race in writerly success. This is an important facet of both *Erasure* and *Angry Black White Boy* as post-soul satirical novels. Rather than wage

criticisms against an abstract and monolithic society at large, Everett and Mansbach both slow down their narratives to meticulously indict various facets of a broad society to demonstrate the ways all are working to subconsciously and consciously maintain the damaging status quo.

Richard Dyer explains, "There is no more powerful position than that of being 'just' human. The claim to power is the claim to speak for the commonality of humanity. Raced people can't do that—they can only speak for their race. But non-raced people can, for they do not represent the interests of a race" (Dyer 2). As a result, blackness often necessitates specific signifiers so it can serve as contextualization for whiteness—whiteness simply exists, and what whiteness *is not,* blackness *is.* In *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination,* Toni Morrison explains that "Africanism is the vehicle by which the American self knows itself as not enslaved, but free; not repulsive, but desirable; not helpless, but licensed and powerful; not history-less, but historical; not damned, but innocent; not a blind accident of evolution, but a progressive fulfillment of destiny" (52). Macon complicates this traditional binary when he explains, "My job is to make whiteness visible. I want people to look at me… this crazy kid who won't shut up about race, and realize, maybe for the first time, that hey, whiteness is an identity" (Mansbach 191). It is this effort at making whiteness visible that disallows the comfortable privilege subconsciously anticipated by some of his readers. Anita Gonzalez recounts a story worth including here in its entirety:

> *After a lengthy oral defense in which I argued passionately about the "relative construction of blackness" and the need to recognize variable types of blackness based upon historical and social circumstance, Sally [Barnes] turned to me with a deadpan face. "Well then, Anita," she said, "What are you going to teach?" Her point was that if black is relative and variable, then how do we talk about*

> *it/theorize it? In an attempt to diversify blackness, I had removed blackness from the equation* (DeFrantz and Gonzalez 7, emphasis in original).

Indeed, by making whiteness visible or by not pointing out the arbitrariness or ridiculousness of race, this should not imply racial erasure. For these reasons, satire is especially useful in dissecting and addressing issues of blackness and racialization more broadly. Because Everett and Mansbach provide context both within and without the texts they are able to articulate their concerns around racialization and thus confound its simplistic dyadicism. Everett's and Mansbach's utilization of satire highlights the simultaneous fear of and need for racialization—a fear so profound that whiteness must represent its absence. Indeed, blackness is phantasmatic and operates not only as a cultural presence but through spectrality. By addressing this difficult subject matter from a satirical angle, the authors create a fictitious American public that is abhorrent enough to shock readers out of their own complacency and self-absolution, but familiar enough to simultaneously highlight audience culpability. These novels create a space for a conversation about the more complicated, transient, and often transgressive nature of blackness in America.

Chapter 3

"Assimilation as Revolution": Passing Reclamations in Lynn Nottage's *By the Way, Meet Vera Stark* and Mat Johnson's *Incognegro*

> So no matter what I do or do not do about my racial identity, someone is bound to feel uncomfortable. But I have resolved that it is no longer going to be me.
>
> —Adrian Piper, "Passing for White, Passing for Black"

Racial passing is a fundamentally complicated endeavor, yet within the national consciousness passing narratives are recounted as acts of simple, unidirectional choice—black men or black women passing for white men or white women for seemingly obvious reasons—and are lodged soundly in the past. Much of this has to do with the performance of fictionalized accounts of passing in 20th-century in literature, disseminated into the public realm through characters like Clare Kendry in Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929) and Peola in Fannie Hurst's *Imitation of Life* (1933). These foregrounded images of tragic mulattas place more complicated understandings of passing under erasure, perhaps intentionally to underscore a racial binary. It is because of this oversimplified understanding of passing, perhaps, that popular culture has become reanimated by the possibilities of white individuals passing for black. These works are not concerned simply with passing but instead with the fluidity and rigidity of identity. Passing

works as a particularly useful stand-in for the complications of identity because it overtly works as a performative misdirection—it shows the ways that we are and are not beholden to the expectations of others in our self-formation.

I have chosen to focus on two works published by post-soul authors because this period marks an even more forceful and explicit disruption of the expected tropes of blackness and passing—while the black/white binary has been consistently disrupted by African American authors, in the post-soul era, in these works this binary is rendered not only ridiculous but also an inefficient articulation of racial reality. These authors are not necessarily arguing that racial difference doesn't exist but instead refusing the polarity so often associated with it in favor of a broader, multifaceted scope of difference within racialization. The two works discussed at length in this chapter are not only post-civil rights era satirical texts, but because one is a play and the other a graphic novel, they are reliant on this physical appearance and performativity of black bodies, making them particularly useful in an analysis of post-soul writing, performance, and visual culture—and here, the variety of forms of passing exhibited become a significant point of entry.

The catalyst for this renewed fascination with passing in the media might be traced to Rachel Dolezal. In June 2015, it was revealed by her biological parents that Dolezal, who at the time was the head of the Spokane, Washington chapter of the NAACP and an African American studies professor, was actually a white woman passing for black. The Internet erupted with jokes, memes, "think pieces," and genuine curiosity. The nation was riveted, of course by the strange passing itself and by the ways Dolezal seemed to equate blackness with accoutrements and stereotypes—from the weaves to the bronzer to the specificity of her articulated experiences—but it is perhaps more useful to critically consider the strange *context* of Dolezal's passing. One

striking aspect of passing narratives is the heartbreaking fact that the passer's family has to participate—they have to allow the passing and let the passer go, usually forever. In these prominent passing narratives, individuals intentionally sever ties with their family, and families struggle to allow the pass, recognizing the mutual sacrifice on both the part of the passer and the witnessing family—this is recurrent in fictionalized accounts as non-fiction tales of successful passing are scarce, for clear reasons. What is most interesting is not that Rachel Dolezal chose to pass. This is unsurprising, particularly as she made quantifiable gains privately and professionally as an African American woman. What is worth greater consideration is that her family revealed her and chose *this moment* to do so. Could it be that her family couldn't abide the connection to blackness and the attendant questions about their own whiteness, which resulted from their connection to their daughter, nor could they fathom any benefits to or legitimate reason to disavow whiteness? In fact, their choice to "out" Dolezal's racial heritage explicitly breaks the conventional rule of *not* divulging the passers secret identity in black communities. Is this, if not overt anti-blackness, a staggering example of white privilege—the ability to reveal without fearing repercussion? Despite the controversy, Dolezal told Matt Lauer on *The Today Show* that she still openly identifies as black. While this has been criticized as an astounding display of white privilege—as indeed, in most cases black Americans don't have the right to opt-in and opt-out of blackness at their pleasure, and certainly not once their racial identity has been revealed—her decision to openly flout a national understanding of race is intriguing.

Yet, more troubling are the recent attacks waged against activist Shaun King. While Dolezal's parents chose to "out" her status as white, King's racial background was brought into question by a number of conservative, right-wing bloggers and pundits. King, a prominent young

civil rights activist and #blacklivesmatter supporter on Twitter, initially remained silent and then felt forced to defend himself. He wrote for *The Daily Kos*,

> The reports about my race, about my past, and about the pain I've endured are all lies. My mother is a senior citizen. I refuse to speak in detail about the nature of my mother's past, or her sexual partners, and I am gravely embarrassed to even be saying this now, but I have been told for most of my life that the white man on my birth certificate is not my biological father and that my actual biological father is a light-skinned black man (n.p.).

That King has had to reveal these personal and intimate circumstances surrounding his own birth is despicable, and his situation is much different from that of Rachel Dolezal. For one, King is African American based on the historic national understanding of the one-drop rule and hypodescent. Moreover, the dispute surrounding his ethnic background is peculiar because while King is indeed quite light-skinned he does read as phenotypically having African-descended facial features, and he also recounts verified racist physical and emotional attacks he experienced while growing up which further validate his self-identification as black. It is also compelling to consider that King was targeted by outside sources in an apparent effort to discredit him and to distract from the work he does to uncover cases of police brutality. This was a calculated attack. King continued to explain, "For my entire life, I have held the cards of my complicated family history very close to my chest. I preferred to keep it that way and deeply resent that I have been forced to authenticate so many intimate details of my life to prove who I really am. This, in and of itself, is a form of violence" (n.p.). Indeed, he is correct that this is a violent act, and it is meant to be one. King and his family have been targeted by outraged parties, have received death threats, and King himself has had not only his allegiance to the cause undermined, but his very

right to participate actively in protest questioned, as if protest is only the realm of those deemed "black enough" in the context of an outside gaze. This is a peculiar and saddening development and one that, on its face, is ahistorical. One need only consider the historical context of the NAACP, but also that of Walter White, leader of the NAACP and a writer, who passed for white while investigating lynchings. *The New York Times* wrote in their obituary for him in 1955,

> Only five-thirty-seconds of his ancestry was Negro. His skin was fair, his hair blond, his eyes blue and his features Caucasian. He could easily have joined the 12,000 Negroes who pass the color-line and disappear into the white majority every year in this country. But he deliberately sacrificed his comfort to publicize himself as a Negro and to devote his entire adult life to completing the emancipation of his people (n.p.).

While the articulation of 5/32 blackness is peculiar, *The Times* here is seeking to quantify and qualify the terms under which a man could look white but remain black. There is no sense here that 5/32 is too minute a quantity to matter, even in the 1950s. Indeed, it expressly does matter, for both White and for the general public. For King, it is the same. Although he admits that his mother spoke very little about race while he grew up for clear reasons, this did not lessen the impact of being racialized or of understanding his place in a racialized and racist society. Even today it is a double-edged sword—as a light-skinned man who is racially-ambiguous, had King chosen to pass and his background been revealed he would be disparaged as filled with self-hatred. By not passing, however, his motivations are in question as antagonists wonder both quietly and aloud what benefit he gains from identifying as black—the implication being that the only reason a person would pass for black today would be to gain some tangible benefit, and Rachel Dolezal's own self-serving pass only adding fuel to the fire.

In the 19th century, however, passing was consistently depicted as a rightly complicated and nuanced phenomenon, even as it usually relied still on African Americans as the passers. In 1848, the enslaved and female Ellen Craft passes as a white and male planter to lead her husband and herself to freedom. Likewise, in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), George Harris actively chooses not to pass for white and instead passes as a Spanish gentleman—a characterization that may have still be considered "white" by 19th-century definitions, but the specificity of the ethnic heritage is surprising in his efforts to pass unnoticed. This chapter examines the ways that the historical fictions of Lynn Nottage's play, *By the Way, Meet Vera Stark* (2013) and Mat Johnson and Warren Pleece's graphic novel, *Incognegro* (2009)—a text which hearkens to the real experiences of Walter White—seek to reclaim more complicated understanding of passing by placing them in contemporary contexts. In these 21st-century passing texts, passing occurs not as unidirectional binary but as a more fluid, multidirectional result of choosing. They disrupt the notion of a static past and bring the historical into conversation with the present, highlighting the ways that racial malleability and arbitrariness exist within national identity.

In this dismantling of blackness and black performativity, these works occupy the space of pastiche and parody simultaneously. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr. describes it, "Pastiche is an act of literary 'Naming'; parody is an act of 'Calling out of one's name'" (124). As pastiche, these texts work to actively and explicitly refuse the names given by the culture at large. Instead, they place the burdensome weight of the names on the audience as the audience is implicated in their existence, freeing the characters to explore their own possibilities in reclaiming themselves. It is

this treatment of the audience as willing participant[27] in the performance that lends itself so neatly to parody. The audience observes itself satirized as members of a society that traditionally disallows the autonomy of these characters. Here, audiences are not permitted critical, indifferent distance. These narrative collapses persist as a response to audience desire for a clean oversimplification of racial matters and self-absolution. The portrayal of society as a whole is done with such nuance within these works that the audience associates itself *with* society but not necessarily *as* society at large—the narrative space opens up the potential for redemption, which audiences require to be open to the possibilities the texts present. Here, although the audience is indicted with society they need not resign themselves to be remain indicted once the text has ended. This distinction is crucial because while these works are not didactic in the traditional sense,[28] they are seeking to underscore difficult truths about the racialization of American society.

Characteristics of Post-Soul Satirical Visual Representation

In 1981, Houston Baker published "Generational Shifts and the Recent Criticism of Afro-American Literature," in which he express a valid concern, "Rather than attempting to assess the

[27] In *Vera Stark,* Nottage seems to satirize audience framing and opinion by presenting three critics who come to wildly-different conclusions about the nature of Stark's performances. In *Incognegro,* Johnson and Pleece demonstrate how subjectivity and objectivity work in tandem to not only shape reception but to shape the performance itself. Nottage satirizes both the real and imagine audience—those who exist in the universe where Stark is a star, and those watching the action unfold on stage. Johnson and Pleece, although examining the implications of our preconceptions of passing, primarily address the literal viewership in the world of *Incognegro*—the active and passive participants in the act of lynching. That passive participants are likewise addressed demonstrates the way that racial understanding exists not only as a result of the performer but because of audience perception.

[28] Both Nottage and Johnson address traditional questions surrounding African American performance and history—that it may have been better to be a maid on the silver screen than to be one in reality, and that the decision to pass is rife with both benefit and risk. However neither work attempts to definitively determine the validity of either choice. Indeed, even the characters themselves are ultimately ambivalent about their choices. Indeed, even the characters themselves are ultimately ambivalent about their choices.

merits of the Black Aesthetic's methodological assumptions… the new generation has adopted the professional assumptions (and attendant jargon) that mark the world of white academic literary critics" (303). The apprehension that Baker articulates at the beginning of the post-soul era speaks directly to what he views as the shortcomings of academic, rather than artistic output, but they are nevertheless related to incisive concerns of the post-soul artist. There is some appropriate anxiety that a mainstream frame of reference remains automatically and even subconsciously privileged not only by critics but by a wider audience as well. As a result, post-soul authors work to undercut this possibility not by placing whiteness itself under erasure in isolation but instead by decentering presumed racial specificity by rendering racial identity ambiguous. Perhaps nowhere in the post-soul oeuvre is this more obviously situated than in those works that are couched in overt visuality. These satiric visual representations reiterate the characteristics found more broadly in the post-soul satiric novel[29] while, though their emphasis on physicality, illuminate two key features—the fluidity of identity performance and the simultaneous necessity of and unreliability of visualization.

Derek Maus notes,

> Despite the fact that few, if any, satirical works by African Americans entirely abandon the externally focused satirical vector in favor of the self-critical mode, engaging in intragroup satire risks charges of airing 'house business' that presents a less-than-noble picture of the race to an audience of outsiders already disinclined to accept African Americans as truly equal partners in American society (xvi).

[29] These features are discussed at greater length in chapter two.

These post-soul texts, then, through their explication of the fluidity of identity work not to indict just the performers but the viewers as well. As noted previously, the post-soul is characterized by its willingness to indict its own audience—not only the imagined audience within the text but the literal audience reading or viewing the work. In these analyses of passing, the texts work to make sure that passing does not become pathologized or ghettoized, as it were. Instead, they demonstrate that passing itself is endemic in a society that emphasizes racial difference to create an exclusionary hierarchical system, but—and this is the most important point for these texts—permanent black to white racial passing is not the only form of identity passing. Instead, identity can and does exist in multiple realms and a person can choose to perform or not from moment to moment *or* to pass in unexpected ways. For this reason, the second feature, that of the unreliability of visualization is particularly critical to these visual representations. While many texts have underscored the ability to pass based on an individual's decision to straighten hair or don makeup, or through the use of costuming to visually trick the viewer, the post-soul instead focuses on the eye of the beholder as the ultimate deceiver because passing is reliant on expectations of racial performance.

The performative is a particularly useful genre within the African American literary tradition because it fosters audience malleability—the viewing of the performance elicits a response from the audience, a response that is unpredictable and uncontrollable. The theatrical unsettles because its collective nature implies active audience choice and participation. Audience members are able to choose if they will attend, and so the fact that they remain to watch seems to imply tacit approval. Not only this, but because, as Larry Neal explains, "Theatre is potentially the most social of all of the arts. It is an integral part of the socializing process. It exists in direct relationship to the audience it claims to serve" (279), these responses are public and communal.

Resultantly, particularly in satirical drama, the shame can easily shift from the performers to the spectators. This shifting shame makes theater an especially useful genre for satirical reclamation as these playwrights work to remove shame from black bodies, tropes, and forms, and instead indict audience members and society more broadly for a negative understanding of blackness. Koritha Mitchell notes, "Because African Americans were attuned to the power that theatricality lent to the mob, when black authors began writing lynching plays, they continued the tradition of exposing the ways in which theater and lynching worked together to conceal evidence of black humanity and achievement" (91). Post-soul plays, by explicitly naming the harmful expectations about blackness and black performance are then able to reclaim the tropes and use them to humanize the black performative experience. Consider certainly the image of the traditional Broadway audience—wealthy, middle-aged, and white—seemingly out to enjoy the escapism the musical format provides. Indeed, The Broadway League reports that even as recently as the 2013-2014 theater season, almost 80% of the Broadway theatergoing audience was white. They are also, importantly, primarily female, with an average age of 44 years, and an average annual household income of $201,500—and this is the audience for a revamped, intentionally more diverse and accessible Broadway theater than in the past. Given the shifting scope of Broadway plays and musicals since the 1950s—many of the more popular plays and musicals do deal with issues of poverty, oppression, and (nominal and tangible) diversity—is it possible that perhaps these theatergoers, even inadvertently, momentarily lose themselves while gazing at the Other, but only temporarily and only an other that matches an expectation of palatable alien otherness and distinctly an other with whom they do *not* identify in any substantive way? Through this engagement with kaleidoscopic blackness and the possibilities of viewer inclination, however,

Nottage disallows apathetic viewership and instead redefines, quite literally, the appearance of blackness on the stage and audience understanding of it.

Likewise, although imagistic storytelling has existed since at least the age of Egyptian hieroglyphs, graphic novels have not been fully accepted into the realm of the literary, despite the rather arbitrary distinction between text and image, and the way graphic novels operate in these interstices. Scott McCloud explains, "When we *abstract* an image through cartooning, we're not so much *eliminating* details as we are *focusing* on *specific details*. By *stripping down* an image to its essential *"meaning,"* an artist can *amplify* that meaning in a way that realistic art *can't*" (30, emphasis in original). While some texts, notably Art Spiegelman's *Maus* and Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*, are routinely taught in public school and inch toward eventual canonization, graphic novels and comics as a genre are generally disregarded and seldom considered in terms of their literariness or scholastic impact. By way of introduction to *A Right to Be Hostile,* a collection of Aaron McGruder's incendiary and incisive comic, *The Boondocks,* Michael Moore ends the foreword with the request, "Let The Boondocks go on its merry, subversive way ("Hey, it's just a cartoon") and hope that, somewhere down the road when we all live in a more just America, we will look back and say that in the beginning, the revolution wasn't televised, it was on the comics page"(n.p.). It is this consistent underselling of the visual—especially in graphics and comics, but extended, too, to theatrical performance—that illuminates its significance as Moore articulates it. Here the risks of social commentary have changed as the relationship of African Americans to power has shifted in the nation. Consider, for example, slave narratives. These narratives weren't without humor, but the humor was, in many ways, veiled and framed by

a satirical deference to the existing power structure.[30] The satire existed, but it had to be presented subtly as if the meaning were genuine. Now, not only do the stakes seem perhaps not quite as immediately connected to matters of life or death, the means of distribution have shifted. Despite their large readership, comics and graphic novels are often critically ignored and can be useful tools of political and social commentary specifically because their importance is so undervalued—they have an intriguing and stealthy potential.

Working in concert, image and text are able to expose the reader's participation in the political and social realm. McCloud elaborates,

> When two people interact, they usually look directly *at* one another, seeing their partner's features in *vivid detail.* Each one *also* sustains a constant awareness of his or her *own* face, but *this* mind-picture is not nearly so vivid; just a sketchy arrangement… a sense of shape… a sense of *general placement*. Something as *simple* and as *basic*—as a *cartoon.* Thus, when you look at a photo or realistic drawing of a face—you see it as the face of *another.* But when you enter the world of the *cartoon*—you see *yourself"* (35-6).

It is clear then that, depending on the reach, these comics and graphic novels have great potential to engage the audience in a personal way. While statistics are more difficult to find due to the transient and shifting nature of book sales, Brett Schenker, political consultant and self-proclaimed "comic book nerd," continues to conduct a methodological analysis multiple times a year of the over 38 million self-identified comic book readers on Facebook living in the United States to glean general information about comic fandom and readership. What he discovered is that, despite the seeming devaluation of the form itself, comic books reach a wider audience than

[30] See a comprehensive analysis of Jourdon Anderson's "To My Old Master" and the humor inherent in some firsthand accounts of slavery undertaken in chapter one.

often discussed and, importantly, an older audience than usually discussed as well. The gender-based results indicate that 42.63% of comic fans identify as women with 57.89% identifying as male—a much more even distribution than is often addressed in discussions of comic readership. The average age of the audience as recorded in 2011 is between 18-30, in stark contrast to the perception of comics as "kid stuff."[31] Indeed, since beginning his study, Schenker has noted that comic book readership has grown increasingly ethnically-diverse with each year. Taken together, these statistics indicate that comic book readership is more dynamic than often discussed—it is not simply the realm of white, teenage boys—and may gesture to a broader reach of the texts than often expected.

By the Way, Meet Vera Stark and Passing Performativity

By the Way, Meet Vera Stark seamlessly spans 70 years as it chronicles the life and legacy of the fictional Vera Stark, an African American maid turned actress—an actress made famous for her performances as a maid. Audiences watch as Vera and her cohorts work to self-actualize and to carve out a place for themselves in a society that is both racist and sexist. To do so, these women work to negotiate their wants as juxtaposed against their physical identities—they desire things and livelihoods presumed to be above their station based on the intersections of race, class, and gender. In this sense, the characters work to "pass" in surprising and non-traditional ways. Theories of passing are a particularly useful frame for viewing *Vera Stark*

[31] In fact, Schenker found that there are more readers even between the age of 31 to 45 than there are 17 and under. While Schenker himself acknowledges the difficulty of attaining statistical certainty through a process of self-identification, this survey does offer some significant insights. Recently Schenker began to examine the ethnic identity of comic readers. This is a more complicated issue as Facebook does not allow users the space to formally acknowledge their race—unlike age or gender or sexual identity—and so statistics are based on Facebook's extrapolation of data such as last name and "likes" viewed as a microcosm of broader United States statistical census record. Interestingly, the data for white Americans is absent, but the statistics indicate that 10% of the Facebook comic readership is African American, over 5% is Asian American, and over 22% is Hispanic.

because of the inherent dynamism of passing itself. If passing in the United States is primarily thought of as unidirectional—a person passes from black to white for seemingly "obvious" reasons—then *Vera Stark* disrupts that naturalization through the very acts of passing that occur in myriad ways.

In *Vera Stark*, while this black-to-white passing may occur—indeed the actress for whom Vera initially works is described as "white," marked with meaningful quotation marks, while Vera herself is labeled an African-American beauty without quotation marks[32]—this play ultimately highlights the fluidity of identity and self without boundary. These characters shift their racial identities with apparent ease and without much discussion or trauma, and importantly, without choosing to be boxed in by an assumption of racial permanence. Instead, the borders of identity remain permeable and passing can exist for the moment until a return to the chosen and more permanent self is more appropriate. Once again, it is this "large circumference" that *Vera Stark* charts, this idea that passing itself cannot be pinned down and is never as definitive as it is often considered when abstracted. Most significantly, here is Vera and her friend, Lottie, both of whom are African American women who pass for stereotypes of blackness, displaying the logic of Hattie McDaniels, Louise Beavers, and other early black actresses who felt it was better to don the apparel of a domestic on the silver screen than to live as one in reality. Upon encountering a director discussing the casting of his new film, the following scene transpires:

[32] It is interesting to consider that audiences would be unaware of the existence of these notations, but the actors themselves would be. How, then, could the portrayal of a "white" actress be made manifest on the stage? The potential meaning of this passing is interrogated by Nottage with less rigor than the other forms of passing in the play, as if Nottage wants to acknowledge *in passing* that this passing occurs while still engaging in "the space-clearing gesture" Appiah allows that opens up room for a more critical examination of other forms of racial passing.

> Maximillian: It is time to capture the truth. For instance, I vant the Negroes to be real, to be Negroes of the earth, I vant to feel their struggle, the rhythm of their language, I vant actors that… no, I don't vant actors, I vant people.
> (*Vera and Lottie slowly shift their posture, auditioning for the roles of slaves*.)
> Negroes who have felt the burden of hard unmerciful labor.
> (*Vera and Lottie continue to morph into slave women*.)
> I vant to see hundred years of oppression in the hunch of their shoulders.
> (*Vera and Lottie hunch their shoulders, continuing to morph. Vera, seeing an opportunity, slowly and in the character of a slave, crosses to freshen his drink. Her gait is slow, posture deferential.*) (46).

Max argues that he wants to cast real people, yet what he is really searching for is stereotypical portrayals. It is especially interesting here that, for Vera and Lottie, the difference between their current existence as maids and their performance as slaves is, as noted in the stage directions, a *posture of deference.* They later manufacture a rather slipshod *dialect of slavery*, but what first catches Max's attention is their posture. This seemingly simple detail, whether to hunch as they serve tea or stand upright, speaks to their understanding of the difference between domestic work and slavery as performed in this moment—a sense of demonstrable pride. This is not to say, of course, that the women mean to imply that slaves had no sense of pride. Instead, they seem to acknowledge that slaves were disallowed the overt display of self-worth. In this moment, they choose to stifle their own small, allowable demonstration of pride by hunching over, slouching toward slavery—this speaks directly to ways that an inherent sense of shame surrounding slavery is troubled, and slaves themselves humanized, in the post-soul satirical imagination, through an implicit physical statement that the appearance of deference in slavery was feigned and forced,

rather than a natural condition. Lottie and Vera, in fact, refuse the reality of their nuanced existence in favor of the comforting lie of predictably meek black performance in an ironic effort to ultimately achieve a higher degree of personhood—the irony that these actors are not only required to play stereotypical roles that are at odds against their actual authentic experiences, but also to disavow that these authentic experiences exist. This scene is not only played for laughs. This circuitous method of achieving selfhood underscores the particular difficulties that can be attributed to issues of race, class, and sex in the United States. Likewise, that there is no space in the paradigm for authenticity here gestures to why Nottage places these reclamations at the forefront. Here, it is not simply enough to broaden the scope of passing narratives to include black-to-black passing—where African Americans refuse their nuanced existence to perform a more simplified and oppressive form of blackness taken as monolithic—but to underscore the ludicrousness of the necessity of these performances and the ease with which they are perpetrated.

Nottage imbues *Vera Stark* with a timeliness that belies its historical frame by allowing Vera and Lottie the space to luxuriate in the vagueries of Max's articulation of "real" black people. It is the ultimate vagueness implied in "racial specificity" that permits the pass. Vera and Lottie's friend, Anna Mae, is likewise engaged in a pass, from African American to Brazilian.[33] The three women discuss Anna Mae's decision:

> Lottie: He don't know she colored.
>
> Vera: Ya lyin'.

[33] Passing for Brazilian is a recurrent theme in African American literature. In Nella Larsen's *Passing,* the narrator's husband, Brian, often mentions a desire to go to Brazil. Likewise in Fannie Hurst's *Imitation of Life,* it is discovered that Peola has fled to Brazil where she can pass without risk of discovery. Brazil is often hearkened to as a geographic space of racial fluidity for those of African or African American descent.

Lottie: Am I? Ask her.

Vera: OOO-WEE. This has the makings of a might good tragedy.

(Anna Mae puts on Vera's coat).

Anna Mae: Only in the movies, sugar, only in the movies. In real life one Anna Mae Simpkins gets to eat clams on a half shell, sip champagne from crystal and dance all night to the Starlight Orchestra. *(She winks)*

Lottie: Ask her where she's from?

Anna Mae (*With accent)*: Rio de Janeiro (21).

This satirically comments on the ridiculousness of racial categorization and the simultaneous rigidity and flexibility of race as Anna Mae knows nothing of Brazil and Brazilian culture, but by feigning an accent she is able to pass. It is worth noting here the inherent absurdity of these efforts to pass and that they go unquestioned. Indeed, Anna Mae refuses the possibility of a tragic end—and audiences witness no such fall for her—because, as Nottage depicts it, passing is a space for play rather than, by necessity, melodrama. These women are taking advantage of the limitations of a racist system; they are not tragically crushed under it.

These three women all perform as caricature because the caricature is most readily imagined. While this idea may seem to venture to the absurd or even to farce, there are numerous documented, historical accounts of African Americans playing within the pass—using the prejudices and expectations of the viewer against them to successfully pass. One of the most compelling examples is that of Langston Hughes. Arnold Rampersad records one particular time in which Hughes passed for Mexican, writing, "At San Antonio he pulled his hat down over his curly hair and, in Spanish, secured a comfortable Pullman berth to Laredo… he spent the night in a fleabag. 'Of course it's far from being the Ritz-Carlton,' he reasoned, 'but then I couldn't stay

there anyhow for I am Colored. But here nothing is barred from me. I am among my own people for… Mexico is a brown man's country'"(40). Unlike the women of Nottage's imagining, Hughes here is passing not only to afford himself opportunities otherwise denied but to reduce imminent danger. W. Jason Miller makes the difference plain, "[Passing] did more than offer him a more comfortable ride than the one afforded back on the Jim Crow cars: it lessened his chances of being a victim of violence" (11). This is certainly true and Hughes' experiences with passing are particularly relevant in this post-soul context because Hughes also passed for more seemingly frivolous reasons—reasons that are not discussed as frequently in conversations about passing. When Hughes visited the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill to give a poetry reading, although he was there in an official capacity *as* Langston Hughes, he passed—or, rather, did nothing to dissuade the perception that he may not have been African American, a *passive* pass—in the presence of those who were unaware of his identity. Rampersad records the words of Anthony J. Buttitta, who housed Hughes in North Carolina, "'the cheap, southern soda jerker took Hughes for a mexican [sic] or something and let it go at that, but since he found out that Hughes was a "nigger" and he had given him service the way he would have a white man, he got angry and attempted to catch us in a place or two and sock us in the jaw…'" (225). This incident highlights the further ridiculousness of racial understanding as the shop owner was fine with Hughes's physicality when he was *not* black, yet reacts violently against the same physicality upon suspicion that Hughes, in fact, *was.* Moreover, that Hughes was perpetrator in both types of passing—one seeming to stem from a genuine need for protection, one from a lighter desire to eat in a local restaurant—is particularly notable and gives further credence to the forms of passing undertaken in *Vera Stark*. The discourse surrounding passing often discounts the usefulness of the pass outside of matters of life or death. That Hughes could engage in a pass

without it emerging from critical trauma is a stark disavowal of the insistence on passing as connected always to some immediate or predicted clear suffering—an insistence that exists in large part to lessen fears of widespread racial passing and reify the racial binary. Miller explains, "Hughes invoked humor to significantly lessen community outrage on the campus of The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1931. *Such humor was imperative*" (11, emphasis mine). Indeed, that Hughes used humor as a tool for passing serves as a precursor to the post-soul images of passing. The women of *Vera Stark* alter their identities in the simplest ways by reading the expectations of their viewers and using them to their advantage. In the end, the pass does not *necessarily* render them victim—they never become figurative tragic mulattas. The pass is not undertaken out of disgrace or racial shame; it is not their only option for actualization, but they exercise their autonomy in choosing to engage in it.

Regardless of the passer's initial motivation, passing is never a solitary action. It relies on the active participation of others. Marcia Alesan Dawkins describes it by noting:

> Each participant plays a role, without which any pass would fail. The passer begins with a racial identity (a self-understanding as multiracial, white, or black, say) and creates a racial identification. The racial identification (how others understand and categorize the passer) is seen one way by the in-group clairvoyant, who knows the passer's "real" identity (as either multiracial, white, or black) and keeps the secret. The dupe identifies the passer according to the racial identify projected by the passer in passing (as either white or black) (17).

Indeed, if even one participant is unwilling to play, the pass can no longer take place. Nottage invokes this sense of the communality of the passing dynamic in the passes perpetrated by the three women in her play. Vera and Lottie orchestrate a joint pass through the use of slavery

tropes while Anna Mae passes for Brazilian, but it is important to note that while these passes are played concurrently and Anna Mae's operates seemingly irrespective of Vera and Lottie's, they would fail without each other's acquiescence in the performance. Again, within the post-soul frame, we are witness to the reliance on visualization—the pass is successful not only where performance becomes identity in toto but when silence represents approval. For this reason, even within the degree of liberation or the potential for a degree of actualization or autonomy advanced through these degrees of passing, these same concerns about representation and selfhood linger. Here is where passing is problematized, not in the abiding concern over implied miscegenation or a persistent feeling of racial trauma—because surely the trauma of race exists in America with or without the pass—it rests in immediate consideration surrounding issues of intraracial representation.

These concerns around intraracial representation are made manifest not only in the disparity between the types of passes allowed Vera, Lottie, and Anna Mae, but in two critical scenes in the play: Vera's introduction to Leroy, her future ex-husband, and the scholarly conversation surrounding Vera's impact and legacy after her death. When Vera meets Leroy, a jazz musician, the two immediately engage in a flirtatious debate around racial performativity both on and off the screen.

> Vera: I sense judgment in your voice. Are you one of those people who think the pictures are a blight on our culture? Are you a race man?
>
> Leroy: I like a good picture.
>
> (*Leroy does a spot-on impression of Stepin Fetchit. Vera succumbs to laughter.*)
>
> Vera: You're a real fool, Man Friday.

Leroy: You find that funny, do ya? Don't get me wrong I'm up for a good laugh as much as the next fella, but why we still playing slaves. Shucks, it was hard enough getting free the first damn time.

Vera: It's steady work and it beats picking cotton (32).

This scene is rife with concern for the possible representation of selfhood. Here it is not only about the performer, but about the person who is casting the gaze. There is now being brought to attention, as Walter White mentions before, concerns not only about the white gaze but also of the black gaze, that both gazes can operate as policing impediments. In this way, intraracial complicates the traditional black/white nature of passing as it is not contingent on the racial binary. Instead, the affective center of passing is the performative—how the passer interprets their viewer's receptive needs to be persuaded of the pass effectively. Vera indicates an apparent incompatibility between enjoying entertainment and racial uplift—the definition here of a race man apparently lies in contrast with the ability to enjoy a film. Yet that Leroy's response is an impression of Stepin Fetchit, and that the impression—this momentary pass—is *successful* indicates not only the pervasiveness of the oversimplified tropes and the immediacy of their recall, which the post-soul critiques, but also highlights the ways that the visual culture of the post-soul is concerned with not only the performance but the choosing. In fact, it fully underscores the importance of this visual culture as Nottage identifies it—these performances rely on viewer locking the passer in his or her gaze.

That Leroy can immediately perform as Stepin Fetchit may indicate that within the post-soul the concern surrounding narratives of passing is with the choice to pass, rather than the ability to pass. Moreover, that Leroy is an aspiring jazz musician speaks directly to the multitudinous possibilities of black performativity, and the contrast of the perception of some

musicianship and acting in the 1930s. Could both be considered as ways of passing? If passing is, as it is implied to be throughout the play, a way of getting over or getting by, rather than a moralistic choice or a necessity bred from direct racialized trauma, the answer may be in the affirmative. Certainly, and quite significantly, Nottage's rendering of Leroy does not imply any superiority or racial authenticity that Vera's choosing lacks, seeming to indicate a sense of adequation between the two. Leroy's question surrounding African American performance as slave is, as Nottage writes it, asked without a question mark. While this may be an error in editing, it may also gesture to the way in which his query refuses critical analysis. Leroy is not concerned with an answer because he and Vera are both acutely aware of the problematic nature of these performances. That Vera's response includes the pseudo-anachronistic "picking cotton"[34] gives further credence to this potential. In fact, both end their lives with legacies that reside in these spaces of pride and shame simultaneously—neither is wholly lauded or entirely condemned, but as a result of their binaric disruption they are unable to be easily quantified and their performances offer complications for black performativity that reverberate even after their deaths.

The way the readerly audience is meant to understand Vera's complicated legacy is best illuminated by the discussion held in the second act. Like the rest of the play, the assemblage of the scholarly panel has a comic element that belies the serious significance of these critics' insights. Although, on the surface, the second act deals very little with passing—save a brief moment when a character's possible black-to-white passing is more overtly alluded—the double-

[34] Although picking cotton has occurred in all periods in the United States, it is not a circumstance with which we are given any indication that Vera has any experience. Instead, the assertion that playing a slave beats "picking cotton" may serve to underscore not only Vera's certainty that her pass is incontrovertibly useful but also the ways that even with emancipation the status of African Americans had changed little in the popular imaginary.

casting of the actors here is significant to an understanding of the way that passing operates in a more contemporary setting. Here Herb Forrester is played by the same actor as Leroy Barksdale, Carmen Levy-Green by Lottie McBride's, and Afua Assata Ejobo by Anna Mae Simpkins's. Nottage thus reimagines these roles in the 21st century to show that there is no central point for identity—and, perhaps that all identity, even that which is described as *fixed*, is ultimately in flux. Here the actors have transitioned to stereotypical imagined members of academia: the elitist professor, the radical leftist, the bookish scholar, perhaps indicating the ways that the virtuality that once seemed to necessitate passing as the jazz man, the Brazilian bombshell, or the slave-actor now lend themselves to a different, present performance of identity.

These three academics analyze Vera's life in terms that converge and diverge, working to quantify not only her legacy but her motivation. Was it for the art? For the people? For herself? They are not arguing incompatible points, but they frame them as though they are. This is the difficulty of performative identity for all—it is performed and not explained, and it is left to the viewer to make sense of it. What is so important here is that even as we witnessed Vera's origin story, her life remains undetermined. This difficulty in arguing any clear causality or final legacy only further proves the resilience of the binary and explains why our understanding of passing tends toward melodrama even in the face of complicated portrayals. Nottage provides Vera the moment to reflect on her own,

> But, it's funny I played the role of Tilly, a slave woman bound to her mistress, and here all of these years later and I find myself bound to Tilly, a slave woman. I wish I could shake that silly little wench out of me. But here we are nearly forty years later still… still answering questions about that picture. I've lived a lifetime since I made it. But, Tilly… Tilly is my shame and… my glory. She birthed me

into a career. Perhaps I had to play her to get where I am. I don't know. (*Whispered*). I don't know (89-90).

Vera herself recognizes the ambiguity surrounding her own performance, but unlike her critics, can see the binary as a possible space to be disrupted. She is simply unable to articulate it, ultimately deciding she "doesn't know" because she knows her listeners cannot understand that a performance can simultaneously be both shame and glory. Audiences are simply unable to imagine that Vera can reside in two spaces simultaneously. Vera's legacy is undetermined in large part because the legacy of passing itself is veiled and undetermined and threatens the binary. In this way, Nottage is continuing the trajectory that was emphasized by other post-soul playwrights, where pride and shame can occupy the same space and time.

Slavery and the racial limitations enforced by Reconstruction and Jim Crow serve as useful satirical themes because there are certain factors a playwright can take for granted. The current national consciousness requires a certain amount of amnesia surrounding the humanity of those involved and so slaves tend to receive treatment that is so historically distant that they lose identifiable humanity—but either way any nuance surrounding the personhood or personality of the slaves as individuals, rather than slaves as a monolith, is disallowed. *Vera Stark* places these beliefs under examination not by arguing that passing was noble, nor that it was undertaken without repercussion, but instead by showing passing as existing outside of a narrative frame that requires it be a phenomenon where identity is either/or, rather than both/and.

Similarly, Young Jean Lee's *The Shipment* (2010), found in *The Methuen Drama Book of Post-Black Plays* (2013) is especially intriguing in a discussion of post-soul black performativity and passing possibilities. Lee, a Korean American playwright, set out to write a "black identity politics show" (qtd. in Elam and Jones xxviii) and *The Shipment* incisively addresses a number

of African American stereotypes and tropes. It is worthwhile to include her "Author's Note" in its entirety:

> "*The show is divided into two parts. The first half is structured like a minstrel show—dance, stand-up routine, sketches, and a song—and I wrote it to address the stereotypes my cast members felt they had to deal with as black performers. Our goal was to walk the line between stock forms of black entertainment and some unidentifiable weirdness to the point where the audience wasn't sure what they were watching or how they were supposed to respond. The performers wore stereotypes like ill-fitting paper-doll outfits held on by two tabs, which denied the audience easy responses (illicit pleasure or self-righteous indignation) to racial clichés and created a kind of uncomfortable, paranoid watchfulness in everyone. The second half of the show is relatively straight naturalistic comedy. I asked the actors to come up with roles they'd always wanted to play and wrote the second half of the show in response to their requests*" (Lee 212).

Audiences witness an anachronistic minstrel show as flat, offensive African American "types" perform in expected fashion. It is as uncomfortable as Lee intends it to be. Lee's assertion that the actors "*wore stereotypes like ill-fitting paper-doll outfits held on by two tabs*" is especially compelling—it bears comment that an aspiring rapper in the play raps a thinly-veiled version of the rhyme from a 1992 Fruity Pebbles commercial as rapped by *The Flintstones'* Barney Rubble in the brand's attempt to capitalize on rap music's arrival in the mainstream—a parody of a parody. These moments are intentionally disconcerting as Lee elucidates the problem of limiting blackness but, as in the post-soul more broadly, seems to offer no solution.

The incredible turn, however, comes in the play's second half when these same actors portray different, more subdued characters who do not necessarily conform to easily-identifiable types. As the characters interact, the conversation disintegrates into racial humor and an embracing of African American stereotypes. As audiences gaze upon the scene, the moment shifts again as a character begins to express his discomfort,

> Omar: I'm sorry. I'm sorry, but I have to say that I'm uncomfortable with all of this.
>
> I just don't think we'd be doing this if there were a black person in the room.
>
> *Pause.*
>
> Desmond: I guess that would depend on what kind of black person it was.
>
> *Blackout.*
>
> End (Lee 268)

Audiences witness physical black bodies on the stage, yet these characters are *not* black—they too are engaging in a pass. The frame of minstrelsy and the expectation of black stereotypes coupled with the preeminence of phenotype as racial indicator in our understanding of race inform our viewing of the second half of the performance. In this moment we have the physical presence of black bodies in the actors—these actors are all African-descended and phenotypically "black"—but the absence of black *people* as these actors are playing white *characters*. We begin to likewise wonder if the minstrel characters presented in the former half were African American as well. Or were we merely mystified by assumptions of the corporeality of blackness—a sort of theatrical law of hypodescent even as we suspend disbelief, where we allow the fantastical world of the theatre but still presume that characters played by black people are always defined by race?

Lee's assertion that for the second half of the play she *"asked the actors to come up with roles they'd always wanted to play and wrote the second half of the show in response to their requests"* is particularly important and serves to elucidate some of what the post-soul represents. These post-civil rights satirical works are important because in staking claim to the humanity of these disparaged African American types, they do not simply seek to uplift slaves by rewriting them all as positive characters. Instead, "they enlist satire to reclaim Stowe's Tom or Topsy, exaggerating stereotypes and turning the new negative affects of revenge, fear, or shame, into the basis of new democratic collectivities" (Tillet 58). These "democratic collectivities" demand that blackness be seen for the multitudes it contains—the multitudes that blackness always knew it contained. This is so meaningful because when someone appropriates your culture, the fitting response is not necessarily to try to correct their appropriation—instead, it seems that the most satisfying response is to take it right back from them and do with it what you will.

Through these portrayals, Nottage, Lee, and other post-soul playwrights provide these characters with autonomy or, in some cases, make the depiction of limited blackness seem foolish rather than false—a reclamation rather than an annihilation which works to rescript blackness in the national consciousness. Once again, it is not a matter in the post-soul of a responsibility toward didactic racial uplift, but instead an uplift that is born of a sense of the humanity and dynamism of people of color. These playwrights refuse the hierarchy of the real juxtaposed against the fictive—a comparative lens that has been disturbed in African American literature and culture in a wide array of forms, beginning in its inception with the necessity of fictive kinships.[35] As articulated by Aimee Zygmonski, "To interrogate the nature of the 'real,'

[35] Fictive kinships are best described as invented familial relationships where individuals are not related by blood or marriage. These relationships make up a critical piece of the African American cultural tradition.

Nottage reproaches audience complicity through parodic satire, sending up stereotypes while sending out critique" (208). Ultimately, these works demonstrate the impossibility of racial singularity through their focus on passing as performance. It is the emphasis on the multiple possibilities in passing—an act that itself reveals the imprudent structuring of the color line—that renders race a complicated social construct, both positive and negative, without simply implying that it holds no importance or should be torn asunder. In fact, these post-soul works distinguish between race and its attendant stereotypes, seeming to indicate that race itself is at worst a neutral phenomenon and instead striking against the prejudiced beliefs of the viewer which surround race.

In doing so, Nottage refuses the terror of previous passing stories while retaining the emphasis on choosing. In particular, she disallows passing as a tragic state or one that is solely black-to-white. Nella Larsen's 1929 novella, *Passing,* addresses the potential tragedy of passing[36] and is hearkened to by Nottage in a few ways—particularly in the reliance of these three female friends on each other to keep passing secrets. In *Passing,* Clare is white enough to pass and does so, marrying a wealthy and overtly racist white man. Through a chance encounter with a friend from her past, Irene Redfield, Clare is forced to consider the life she gave up. As Irene is likewise light enough to pass but did not, save a few momentary excursions, she is presented now with a living example of the reality of passing. George Hutchinson keenly notes that "*Passing* overturned prior conventions of black-authored novels of passing and put to

[36] George Hutchinson rightly points out, "Clare Kendry is not a 'tragic mulatto.' In Larsen's terms she is not even a mulatto… To Clare, there is nothing tragic about being black. She makes no profound sacrifices, no deeply ethical choice for one race over the other. Her choices are entirely selfish and epicurean; she does what pleases her" (299). In this sense, *Passing* may be considered a tragedy not about characters but instead about the tragedy of passing as thematically-addressed and rather broadly-defined. That tragedy manifests in the necessity of passing, rather than in the passer or the action of passing itself.

confusion nearly all the tendencies to racial idealization common in both white- and black-authored texts on the topic" (298). Yet even here Larsen's account is much more nuanced than often recalled as the narrative trajectory of passing stories has become muddled and oversimplified in conversation as popular opinions about passing overtake both real and fictional accounts. Despite the way the text is recalled, Clare is not the protagonist. It is Irene who is both protagonist and narrator. By framing the narrative around Irene's thoughts and experiences, Larsen ultimately de-centers if not white supremacy then certainly at least white primacy as Clare's whiteness renders her the Other—she becomes the object to be viewed. Additionally, the novella addresses three[37] unique forms of passing—Clare's passing is of the unidirectional and permanent sort, but there is also Gertrude who passes while her white husband is aware of her racial background. Finally, Irene herself engages in moments of passing. At the outset of the novella, audiences are introduced to her as she ducks into a taxicab on a sweltering day to get out to of the heat and sits and drinks in a posh hotel. Her passing is a result of omission—the taxicab driver, hotel staff, and patrons all assume she is white by appearances, and so no conflict occurs. Still, Irene worries that she may be found out. Larsen writes, "And gradually there rose in Irene a small inner disturbance, odious and hatefully familiar. She laughed softly, but her eyes flashed. Did that woman, could that woman, somehow know that here before her very eyes on the roof of the Drayton sat a Negro?" (10). Even these moments of temporary passing are not without their danger, but the sense of constant, impending trauma is not as pervasive.

It is similarly worth considering *Imitation of Life* and its reframing of passing. For the purposes of this analysis, it is less important to consider Fannie Hurst's novel than to address the

[37] Arguably, Irene's husband, Brian, may be engaging in his own forms of passing with regards to his sexuality and (lack of) contentedness in married life, as could Clare and Irene, but a discussion of this possibility is beyond the scope of this chapter.

changes suggested by Fredi Washington in her nuanced portrayal of Peola in the 1934 film. In the novel, Peola has herself sterilized, marries a white man in Seattle, flees to Brazil, and does not return for her mother's funeral. At Fredi Washington's encouragement, the film version depicts a somewhat less despicable Peola who returns to her mother's funeral filled with guilt and regret and returns over the color line and fulfills her mother's wishes by finishing her education at a colored school. Charlene Regester notes of Washington, "Though she wore a mask of whiteness in her private life in that she was a white mulatto, she refused to masquerade as white off screen. In her words, 'I have never tried to pass for white and never had any desire to do so'" (123). Washington did, however, pass occasionally for white, but she made it clear that these moments were never done in acceptance of white supremacy. Instead, these momentary passes were done for momentary benefits. Washington instead consistently maintained her pride in her heritage. In "Looking White, Acting Black: Cast(e)ing Fredi Washington," Cheryl Black emphasizes that Washington, "[E]xpressed regret for her light skin, insisting that she wished for a darker complexion. Washington now responded to the accusations of passing that had surfaced in her *Singin' the Blues* days, confirming that she had taken advantage of her color to get better accommodations in hotels, restaurants, and shops: 'When they know you are colored, they rob you'"(30). For Washington, there was a distinction between passing for equality and passing due to subscription to a racial hierarchy—a distinction often overlooked in passing recollections. These later works seek to reinstate this particular difference.

Incognegro and the Black/White Color Line

It is the focus on virtuality and performance that likewise makes the graphic novel a useful form for dismantling the formulaic passing narratives. Will Eisner describes sequential art by explaining, "In its most economical state, comics employ a series of repetitive images and

recognizable symbols. When these are used again and again to convey similar ideas, they become a language—a literary form, if you will. And it is this disciplined application that creates the 'grammar' of Sequential Art" (8). Indeed, it is this invention of a new "language" implied by the graphic novel that lays bare the absurdity of race.[38] In the construction of *Incognegro,* images are subtle and open to interpretation, placing the burden of racial identification on the audience. The text opens abruptly with an unspecified narrator, explaining, "Between 1889 and 1918, 2,522 negroes were **murdered** by lynch mobs in America. That we **know** of. Now, since the beginning of the '30s, most of the white papers don't even consider it **news**. To them, another nigger dead is not a **story**. So my job is to **make** it one. That's all" (7). These words appear in text box captions with quotations, rather than the more traditional speech balloons, indicating that this is not a third-person omniscient narrator but instead a narrator who is physically present in the action. The page on which these words appear, opposite a stark black page, displays a realistically, though simply, drawn lynching in black and white. The image instantly recalls the photographs and postcards of the early 20th century in which these graphic murders are chronicled and then distributed. The victim's face is obscured, and he stands on a box with a noose around his neck. On the following page the audience bears witness to the murder in jarring stages—the panel closes in on the screaming face, the dismemberment, the brutality and costuming, and, finally, the man dead and hanging in the midst of the crowd.

In "Black and White and Read All Over: Representing Race in Mat Johnson and Warren Pleece's *Incognegro: A Graphic Mystery*" Tim Caron argues, "The fact that Pleece renders the victim of the lynching in the moments before the mutilation and murder elicits sympathy for him

[38] Although *Incognegro* compelling delves into a wide variety of passing, including woman-to-woman and woman-to-man, in this chapter I am choosing to focus primarily on Zane's "traditional" black-to-white passing in the graphic novel as it exposes most thoroughly the Afro-Millenial focus on the unreliability of performance and virtuality in identity formation.

from the reader" (147). Perhaps, but I also believe that more than a need to invoke sympathy, Pleece is indicting the reader for the murder. By making the reader's perspective on the same plane of vision as the other spectators, he makes the reader an active participant and brings the abstraction of passing, of lynching, of all the horrors and activities of some fictional and static United States into the 21st century. It is as Michael A. Chaney argues in "Drawing on History in Recent African American Graphic Novels," "Rather than reflect the putative facts of history from some transparent or bounded notion of a "black" perspective, these texts question institutions of recollection, such as documentary photography and Hollywood cinema, upon whose premises any such thing as the past is produced for scrutiny in the first place" (176). Indeed, in the first page, readers enter into the action from *above* the scene—from their comfortable location as above these horrors, as guiltless. Yet this distance is immediately disrupted as the images jerk into closer view with an immediate close-up of the victim's screaming face and his subsequent torture and torment, only occasionally obscured by the bodies of other participants. As readers, our perspective is much more closely associated in these scenes with the audience than of the anti-lynching protagonist. We gaze upon the lynching as active participants in it. Comic artist Scott McCloud explains,

> I may have drawn an *axe* being *raised* in this example, but I'm not the one who let it *drop* or decided how *hard* the blow, or *who* screamed, or *why. That,* dear reader, was your *special crime,* each of you committing it in your own *style*. All of you *participated* in the murder. All of you *held the axe* and *chose your spot*. To kill a man between panels is to condemn him to a thousand deaths (68-9, emphasis in original).

These "thousand deaths" are fully lodged in the province of the reader's mind, particularly in the case of these lynching stories. Readers have already seen the postcard images and heard Billie Holiday's plaintive song. They have seen the films that engage these narratives. Now, at the hand of Johnson and Pleece, they are asked to recall these images on their own, to fill in the spaces too brutal for Johnson to verbalize or Pleece to make visible. In this way, the reader becomes the lynch mob. In fact, throughout the text, the reader is seldom invited to see the plot unfold from Zane's perspective. Instead, Zane is pictured in most frames, even as he narrates the tale, and the reader watches from the vantage point of an unidentified onlooker. The reader is expressly *not* Zane Pinchback. The reader is at best a passive observer and, at worst, a threat to Zane's binary-rupturing existence. Through this delicate coordination of image and word, *Incognegro* both literally and figuratively presents an image that relies heavily on audience participation to gain meaning—readers bring their own preconceptions of both lynchings and passing to the narrative and Pleece's understated drawings require the audience to fill in the gaps. Scott McCloud explains, "When we *abstract* an image through cartooning, we're not so much *eliminating* details as we are *focusing* on *specific details.* By *stripping down* an image to its essential *"meaning,"* an artist can *amplify* that meaning in a way that realistic art *can't*" (30). These images then take on meaning in the 21st century that a postcard of an actual lynching from the 20th century may not. That is, these images cannot be left behind in the past. Instead, these images merge the historical with the present through this implicit need for audience participation and recall.

At the beginning of the text, the audience is not aware of the speaker's identity. This ambiguity is important as Pleece and Johnson set the tone for a text in which race, gender, sexuality, and identity more broadly are rendered enigmatic if not completely unintelligible. The

frame finally closes in on the narrator—his race is indeterminate and cannot be gleaned from Pleece's drawings alone. His expression is likewise unclear. His face is placid and calm, registering none of the horror that one would expect from an anti-lynching activist thrust onto a lynching scene. Readers may be temporarily baffled by the impassioned behavior of the narrator until, in exposition the following conversation occurs

> Carl: How do you keep them from **discovering** you?
>
> Zane: That I'm a **journalist?**
>
> Carl: No… That you're really a **negro.**
>
> Zane: Oh, that. I just don't stay long enough for those **crackers** to figure it out (9).

Here Zane is revealed to be both a journalist and African American. Yet what is particularly intriguing is Zane's apparent nonchalance in regards to his racial identity. When Carl asks him how he hides his identity, Zane assumes the question surrounds his livelihood. In fact, it becomes apparent that Zane is able to pass for white *and return to black* with great ease—he enters into white society without much difficulty and then returns home to Harlem without incident. Once again, the post-soul emphasis is on the permeability of the color line, where passing individuals may choose one identity in one moment, and a different one in another. This is an often-overlooked theme in recorded accounts of actual passing. In Walter White's "I Investigate Lynchings, " for example, there is no sense of melodrama. Instead, White depicts his moments of passing as engagement with adventure. He writes,

> The lynching were not so difficult to inquire into because of the fact already noted that those who perpetrated them were in nearly every instance simple-minded and easily fooled individuals. On but three occasions were suspicions aroused by my

> too definite questions or by informers who had seen me in other places… One other time the possession of a light skin and blue eyes (though I consider myself a colored man) almost cost me my life when (it was during the Chicago race riots in 1919) a Negro shot at me thinking me to be a white man (254).

White acknowledges the dangers of both the white and the black gaze while simultaneously articulating the ease of engaging the pass. What is especially interesting, here, is the way that White speaks of his own racial identity, as chosen. He says, "I consider myself a colored man," flouting the one-drop rule or any sense of inherent blackness. Instead, even writing in the early 20th century, White sees race as having a fluid potential—something that aids in his passing in reality and in the passing of Zane Pinchback in fiction.

As the narrative continues, we find the protagonist, by way of writerly introduction, has been recounting his exploits and explaining his rationale to friends in Harlem. When one comments, "Joking aside, Zane, what you do is a great service to our **people**. You're not just passing for white to get a table at the Waldorf-Astoria" (12), his response is swift but light: "Now honey, I take offense to that. Can't a black man eat a Waldorf salad without being branded a race-traitor?" (12). That Zane is able to find humor in this conversation about lynching is not necessarily new—indeed, it hearkens to Langston Hughes' real-life willingness to engage in passing for a meal—but it underscores the post-soul emphasis on the multitude of reasons for passing. In investigating lynchings, Zane is undoubtedly putting his life on the (color) line and still refuses to condemn those who choose to pass for seemingly frivolous reasons.

What is particularly striking about the construction of *Incognegro* is Warren Pleece's imagery. Because of the nature of graphic novels and comics, images are often reliant on phenotypic stereotypicality—the colors and faces are meant to leave no question as to the

identity of the players. Yet Pleece's images intentionally shirk the concreteness of race. The drawings are done in only black and white and while the characters are drawn realistically, they lack enough detail to make them recognizable. In fact, even the shading of the images is so wildly varied that it becomes in some cases impossible to determine the coloring evoked—this is perhaps most noticeable in Ryder's horse which shifts from black to white from frame to frame without explanation and without comment from any other character. Indeed, that our eyes deceive us seems to be the only constant—that even when race is rendered in literal black and white it is unstable. McCloud argues, "In black and white, the ideas *behind* the art are communicated more *directly*. Meaning transcends form. Art approaches *language"* (192). Certainly, then, the idea of the immateriality of race is at the forefront.

The indefiniteness of race is emphasized further as the plot progresses and audiences are informed as to why Zane is engaging in this particular pass. In this moment, Zane must travel to the South to save his brother, Pinchy,[39] who has been wrongly imprisoned for the murder of a white woman. While Zane is able to pass, Pinchy is not. This fact alone would be enough to explicate the ludicrousness of race, but Johnson and Pleece take this further—Zane and Pinchy are not only brothers, but twins. Johnson—himself an African American with light skin and straight, nearly-blond hair—explains in his "Author's Note," "The birth of my twins in 2005, one of whom is brown-skinned with black Afro hair, the other with the palest of pink skins and more European curly hair, brought the rest of the story home to me. Two people with the exact same ethnic lineage, destined to be viewed differently only because of genetic randomness" (n.p.). That one twin is able to infiltrate the permeations of the color line sounds like the realm of the

[39] The naming of Zane and Pinchy seems to address, however, subtly, Jean Toomer's grandfather, P.B.S. Pinchback, Lieutenant Governor and Governor of Louisiana during Reconstruction—a man who was phenotypically white and able to pass. In fact, Toomer's childhood nickname was "Pinchy."

imaginary, but Johnson wants to make sure that readers are aware that while some of the plot details may emerge from authorial imagination, the particulars of (un)identical twins is no fiction. The construction of Zane and Pinchy not only exposes the impermanence of race and genetics—Zane and Pinchy's legally black parents produced one child who, if he chose, could pass as legally white—but also underscores color as unreliable. Zane and a black cohort, Ryder, engage in the following conversation after Ryder realizes Zane is Pinchy's brother:

> Zane: How did you know? Have I become that **obvious**? Is my kink showing?
>
> Ryder: You look just like the man! You **lucky** folks around here are so color struck or they would see it first thing too. White folks see what they want to see. That's what makes them so easy to fool with this passing thing.
>
> Zane: White folks do see what they want to see. And that's what makes them so damn **dangerous** (64).

It is the simultaneity of safety and anger inherent in passing that once again rips a presumption of the binary asunder. Here it is clear that, due to his phenotypic presentation, Zane is protected by virtue of his white skin—his would-be attackers are unlikely to probe more deeply than the surface level. However, Zane eschews the presumption of the racialized safety, knowing fully well that, despite his phenotypic whiteness, if he is suspected of passing he will be in grave danger.

In fact, it is his belief that white Americans "see what they want to see" that allows Zane not only the license to free his brother but also to enact vengeance on the most vile of all the perpetrators of racial violence. After saving his brother and returning with him to Harlem, Zane articulates to Pinchy the malleability of identity, explaining, "That's the **best** thing: identity is **open-ended**. Why have just **one**?" (129) If there is any moralizing to be found in the narrative, it

is here. Zane makes plain that identity cannot be located on a binary and, even more, that identity permanence is a myth. Both Zane and Pinchy are not only able to vacillate between many points on the scale of identity at will, but occupy them at the same time according to their whim. Additionally, the text ends with Zane having used his position as journalist to indict the greatest perpetrator of violence—he has the newspaper "reveal" the leader of the Ku Klux Klan to be the infamous Incognegro, and the graphic novel ends with what we can assume is the man's death by the growing mob approaching him. This turn of fate is particularly compelling because all the man's "good" work within the Ku Klux Klan is immediately erased upon suspicion of racial impropriety. What is even more interesting about this moment, and about these narratives of passing in general, is that they fly in the face of the expectation of law and morality wielded in the United States. The law of lenity dictates that ambiguity in disputes should be resolved in favor of the defendant. And yet in these cases of racial panic the law of the land expressly works against the defendant. In most cases, we view a false positive as worse than a false negative and there is a resultant burden of proof to prove the crime occurred. In these racial panics, we would rather a person erroneously be convicted of the "crime" of blackness than the false negative of being counted among whiteness if they are not. The idea of racial panic is at the heart of all passing narratives—that the individual who passes must engage the pass to attain some degree of equality or opportunity otherwise missed and must maintain the pass for fear of violent retribution. However, in *Passing*, any moments of what could be described as "racial panic" are fleeting for these three women, until the end, and are self-imposed for Clare out of a lack of discretion. Later narratives emphasize Irene's vacillating, pass, reclaiming passing itself by reminding audiences that while the line is transgressed the transgressor can pass back again. Passing must be undertaken with sincerity and genuine effort but, as seen as early as Ellen Craft,

it need not be a permanent condition. If the pass can be seen as temporary, the ideas of race—and the racial permanence that reifies a racial hierarchy that is the foundation of the national consciousness—are precarious and open for play. If this is the case then race, and by extension, white supremacy which necessitates it, no longer hold dominion over the social and political realms.

To understand the significance of the way that passing itself is reexamined and reclaimed, it is important to consider more closely the historical trajectory of passing narratives and the ways that these texts have both celebrated and condemned a more static and even biological understanding of race. One of the earliest accounts, that of Ellen and William Craft, appears in the mid-19th century. The Crafts's escape to freedom was orchestrated through an understanding of the expectations of passing and a disruption of the binary upon which it operates. The light-skinned Ellen Craft fixed her hair under a top hat and donned the attire of a sickly white planter traveling with his faithful slave—actually her husband, William Craft. Knowing that slave catchers would be searching for Ellen passing in the more obvious disguise as a white woman, the Crafts wisely played social constructions to their advantage—William Craft records that his wife "made a most respectable looking gentleman" (210). The pair arrived to freedom in Philadelphia on Christmas Day and, after being pursued by and eluding bounty hunters for two years, relocated to England where they remained until returning to the United States—and the South—in 1890.

What is particularly interesting here is that Ellen Craft is not the only female slave to pass as a white male. Maria Weems, at the age of fifteen, chose the same method. What is worth more consideration here, however, is the way in which Ellen and William Craft passed together in concert to escape undetected. William Craft is engaged in his own form of passing, as he passes

for the slave of an imaginary white man. It is in this capacity that the popular notion of passing is particularly disrupted as passing is frequently considered as a naturally solitary endeavor. What is beheld in the account of the Crafts is the way that passing can only operate within a system of willing participation by all involved—that the possibility of passing is only made manifest if both Ellen and William are able to play their roles. These accounts likewise exist in the realm of fiction. Perhaps most significantly, in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Eliza Harris escapes to Canada by cutting her hair and placing her young son in a wig and passing as a white man and daughter. Her husband, George, actively refuses the racial binary and, knowing that he is expected to pass for white instead darkens his skin and passes for a Spanish gentleman. What these deceptions by the Harris family demonstrate is that the expectations of race, class, and gender collaborate in ways to ultimately make racial passing possible. As Julia Stern argues, "George's disguise figures a self that could exist beyond the terms of nineteenth-century African American slavery" (108). Indeed, that George is able to create for himself a temporary identity that refuses both blackness and whiteness and—even more problematically for 19th-century audiences—the predictability and clear visual referents of racial identifiers speaks directly to the ways in which the possibility of race as mythology is being examined. What is interesting here is not only the methodology of passing but also its seeming ephemerality. Ellen and William Craft and the Harris family all use passing as a means to an end, but not the end itself. They pass to arrive to freedom and live *as African Americans*. The masquerade is used only to reach emancipation but expressly not to permanently exist in whiteness. This actuality does not merely trouble the perception that passing is defined by its permanent secrecy but adamantly refuses it. Instead the Crafts disrupt the color line not only by transgressing it but also by returning to their original racial designation while acknowledging that they did indeed pass temporarily. In doing so, they undermine the traditional

hierarchy of race that implies that those who can pass do pass permanently because whiteness reigns unquestionably supreme.

Racial Signifyin': Passing as Revisiting and Revising

What is important here, then, is not so much the treatment of blackness itself but that it operates specifically through this reclamation of negative stereotypes and tropes of passing to take blackness back, endowing it with all the nuance inherent to it. These gestures toward the already familiar follow the trajectory of African American literary tradition. Aldon Lynn Nielsen explains in *Black Chant,* "Chant, and this is true equally of such terms as 'song' and 'tradition,' in order to be *heard* as chant, must present itself to us as the at least vaguely familiar, the already heard, for it must have presupposed the possibility of reiteration, response, recall, re-rapping" (30). That these stereotypes are familiar—that they can be presented without further elucidation—is significant because it reminds audiences of the insidious nature of these tropes. Moreover, by invoking these symbols of the national consciousness and dismantling them, these playwrights are able to rewrite the script of blackness within the frame of these expectations. This is the African American tradition of repetition with a difference, having features of what Wall calls "worrying the line," what Gates refers to as "signifyin(g)," a revisiting and revising of that which is already known. Gates explains further that "Signifyin(g) is so fundamentally black, that is, it is such a familiar rhetorical practice, that one encounters the great resistance of inertia when writing about it. By inertia I am thinking here of the difficulty of rendering the implications of a concept that is so shared in one's culture as to have long ago become second nature to its users" (64). Indeed, that these authors choose to signify—that they choose to take types known to their audiences and recreate and reappropriate them—is not, in and of itself, especially new or even significant in a discussion of African American satire. What is especially

significant, though, is the reclamation of these negative stereotypes and characterizations of passing in an effort to examine and dismantle the stigma. While earlier texts did much work toward this same examination, they usually also contained a clear, homiletic message that underscored authorial purpose. More recent works instead push the effort to dismantle to the forefront rather than making a message that the stigma is wrong or hurtful or place a didactic message the immediate purpose.[40]

Rather than strict didacticism, these post-soul works disrupt the standard paradigmatic understanding of race and racialization. In *Satiric Inheritance: Rabelais to Sterne,* Michael Seidel compellingly argues, "The satiric representation… refuses to entertain notions of the accommodating, idealizing lie; that is, it refuses to break into normative form. Hence in satiric invective the urge to reform is literally overwhelmed by the urge to annihilate" (3). However, for African American satirical impulse after the civil rights movement, it may not be an urge to annihilate to which audiences bear witness—it is an urge to reclaim. These works target a limited understanding of blackness and rather than destroy it they reappropriate and reframe it. Images and performances of blackness so frequently tied to shame are reimagined as nuanced and dynamic—they occupy a space of pride and shame simultaneously, refusing a binary definition of identity. In doing so, by indicting performer, performance, and audience, all are held accountable for the propagation of these images and beliefs.

Certainly in the 19th century there are direct accounts of passing as a means to escape to freedom, but at the beginning of the 20th century these narratives really begin to take hold of the popular imagination. In 1931's "Crossing the Color Line" Caleb Johnson writes, "One out of

[40] In this way, these texts seem to signify on some Harlem Renaissance texts (most notably George Schuyler's *Black No More* and Nella Larsen's aforementioned *Passing*) in their interest in racial malleability without a concluding didactic message.

every ten persons in the United States bears the visible tinge of the 'tar brush,'[41] according to the last Federal Census. No statistics are available, naturally, of the number of persons who do not acknowledge their Negro ancestry but pass for white in their home communities and elsewhere, but it is a large and rapidly increasing number" (121). The need for fear implied in this statement is tangible—it is impossible to quantify the increasing number of individuals passing for white. The title itself, "Crossing the Color Line," seems to indicate a visible demarcation that must be transgressed with no backward glance—as if, like Lot's wife, those who do may find themselves turned into a pillar of salt for too fondly remembering their past. This oversimplification simultaneously offers some relief from the impending terror because it allows that racial passing occurs, but that the color line is impermeable once crossed and that racial categorizations then remain a binary and ultimately solid and secure. The fear exists in the idea that the Other is ever present in forbidden spaces, but even this fear is checked to a degree. Once a person passes and is engulfed in whiteness—even performative whiteness—the fear for potential miscegenation is allayed if the specter of blackness disappears. For this reason, fictional accounts are keen to mention the subsequent sterility of the passer, the light and fair unknowing offspring, or, barring this, turn tragic and record the horror of a dark child born to an unsuspecting white parent and passing spouse.

This absorption/absolution remedy marks a 20th century shift in the way that passing narratives are articulated. Here those stories where black men or women—but *especially* black women—pass over and are absorbed into whiteness take precedence. There are a few factors at play that seem to gesture toward an explanation. First, the end of slavery and a move into a period of Reconstruction and Jim Crow allowed a new degree of mobility for African Americans

[41] "Tar brush" is a derogatory phrase used to identify and degrade individuals of African descent.

and so the predominant reasons for passing likewise shifted. With this possible increase in the ability to pass, as it was no longer an issue of passing until geographical safety was reached but instead until social opportunities could be attained, couching these narratives in the ostentatiously tragic could serve as a warning to interested and likely parties. The focus on female passing allays fears of black masculinity in regards to miscegenation—if racial mixing is occurring, at least the idea of white womanhood remains protected. Additionally, by portraying the color line as unidirectional and situated in permanence, these narratives work to reify white supremacy and further degrade blackness. In this way, passing has no shades of grey and becomes literally an issue of black and white. This is comforting because it renders the perpetrators of the pass as tragic and lost—cut off from their past and from their loved and ultimately doomed. While this is certainly true for many, passing, as described by Marcia Alesan Dawkins, "is a strange thing. It has a large circumference. It is a way for us to see and not see, a way for us to be seen and not be seen. It looks at us and turns away from us at the same time. Passing shifts our social positions amidst social limitations. Constant movement is what makes passing so easy for us to wonder about and so difficult to understand" (xi). It cannot be neatly and unanimously described.

Why Passing? Why Now? What Next?

The current fascination with passing may seem, in many regards, rather anachronistic. Michele Elam acknowledges,

> Passing, then, seems a particularly antique phenomenon in this 'mulatto millennium,' usually invoked merely as a historical footnote supporting a complacent national narrative suggesting that the de facto and de jure discrimination which first led African Americans to pass before the civil rights era

> has itself passed from this world, given an easeful death by *Loving v. Virginia* (1967) (96).

What Elam notes here is that despite the present determination that modern society is "multi-racial"—as if multi-raciality is excitingly new—these new narratives of passing reinscribe the binaric racial terms of the past in order to formulate a more comprehensive understanding of identity performance today. As in the past, proper performance of racial identity has sometimes overwhelmed articulations of blackness and individual black identity. The search for a racial identity that is authentic to both the group and the individual, the public and the private has been challenging at best and an impossible undertaking at worst. Jean-François Bayart writes that "authenticity is not established by the immanent properties of the phenomenon or object under consideration. It results from the perspective, full of desires and judgements [sic], that is brought to bear on the past, in the eminently contemporary context in which one is situated" (78). These "desires and judgments" are meant to subscribe identity to the easily quantified and commodified. Yet these later texts refuse mass production and consumption and instead encourage play within these expectations and, most importantly, autonomy in their acceptance and refusal. Critically, as a result, these post-soul passers never locate their ability to pass on their own exceptionality but instead on the short-sightedness of their viewer. They render it ridiculous by pointing out the ways that passing relies on the expectation of whiteness—that blackness must announce itself, whereas whiteness simply always *is.* Zane explains his ability to pass, calling it, "Assimilation as **revolution**… That's what white folks never get. They don't think they have **accents.** They don't think they eat **ethnic** foods. Their music is **classical**. They think they're just **normal**. That they are the **universal**, and everyone else is an odd **deviation** from form. That's what makes them so easy to **infiltrate**" (18-19). It is the inability to see race as

nuanced, rather than a desire of the passer to climb to a higher rung on the racial ladder, that permits passing. These examples of passing in these texts, articulate the necessity of a focus on the past in an understanding of present identity formation. By demonstrating the malleability of race, thereby calling the racial hierarchy into question and critiquing attendant racialized expectations, these texts clear the way for a nuanced, post-soul understanding of race that exists both because of and despite racialization.

Chapter 4

"When Keeping It Real Goes Wrong": The Seriously Funny Chris Rock and Dave Chappelle

> The moderns, then, after they have abolished slavery, have three prejudices to contend against, which are less easy to attack and far less easy to conquer than the mere fact of servitude: the prejudice of the master, the prejudice of the race, and the prejudice of color.
>
> —Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*

> You know why my show is good? Because the network officials say you're not smart enough to get what I'm doing, and every day I fight for you. I tell them how smart you are. Turns out, I was wrong. You people are stupid.
>
> —Dave Chappelle

In an interview with Kalamu ya Salaam, James Baldwin expounds on writerly purpose. He notes, "The role of the writer is to write, but this is a cryptic statement. What I'd meant is that a writer doesn't dance. His function is very particular and so is his responsibility. After all, to

write, if taken seriously, is to be subversive. To disturb the peace" (36). Baldwin, as always, is intentional and incisive with his words. The role goes beyond, then, the performative aspect of writing a text or assuming an authorial persona or voice. The writer is defined by the eschewing of the frivolity often incorrectly attributed to the arts, by his or her inherent refusal of the status quo, a refusal that manifests itself through the written word structured itself as a critical lens. In this same way, it is useful to consider comedians Chris Rock and Dave Chappelle as writers who reflect this sense of obligation and duty in their self-written and televised performances. As a result, these comedians operate as public intellectuals as they intentionally subvert an understanding of mainstream humor as potentially frivolous and stress that the political and social import of comedy must not be disassociated from the laughter it inspires today. These satirical moments are meant to subvert the mainstream acceptance of and propagation of the racial status quo. In this sense, Rock's and Chappelle's roles as both writers and performers are significant. To extrapolate from Baldwin, these comedians inhabit the realm of the subversive in their skillful analyses and performances of racialization at the end of the 20th century and beginning of the 21st century. What they seek to do is inspire a "seriously funny"[42] laughter, laughter that itself inhabits a tricky space of simultaneous delight and sorrow. In this sense, this laughter evokes contemplation and self-reflection—as Percival Everett keenly explains, "Humor is an interesting thing. It's hard to do, but it allows you certain strategic advantages. If you can get someone laughing, then you can make them feel like shit a lot more easily" (qtd. in Shavers 48). This distinction by Everett is particularly useful in consideration of the real-world

[42] These comedians—often referred to as two of the greatest comedians of their time—are infamous for their ability to trigger raucous, uncontainable laughter from large audiences. However, their intention is that audiences will also become aware that underlying the hilarity is a feeling of somber understanding of racial politics and dissatisfaction with the racial reality as they articulate it. The jokes are funny, but the meaning serious.

applicability of satirical humor—that these texts and performances, while they inspire laughter, also compel the audience to reexamine themselves and their place within the establishments being satirized. However, this comedic moralizing can be easily rendered problematic at best and wholly ineffectual at worst due to the reliance on audience understanding and acceptance. When these fixed satires[43] are misunderstood—even when only misunderstood in part—what damage is done to the message, and is the performer to blame or the audience? Can there ever be enough due diligence to avoid these misconstructions? What happens when satire and the satirical are misconstrued or, to borrow a phrase from Chappelle, what happens "when keeping it real goes wrong"?

Since the late 1990s, Rock has refused to perform his controversial "Niggas versus Black People" stand-up bit, in which he raucously expressed his disgust with the behaviors and attitudes of the former as he spoke indirectly toward a politics of respectability. Similarly, nearly 10 years later, Dave Chappelle walked away from a $55 million contract with Comedy Central amidst personal concerns that his jokes were missing their mark, and that the laughter inspired was occurring as his performances were viewed through a racist—in stark contrast to a racially-conscious—lens. Chappelle later explained, "I want to make sure that I am dancing and not shuffling" (qtd. in Robinson), indicating not only an understanding of his role as entertainer but a desire to perform and enjoy the performance but only on his own terms. Rock and Chappelle are keenly aware of the complicated issues that arise when performative satire misses its intended mark through authorial carelessness, audience resistance, or a combination of both, and address the ultimate fear of satiric misfires—that they do more damage than the stereotype or

[43] By "fixed satire" I mean satires that take direct aim at an object to be ridiculed. This distinction leaves open the space for some satires that may have a more flexible message or intention.

problematic trope left unexamined. In "Exploring Niggerdom: Racial Inversion in Language Taboos," Richard J. Gray II and Michael Putnam explain, "to laugh at someone, is to expect the individual to curb the behavior and operate in a way more in conformity with the rules established by our society. When someone shows the inability to curb a behavior, laughter reveals our disapproval" (19). The satiric laughter is meant to highlight audience in-group status—the audience "gets the joke" and in understanding the joke is proven to be objectively dissimilar to the object of ridicule, or at least found to have the potential for salvation. When the distinction between the joker and the joke—the satirist and the satire—is blurred, the laughter may be heard as acceptance rather than disapprobation. Herein lies the potential difficulty with audience interpretation of African American satiric performance. If the purpose of the satirical mode as it approaches race is often to imagine the object of ridicule out to an absurd conclusion, if racism and racialization already verge on the inherently absurd, the distinction between the reality and the satire may be indistinguishable. This can be an especially damning prospect if African American satirical performance is meant to subvert the mainstream acceptance of and propagation of the racial status quo.

The Minstrel Tradition and Satirical Critique

To understand the stakes when satire is misunderstood in the 21st century, it is important to consider the beginnings of and continuing trajectory of African American performance of satire. The subversive potential of black satiric performance has been intrinsic since its inception, even as far back as slavery. William Jelani Cobb notes,

> Black humor out of necessity began as a series of inside jokes. The early records of slavery in the United States are filled with accounts of paranoid slave masters who hear slaves laughing and believe they must be the subject of the joke—a fear

> that works in the same way a person in a room with two others who are speaking a foreign language becomes convinced that they *must* be talking about him. But as the saying goes, just because you're paranoid doesn't mean you're crazy (249).

African American humor was shaped by the potential danger inherent to the chattel slave system and emerged as simultaneous catharsis and necessarily-clandestine insubordination. Indeed, this reliance on the seriously funny is underscored in significant ways in slave narratives and letters from former slaves[44]—the subject matter was serious, but there are humorous moments meant not only to inspire laughter but to ironically highlight the trauma endured by black bodies and to indict literate, white audiences for their silence or passive participation. Even in these moments which initially seem wholly lacking humor, there was a sense of not only "laughing to keep from crying" but even more of laughing to keep from *dying*[45]—humor was necessary for day-to-day survival as it reinforced the humanity of both the joke teller and listener while secretly, simultaneously constructing an in-group positioned with more knowledge than their oppressor.

After emancipation, these forms and functions became even more overt as acted out on the stage through minstrelsy. In *Darkest America,* Yuval Taylor and Jake Austen rightly explain, "Despite the appearance of black minstrelsy as a servile tradition, there were elements of *liberation* in it from its very beginning, and these were instrumental to its popularity" (27, emphasis in original). Certainly then, despite the shame often tied to it today, there is a direct trajectory from the minstrelsy of the 19th century to the African American stand-up comedy of the post-soul era in its efforts to allow the self-actualization of the performers through an ironic—although not always read as such—embracing of stereotypes of blackness. Minstrelsy as

[44] A more comprehensive examination of humor during slavery, with particular attention to Jourdon Anderson, is undertaken in chapter one.
[45] This idea is introduced more comprehensively in chapter one.

undertaken by African American performers had a subversive element as it was often structured as black comedy for black audiences even in the presence of white viewers. What this means is that while the white viewing audience may laugh at the expected tropes of blackness as performed, black performers and audiences laughed at the foolishness of white audiences for believing in the myth of the docile blackness. As Eric Lott describes it, minstrelsy could in some contexts be read as "a derisive celebration of the power of blackness; blacks, for a moment, ambiguously on top" (29).

Perhaps the innovator of this performance—or, more specifically, the performance within the performance—was Bert Williams, a black Vaudevillian. The Bahamian-born Williams and his partner, George Walker, billed themselves as "Two Real Coons"[46] and performed in blackface on stage and screen. In *Coloring Whiteness: Acts of Critique in Black Performance,* Faedra Chatard Carpenter describes Williams' role by saying, "Bert Williams was one of the first comedians to introduce the notion of black comedy for black audiences. White audiences could laugh without knowing that they were being criticized for their misperceptions and bigotry" (108). Indeed, it would seem that the use of blackface was integral to this goal. The use of blackface allowed black performers not only to acquire gainful employment in the few roles afforded to them, but also to imagine race and racialization out to an absurd conclusion. This charcoal-enhanced blackness became both literal and figurative mask, as Bert Williams seemed to indicate that he was a laughable darky while wearing it, but not without—a message that was meant to be lost on white audiences, but not black. Indeed, "By masking critical commentary, comic performers throughout comedy history were able to obscure their intent and attempt to

[46] The label "Two Real Coons" served to distinguish them from the myriad white minstrels performing in blackface at the time while simultaneously purposefully obfuscating the line between performer and performance.

escape the scrutiny of the upper classes and authoritarians. Comic performers in the late nineteenth century hid under the veil of the 'darky' whose rebellion against their masters would be perceived as a joke" (Carpenter 111). This perception of the performance as inconsequential and merely a joke was ultimately important in reifying an understanding of black personhood as dynamic.

The multiple facets of this comedy were not intended as just an in-joke or a "punching up" laugh at the expense of those at the pinnacle of the racial hierarchy. This clandestinity was absolutely necessary for survival. Even as minstrel performers made white audiences laugh, not only were their *livelihoods* but their very *lives* were on the line. In 1902, Louis Wright, a minstrel performer with Richards and Pringle Company was hanged following an interrupted performance. As he and his fellow actors walked through the St. Louis streets they were taunted by white bystanders who also launched snowballs at the men. Wright turned and allegedly cursed the men. Shortly thereafter, the performers took to the stage where the taunts erupted into a riot, during which Wright was reported to have drawn a pistol and fired into the crowd with others returning his fire.[47] Wright was arrested, subsequently taken from the jail, and then lynched. His battered and beaten body was shipped back to his mother in a pine box (Watkins 100-1). The public nature of this trauma sheds particular light on the necessity of doubleness in black comic performance when the chain of events is more closely examined. What is especially interesting is not that Wright was lynched for supposed insubordination but that he was not publicly punished for his *defiance before his minstrel performance.* As the story is recorded, Wright was attacked

[47] Given the present-day unreliability of reports of black violence or initial attacks waged by black people as justification for the subsequent murder of black men and women, I am unconvinced that Wright actually had a gun on stage or that he fired into the crowd with wild abandon. While this may be the case, it sounds so similar to the retroactive excuses that popularize these accounts today that it gives me pause.

in the street verbally and with snowballs, and responded in kind. Yet this defensive maneuver was allowed and did not result in any clear punishment or immediate violence. Was it the promise of the minstrel mask that offered his temporary protection? It was once this veil was removed—once he refused to allow the attacks on the stage and to perform the stereotypical role of subservience and docility that his black body was viewed as a legitimate threat where the only recourse was destruction and a warning display.

As a result of the threat inherent in the loss of the minstrel mask, some performances were so subtle that, stripped of context and intentionality for modern audiences, they seem to lose their quality of insubordination and are taken as legitimate acts of servility. Certainly in the post-soul era, while racial performativity takes on new forms, this oversimplified specter of minstrelsy remains as the potential terror inherent in the possibility of a lifted veil between the performer and the audience which once framed the articulation of a black performative self is now absent or unseen. Chiwen Bao explains, "Speaking about how the commercial space where race is performed is haunted is not about trivially talking about actors wearing white bed sheets and objects mysteriously moving across the stage; *it is about seriously acknowledging how histories continue to be replayed in our present moment as long as they remain repressed and unchallenged*" (169, emphasis mine). When performers rely on old tropes and stereotypes of blackness without this proper context, the results can be disastrous, as was the case for Chris Rock in his infamous set on the difference between "niggas and black people." However, the rise and retreat of Dave Chappelle indicates that even when a performer attempts to articulate clearly the meaning behind the performance, this more nuanced interpretation rests so heavily on the audience that they may be unable to provide enough framing for its success.

Post-Soul Comic Performance and Pryor Gestures

Post-soul comic performance retains the broader characteristics of post-soul satire itself with one main, important distinction. In these performances, there is a required affectation of disinterest—a line that must be negotiated skillfully, lest this appearance of disinterest overwhelm intentionality. Importantly, post-soul satirical texts, performances, and comics emphasize the importance of conversations about race and representation even as they eschew any significant racial difference. Yet simultaneously they seem to imply the conversations about race are tiring and overwrought, even as they ironically engage with the very subject matter at length. For instance, in framing a *Chappelle's Show* sketch, Dave Chappelle cautions, "I hate to hit this point so hard, but remember: whenever we do these racial commentaries, it's all about the subtleties. We're all part of the same human family. Our differences are just cultural, that's it," before entering into a scene about the soporific qualities of barbeque ribs in black communities. Chappelle's insistence on the inconsequence of culture belies a deeper truth—without these cultural differences that Chappelle feigns are insignificant, he would have no show, no material, and no real force behind his jokes. It would appear then that he trusts his audience to watch these performances with enough discernment to glean the true racial significance without a frame that needs clear articulation—a point on which his comedy is contingent, and on which he later reneges and voices concern that it was an initial misreading of his viewer. Unlike Chappelle, Richard Pryor trusts his audience to have enough savvy to understand his meaning, but he also works actively to step away from the comedic in moments where the meaning may be lost and where meaning takes on more significance than the laughter—a risk Chappelle, at least initially, was unwilling to take.

Although Richard Pryor often actively heightened rather than feigning to trivialize the significance of race in his material, he is perhaps the post-soul's most direct forefather. Pryor has

been described in lofty terms that merge man and myth and, unlike most legends, seems to have earned the reputation in both theory and practice. Eddie Tafoya notes, for example, that Chris Rock "began transforming himself into comedic scholar, studying the recorded work of Bill Cosby, *Richard Pryor*, Moms Mabley, Mel Brooks and Carl Reiner, Redd Foxx, and Buddy Hackett, among others. He'd steal into clubs to watch the audience, taking note of when they laughed and what they did and did not respond to" (222, emphasis mine). During an interview on *60 Minutes,* Dave Chappelle said of Richard Pryor passing the comedic torch to him, "That's more pressure than $50 million. That's a lot of pressure. He was the best, man. For him to say that is, you know, that's something I don't even know if I'll attempt to live up to that" (Leung).[48] Richard Pryor has informed the comedic persona of most black comics coming after him, even by their own admission. What is most striking about his persona and his performance as comic is that he is consistently and unabashedly willing to make himself the joke. His vulnerability is so profound, yet it never verges on the pathetic. It is perhaps for this reason that audiences were willing to listen to his jokes without jumping to conclusions—to patiently wait for the end of the joke before they assumed his meaning—a difficulty that both Rock and Chappelle have experienced for reasons regarding the cult of celebrity in the post-soul era. While Rock overwhelmingly eschews vulnerability in his performances—he is Chris Rock, the rock star comic playing to enormous theaters, and with the exception of his semi-autobiographical coming-of-age sitcom, *Everybody Hates Chris*, Rock himself is seldom the target of his own jokes—early Chappelle assumes the posture of the ne'er-do-well slacker with the heart of gold, playing to historic, but less ostentatious venues. Even their attire—Rock's ever-present leather and shine, compared with Chappelle who, at his most formal, put a blazer on over a tee shirt—

[48] Interestingly, this was shortly before Chappelle did in fact walk away from his contract with Comedy Central.

positions them on opposite ends of the spectrum of celebrity. Unfortunately for Chappelle, this persona was more difficult to maintain once he was seen as the greatest comic mind of his generation and signed a contract for over $55 million to seal the deal. In a society where the private lives of celebrity are considered fodder for media reports, Chappelle was unable to continue to allow himself this degree of vulnerability for myriad reasons that did not, at least until the 1980's, impact Pryor in the same way.

Ultimately, then Pryor's comedic life should have served for Rock and Chappelle to indicate the ways that this vulnerability must remain at the forefront or else the jokes may miss their mark. There seems to be a need, even in racial matters, for a clear and unambiguous "punching up," where audiences can identify that the status of the comic is lower than his subject, to lessen the cries of "reverse racism" or unfair racial simplification. Pryor allowed the seeming tragedies of his own life, be it growing up in a brothel, familial loss, or rampant drug use, to become the framework for understanding his comedic persona. He understood that "to get inside the racist imagination without adding to its power, arguably an impossible task, someone, specifically the comedian, must take the brunt" (Carpio 115). Pryor lowers himself so that the articulation of and meaning of the joke may take center stage, free from traditionally flashy accoutrements. This vulnerability as an aid to understanding is most prominently on display in his sketch, "Bicentennial Nigger," the closing track on the album of the same name. In it, Pryor takes on the persona of a black man who has lived since the Declaration of Independence and is now celebrating the bicentennial of the United States of America. His tone is docile and affable as he recounts the history of the Atlantic Slave Trade and the history of chattel slavery. At the end of the set, he continues his forced jovial laughter, acknowledging, "Y'all prob'ly done forgot about it, yuk yuk yuk." His voice shifts unexpectedly out of character and back to Richard

Pryor's as he gravely announces, "but I ain't gon' never forget it." This abrupt jarring conclusion is not only the end of the set, but the end of the album itself. Pryor ends an ostensibly light comic album by shifting to a direct assessment, through humor, of slavery and its lasting impact. While he laughs throughout, the laughter is clearly feigned, misplaced, and insincere. Here it is certainly not laughing to keep from crying, as no joke is being told after the framing of the set, and no humor is found in the serious subject matter. It is forced, inappropriate laughter meant to highlight that perhaps there are even some subjects that cannot be made into jokes. Even audience laughter begins to dwindle as the music to the "Battle Hymn of the Republic" swells. When Pryor shifts back to his own voice and asserts that he will never forget the history of African Americans, the laughter and music both abruptly end—there is no comedy here. Now audiences are not only forced to reexamine their understanding of the past set, a mere two-and-a-half minutes long, but also to consider the entire performative nature of the album in its entirety. Glenda Carpio notes, "The monologue is not comic in the most basic sense; it is, instead, darkly satirical, even bitter. His laughter, mechanized and obviously constructed, is piercingly ironic, since far from expressing gaiety, it is from the start a laughter that kills" (76). This intentional, momentary retreat from comedy can be termed *the killing joke* of African American existence as articulated by Pryor—a people removed from their land who now existence in cramped interstices, forced to labor as slaves or as clowns for the amusement and sustenance of a nation that is not their own. This is a jarring indictment from a comedian, particularly one at the height of his career, who could certainly choose to keep these traumas unspoken, or at least refuse to center himself within the crosshairs of these traumatic ancestral remembrances. Here Pryor's willingness to make himself vulnerable underscores the lasting impact of slavery on the black bodies of slave descendants in the United States. Pryor's vocal shift from the "Bicentennial

Nigger" back to himself unequivocally demonstrates a personal relevance that can only exist through a performance of vulnerability.

Chris Rock and Racist Imagination

It can also be useful to consider the ways in which comedians make an active retreat away from vulnerability, decentering themselves from the joke itself and reimagining themselves as central to the joke *telling.* Chris Rock is one of the first comics, following in the footsteps of Eddie Murphy, to make stand-up comedy have a similar tenor to rock and roll stardom. Rock got his start doing stand-up before briefly appearing as an ensemble player on *Saturday Night Live.* From this short stint, Rock seamlessly transitioned to small movie roles and, most importantly, a number of HBO specials like *Big Ass Jokes* (1994), *Bring the Pain* (1996), *Bigger and Blacker* (1999), and *Never Scared* (2004). For the purposes of this discussion on the risks of comedy, 1996's *Bring the Pain* merits closer examination. In this show, Rock performs his infamous "Niggas versus Black People" set. In it, he elucidates perceived differences between two groups with a mythologized black community. He speak-shouts, in the expected Rock intonation,

> Can't do shit without some ignorant-assed niggas fucking it up. Can't do nothing. Can't keep a disco open more than three weeks—'Grand opening! Grand closing!' Can't go to a movie the first week it comes out. You know why? 'Cause niggas are shooting at the screen. What kind of ignorant shit is that? 'Hey, this is a good movie. It's so good, I gotta bust a cap in here.' Hey, I love black people, but I hate niggas. I wish they'd let me join the Ku Klux Klan. I'd do a drive-by from here to Brooklyn.

The bit continues, ad nauseum. Rock indicates a clear delineation between worthless "niggas" and worthwhile "black people," situating himself and his primarily-black audience[49] with the latter group. Eddie Tafoya articulates the immediate impetus behind Rock's set and in-group attempts so well in a passage worth considering in its entirety:

> Even though he speaks as though his act is fashioned primarily for a black audience (at one point he says that 'It ain't only black people on welfare. White people are on welfare too. But we can't give a fuck about them. We just gotta do our own thing') the tack serves the performance in a variety of ways. First of all, by establishing an out-group, the dishonest and irresponsible people, he is implying that there is an in-group, one that is comprised of people who laugh and cheer at his proclamations, a move that not only makes the crowd like him more but solidifies the crowd as a single unit. Secondly, the distinction deracinates the epithet as Rock implies that what is at issue here is not one's race but one's behavior—not skin color, but personal choices. Finally, by calling out people on such shortcomings, he is also suggesting that anybody who lumps all black people together into one kind of group, culture, or value system is simply not seeing the whole picture. He pounds on this issue for seven minutes, saying, 'A black man that's got two jobs, going to work every day, hates the nigga on welfare—'Nigga, get a job. I got two, you can't get one?' (226).

Tafoya is correct, but the problems inherent in Rock's structure remain myriad. For one, the in-group cannot exist as Rock has established it. Although the live audience is primarily African

[49] *Bring the Pain* is filmed at the Takoma Theater in Washington, DC, which Rock refers to as a "chocolate city."

American, the HBO audience watching from the comfort of their homes is primarily *not.*[50] What this means then is that the home viewership witnesses an African American comic spouting nigga as a definitive, racially-specific if not outright racist slur, African American audiences laughing, and hearing themselves grouped in with an in-group that not only permits the usage but finds it necessary for the articulation of difference. Rock is a skillful orator whose cadence rises and falls like a preacher in a black church—and indeed, his grandfather was a minster—and is every bit as compelling. His persuasiveness and rock star sensibility are part and parcel to the problem. Rock is so dynamic that the distinction he makes can be seen as not only his viewpoint but an extension of the viewpoint of *all respectable* black people, as he describes the group. Unlike Pryor, whose heightened vulnerability gestured toward a communal articulation of the harm of racialization, the risk with Rock's articulation—is that he becomes the exception that proves the rule—if Rock is disgusted by "niggas" then his audience is justified in their distaste as well. As a result, a routine that is inherently racist in structure offers wide usage by individuals who not only do not understand the nuances Rock seeks to imply but also may be uninterested in those nuances. In a *60 Minutes* interview, Rock tells Ed Bradley that he has never done the joke since, "and I probably never will. 'Cause some people who were racist thought they had license to say nigger. So I'm done with that routine" (Leung). It is interesting her that Rock positions the use of the word "nigger" as something some people have a right to where others do not, squarely situating himself in the former category. Yet even in this more calculated later articulation Rock does not delineate the able from the not. The implication may be race, but since Rock has already separated blackness into "niggas" and "black people," this possibility cannot be wholly assumed.

[50] The NBC sitcom, *The Office*, does an excellent send up of this troubling situation in an episode titled "Diversity Day" (2005) where socially-clueless boss, Michael Scott (played by a pitch perfect Steve Carrell), performs this set for his horrified employees, ultimately resulting in the entire office being forced to attend mandated racial sensitivity/diversity training.

Yet certainly a thoughtful audience member of any race should have been able to differentiate between his performative use of racist language and the inappropriateness of the ideas in practice, it seems to follow for Rock. If this expectation may be somewhat reasonable for audience members in person in a more intimate setting, in this larger and ultimately televised space, the less room for audience accountability. In person, Rock is able to frame his set in a variety of ways—through his posture, eye contact, introductory anecdotes—that are systematically impossible to perform for television or are removed through the editing process. While this joke should indeed highlight "that anybody who lumps all black people together into one kind of group, culture, or value system is simply not seeing the whole picture" (Tafoya 226), what audiences witness instead is a performance that, when stripped of its context, bears little dissimilarity from any argument about respectability politics at best, and from racist propaganda at worst.

This "Niggas vs. Black People" set was certainly not the last time the comedian courted controversy. While there exist many analyses of the aforementioned set which all point to the problematic nature of Rock's set, there are very few in-depth considerations of the similar issues he revived in his 2009 documentary, *Good Hair*. Although not satire in the strictest sense, Chris Rock's documentary addresses the relationship some African American women have with their hair, viewed through an intentionally comedic lens. Perhaps Chris Rock deserves credit for having achieved the seemingly impossible. Through the production of this documentary, Rock sought to up a space where African-American women could and would publicly comment on their own hair and cultural hair *issues*. This effort is full of promise. Black hair has often appeared to many as an exclusive club that outsiders never quite understood was hidden. It hasn't been something black women are traditionally encouraged to talk about, and certainly not to

women who weren't black, for a variety of reasons. This documentary forces the issue of hair into the mainstream spotlight. Rock's editorial decisions in framing this narrative, however, are rather troubling.

Good Hair is a comedy-documentary dreamed up by Rock ostensibly to answer his young daughter Lola's question, "Daddy, why don't I have good hair?" To this end, Rock traveled to Atlanta, Greensboro, Los Angeles, and even to India to understand and analyze the complicated relationship between African American women and their hair. He interviewed a number of black women in the process—most of them famous from television and film—and allowed them the opportunity to divulge their hair history and musings as he consults both "experts" and the opinionated masses. The film skillfully navigates the razor's edge between the troubling—a six-year-old girl sitting patiently and uncomfortably as a relaxer is painstakingly applied to her hair—and the downright funny—Derek J.'s coexistent tantrums and dazzling glamour in the Bronner Brothers hair show in Atlanta, Georgia. Yet, while the information in the documentary is undeniably engaging, there are more than a few problematic moments in the film**,** most of which stem from a lack of context. In the creation of this documentary, Rock was afforded the allowances that are only provided celebrities. He had money, fame, means and, as an African-American man, implied credibility—whether this credibility was deserved or not. And while *Good Hair* is consistently interesting and even enthralling in moments, it never quite answers the purported question he seeks to solve. So then, if Rock isn't seeking to specifically answer his daughter's heartbreaking query of "why don't I have good hair?" then certainly it would seem that the related, wide-reaching concern for Rock should be "does good hair exist and why should anyone watching care?" By never directly addressing the latter question and, even more specifically, by never rejecting the assumption of "good hair" or addressing the origins of

the concepts, he unintentionally implies that "good hair" is not only a *real thing*, but that it's a valid concept and one that exists separate from socialization. Further, Rock's interactions in the film indicate that not only does he accept this thinking in others, but that he himself subscribes to the fallacy of good hair. He runs his fingers through one woman's hair and swoons over its straightened texture, announcing to everyone present "I think I'ma marry you" (*Good Hair*). In this seemingly harmless joke—and Rock negotiates the line between comic and documentarian unsteadily in a film meant to address the fraught territory of black women and their appearance in the mainstream—Rock inadvertently demonstrates that he is as culpable for the perpetuation of the myth of good hair as the general public he is tacitly condemning. What is especially troubling, then, is that this film has been positioned as *the* film on African American women's hair and Rock's lens—controlling male gaze and all—as framing the final word on the subject.[51]

The problem of a comedian creating a documentary on a serious subject is often the incongruence between content and context. Rock is tackling an important topic, but audiences still anticipate some infused humor because of the name attached to the film. So, unfortunately, the seriousness of the subject goes unheeded and the history behind these ideas is unmentioned. Indeed, the film isn't merely ahistorical—it is *anti-historical*. It doesn't merely ignore history, but actively removes the important and necessary historical origin from the context. Nowhere in the film is slavery, miscegenation, or racism mentioned, let alone discussed. In fact, the 1970s, a time when African-American women in popular culture shunned chemicals and embraced Afros in large numbers, goes completely overlooked both in the filmic conversation and in the opening

[51] I am reminded here of a similar situation in which actor Morgan Freeman's assertion that the best way to move to a post-racial society is to "stop talking about" race, and the ways that this quotation and video clip have been bandied about as the *final word* on race relations as if Freeman is the most credible source by virtue of his blackness, fame, and robust and resonant voice.

montage of black women and their hair through the years—it begins in the 1920s or 1930s, completely disregards the 1970s, and moves to elaborate, overprocessed contemporary styles. The intentional elision of the body work of the Black Power Movement and its literal articulation of the idea that blackness, natural and unencumbered by western ideals or conventions, is not only worthy of consideration but is beautiful in its own right, is a distracting lacuna the undermines the historical content and context of the film. Indeed, although the recent resurgence of the natural hair movement was not as prominent in 2009 as it has been in more recent years, it was certainly a growing movement that is conspicuously absent in his film. Most disturbingly, audiences are never privy to the causality behind the idea of good hair. Leaving out historicity in hair is disregarding the backstory of a war. Rather than seeking to dismantle or even acknowledge the systems that foster an environment in which the idea of good hair can thrive, the absence of rationale renders any implied importance impotent. In fact, the shock footage of relaxers and the exorbitant prices of weaves appear as narcissist rather than indicative of a social epidemic that stems from an oppressive system—indeed, Rock seems intentionally to make it so. Rock consistently toes the line when it comes to tone—vacillating swiftly between embracing a satirical impulse in talking about hair as "important" and an earnest, albeit judgmental, tone in addressing the significance of hair in some black communities which he sees as one monolithic community. When asked why women would put themselves through what he himself frames as torture, he states, "to look white." The implication—that black women, apropos of nothing, subscribe to a white standard of beauty—is both hurtful and harmful. Women are never asked *why* they have relaxers or weaves, or to consider the long-term ramifications or even asked about the historical significance of their autonomous hair choices. The film addresses the where and the how, but never goes any deeper than this surface level.

Ultimately, the greatest incongruence is between the purported moral and the footage selected. Rock states in the end that he wants to teach his daughters that "the stuff on top of their heads is nowhere near as important as the stuff inside their heads," but nowhere is that idea depicted overtly or even implied. He picks some of the most beautiful and powerful African American women in the public realm and has them discuss their prized weaves, chuckles at the cost, and then delves no further into the subject. One must wonder, then, if his daughters are in fact his intended audience. The content of the film surely indicates otherwise. Certainly the language and general raunchiness indicates his daughters, who were elementary school aged at the time, were not his immediate target viewers. If the audience isn't immediately his daughters, then who is it? If it is African American women then that intention is a bit muddled and unclear because, while African American women in some communities might be most prone to watch a movie that seems on first glance geared toward them, they have nothing new to learn from the film and are ultimately ridiculed throughout. If the intended audience is white America, it doesn't provide any real insight except to display private hair choices, stripped of historicity. And that alone should not be enough to hold anyone's interest in isolation. What then is his goal with *Good Hair*? Ultimately, the film moves unsteadily toward addressing a multicultural audience by holding up a mirror to African American culture and then blaming the culture in a vacuum for what Rock views as its shortcomings. Rock framed this film in publicity spots as a satire on social constructions and expectations of beauty. Yet, by never answering any significant questions and instead focusing on what he views as the victimizing nature of the idea of good hair without dismantling good hair as a fallacious construct in itself, the idea of black culture as mere spectacle is reinforced. Here Rock is back to the rhetoric of a new brand of respectability

politics where, unlike in *Bring the Pain*, here respectability means gesturing vaguely to a more positive performance of blackness that is tangible and ultimately easily quantifiable.

Dave Chappelle's Everyman

William Jelani Cobb considers the differences in the ways that Rock and Dave Chappelle address issues of race by wisely pairing Rock with comic artist Aaron McGruder[52] and Chappelle with Richard Pryor. Cobb recalls Rock's aforementioned infamous set, explaining,

> Rock's and McGruder's humor are driven in large part by intraracial anger. Rock's famous 'Black People vs. Niggers' bit centers on an alleged civil war pitting the hard-working, respectable members of the race against the kinds of black people that the old folks refer to as 'trifling.' For Pryor and Chappelle, though, those kinds of divisions were not possible, or even desirable (252).

Indeed, for Chappelle, racial lines are drawn solidly even while he acknowledges their performative nature. While Chappelle may hearken, in one sketch, to a racial draft—mimicking the NBA draft, where racial delegations choose new celebrity members of their race based not on phenotype but instead based on their racial ambiguity or fluidity as paired with their racialized performance—even this set underscores the monolithic nature of race and racialization. Rather than viewing racial groups as striated from within or even able to be differentiated in significant ways—as problematic as Rock's set was, his meaning was to elucidate that racial identification does not occur as a monolith, even as his aim missed—Chappelle's focus is on race as understood by the gazer, rather than by the object of the gaze. By imagining monolithic race out to an absurd and impossible conclusion, Chappelle sought to highlight the ridiculousness of racialization. Unfortunately, his jokes—fueled simultaneously by debauchery and intense critical

[52] Aaron MacGruder is most famous for his comic strip and cartoon *The Boondocks.*

concern—were so hilarious immediately that some audiences were unwilling to peer beneath this surface level to the more complicated meaning beneath.

It is certainly no stretch to discern Chappelle's deep engagement hidden underneath a veil of slacker comedy. Chappelle was born in Washington, D.C., to two professors. His mother, in addition to being a professor, was also a minister. His humor is couched in the political, social, and performative. Rick DesRochers argues that "Chappelle works to confront racism by exposing its arbitrary and capricious nature, born of willful ignorance and ingrained hatred from America's resistance to dealing with its legacy of slavery and its complex relationship with immigration and colonization" (122). However, more than the arbitrariness of *racism*, Chappelle is concerned with *the mechanisms of racial identification* and how these foster racism. The distinction here is subtle, but critical. Chappelle notes that the expected performance of race is to be problematized. Whether it be a white family named Niggar who feel no sting when their last name is used or black people who perform race in ludicrous and ultimately self-harmful ways, Chappelle is not only conscious of the lived experiences of racialized bodies but attempts to bring this racialization to the forefront by implying that it is a slippery slope that ultimately results in the harm of the object. In this latter sketch, aptly titled "When Keeping It Real Goes Wrong," Chappelle highlights a blackness that need fervently announce itself. Traditionally, the phrase "keeping it real" in African American vernacular is meant as an intraracial attempt to prove or reinforce blackness in stereotypical ways. To "keep it real" is to perform behavior in such a way that seems to refuse assimilation and heighten blackness. It is couched in a somewhat playful understanding of fears surrounding blackness—toughness, confrontation, and speech without a filter or having what is termed in popular parlance "no chill"—and Chappelle leans into this idea. Here, the actors here react to perceived slights with violence and threats to

comedic effect. Ultimately, however, the perpetrator is victorious and the individual who "kept it real" is severely punished. The sketch operates well on a number of levels. Certainly audiences laugh at the instantaneous nature of the reversal of fortune. However, to write these sketches off as mere slapstick would be erroneous. This is Chappelle's leitmotif, the idea that race is performed and that the performance matters as much as or more than phenotypic appearance. Chappelle's stand up and his comedic persona are defined by his openness and his belief that his audience follows along with his train of thought. Where Richard Pryor makes himself vulnerable—he is all too willing to be the butt of his own joke—Chappelle follows suit, but extends this vulnerability to a too trusting view of his audience. Pryor works to guide his audience to the conclusion. Chappelle trusts that his audience—and while Chappelle is a late member of the post-soul, his audience is primarily both post-soul and Afro-Millenial—and perhaps allows that his audience can handle the responsibility of his merger between laughter and serious social commentary. He is ultimately, in his own estimation, proven wrong.

Chappelle's trouble here seems to emerge more in his sketch comedy than in his stand-up.[53] Faedra Chatard Carpenter rightly notes,

> Chappelle comes from a stand-up comedy background in which the audience, like that of any live performance, is relatively stationary and engaged. Contemporary television viewing, on the other hand, offers audience members the opportunity to tune in and tune out on a moment's notice. Despite the fact that *Chappelle's Show* was consciously structured to incorporate moments of reflection and commentary from Chappelle, there was no ay to ensure that audience members—with their

[53] It is worth noting that Chappelle has a strong background in stand-up comedy. He began performing in clubs as a teenager and while he is gifted as both an actor and comedian, he seems more comfortable in a comedy club than other performance venues.

> remotes in hand—would linger long enough to allow their readings of the skits to be properly contextualized (191).

Indeed, even as Chappelle performs stand-up for larger, televised crowds, the set up for his jokes is lengthy and precise. Unlike Rock, whose rapid-fire delivery prohibits greater elaboration, Chappelle works to explain the significance of the joke in ways that leave little room for misperception. This framing is much more difficult in sketch comedy. Although Chappelle introduces each sketch with a pithy statement on its construction or meaning, he is allotted very little time to do so or to revisit the sketch upon completion. The burden of understanding is on the audience, the majority of whom are watching—perhaps distractedly, but certainly not with the attentiveness of a live audience—from their homes late at night.

The moment this trust is most clearly shaken is in season three and Chappelle's infamous "Racial Pixies" sketch. The sketch has been addressed and analyzed in both academic and popular realms, but it remains worthy of conversation as it is the precise sketch that Chappelle claims forced him to leave his show. Moreover, more than solely analyzing the specific moment in the sketch that triggered Chappelle's departure, it is important and necessary to expand on these analyses to consider the three other scenes in the sketch *and* the way that the sketch in total treads on Chappelle's own comfortable and well-worn territory from previous stand-up performances. The racial pixie, although usually discussed in reference to minstrelsy, is actually a four-pronged sketch—the black pixie is first, followed by a "Spanish" pixie, an Asian pixie, and (finally) a white pixie. When the sketch begins, Chappelle himself is dressed in full blackface attire as a Zip Coon minstrel—he wears a red jacket and black pants, black greasepaint on his face, over-articulated lips, and a constant, seemingly-simple, foolish grin. The pixie encourages Chappelle to request the chicken over the fish on a flight, specifically to succumb to

stereotypes surrounding blackness, as Chappelle looks on at the pixie, horrified and working to avoid this type of black performativity. As Chappelle tells the behind-the-scenes story, as he was dressed as the minstrel pixie, he became uncomfortable by the laughter of a white stagehand. When the sketch proper is closely examined, it has a great deal of potential to work well as a commentary on racial performativity and the insidious ways that racism impacts the understanding of and articulation of an authentic self. However, without more framing, the message was lost. Indeed, "Though outrageous, the skit was clearly a multileveled exploration of racism. It was a smart piece that reflected upon minstrelsy's echoes… But apparently, for a contemporary African American performer, standing in front of a white audience (even a handful of crew and cast members) is not easily reconciled with performing buffoonish comedy in blackface" (Taylor and Austen 2). However, due to the feigned aloofness of slacker comedy, Chappelle was unable to break that fourth wall to the extent necessary to make his purpose unequivocal.

This moment was not the first time Chappelle addressed issues of food consumption and black performativity, although this aspect has gone mostly unexamined in the existing scholarship. In his 2000 stand up special, *Killing Them Softly,* he recounts a time he went to a restaurant in the South and the waiter assumed, based on his race, that he wanted chicken (which he did). Chappelle notes, "All these years I thought I liked chicken because it's delicious. Turns out, I'm genetically-predisposed to liking chicken!" He later goes on to explain that the incident made him concerned about eating chicken in public from that moment on, fearful that white onlookers would view it as spectacle, remarking among themselves, "Look at him: he loves it! Just like it said in the encyclopedia! Look how happy he looks!" This set was met with laughter and clear, apparent understanding of Chappelle's larger point. He is able to well articulate the

quotidian impact of racism and racialization while never undercutting the humor inherent in the delivery. He now fears eating certain foods in public—a seemingly ridiculous behavior to fear, but one that limits his ability to act with autonomy—because of the very real and tangible stress of racial performance. Chappelle mentions in his 2004 stand up, *For What It's Worth*, "just because I eat chicken and watermelon, they think there's something wrong with me. Listen: if you don't like chicken and watermelon, something is wrong with *you*... The only reason these things are an issue is because nobody knows what white people eat. You've been very good about keeping that shit a secret among yourselves!"[54] In juxtaposition with his response to the racial pixies sketch, this begs three questions—what is the difference? What remained unaccomplished in his first articulations of this idea that merited a revisiting that led to misunderstanding? And why did Chappelle find one set to appropriately engage in a discourse surrounding racism and one to have a potential devastating effect?

There are two possible reasons for the intensity of the misunderstanding, as Chappelle interpreted it. The first is that this analysis of racism, when viewed in context with the other racial stereotypes as presented, began to verge on a performance of anti-blackness rather than a critique of these stereotypes in total. This sketch, when viewed in its entirety, reinforces his initial inclination. While the other pixies, all played by Chappelle, speak to racial stereotypes,

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[54] This joke seems to take its roots from Ralph Ellison's *Invisble Man* in which the narrator remarks upon eating a sweet yam, "I walked along, munching the yam, just as suddenly overcome by an intense feeling of freedom – simply because I was eating while walking along the street. It was exhilarating. I no longer had to worry about who saw me or about what was proper. To hell with all that, and as sweet as the yam actually was, it became like nectar with the thought. If only someone who had known me at school or at home would come along and see me now. How shocked they'd be! I'd push them into a side street and smear their faces with the peel. What a group of people we were, I thought. Why, you could cause us the greatest humiliation simply by confronting us with something we liked. Not *all* of us, but so many."

their significance is not as readily felt nor conjured as the black pixie. The "Spanish" pixie is actually meant to be Mexican, speaking to actor and Chappelle's friend, Guillermo Diaz. Dressed as a stereotypical matador with castanets, a thin mustache, and sombrero, he encourages Diaz to buy leopard skin seat covers in a thick, Californian-Mexican accent. The Asian pixie pushes a man to respond to an introduction television personality Lala with "Rah-rah." At his refusal, the pixie commits seppuku before strangely sliding into Lala's cleavage to die—Chappelle's comedy does often veer towards traditional juvenile sight and sound gags. The white pixie tries to teach a man how to speak to his black friends through incorrectly applied rap lyrics before commenting on his preference for flat behinds. All of these performances are problematic in their reliance on stereotypes with insufficient context—Chappelle is right to worry that the laughter may be at the object, rather than the broad subject of the racist imaginary being skewered. These pixies are meant to highlight the ways that racism shames the object of racialization into "right behaviors" to the detriment of personal choice. Yet the shift from the first three pixies to the white pixie renders this possibility unlikely as it is performed. Where the other three are stifled by seemingly innocuous personal preferences and behaviors—food choices, fashion statements, the phonetic l-r merger—the white pixie encourages his man to engage in racist stereotypes of blackness in an effort to be black before discussing his desire for a flat-bottomed woman and stiff, erratic dance moves. Even while the latter gestures speak to clear stereotypes of whiteness, these stereotypes do not hold the same weight as those of the black "Spanish," or Asian pixie. Indeed, in the DVD commentary by co-creator Neal Brennan and performers Charlie Murphy and Donnell Rawlings, they express confusion over what the white pixie could have done—which is precisely the problem. There are no substantive stereotypes which serve to prove the inferiority or inhumanity of whiteness. There is no real sense of equity in comparing the racialization of whiteness to that

of marginalized people. This is further illuminated by Brennan's statement, "I'm so sick of talking about this shit. I'm so sick of thinking about this shit." Even as Rawlings and Murphy bemoan Chappelle's decision to leave, their silence indicates a tacit refusal to cosign Brennan's statement. It would appear that only Brennan, the only white man featured in the commentary, is afforded the luxury of being sick of the issues.

The second possibility is that the scope of the show grew so large so quickly that it soon became unwieldy for Chappelle—as an intentionally unflashy celebrity, Chappelle now had bonafide superstar status and the paycheck and public expectations tantamount to it. Unlike Rock, Chappelle's humor always had a clear autobiographical bent—while Rock spoke harshly against public figures and society at large, Chappelle placed himself front and center of the critique as the everyman who both participates in and is affected by the peculiarities of social structure. Even his criticisms, which are waged against society, are directed at Chappelle himself as a member of society. He never implies that he himself is above reproach—if he verges on the blameless in one sketch, the next centers him as a target of ridicule. However, once heaps of adoration were thrown upon the man, it became more difficult to convince the audience that Chappelle—Dave, the affable everyman—was just like them and they, likewise, should be critically considering their role in the society around them. Indeed, this must have proven quite disillusioning, as Chappelle's co-conspirators plainly articulate in the DVD commentary their disinterest in responsible humor. The men discuss this dilemma, and the following conversation transpires:

> Neal Brennan: "You get a laugh from 'bitch.' You get a laugh from the n word. And if you don't write that way you're being soft or you aren't writing the way actual human beings are talking like."

> Charlie Murphy: "It's like Jay Z said, he had to dumb down for his audience, you know, you gotta meet 'em somewhere."
>
> Neal Brennan: "Right, but is he dumbing down or… it's a hard line to walk between trying to be real and trying to be responsible, I guess."
>
> Donnell Rawlings: "And I'm never trying to be responsible."
>
> Charlie Murphy: "That's the part that kills me about this whole thing, that word, once you crack a joke you're irresponsible. Even though everyone's laughing your joke was irresponsible. No, the whole idea is to make you laugh, and that's the end of the story."
>
> Neal Brennan: "Being responsible was never a concern of the show until, when it gets popular then you're like, well I guess…"

This attitude from Brennan, in particular, is disturbing. In his uneven first one-hour stand up special, 2014's peculiarly-named "Women and Black Dudes," Brennan positions himself as a white guy who "gets" race and—in large part because of his publicized friendship with Chappelle[55]—is able to speak on issues of race frankly. Moreover, the cavalier attitude surrounding comedy seems to disregard the fact that the name of the show is *Chappelle's*. The burden of responsibility weighs heavily and it is one the other men do not have to bear. Their flippancy stems from the fact that they know, perhaps unconsciously even, that they will not be taken to task for their performance in any substantive way. Chappelle made it clear from the show's inception that he felt a clear social and political responsibility. Even in his choice of musical artists to frame the sketches, he chose from among the most conscious and politically-inclined musicians—Mos Def, Talib Kweli, The Roots, Erykah Badu—to be featured

[55] After Chappelle left the show, he and Brennan had a very public falling out. Both say they are on friendly terms now, more than a decade after.

throughout. Additionally, their willingness to jettison responsibility lies in stark contrast to the show's role as a satire. If satires operate as social critique then there is a level of social responsibility for the satirist that remains implicit. This humor is not abstract—and no matter how many childish jokes Chappelle makes about body parts or bodily functions, he cannot negate his social responsibility—indeed he never attempts to do so. That his co-writers and co-performers are willing to overlook what, for Chappelle, is the show's impulse, is not only troubling on its face but speaks directly to a possible impetus for Chappelle's departure—audience (un)willingness to understand the nuances of racial performance may overwhelm the performance itself. Ultimately, there is a great and damaging difference in articulating racial stereotypes as Chappelle or having them performed by an identifiable minstrel—even in a "post-racial" society, the specter of these racialized performances loom too large, no matter Chappelle's efforts to subvert them, particularly for a too casual, home-viewing cable audience. It is absolutely as William Jelani Cobb notes, "The moral of the story is clear: Chappelle's character lives in a catch-22 where anything he does fulfills some trait on an infinite checklist of stereotypes. It is a riff on the racial gymnastics required to negotiate the most routine of daily scenarios. Or it is a hilarious bit about a jigaboo dancing on an airplane. Depending upon who you're talking to" (251).

The Salience of Gender in Black Comedy

When it comes to women in comedy, these aforementioned misconstructions take on a new dimension as these female comedians—already battling the misconception that women are inherently unfunny, or surely not as funny as their male counterparts—attempt social commentary. Women are implicitly required to take greater precautions and pains in making sure that their meaning is not misconstrued as they make themselves vulnerable in discussing the

interstices of race and gender. This is especially true of black women, who are stifled by stereotypical constructions of blackness and femininity in the public sphere—the tropes of the mammy, the Jezebel, or the Sapphire allows space for play or joke-telling. While black men struggle against stereotypes that render their joke-telling impotent or devoid of meaning—the Sambo, the coon—the historic public assumption is that while black men are inherently funny, black women are inherently not. Likewise, as many contemporary jokes are based around the sex and sexuality of the speaker, a particular problem is present female comedians—black male sexuality is permitted discussion, black female sexuality (and, more importantly, autonomy over or enjoyment of sexuality) is not, especially if articulated by black women. Evelynn Hammonds points out in discussions of black female sexuality, "It should not surprise us that black women are silent about sexuality. The imposed production of silence and the removal of any alternative to the production of silence reflect the deployment of power against racialized subjects" (488). Black female sexuality is for the benefit of others—it is to be used as object for the pleasure of men and juxtaposed against white female sexuality as always available and of little qualifiable value.

As a result, jokes made by black women are at an intensified risk of misconstrual. One infamous case in point is the 1993 Friar's Roast in which Ted Danson, an actor and Whoopi Goldberg's paramour at the time, appeared in full blackface and performed a grotesque caricature of blackness. The mostly-celebrity audience was notoriously scandalized and disgusted. Roger Ebert wrote,

> Friar's roasts, which are never taped for telecast, are traditionally raucous and obscene. But the specter of a white man in blackface repeatedly using the word "nigger" and other strongly coded words seemed to cross a line that was sensed by

> most of the people in the room. The event demonstrated that the painful history of black-white relations in America is still too sensitive to be joked about crudely. Goldberg, whose real name is Caren [sic] Johnson, has used her entire career to try to break down racial stereotyping, and in encouraging Danson's approach she may have thought it would play as satire. But, as stand-up comics say when their material isn't working, he was dying up there.

Is it, then, that blackface in the 20th and 21st century is always over the line? Perhaps. The territory is too worn and too fraught and, as aforementioned, too frequently stripped of context to be effective, or its nuanced meaning refused in favor of an oversimplification. It is a struggle to think of a recent use of blackface that has been effective.[56] However, in this particular usage the implications, intentional or not, are far more, problematic. For one, Danson's white masculine form in blackface does not, on the surface, at least, work to subvert a current understanding of racial performativity. Instead it speaks most directly to national understanding of how blackface works to reinforce a racial hierarchy where white men appropriate and misunderstand blackness, dehumanizing blackness to rearticulate white superiority. Danson's performance highlights this historical intention. His jokes surrounding his sex life with Goldberg, her genitalia, and rife with the use of the word "nigger," do no real work to shift the status quo or to highlight anything

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[56] Perhaps the most effective use in recent years was an episode of *A Different World* in which Freddie (played by Cree Summer) dons blackface and performs as Topsy in an ensemble performance which seeks to refuse and reclaim negative tropes of blackness. Spike Lee's film, *Bamboozled* (2000) also utilizes blackface to reception that skewed negative. Lisa Schwarzbaum remarked, "So acrid is the indictment, yet so muddled the arguments, that Lee feels compelled to include the dictionary definition of the word *satire"* and Rick Groen that *"*At his best, Spike Lee is too brave to be subtle." These reviews seem to anticipate the failed satires undertaken in the metanarratives of the 21st century where the implication is that the writer must be condemned for a supposed imprecision and for an overdetermined satirical frame. It also seems a widespread misunderstanding not only of Lee's authorial intent to unsettle our understanding of the satirical object but also of satire as necessarily subtle.

useful surrounding the ludicrousness of race or racism. Blackface is not subversive as an abstracted performance. Neither Goldberg nor Danson provided any framing outside of what audience members brought with them. Danson and Goldberg may also have unintentionally evoked for audiences through this performance the historical context of white slave owners sexually and physically abusing black slave women—they were the wrong performers at the wrong time, particularly with the provision of very little context.

In Whoopi Goldberg's autobiographical *Book,* she references the fall out, writing,

> When you go to see *Rosewood*, and Jon Voight says *nigger*, he's got an attitude when he says it. He says it negatively, because that's the character he's playing, that's the way it was written, but no one goes out and strings up Jon Voight because of it. We get that he's just reading his lines, that he's just acting. We don't hold him to it.
>
> But the people held me to mine. Man, did they string me up and hold me to it, and I still don't get why. The material I wrote was funny, 'cause I tend to write funny stuff, 'cause I'm a funny person. And the person who was reading my lines, who happened to be white, performed the material as I wrote it. He was a white man, made up in black face, performing material written for the occasion by a black woman. It was no different than if I had gotten up on that platform and said the words myself. It was a piece written about me, by me, that I put into the mouth of a character (187).

That Goldberg may or may not have written the set is ultimately irrelevant as intent matters less than impact. Her comparison to Jon Voight's character in *Rosewood* is disingenuous and, ultimately, a distraction. What Goldberg seems to purposefully ignore here is the question of

intentionality. The difference in Voight using racial slurs in *Rosewood* versus Danson in blackface is that Voight is playing a historicized character in a historical piece. He is framed as despicable and meant to be despised by modern audiences. Danson's role as minstrel is unclear, particularly as his jokes are directed at the real physical person of Goldberg and are told as Ted Danson in blackface, and not some discrete other character. A roast is constructed to rib and ridicule the honoree to humorous effect, but what can be assumed about the joke teller and the target when these harsh and raunchy jokes are made about an African American woman by a white man in blackface? What is the ultimate takeaway? It is a muddled and mottled hodgepodge of offensive images and stereotypes that degrade black womanhood without the *gotcha* at the end that holds the listener culpable or proves the foolishness of the beliefs. It doesn't miss its target because there *is* no target. A risqué premise does not a good joke make. To this same end, if Goldberg had performed the material herself it still may have been unsuccessful. She argues that the material was funny, yet the audience was uncomfortable and the initial titters of polite laughter stopped quickly. Even if her material was funny, it missed the primary goals of satirical comedy as it seemed to neither make people laugh nor think in the ways she claims to have intended.

More recently, Leslie Jones encountered controversy during sets on *Saturday Night Live*'s Weekend Update. Most notoriously was a set performed May 3, 2014. In it, Jones bemoans being single. She uses Lupita Nyong'o's appearance on the cover of *People* magazine's most beautiful list as an entry point for a conversation on black beauty standards. She begins by explaining, "The way we view black beauty has changed. Look at me! See, I'm single right now. But back in the slave days? I would've *never* been single. I'm six feet tall and I'm strong, Colin.

Strong!" Host Colin Jost, a white former *Harvard Lampoon*[57] president, looks uncomfortable, which is certainly part of the schtick, but coupled with the hesitant laughter of the audience seems to indicate a larger issue. Yet Jones continues,

> I'm just saying, back in the slave days my love life would've been way better. Master would've hooked me up with the best brotha on the plantation. And every nine months I'd be in the corner having a super baby. Every nine months! Every nine months, I'd be in the corner just poppin' 'em out just *Shaq! Kobe! LeBron! Kimbo Slice! Sinbad!* I would be the number one slave draft pick.

From an artistic standpoint, fundamentally, the joke fails. The metaphor of slavery and the NBA while appropriate in many regards, here is either executed with too much nuance for audiences to understand or is undertaken too haphazardly, its articulation inchoate—it could be claimed, in fact, that Jones herself is not consciously making the connection from slavery to the role of African American men in the NBA and so the awkward comparison is particularly disturbing in what it unintentionally conjures for viewers. Substantively, her joke makes no interventions by way of a more complicated understanding of black womanhood or even the legacy of a chattel slave system. She focuses the jokes inward by saying that she is big and can't get a man, and instead of making that a criticism on a western standard of beauty or a social commentary on the rising statistics of single black women in the nation, she instead explains that she would have been "better" off in a slave system. Her articulation blurs rape into a convoluted understanding of a "love life," and breeding into "having a man"—a wholly horrifying prospect. Audiences are made to feel entirely uncomfortable and perhaps rightly so. After all, what lesson is there to be learned here? What is Jones attempting to demonstrate to this late-night audience? Additionally,

[57] *The Harvard Lampoon* is an undergraduate humor publication and is often considered the premiere collegiate humor magazine.

the use of Nyong'o as her framework is particularly unsettling, as Nyong'o has been hailed for a beauty that, in many ways, refuses the stereotypical portrayal of black beauty in Hollywood. While certainly petite and lithe, as most starlets are, Nyong'o's skin is a dark chocolate and her hair was, at the time, closely-cropped and tightly-coiled. Her most famous role to date is that of Patsey, a slave, in *Twelve Years a Slave.* Focusing her complaint around Nyong'o is peculiar, especially where there are other African and African American celebrities who are perhaps more worthwhile of her ire. It lessens the impact of her valid criticism of beauty standards in the black community. Moreover, that Nyong'o has come to prominence by portraying a slave—one who audiences witness bearing the brutality and trauma of the dehumanizing system—that Jones' jokes rely on Nyong'o's physicality as the premise is quite problematic as well.

The following day she took to Twitter to respond to social media criticism—and, more specifically, Black Twitter[58] criticism. Twitter only allows posts (Tweets) of 140 characters or less, and so Jones tweeted in rapid succession to create a comprehensive whole. Her diatribe read, in part,

> What part of this joke that wasn't true? I would have been used for breeding straight up. That's my reality. And it saddens me that BLACK PEOPLE bitch and moan about the most stupid shit. I'm a comic it is my job to take things and make them funny. To make you think. Especially the painful things. Why are y'all so mad [sic]. This joke was written from the pain that one night I realized that Black men don't really fuck with me and why am I single [sic]. And that in slave days I would have always had a man cause of breeding. If anybody should be offended is white folks cause it's what they did. Y'all so busy trying to be self righteous [sic]

[58] Black Twitter refers to the perceived collective interests and bargaining power of black Twitter users. It often is identified by unified trending topics and points of conversation.

> you miss what the joke really is. Very sad I have to defend myself to black people. Now I'm betting if Chris Rock or Dave Chappelle did that joke or jay z [sic] or Kanye put in a rap they would be called brilliant. Cause they all do this type of material. Just cause it came from a strong black woman who ain't afraid to be real y'all mad. So here is my announcement black folks, you won't stop me and Im [sic] gonna go even harder and deeper now. Cause it's a shame that we kill each other instead of support [sic] each other. This exactly why black people are where we are now cause we [sic] too fucking sensitive and instead of make [sic] lemonade out of lemons we just suck the sour juice from the lemons. Wake up. I wouldn't be able to do a joke like that if I didn't know my history or [sic] proud of where I came from and who I am.

Jones later apologized, writing, "sorry had a moment, can't when [sic] over the haters i [sic] am not the jackass whisperer. that is all…" Jones's response offers much to unpack. She focuses the blame for her comedic misfires on a number of targets—sexism, intraracism, hypersensitivity, and a lack of historical consideration. It is worth considering Jones's grievances as she lists them here. First the complaint of sexism is potentially the most valid. Male comedians do seem to get away with more than female comedians. Their comedy is allowed to be more raunchy and less reticent. As aforementioned, women are assumed to be inherently less funny than their male counterparts, and even in the 21st century, there is a tacit sexist expectation of the speech and behavior of women as necessarily needing to be respectable—the impetus remains on women to encourage and structure right behaviors and politesse in society. Yet it is hard to imagine any of the men named engaging in such material as Jones constructs it, and certainly not without fallout. Certainly each of the men named have discussed slavery or black beauty standards to some

degree. However none have made a joke that implies that any black woman would be better off as a slave. None have discounted the very real fact of systemic rape in chattel slavery. Jones does so with such staggering flippancy. This is another moment in which audience awareness is so significant. Jones was speaking on *Saturday Night Live* on NBC, rather than, for example, a theatre full of people who paid to see Chris Rock perform and knew what to expect. This is a primarily white and middle class audience and this was her first occasion on Weekend Update—her audience wasn't ready for the material and had no idea what to expect from this new performer. To this same end, Jones' newness did show as she stumbled over much of her material, making a difficult piece seem perhaps even clumsier. Jones was also, quite famously, hired to *Saturday Night Live* in response to claims that the show did a poor job of representing black people—prior to Jones' arrival, the show had very few black writers and only three black cast members in Kenan Thompson, Jay Pharaoh, and the newly-added Sasheer Zamata. If Jones was brought on to, in a sense, represent an undervalued "black perspective" this was quite a troubling introduction, and one where the criticism is at least understandable if not wholly merited. In this same way her claim that as comedian she is meant "to take things and make them funny. To make you think," is particularly troubling because she is unable in this set to demonstrate how her joke accomplishes either of these goals, or even how a comedian is able to effectively accomplish these seemingly incongruous—or at least unrelated—goals simultaneously.

Perhaps even more troubling, though, are her claims of intraracial tension as the reason behind her maligned reception. Jones asserts that African Americans are unsupportive and have no cause for alarm and that whites should be the injured party. Yet Jones never addresses whites in her set, save a casual mention of "master." Her target *is* blackness. Why would white

audiences be offended, other than on the level of their sensibilities? She lodges any possible offense of whiteness soundly in the past. Her complaints of blackness and dating while black—both experienced and presumed—while positioned in the past are meant to frame her very present existence. The structure is so racially-specific that white audiences are never indicted and black audiences have no choice but to feel themselves targeted and belittled. It is not at all, as Jones claims, an issue of hypersensitivity. Instead it is a problem of articulation that ultimately implies that the traumas of slavery had silver linings for a group of people who, even by Jones' own explication, still suffer from post-traumatic slave syndrome. Jones avoids historicity in favor of an trite understanding of the reality of slavery and the lasting impact on black bodies, and this is ultimately why her material fails—even the oversimplified understanding of the slavery in the national consciousness usually presumes that it was of no benefit to African Americans.

On September 27, 2014, Jones returned to Weekend Update, continuing to address modern dating woes. She explains, "It's hard to date now. Remember back in the day when the only question you had to ask a man was 'are you single?' Now it's a whole interview: 'Are you single? Are you on drugs? Are you gay? Are you sure? Do you have any kids? The baby on the way *counts* as a kid!' It's just too hard now!" This is more subtle than her previous incarnation even while Jones seems to continue in the vein of racial specificity. Jones returned to specific, personal conversations about her physicality on Weekend Update on March 7, 2015, but now to largely different effect. She scream-delivers—she is friends with Chris Rock, he claims to have suggested to Lorne Michaels that he hire her, and they do share an undeniable, frenetic cadence—about dating woes in New York City as the anchor, Colin Jost, looks on. "And none of y'all scared of me, at all. I used to be able to scare the hell out of a white girl in L.A. Just walk up to 'em, give 'em my best Compton stare. [stares angrily] Not out here. You white bitches are

strong." Now she is setting up a more nuanced and engaging trajectory about what it means to be black and female. Even while still making her own physicality bear the brunt of the joke, she speaks more subtly to how racial understanding may be shifting geographically and in the 21st century. It is as if Jones, despite her protestations, did in fact learn from the initial controversy in a significant way—Jones didn't back down, but she has shifted her framing. She is not softening her delivery or even her appearance[59]—she remains wide-eyed and spiky-haired—but the association with white womanhood is intriguing. Her audience is laughing heartily with her.

Audience (Un)Awareness

What the Jones fiasco highlights is the consistent unease in many black communities with a seeming airing of dirty laundry, particularly when it is aired without the precision necessary to link it to a broader, significant social commentary. This is especially true when the jokes are made by someone *intentionally* brought on to underscore a "black perspective." Here, it seems that the issue is not necessarily one of a need for racial uplift but instead the avoidance of racial self-denigration, particularly in mixed company, where personal opinion of the racialized speaker is often taken as representative of a monolithic race, especially when that opinion can be construed as negative. There is an anticipation of non-black, namely white, audience membership, and an expectation of a tonal shift . Perhaps this is to be expected. In *Black Skins, White Masks,* Frantz Fanon writes that "the black man possesses two dimensions: one with his fellow Blacks, the other with the Whites. A black man behaves differently with a white man than

[59] It is also interesting to consider, in passing, the subtle ways in which her appearance did change from her first Weekend Update stint. In her first poorly-received set, her shirt featured a large dandelion. In *both* subsequent sketches, she wore shirts featuring the large faces of cartoonized women—first a blonde, white woman; next a tan, ambiguously-raced blonde woman. Did Jones mean to align herself with white womanhood to assert her humanity and desire for respect? Did she hope to, in some ways, de-racialize her material for the *Saturday Night Live* viewing audience? It is unclear, but these are intriguing possibilities.

he does with another black man. There is no doubt whatsoever that this fissiparousness is a direct consequence of the colonial undertaking" (1). Baratunde Thurston[60] seems most aware of this doubleness, and actively leans into it to articulate blackness to a black and white audience in his memoir and facetitious self-help book, *How to Be Black.* Rather than a primer on "how to be black," the book instead shows how Thurston has been able to move through society successfully, tongue planted firmly in cheek, while articulating his blackness without appearing too radical or too frightening, without, conversely, suffering internal conflict that he may be sacrificing his own selfhood. He recalls a repeated occurrence involving his very physicality in great detail,

> It began with my hair. White schoolmates would look at my afro, then shout excitedly, 'Is that your real hair?' and 'That is so cool!' and 'Can I touch it?' all the while *reaching* to touch it regardless of what answer was percolating from my mind to my mouth in response to their perfunctory inquiry. If I did not know you, the answer was simply, 'No!' accompanied by a gracefully evasive maneuver to avoid unsanctioned hand-to-hair contact. But if we were friends, I would offer a detailed response. I would patiently explain that it was rude to just touch someone's hair without permission; that black people, especially, have a history of white people exerting their privilege over black bodies, extending from uninvited head-rubbing to far worse transgression; that it was disgusting, considering how many people don't wash their hands after using the restroom. Now armed with inside information, these white friends of mine were more

[60] Baratunde Thurston is also a supervising producer of *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah*, where he is involved with digital content expansion. *The Daily Show* is a stand-alone satirical, late-night news show, somewhat similar in content and format to *Saturday Night Live*'s "Weekend Update."

> respectful of my perspective and sometimes explained the logic to their own friends on their own initiative (80-1).

This encounter is interesting for a number of reasons. Initially, on the surface Thurston seems to gesture to the politics of respectability in his politeness and willingness to humor the arbitrator. However, a closer examination reveals a much more complicated and interesting possibility. Thurston's patience in explaining to white Americans why touching someone's hair is inappropriate belies a deeper frustration. It may be that in this moment, Thurston is subtly commenting on the necessity of correcting white Americans—those who ostensibly *create* the cultural and social norms—on appropriate social behavior. White Americanness is often viewed as the gatekeeper of correct behavior, and so here Thurston preys on this idea by teaching white Americans why this behavior is intolerable and how to dissuade this behavior in others as well. His performance of tolerant—and, perhaps, *tolerable*?—blackness here serves to tacitly undermine whiteness. Although Thurston's rhetoric seems at times to embrace a post-racial mythology more than some of his contemporaries, he summarily dismisses his book as one of the post-race. He reveals, "At one point during my writing of this book, someone suggested to me that I title it *Thoughts on Post-Racial America.* I calmly informed this person that the only way the term 'post-racial' was getting into the title of my book is if it was called *Post-Racial America Is Some Bullshit, and Other Thoughts on How to Be Black*" (202). Indeed the myriad problems with the post-racial are tied to the problems of respectability politics[61] and Thurston is not interested in performing either.

[61] Both the "post-racial" and respectability politics seem founded on the idea of performing blackness in ways that actively refuse and reverse negative stereotypes of blackness in an effort to be proven worthy of full citizenship. Much like subscription to any limited performance of blackness, the post-racial and respectability politics disallow dynamic personhood and demand performance to outside expectations.

He continues in this same vein as he discusses interracial friendships, explaining, "The Black Friend has value to all non-black Americans but especially white Americans. By having a Black Friend, white Americans automatically inoculate themselves against most charges of racism and capture some of the rebellious spirit that has made this country what it is. They become cooler by association" (81). Here Thurston ridicules the cliché defense against racism, *but some of my best friends are black.* When he explains it as an attempt of "automatic inoculation," it becomes instantly ludicrous. Moreover, when he argues that friendship with blacks affords whites "some of the rebellious spirit that has made this country what it is," the phrasing operates as a protest of revisionist American history, as well as, perhaps, a winking juxtaposition with the "rebels" of the South during the Civil War. Thurston stakes claim to the role African Americans had in creating the country and unequivocally speaks it into existence, thus speaking a more comprehensive blackness into existence.

Thurston anticipates further black-white relationships, saying,

> One entertaining way to keep your friends on their toes is to occasionally play the race card for fun. For example, if you're getting in the car with them and you end up being directed to the backseat, you can yell, 'Why do I have to sit in the back? Is it because I'm black!?' They'll be nervous for a moment, but then you'll laugh, and they'll laugh, and oh, the fun times you can have being The Black Friend (85).

Once again, audiences witness a surprising reversal of power. He is speaking truth to power through humor—shining a light on historicity that would otherwise go unacknowledged, while the laughter allows these moments to recur and seem innocuous. However, in this moment, Thurston is also ridiculing the joke teller for simultaneously making the listener feel at ease with real-life racial issues—jokes of this nature simply marginalize the real racist history and culture

at play in the United States. The joke teller is further indicted because the "joke" isn't actually humorous. It is instead just a way to attempt to acknowledge racial tensions while importantly defusing them. Thurston's performance of blackness here is calculated as he refers to playing "the race card"—the idea that racial minorities bring up race in non-racially-charged moments for some tangible benefit—when in actuality he is remembering real, racialized historicity. The fact that his jokes are written allows him the space to take the time and the great lengths indicated to make sure his meaning is made plain. Yet even aside from the limitations of the stage or screen as compared to the page, is it important to note that it is Thurston, a black male, who is allowed to make these broader generalizations about the nature of blackness in relation to whiteness. It is safe to say that Thurston as a heterosexual male is afforded privilege that Goldberg or Jones are not. He is thus able to perform a more *charmingly* antagonistic blackness—an antagonism somewhat obscured by a veil of laughter.

Without Reparations, Without Repercussions, Without Responsibility?

It should startle and shame us that the public and private burden of racism is so weighty, so heinous, and so unendurable that Dave Chappelle decided he could ultimately no longer engage in comedy in the public sphere. Even in his absence, he remains hailed as one of the greatest comic minds of his generation. Yet he is unwilling to participate in comedy in this same way because of the burden of not only racism, but of racial *mis*understanding. What should evoke even more shame is how correct Chappelle may be. In the past few years, he has ventured back into the comedic spotlight with a few performances, which have been noteworthy for problematic reasons—ranging from audience members demanding he perform old material from *Chappelle's Show* to throwing a banana peel at him in the middle of his routine in New

Mexico.[62] Similarly, while Chris Rock remains in the comedic realm, his material has shifted to have a much more clear and dynamic political thrust. Indeed, where *Good Hair* misses the mark, much of Rock's aim is clear even in an occasionally muddled articulation. Since the fallout from the "Niggas versus Black People" set, Rock has reinvented himself as a touchstone for black political insights. Now the comedy seems secondary to the message. Indeed, recent interviews with Rock have shifted away from asking the funny man about his jokes and instead toward asking his opinions on social events. He has become a trusted commentator—and in the past few years he has begun to fully embrace a new role as unanticipated mouthpiece for *the* black community and seems to fully accept the responsibility therein. Chappelle, however, has tentatively tried to step back into comedy in recent years to uneven response—from worshipful praise to physical assaults. Where Rock seemed to initially eschew a level of intense social responsibility before later recognizing it, Chappelle has always embraced a role as political comedian. It is, perhaps, the reason why Chappelle has found it so difficult to return to the stage in view of the potential for misunderstandings.

[62] In 2015, I saw Dave Chappelle in Rochester, New York. While his renewed enjoyment of joke telling was palpable, the vulnerability that marked his comedy was absent. My confusion surrounding his lack of vulnerability was short-lived as an inebriated audience member began to loudly and belligerently heckle Chappelle, concluding by shouting "I'm Rick James, bitch!" Chappelle mildly humored the man until finally speaking back and having the man removed. I no longer had any questions about Chappelle's rationale for disallowing his own vulnerability on the comedic stage.

Conclusion

Post-Soul Satire in a Post-Obama America

> The people whose appearance matches the identity they project, they have a place in society that they fit into with minimal cramping. But here, standing next to us, is everyone else. The human equivalent of mismatched socks. The people whose racial appearance fails to mirror the ethnicity of their inner spirit.
>
> —Mat Johnson, *Loving Day*

> Is there a point to recognizing a person of color *as* a person of color, as black, Asian, Latino, Native American, biracial, even multiracial? Or is the point to 'forget" or disregard that feature of identity insofar as a just society is possible only when we move beyond race consciousness, as many proponents of postracialism suggest?
>
> —Ki Joo (KC) Choi

> I would have to… investigate Bill's dancing abilities… before I accurately judge whether he was in fact a brother.
>
> —Barack Obama, on Bill Clinton during the 2008 South Carolina Primary

A brief personal anecdote may serve here to elucidate the real-world applicability of humor and why one of the most significant questions engaging the intersection of critical race

studies and comedy may be that of what happens "when keeping it real goes wrong." Many years ago, I went with a group of friends to see up-and-coming[63] comedian Aziz Ansari perform stand-up in Atlanta, Georgia. While I was under the impression I would be at this event with a small group of close friends, the gathering grew, as these things often do, until I was surrounded by a number of people I did not know. During the show, Ansari was simultaneously hilarious and thoughtful, displaying his characteristic self-deprecation. He performed one particularly striking piece where he read off a number of antiquated and less-common racial slurs and then revealed their peculiar definitions. Ansari, an Indian American who grew up in South Carolina, explicitly stated he wanted to demonstrate the seeming arbitrariness of racism by showing the ludicrousness of these terms when considered critically while highlighting the power they retain in their framing *as* slurs. The biggest laugh was drawn from the phrase "touch of the tar brush," meaning a person with distant African ancestry who may or may not appear to have any. I laughed and cringed, like the rest of the audience, and appreciated Ansari's use of his platform. Leaving the venue, the ever-larger group split into cars to caravan out for food and drinks. Somehow, I ended in a car with a group of friends-of-a-friend-of-a-friend, a couple of white men in their mid-twenties—the same age as me. We made polite introductions and began to talk about the show. As quickly as the conversation began, the driver and his cohorts dove into a conversation about the racial slurs and the hilarity of their use, interjecting the phrase "touch of the tar brush" at random and wondering aloud if passersby had a "touch of the tar brush." These men were not only laughing at the wrong part of the joke but had unknowingly become its punch line. Outnumbered and feeling ill at ease—and quite sincerely threatened and under attack—I wondered if I had been rendered invisible or merely irrelevant to them. I remained silent and

[63] Ansari was "up-and-coming" at the time but has certainly achieved high comedic status at this point.

tried to make myself smaller than they had. I left the group shortly after I got out of the car, hoping my absence would speak for me, sure it would not.

I have often thought back on the implications of this day—the joy evoked by the show so quickly tempered and then erased by the unexpected trauma and fear I felt immediately following. What strikes me now, years later, is the way that Ansari's framework was immaterial to the conversation the members of his audience wanted to have. Ansari could not have been more explicit in his articulation or his performance. He overtly stated his meaning and explained his intention with precision—and indeed, even his very existence as a person of color was tacitly indicated to explain his investment in the conversation and its framing. Yet these members of his audience chose to disregard his intention in favor of the reductive—the show became an opportunity for these audience members to utter slurs without guilt and without culpability. The stakes of satire and humor more broadly can be seen clearly through further consideration of this moment. Although Ansari is not an African American comedian, nor is his comedy immediately defined as "race comedy," much of his joke telling is derived from a keen understanding of what it means to have your body racialized and essentialized as you negotiate your place in society[64]—his brown skin, diminutive frame, his seemingly-incongruent South Carolina adolescence, and the expectations of society at large as they view him. Jonathan P. Rossing describes this as a sense of parrhesia in comedy. He explains,

> Major revisions to dominant knowledge require insights from those outside of dominant political culture whose experiential truths disrupt the status quo and challenge dominant knowledge and conventions. Critical race humor provides a pathway to parrhesia for speakers who are underpowered in relation to their

[64] In fact, many of Ansari's most well-known jokes revolve around his encounters with famous African American musicians, such as Kanye West and R. Kelly.

> audience. Such humor empowers marginalized critics to problematize shared and sacred truths, and it provides opportunities to undermine oppressive forces that stifle justice (23).

So then this potentially deliberate misunderstanding on the part of these viewers is more than just a failed joke or a punchline falling flat. If the point of this humor is to "empower and marginalize," then when these jokes fail, it is not only the underpowered comedian who suffers, but the underpowered members of his or her audience as well. These moments reinforce social interactions, feelings of safety and of self-worth, and the reification of limited, easily-recalled racial preconceptions. For this reason, perhaps even more than in years past, African American humor is especially in need of greater analysis as a conscious and deliberate effort to examine not only the play of the satirical but of the dynamic literary reach and applicability of the field more broadly. For this reason, I want to conclude by expanding on the reception of racialized topics outside of academia and the way their articulation in the popular realm influences our public understandings of race in the twenty-first century.

Loving Day, *Louie*, and the Fallacy of the Post-Racial

Mat Johnson's 2015 novel, *Loving Day*, addresses issue of racial malleability and fluidity through a close examination of the identity possibilities through the frame of multi-raciality. This text works well in consideration of future directions of African American literature not only because of its newness but also because of the excitement with which it was met. While the novel is unapologetically dense, cerebral, and metanarrative, it was met with both critical and popular anticipation and acclaim—talks to develop the novel into a Showtime television series are currently in the works. This begs the question: what is it about the ideas of racial confusion, identity ambiguity, and multi-raciality that is so engaged in a twenty-first century? It may be a

desire to tacitly acknowledge the unfulfilled promise of the *post*-racial. In *Loving Day*, the protagonist, Warren Duffy, another thinly-veiled racial stand-in for Johnson himself, works to negotiate the shifting parameters of race in the 21st century—he looks phenotypically white and, like both Johnson and Johnson's Zane Pinchback of *Incognegro*, chooses to identify as African American. As a result, Warren is forced to examine the practicality of racial performance and performativity as his self-identity is in stark contrast to his other-identified self. In this sense, multiple possibilities of racial identity are highlighted—Johnson extends his argument forwarded in *Incognegro* that the binary is an insufficient frame because it is able to be traversed; now, the binary is inadequate because a person can accept a binary definition of race that exists irrespective of phenotype while also inhabiting multiple positions outside of the binary simultaneously. Duffy explains upon arriving in Philadelphia,

> I'm not white, but I can feel the eyes of the few people outside on me, people who must think that I am, because I look white, and as such what the hell am I doing here? This disconnect in my racial projection is one of the things I hate. It goes in a subcategory I call "America," which has another subheading called "Philly." I hate that because I know I'm black. My mother was black—that counts, no matter how pale and Irish my father was. So I shall not be rebuked. I will not be rejected. I want to run but I refuse to be run off (4).

Once again, it appears initially that credence is given to hypodescent. Warren identifies himself as black because his mother is black and "that counts," in his estimation. Yet even here, there seems to be a distinction between hypodescent as *law* versus hypodescent as chosen parameter. The twenty-first century satirical impulse is marked by the reappropriation of negative tropes of blackness, but here we see even the reappropriation of the *very terms* meant to define and

prescribe black identity. This notion expands upon Walter White's assertion in the early twentieth century that he "considers" himself black and turns blackness into something that isn't only chosen, but is nearly aspirational. In this sense, blackness is definable by genetics—by having a phenotypically-identifiable black relative. However it is also defined in its stark defiance of the gaze—by refusing an other-assigned racial categorization. In this sense, while whiteness is still assumed and normalized, blackness refuses to be made abject even as it works to announce itself within a racialized hierarchy. As a result, blackness is rendered performative, but importantly it is performative within the context of genetics.

Warren explains the subtlety of his own performance when he suspects his racial identity is either in question or unclear. He describes his voice,

> The words don't really matter. What I'm really doing is letting my black voice come out, to compensate for my ambiguous appearance. Let the bass take over my tongue. Let the South of Mom's ancestry inform the rhythm of my words in a way few white men could pull off. It's conscious but not unnatural—I sometimes revert to this native tongue even when I have nothing to prove… What I'm saying is, *I'm black too.* What I'm saying is that he can relax around me, because I'm on his side. That he doesn't have to worry I'm going to make some random racist statement that will stab him when he's unguarded, or be offended when he makes some racist comment of his own. People aren't social, they're tribal. Race doesn't exist, but tribes are fucking real. What am I saying? *I'm on Team Blackie,* And I can see in the slight relaxing that he's willing to accept my self-definition, at least tentatively, pending further investigation (17-18).

This is linked into the tradition of passing narratives, to be sure, but Johnson puts a new spin on it which illuminates the reasons why some efforts at passing are accepted while others are soundly rebuffed. What can be presumed in this element of the "tribal" in passing efforts? Is it an affinity that cannot be reduced to the mere happenstance of DNA? That the alliance must be active in specific ways? In Warren's estimation, the tribal connection is marked by the *choosing*—by finding some connectivity with the other members outside of what is easily-identifiable to outsiders. Not only this, but this connection may be marked by a sense of allegiance and protection—the listener needs to know, as Warren posits, that he has shared experiences and understands the fullness of black identity. Warren must demonstrate a careful articulation of blackness, rather than mere fascination with its accoutrements. In fact, his use of the bass that, at least in his description, already exists as a part of his vocal repertoire highlights this idea that it is not something able to be added on—he's not "talking black;"[65] he's talking and he is, in fact, genetically and tribally black. This specific notion of the tribal works to redefine blackness—it refuses ideas of blackness as either abject racial repository simultaneously. What this means then is that blackness is not viewed as the last frontier of racial identity. Johnson depicts blackness as a desirable identity with benefits both tangible and implied. Blackness is not, in this way, a designation inescapable through an unlucky genetic lottery or phenotypic certainty. Similarly, Johnson also refuses the popular pathologizing of blackness—and black *people*—as always already accepting of interlocutors. As seen in the Rachel Dolezal case, a story that quite fascinatingly coincided in the media with the publication of *Loving Day*, blackness

[65] This idea of "talking black"—popularized through portmanteau as a "blaccent"—has especially come under fire in recent years with the success of rapper, Iggy Azalea. Azalea is a white, female, Australian rapper whose speaking voice is marked by an Australian accent and dialect but whose rap persona and voice mimic the sounds and phrasings associated with African American and Atlanta "Dirty South" cultures.

does not immediately absorb any and all who claimed affiliation. Instead, Johnson is deliberate in his articulation that black identity takes effort. In this rather subtle way, he refuses the postracial idea that race doesn't matter in favor of an argument where race matters greatly, but its existence is marked by a new degree of porosity.

Warren's already complicated existence is further complicated through the revelation that he has a newly-discovered teenage daughter, Tal, who was raised Jewish, unaware of her mixed-race background. Her arrival in his life, along with the acquisition of his father's old, decaying house in Philadelphia, serves as impetus for his closer examination of race—both his own and that of those around him. His daughter's initial outright resistance to any understanding of herself as black leads him to attempt to enroll her in an Afrocentric school in the area. When this is proven a poor match, he and Tal become members of Melànge, a school and community for individuals who identify as multiracial, and particularly those whose phenotype seems not to represent their personal racial identity. Throughout the narrative Warren vacillates between his feelings about the need for inclusion and his concerns that even a classification as multiracial doesn't quite explain his identity in satisfactory ways. One of the leaders of the group, Sunita, senses his reluctance and empathizes. Sunita offers,

> Okay, here's the secret. It's not really a secret, but I'll frame it to you as one. The same people who despise you for identifying as mixed? Those are the same people who, when you do identify as black, despise you for not being black enough. And there's nothing you can actually do to be black enough, for them. Because it's not really how you act that they despise. It's you. Your very existence (123).

In this moment, the fraught territory of identity is made explicit and the fallacy of the post-racial mythology is apparent. If the post-racial manifests in an idea that race is meaningless and racial identification is somehow superfluous, then this acute feeling of placelessness, of physicality as problematic and problematized—described by Johnson throughout *Loving Day* as an intrinsic part of the multiracial experience—disproves the utopia that refusing race is implied to create. Instead of being embraced by a post-racial society which views mixed identity as an admirable endgame,[66] Johnson describes a society that, even as it asserts the presumed value of expanding traditional racial parameters still views racial malleability askance and with great hesitation. It may be, then, that even in the claims that race may no longer matter—or that it doesn't matter in the ways that it used to matter—there is still a desire for the traditional and comforting racial categories, for the reification of that racial hierarchy. Those individuals whose bodies are viewed as in opposition to this idea are necessarily alienated and suffer erasure. They become aberrations of the system even outside of their identification because they are outliers to the binary line. The existence of mixed-race people, particularly those who seem racially ambiguous or those who identify as other than their phenotypic portrayal, distorts an understanding of identity as simplistic and, even more importantly, *obvious,* that is part of the national consciousness. Despite claims to the contrary, the United States does indeed not only use race as shorthand for class and mobility but is profoundly desirous of race as it is the frame with which we understand identity. In it resides a focus that deeply shapes our understanding of the self as defined in opposition to the other.

What is interesting here is not simply that Johnson so rightly identifies the national hypocrisy of our insistent articulation of the post-racial as a goal of enlightenment, but that he

[66] Danzy Senna describes this possibility as the "Mulatto Millennium."

places it in the context of multiracial self-identification in the twenty-first century and very real concerns surrounding an affinity toward blackness, or its rejection. The post-soul moment is greatly concerned with the stakes of literature and cultural production—not, as Kenneth Warren seems to posit in *What Was African American Literature?*, because the stakes have shifted in such a way to render the field unnecessary in some ways—but because as the parameters of a racially-identified field shift, our connection to the stakes must likewise expand to accept the wide breadth of possibilities. Johnson makes this explicit in the nuanced characterizations he provides, especially of the mixed-raced individuals populating *Loving Day*'s Philadelphia. Sunita and the Melànge community could have easily veered into stereotypes of either a mythologized racial utopia or a cautionary tale depicting the harm that can be caused when race is unacknowledged or only addressed in superficial ways, but Johnson's interest here is much more expansive. Through Sunita, readers encounter an understanding of race that dwells in the potentials. For Sunita, there is necessity in examining multiple spaces of racial identification—your ability to choose your identity while still acutely understanding the historical context of race in the United States. Toward the end of the novel, her own articulations of identity become even more nuanced as she continues to grapple with the real-life applications. She argues,

> If these Oreos are trying to change things so that they're not really black, how does that help anyone besides themselves? We've got black boys being used for target practice by white cops out there, we've got a prison system overflowing with victims of white judgment. We have a crisis. Right now. Not in the eighteenth century, not in the civil rights era, but right now. How does them quitting blackness help the Trayvon Martins out there? How does it help the Michael Browns? The Renisha McBrides, and all the black women out there

> struggling to hold it down? How does running away from blackness not make that worse? (Johnson 239).

This statement is a useful way to frame the possibilities of distinction between the post-soul, which seems to see value in the acknowledgment of racial difference and race as connected to historicity, and the post-racial. The opportunity for self-identification may be worthwhile, but only insofar as it provides a still-communal sense of autonomy and meaning—the *tribal* designation that Johnson elucidates. That is to say, unequivocally, that race does matter—racialization and racism are real and serve particular purposes within an identity system in the United States. Yet this does not imply an invalidation of multi-raciality. Instead, it simply means that an acknowledgement of multi-raciality should not be taken as some indicator that the post-racial has taken hold. The multi-racial, in the estimation, instead may indicate that race *does* very much exist, and that it is impossible to move *post* it. Using the post-racial in an effort to opt out of race because of fears surrounding the trauma of racism is not only disingenuous but ineffective. Clarence E. Walker and Gregory D. Smithers note in *The Preacher and the Politician*, "Placed in historical context, 'postracial' theories do not enable racialized peoples to transcend race; on the contrary, they involve the deployment of new terminology that reinscribes old racial binaries of white and nonwhite. The increasingly popular 'postracial theories in effect proclaim whiteness as normative" (8). In this sense, then, the post-racial continues to reify the racial hierarchy as it implies the normative status of whiteness. Indeed, Johnson solidifies this meaning by demonstrating that an uncritical investment in the performative aspects of the post-racial—that these individuals touting the advantage of post-raciality are actually those who feel they would benefit from disavowing blackness, or what they presume black performativity entails, for the sake of convenience.

Indeed, even as it is insistently evoked in the media, in recent years the post-racial has been rendered suspect if not ridiculous in surprising ways. One critically-underanalyzed example is the FX series, *Louie*, written by stand-up comedian and writer Louis C.K. and loosely-based on his life, which ostensibly delved into the idea of the post-racial in its casting procedures. While *Louie* itself does not clearly fit within even the broadening parameters of African American or mixed-race literary or cultural studies, the show is worth closer examination as Louis C.K. himself has a strong association with the field—he is a frequent collaborator with Chris Rock and Wanda Sykes, and a former writer for *The Chris Rock Show* as well as the writer and director of the cult film, *Pootie Tang.*[67] *Louie* follows the titular character, a moderately-successful stand-up comic, and his awkward encounters as a well-intentioned ne'er-do-well in New York City. Important for this analysis, however, is he relationship with his daughters and ex-wife. Although his daughters, introduced in the first season of the series, are blonde, fair-skinned actresses, the actress who played his ex-wife beginning in season three is revealed to be African American. In fact, *revealed* may be too active an assertion—his ex-wife was suddenly present as a black woman and this fact of interraciality was never addressed. No explanation was given, and no character ever discussed this apparent incongruence. There was no episode about race, no special conversation about the meaning of his daughters' existence as white-presenting individuals raised by a black woman, and no surprise on the part of any other characters—this intentional silencing not meant necessarily to depict a post-racial utopia but instead perhaps that

[67] *Pootie Tang* is a satire of the Blaxploitation films of the 1970s. Pootie is a consummate "ladies' man" who overcomes adversity through sheer coolness and the power of a belt inherited from his late father. The film, based on a *Chris Rock Show* sketch, was poorly reviewed. Louis C.K. has said that he was not a part of the editing process and that the finished project did not represent his vision for the film. Still, the film retains a strong following and is viewed as a camp or kitsch.

race was simply a non-factor in this realm.[68] Louis C.K. explained in interviews that he trusted his audience to accept the casting decision without any real hesitation or discomfort, and, by and large, he was correct—audiences found Susan Kelechi Watson's portrayal of Janet to be compelling, and response was largely positive to this race neutrality. All of this changed, however, in June 2014, when race was abruptly engaged by a love interest after meeting Janet for the first time. The conversation is worth including in its entirety:

> Pamela: How is your ex-wife black?
>
> Louie: What, I can't marry a black woman?
>
> Pamela: You can marry a green elephant. The question is, how the hell is she the mother of those almost-translucent white girls of yours?
>
> Louie: Oh, her mom is white.
>
> Pamela: Oh, well, then, her mom must have had those kids, because Janet is not their mom.
>
> Louie: Yes... yes, she is.
>
> Pamela: Did you see them being born? Did you see those little white babies come out of her juicy black pussy? Because I think she stole them.

There is much to unpack in this loaded moment. The willingness to allow Louie a marriage to a green elephant over a phenotypically black woman having phenotypically white children is troubling and seems consistent with the historical reduction of black femininity to the animalistic—that of course Louie could marry a black woman as easily as a (fictional) green elephant, that the exchange rate is equal in these two possibilities. Similarly, the vulgar and dehumanizing reduction of Janet to slurs of genitalia speaks to the overt sexualization of the

[68] An interesting possibility, to be sure, when *Louie* depicts no other love interests, potential or realized, who are not phenotypically white.

black female body. Even in maternity, even in the literal act of birthing, Janet is only acknowledged through active sexuality. Finally, of course, the accusation of theft—even as, in Pamela's articulation, it is meant to be received as a *joke*—is itself rife with racist implications about blackness and criminality and seems to imply that these "white" children her body is assumed incapable of producing are inherently worth stealing. This is such a stark tonal shift from the usual treatment of race in *Louie* which consists primarily of avoiding the subject or a rather progressive engagement in which people of color are actively present in New York City and in Louie's life, but racial difference holds much less salience than distinctions of class, gender, sexuality, or culture. Yet here, Pamela's shock at this racial difference is clear and articulated in disturbingly blunt and racialized—and at times simply *racist*—terms. In fact, Pamela's disbelief is couched specifically in the feigned idea that she is not surprised to learn Louie's ex-wife is white, but instead that the mother of his daughters is. Here, once again, we see the acute sense of racial panic that emerges when the rules of genetic result in ambiguity or a sense of confusion, when the procreative reality exists outside the parameters of phenotypic expectations. Indeed, while it might be unlikely for this woman to be the biological mother of these children, it is not *impossible.* Such is the nature of race in the United States. And while Louie does reassert Janet's motherhood, when Pamela refuses to accept this reality, he falls into awkward, uncomfortable silence.

What is troubling here is that this scene is played merely for laughs—Pamela says what, presumably, the audience has been wondering for years; Louie attempts to stand up to her and is ultimately too insecure to do so. As a result, the implications of this scene are so damaging, especially because they are shockingly far afield from the racial content of the show until this moment. Ross Scarano succinctly described the disturbing scene, writing for *Complex* online,

"But last night, after nearly two complete seasons without any (unnecessary) explanation, he explained Janet. Prodded by Pamela, Louie explained that Janet is biracial, that her mother is white. And for what? So that Pamela could use the phrase 'juicy black pussy'? It was a deeply disappointing moment from a show I expect better of" (n.p.). Scarano is right that this instance is grotesque in its oversimplification of race and procreation, and coming from Louis C.K. it is especially troubling. In a series that works against an idea of a "lowest common denominator" sensibility in joke-telling, this particular moment is a disconcerting reminder of the racialization within the idea of the post-raciality—where whiteness is proven normative and post-race presumes clear racial performativity and a limited expectation of race as on a binary. This could have offered a teachable moment on the nuances of race, or phenotypes, or even genetics, but instead the joke is shallow and any meaning is lost outside of Pamela as outrageous (but learning nothing) and Louie as reticent in her presence. Even from a solely artistic standpoint, this seems to waste a subtle and intriguing storyline that had been building well for four seasons on an easy joke that adds nothing to character development and does nothing to further the plot. As previously mentioned, Louis C.K. does not address race in substantive ways in *Louie*, but in his stand-up he works to address race from an actively anti-racist perspective. Imperfect as his material may be, his articulation of racial issues is meant to point out the ridiculousness of it in contemporary society. Moreover, and importantly, Louis C.K., although phenotypically white, with red hair and freckles, is actually of mixed ancestry—his father is Mexican and his first language is Spanish. He has sensitively addressed the preconceptions concerning race and appearance in the frame of his personal experiences to Tavis Smiley, saying, "But because of the way that I look, I wouldn't be pegged as a Mexican, which is interesting because I'm more Mexican than a lot of people that are known as Mexicans, you know… Also, people experience

Mexicans as that brown guy that comes over and works in my house, or whatever it is. They don't realize that they're surrounded by millions of white Mexicans …" His *Louie* doppelganger is white—although occasionally reference is made to his ethnic heritage as being vague or unclear—and, as a "white" person with non-white ancestry in his immediate family, he is aware of the nuances of race and self-categorization. As a result, the cavalier treatment in *Louie* as space for an easy joke is especially disheartening.

Prior to this offensive moment in the series, in an interview with late-night host Jimmy Kimmel in 2012 Louis C.K. explained Janet saying, "If the character works for the show, I don't care about the race." Yet even in this moment, he immediately added, "When a black woman tells you to get a job, it's just more … " before trailing off and laughing. This articulation seems to typify the post-racial imagination, an impulse against which the post-soul agitates. Here Louis C.K. seems unable to disabuse himself of the notion of intrinsic characteristics of black womanhood. In describing a black woman's demands as "more"—even as he finds it difficult to grasp the appropriate adjective—he conjures those stereotypical traits of sassiness, argumentativeness, and even emasculation and places an imagined trope of the black woman in conflict with broader *normal* womanhood. Blackness is once again pathologized, even as in the same breath he disavows the significance of race in his casting these roles. The post-soul, as seen in Johnson's biting critique of post-race, asserts itself in the possibilities of identity without expressing disbelief about the ways race has real impact on the lives of racialized individuals. The post-racial, like the post-black, in its insistent disavowal of racial import often slips accidentally, or not, back into racial essentialism. While Louis C.K. may understand the repercussions of these slippages, he is not including them in the fictionalized account of his life. In fact, it becomes a hugely uncomfortable missed opportunity for viewers as Pamela learns no

lesson, retains the power in the dynamic that so marks their relationship, and Louie is made to feel that his discomfort is unjustified—a signifier of his own awkwardness rather than justifiable unease with racialized language about his ex-wife and, ultimately, his own children.

Obama and Racial (Mis)Directions

Yet perhaps the greatest examples for post-soul satire, mixed-race identity formation, and the application in the twenty-first century have been spurred on by the election of Barack Obama—not merely his reception as candidate and then two-term president, but in the ways he himself has struggled to define himself in the context of a national understanding of blackness that evolves and stays the same. The first few months of his term were marked by this seeming conflict of personal identity and other-determined identity, especially his self-designation as black on the census in April 2009. When Obama filled out the census form, the nation awaited what this newly-elected president would select—his campaign rhetoric seemed to embrace the wide possibilities of racial identity, naming himself as black while still acknowledging the legitimacy of his existence as the son of a Kenyan father and a white mother from Kansas. Yet his decision to check "black" only was met with criticism and disappointment from some supporters. Elizabeth Chang wrote for *The Washington Post*, "Obama, who has also referred to himself as a 'mutt,' made a big deal during the 2008 campaign of being able to relate to Hawaiians and Midwesterners, Harvard grads and salespeople, blacks, whites, Latinos, whatever—precisely because of his 'unconventional' background and multicultural exposure. On the census, however, he has effectively said that when it counts, he is black"(n.p.) Yet this assertion seems an oversimplification of the challenge of identity Obama faced and seems to discount the both/and that Obama has always articulated in his own self-formation in favor of an either/or. While Chang expresses a concern that Obama "does not acknowledge half of his

heritage, or, more basically, the mother and grandparents who raised him, or even his commonality with his sister, who is also biracial, though with a different mix" she conflates his choice of census label—itself a fraught and limited forum to address identity formation—with his repeated personal articulation of self. In *Still a House Divided,* Desmond S. King and Rogers M. Smith imagine Obama's potential motivations,

> Filling out his form quickly while cameras clicked, Obama marked only one box, 'Black, African Am., or Negro' (the last term reportedly maintained due to the Census Bureau's perception of the preferences of older blacks). The president may have done so out of a strong sense of self-identification; or because he knew that if he checked that box at all, he would be counted as 'Black' for most federal administrative purposes; or because he believed that many in his political base would be offended if he identified otherwise. He may have done so with some misgivings or, as his press secretary Robert Gibbs implied, without hesitation. But in any case, as a political figure who has faced suspicions about being both 'not black enough' and 'too black,' Obama must have been aware of how the choice before him had been shaped by the politics of today's racial alliances (203-4).

Indeed, it is Obama's tenuous identity as both the first black president and a president who, some critics claimed, was only elected because his blackness was deemed unthreatening in particular ways that perhaps necessitated his choice. By choosing to articulate his blackness in this *official* capacity, Obama subscribed to the traditional explication of race with the United States—the fact of an immediate ancestor of African descent, and indeed, his *father*, seems to render the question of authenticity moot. Yet even more than this, Obama is not only subscribing to a racial tradition but he is prescribing the choosing of a racial categorization based on phenotype that

simultaneously refuses to discount the actual nuances of racial identity. It is not then, as Chang asserts, "If the most powerful person in this country says that because society thinks he looks black, he is black, it sends a message that biracial children have to identify with the side they most resemble." Instead it places the idea of biraciality and multiraciality within the frame of historicity. For this exact reason, Chang's oversimplification is dangerous because it disregards what Obama has always voiced—he identifies as black because the world views him as black and there are real, immediately felt repercussions regarding safety and legality within that racialized frame; he identifies as biracial because he expressly *does* acknowledge the white mother and grandparents who raised him. Her assertion seems to deliberately obfuscate this possibility as an effort to determine parameters for race that disallow the very nuance that identifying as multi-racial or biracial must by means allow—and it is this limiting falsehood of the multi-raciality that is damaging, as it discounts the felt quotidian experiences of people of color in a world that normalizes whiteness and renders blackness abject. This reality must be acknowledged even as multi-raciality and biraciality are uplifted as valid and discrete identities. In this sense, the active assertion must not be that race is a social construction, especially without addressing the ways in which the United States desires race as a legitimate means of categorization and stratification. This distinction is critical. As Michael P. Jeffries notes in *Paint the White House Black*,

> The danger in affirming race as a social construction is that this understanding is easily distorted into the false belief that race does not exist or does not matter. The problem is compounded by exalting 'assimilation' as part of the moral quest to achieve a color-blind society, where people's attitudes and behaviors are completely liberated from racial thinking and everyone is treated equally

> regardless of color. The impulse towards color blindness, combined with the belief that racism is a thing of the past, results in 'racism without racists,' as the institutional foundation for racism remains intact despite a reduction in attitudinal antipathy towards racial others (4).

This contemporary insistence that race is merely a social construction, intentionally undercuts the actual impact of race in the lives of people of color, and may lead to what has been described as "the new racism," which "draw [s] on the coded lexicon of color-blind racism ('*those* urban people" or '*those* people on welfare') to both preserve white privilege and deflect charges of racial discrimination" (Bonilla-Silva and Childers 24). Conversations about race cannot occur in a space where the pretense is that no one sees color. Ultimately, framing Obama's declaration of his blackness as in opposition to his biraciality is not only ahistorical but implies that somehow his experiences as biracial are more substantive than his experiences as a black man—an identity that he himself claims and that, he has noted, others attribute to him on sight. Despite Chang's claim that race is "an almost useless construct," Obama's self-identification has meaning for biracial and multiracial populations, as well as black populations seeking acknowledgment of the impact of racialization on lived experiences.

Even before the first election, in May of 2008, Ta-Nehisi Coates elucidated the potential influence of Barack Obama's candidacy and ascendency. He wrote for *The Atlantic*, "Whatever comes of it from here on out for the larger country, Obama has redefined blackness for white America, has served notice that wherever we are, we are. What he is positing is blackness as a valid ethnic identity with its own particular folkways and yet still existing within the broader American continuum." Obama's assertion of the multiplicity of identity—and the significance of identity politics and choosing—had already begun to influence our understanding of people of

color in political spheres and the real application of the post-soul impulse surrounding the multiple possibilities of race and pride within the nuances of racial performance. Indeed, as Coates formulates so succinctly, "Already a wave of black politicos–Deval Patrick, Corey Booker, Jesse Jackson Jr.–have raised a similar banner, and there is nothing "postracial," "postblack" or "transcendental" about it." The real critical application of the post-soul, then, can be found in the ways that it shapes a future understanding of race—not by tearing race asunder but instead by asserting the ways that its existence as social construct underscores the fact that it was historically constructed to create a hierarchy that still exists in significant ways. In fact, to this end, the essentializing of race is damaging in all its forms—the racial binary, an exclusionary idea of biracial or multiracial identity, or any hierarchy that presumes either/or in place of both/and. It is through acknowledging and critiquing the power dynamics inherent in racial essentialism that the post-soul opens up this significant space for play in identity formation.

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