

In Living Color, Chappelle's Show and Bamboozled: Decoding  
Representations of Blackness

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## Introduction

I had been to “Another Type of Groove” before--Cal Poly’s answer to spoken word poetry. The monthly event that allowed students the opportunity to present their own poetry to a supportive audience also featured a guest poet. Usually when I attended I enjoyed the atmosphere and the poetry, and then went about the rest of my week. I was, however, unable to forget one poet in particular. To honor Black History Month, in February 2010, the guest poet was Shihan. Shihan was the National Poetry Slam Grand Champion in 2004 and had also been on Russell Simmons’ *HBO Def Poetry Jam* several times.

For the poem “Negro Auction Network,” he explained an encounter he had during a trip to New Zealand. While spending the day with some Maori, a woman walked past the group of men. He was told, “You niggers like big asses like that,” in response to a woman walking by them. Shihan was taken aback at the use of the “n” word, but upon further reflection realized that this was a product of “foreign” exposure to American music and television. After listening to rap videos that repeatedly used that word, those men living in New Zealand considered it an acceptable term to use to refer to Shihan.

Shihan followed that story with one about watching the MTV *Video Music Awards* with his daughter. The rapper 50 Cent was performing dressed as a pimp with “hos” dancing around the stage. Shihan was concerned about how the stereotypical caricatures of African-Americans would affect his daughter, and anyone else exposed to them. He explained his belief that black entertainers had become objects in a modern day slave trade where the American public at larger “buys” black stereotypes of young, angry gangsters.

The metaphor of the slave trade contextualized his next poem in which he acted as an auctioneer describing “negroes” that could be purchased. Shihan described male rappers with

gold teeth, tattoos, and gold crucifixes around their necks. While the whole poem was a scathing criticism about how pigeon-holed depictions of African-Americans have become, a few lines in particular explain how damaging he feels these representations are. “This negro will caricature the entire race until no one expects anything from the blacks except niggas.” Shihan described the thug stereotype of black music artists as harmful to children (like his daughter), American consumers, and people abroad who view these images with no realistic representations of African-Americans to counteract the outrageous stereotypes depicted in rap videos.

After watching Shihan’s performance, I began to question representations of blackness and African-Americans in dominant American media. I thought back to a class about American Black Theater, and drew connections between what is seen today on television to the Minstrel shows of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. After slavery was abolished, black actors would portray minstrel performers and “blacken up.” These racist and inaccurate representations of African-Americans, as Barbara Christian, professor of African American Studies at UC Berkeley, points out, have become a part of blacks’ own psyche (*Ethnic Notions*). Blacks were caricatured as happy servants, buffoons, and black menaces, content with being slaves because they were unable to do anything else. In addition, there were also depictions of blacks as “naturally” violent, so slavery became a necessity in order to keep the peace (*Ethnic Notions*). Clearly these representations still linger in contemporary treatments of African-Americans within popular cultural representations.

I decided to examine representations of blackness in two popular television programs: *In Living Color* and *Chappelle’s Show*. I wanted to examine how these depictions allow African-Americans to re-appropriate negative stereotypes and at the same time entrench them further within the collective cultural consciousness of mainstream America. After spending hours

watching both shows in their entirety, I soon discovered that it is not easy to determine the concrete affects either show has on stereotypes or viewers. It is undeniable that these representations reinforce stereotypes. But understanding how audiences' respond to these images is seemingly more complex: these types of representations pit audience perceptions against creators' intentions. The shows' creators could never guarantee that audiences would interpret the skits in the ways in which the creators had intended.

I also became conflicted about my role as a critic. I know little about the black experience. And, I wondered, who am I to critique television shows that were written and produced by African-Americans? bell hooks' discusses the white supremacist obsession with "the Other" or people of color. She states, "Within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture" (*Black Looks* 21). This forced me to question my own motives. Have I too had only been intrigued by "Otherness"?

Initially, I felt that *In Living Color* and *Chappelle's Show* depictions of blackness were problematic. In these skits, I saw modern day minstrel shows featuring buffoons and actors in "black face." I found it important that representations of African-Americans be more positive than what was created on either show because of their negativity. I also watched Spike Lee's *Bamboozled*, which was a satire criticizing such depictions. Lee's film reinforced my initial attitude toward these comedy sketch shows. However, after watching *Cultural Criticism and Transformation: Conversations with bell hooks*, in which she questions why black entertainers need to somehow be more authentic, I question my initial judgment. Much of it is meant to entertain without having any kind of meaningful message behind it. If we can have soap operas that depict "white" life in ways that do not resemble anything close to reality, what is so horrible about the ways in which *In Living Color* or *Chappelle's Show* portrayed African-Americans?

It is much easier to overlook unrealistic depictions of “whiteness” because of the dominant position whites hold. Being the majority and living within a white supremacist society, representations of “whiteness” do not result in the caricature of an entire race in the same way it does for blacks. This power dynamic that exists within our society creates a horrible double standard. Unrealistic depictions of “whiteness” are easy to laugh at and quickly dismiss, but for blacks, these stereotypical representations aid in their continued oppression. America was created through the subjugation of African-Americans and minstrel characters are rooted in the idea that blacks are an inferior race. These representations reflect the institutional racism that still exists in this country and getting rid of negative stereotypes will not change that. But these media representations are still important because of their wide range of influence. For those people who have never interacted with African-Americans, these representations stand in place for those real life interactions, and when the majority of these images are negative stereotypes, they run the risk of influencing individuals to believe that these depictions are accurate.

The larger social context referenced above greatly influences my interpretation of the artifacts *In Living Color*, *Chappelle’s Show*, and *Bamboozled*. This critique examines multiple sketches from both television shows by drawing on communication studies scholarship about framing, burlesque, Stuart Hall’s message encoding and decoding, and Kenneth Burke’s perspective by incongruity. I conclude by suggesting that it is viewers and their decoding strategies that hold the keys to cultural transformation. By attending closely to *how* one positions depictions of blackness within a variety of contexts, we can appreciate the historical legacy of negative stereotypes without unconsciously entrenching them.

## *Social and Historical Context*

Mediated images both reflect, and aid in the creation of social reality. When looking at televisual representation of African-Americans, we should recall the roots of racism in this country. Slavery, Reconstruction, and the Civil Rights Movement have shaped beliefs about African-Americans by both whites and non-whites. These beliefs form the foundation of a national ideology that constitutes our shared identity. They are, therefore, very hard, if not impossible, to eliminate.

Jabari Asim chronicles racism against blacks in this country investigating the genealogy of the “n” word. Asim considers more than just the history of the racial slur, he examines the history of oppression and racism that African-Americans have faced in this country ever since stepping foot on North American soil. As victims of the slave trade, African-Americans were forced to labor on white Americans’ lands. To justify this subjugation in the “Land of the Free,” scientific research labeled “Niggerology” attempted to prove that blacks were inferior to whites and, thus, needed to be enslaved for their own good (Asim 20). Even after slavery ended, African-Americans were hardly free. With such a low economic position, although no longer “owned” by whites, they were still enslaved in terms of economic, political, and social status. In effect, within mainstream American society, they lacked any type of real agency.

Negative attitudes toward blacks were encoded in entertainment of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. In 1843, the minstrel show was introduced and emerged as the first form of American national entertainment (*Ethnic Notions*). These shows featured white actors in black face who sang and danced and portrayed the life of a slave as an enjoyable experience, ignoring all that the horrors created by the reality of slavery. After slavery was abolished, African-Americans began to “blacken up” to portray these offensive caricatures of themselves, because few options existed

otherwise. Strong racist attitudes prevented many African-Americans from gaining employment and becoming a minstrel performer was actually one of the few (somewhat) lucrative positions available.

As film emerged in the early 1900s, the views personified in minstrel shows influenced this new medium. One of the first films, and definitely one of the most successful, was *Birth of a Nation*, a three hour film that debuted in 1925 (Asim 142). Presenting an extreme caricature of blacks that fabricated racial problems following the emancipation of slaves, the film featured few black actors (with most actors being white in black face) and contained horribly offensive racial stereotypes. Most notably, extreme laziness and uncontrolled lust that resulted in the death of a white woman at the hands of a depraved black man. The violent and misrepresentative images in the film incited and justified racial violence across the country (*Ethnic Notions*). As a direct result of the film, several race riots broke out across the country (Asim 142). These racist, stereotypical depictions still exist in culturally mediated representations.

For many African-Americans in particular, humor has long been a tool used to diffuse the pain that the material conditions that gave rise to such representations and the representations themselves create. The predecessors of the Wayans Brothers (the writers/producers of *In Living Color*) and Dave Chappelle were comics of the 1960s who used the changing political climate to gain fans in mainstream audiences (Asim 203). “Performers such as Bill Cosby and Godfrey Cambridge gently but consistently challenged black stereotypes by presenting a different kind of Negro, warm, witty, and even somewhat cerebral” (Asim 203). With social change came new representations of African-Americans that forced the rigidity of these stereotypes to bend satirically. The use of humor as a coping mechanism, comes from “the heritage of a people who for hundreds of years could not celebrate birth or dignify death, and whose need to live despite

the dehumanizing pressures of slavery developed an endless capacity for laughing at their painful experiences” (Asim 204). To deal with such a horrific past that bleeds into the present, African-Americans needed to find ways to live with their pain.

### *In Living Color*

The sketch comedy show *In Living Color* spanned five seasons from 1990 to 1994, during which time 128 episodes were aired on Fox. Keenan Ivory Wayans both created and executive produced the show for the first four seasons. It was truly a family affair as members of the cast included his brothers Damon, Shawn, and Marlon Wayans as well as his sister Kim Wayans. The show was unique because it was the first of its kind to be written and produced by African-Americans (Schulman 2). It also consisted of a predominantly African American cast. *In Living Color* derived much of its humor through satirized racial stereotypes that were employed throughout all five seasons.

Many of the skits featured in the show recurred frequently and their predictability in content made them familiar favorites among viewers. Within these skits, a few truly captured the overarching themes *In Living Color* embodied. The sketches starred characters like Homey the Clown, the disagreeable clown who was only working as a clown to satisfy his parole agreement. There were also the Brothers Brothers (Tom and Tom) who were considered “the most non threatening black men on television.” The “Homeboy Shopping Network” featured Ice and Wiz who attempted to sell stolen merchandise to their viewers. These characters, along with many others, made up the show’s most memorable sketches.

Homey the Clown, played by Damon Wayans was the most frequently occurring character on *In Living Color* with ten appearances throughout seasons one through four. His sketches were formulaic with Homey arriving at a particular location to entertain children. From

birthday parties, to parks, to playing a mall Santa Claus, or performing in a circus, Homey would arrive at these events, but would end up being anything but what the children, or the parents for that matter, expected. His catchphrase, “Homey don’t play that” was uttered anytime someone requested that he do something typically expected of a clown. Whether it was to smash a cream pie in his face or to perform a magic trick, Homey found these acts to be degrading and refused to participate in such self deprecating humor. In addition, he would usually “bop” someone over the head with a sock for merely suggesting that he do such a thing. He constantly complained about how “The Man” kept him down and would end each sketch with a sing-a-long that he forced the children he was entertaining to repeat. By the end of each song, he would rant about how society was keeping him down and then force the children to repeat that as well.

The sketch that first strayed from this formula aired in the second episode of season two when Homey fell in love with his parole officer. Titled “When Homey Met Sally,” this skit begins when Homey, upon first meeting his parole officer, reads off a long list of crimes perpetrated by “The Man.” She tells him that he is blaming everyone but himself and a romance quickly develops. Once they are established in their relationship, she tells him she wants him to get a job working valet at Chez Whitey, the fancy French restaurant. Homey finally realizes that she is just trying to force him to fit into “The Establishment” and he bops her over the head with a sock. After Homey’s love affair comes to an end, he tells some children about the experience. He tells them how he fell in love until he realized it was just a trick to whiten him up. The sketch ends with Homey pouring flour over one child’s head.

In a two part sketch that begins in season two episode twenty-four and concludes in season three episode one, Homey sells out. When two white executives ask Homey to be the spokesperson for a new sugar coated cereal, Homey predictably says no, but when the executives

tell him he will be paid one million dollars a year, he quickly changes his mind. After filming the commercial, he is off to Chez Whitey to have dinner with his bosses. When he gives his car to the man working the valet, a little boy that is usually ridiculed by Homey asks Homey to “diss him.” Homey refuses and the little boy responds, “You’re not Homey the clown, you’re Homey ‘The Man.’” This is a turning point for Homey and he walks into the restaurant with a plan. He asks the men he is eating dinner with how he could meet “The Man” and they inform him that he must completely sell out first. This is accomplished when Homey says, “Rodney King was out of line.” After uttering that statement, a door in the restaurant opens and he is immediately able to meet “The Man.” “The Man” tells Homey he must kiss his ring before he is able to join “The Establishment.” Homey bends down to kiss the ring, but, at the last second, bops “The Man” over the head with his sock instead. This ends Homey’s subservience to “The Man” and Homey reverts back to his old ways.

Homey the Clown has a serious and somber message. He talks about the problems black men face in American society, but the truth of the message is secondary to the comedic value. Even though his message has a lot of truth to it, it is overshadowed by his clown costume, his unique version of black face. He is quite literally dressed as the buffoon, but is the stifled voice of black men, past and present, who were dehumanized by wearing blackface. Even when he is not working, he is never seen without his make up. When he sells out to the man, the situation is comedic, although the reality for many black performers who were forced to sell out is truly tragic. Homey only experiences brief moments of joy when he betrays his beliefs, for money or love, and then after realizing how he has compromised himself, rejects these things that bring him happiness in a white dominated society.

When Homey contributes to the negative representations he hates, he is left with a great sense of guilt. He has become what he has always hated and criticized. The only time we ever see Homey financially successful is after he sells out to “The Man.” He drives an expensive car and is able to eat at a fancy restaurant like Chez Whitey. He is so consumed by money and fame that he loses himself, and when he confronts this reality from the words of a child, he decides to take a stand for himself. He is only able to meet “The Man” by selling out and regains his agency by bopping him over the head with his infamous black sock.

The Brothers Brothers are played by Keenan Ivory and Damon Wayans. Their names are Tom and Tom and they claim to be named after their Uncle. This sketch appears seven times throughout the first three seasons. In season two episode ten, the Brothers Brothers go on a blind double date with a black and a white woman. Both brothers are more interested in the white woman who is a ditzzy hand model, than they are the black woman who is an intelligent medical student. When discussing music, the Toms, agreeing with the white woman, say they like the Beach Boys, while the black woman says she prefers rap music because of the powerful political statement it makes. When both Toms go to the dance floor with the white woman, the black woman becomes so fed up, she leaves, but before she does she tells the waiter to pass along the message that they “make Bryant Gumbel look like Flava Flav.”

Clearly a reference to the Uncle Tom stereotype, The Brothers Brothers, Tom and Tom, are the white man’s black man. Both names derive from the Harriet Beecher Stowe novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* which “has over time become a symbol of black self-hatred and unreasonable acquiescence to racial oppression” (Asim 61). They are the perfect example of the external behaviors that burlesquers act out to absurd extremes (Bostdorff 46). They over exaggerate those characteristics normally associated with an “Uncle Tom” and embody the ideology of the

racist white man at the expense of their own race. They over exaggerate their speech in order to sound more “white” and subscribe to the white man’s view that racism doesn’t exist while simultaneously privileging the white aesthetic by claiming that their fellow African-Americans who are upset over social inequities are just “angry black men.” Tom and Tom only see the benefits of a white dominated culture and fail to empathize with the discontent felt by their fellow African-Americans toward American society. While being seated at the restaurant the black waiter tells them, “They always give this table to the brothers.” Tom and Tom look at each other and wonder how the restaurant could have known they were related. They are completely oblivious to the fact that they are being discriminated against.

When they see the two women enter the restaurant they both comment that one of the women is quite attractive and neither of them like the second woman. It is obvious they find the white woman more attractive, because of the idealized white standard for beauty, when both women sit down and both brothers pull out the white woman’s chair while completely ignoring the black woman. They demonstrate a hatred for blackness by ignoring their own race when they ignore the black woman sitting at their table. The Brothers Brothers love for white culture is so extreme that declare their favorite band is the Beach Boys and they have no idea what the theme song to *The Jeffersons* sounds like. The Brothers Brothers thoroughly embody an Uncle Tom, through their differing actions and attitudes towards whites and non-whites.

The “Homeboy Shopping Network” stars Damon and Keenan Ivory Wayans as two men who sell stolen merchandise on their television show. They first appear on the pilot episode of *In Living Color* selling stolen property out of the back of a moving truck. In season one episode nine, Ice and Wiz hold a Homeboy Seminar designed to teach attendees how to make “mo’ money.” They discuss the fact that food stamps cannot be used to buy alcoholic beverages and

show a drawing of a drunken black man followed by a drawing of an overweight black woman with six children to explain that the drunk man can simply sell his food stamps to this single welfare mother. Then they give a step-by-step lesson on how to make “mo’ money” by robbing stores with a ski mask. Ice and Wiz also tell those people at their seminar that they can pretend to work at a restaurant’s valet in order to steal cars. Although the skit only appeared four times, each episode abruptly ended when Ice and Wiz heard police sirens. They knew they had to make a run for it in order to avoid being arrested.

The drawing Ice and Wiz display when explaining how to trade food stamps for money features a skinny drunk black man with a beer gut and large ears and lips. The picture resembles cartoons of African-Americans from the early 1900s, and are offensive caricatures. Ice and Wiz explain that you can sell your food stamps to “Laquita with five children.” Both of these characters perpetuate the stereotype of the typical person on welfare. They are at fault for their economic position by having too many children and not being able to afford their cost of living or, they are delinquent men who have no desire to make an honest living or take responsibility for changing their economic position. They only want free rides and take advantage of government social programs in order to get it.

### *Chappelle’s Show*

Although *Chappelle’s Show* was short lived with only two seasons and twenty-six episodes, it was a television phenomenon that introduced a new lens through which to view black comedy. *Chappelle’s Show* skits were racy and offensive. While Chappelle received a lot of criticism for his sketches, he also garnered a great amount of commercial success and became a popular cultural phenomenon. Believing that the stereotypes he tried to question and ridicule in

his sketches were being interpreted incorrectly by audiences, he abruptly left the show during the taping of the third season.

One of his most controversial sketches appeared in the very first episode of *Chappelle's Show*. The episode featured Clayton Bigsby, a white supremacist, who has no idea he is actually black because he is blind. Chappelle knew how controversial this sketch would be: "I had to set black people back with this sketch, sorry." In the skit, the PBS investigative news show *Frontline* tells the story of Clayton Bigsby and documents his present day to day life. As a member of the Ku Klux Klan, Clayton Bigsby's books have sold over 600,000 copies making him so important to the movement that those members of the KKK that know he is black keep it quiet because they feel his contribution is too great to the movement. On his way to a book signing, Clayton Bigsby is waiting at a stop light when a car full of white men blasting rap music pulls up next to him. Clayton calls them "niggers" as he drives off. This receives a surprisingly positive response from the white men who are flattered that they were just called the "n" word by a black man. By the end of the sketch Clayton discovers he is black when he pulls off his mask at a KKK rally and people in the audience are horrified. After Clayton learns his true race, he divorces his wife. The reporter explains that when Clayton was asked his reasoning for the divorce, he said he divorced his wife for being a "nigger lover."

Clayton Bigsby is a black, white supremacist that illustrates how ridiculous racism is. He is a blind black man who hates his own race because he was brought up being told he was white. This is a reminder of just how much we are socialized to perform these cultural roles. It is also an illustration of Kenneth Burke's perspective by incongruity which he defines as, "A method for gauging situations by verbal "atom cracking." That is, a word belongs by custom to a certain category—and by rational planning you wrench it loose and metaphorically apply it to a different

category” (308). The mere thought of a black white supremacist is utterly ridiculous. When Clayton discusses all the things he hates about black people, it is so humorous because the audience is aware of Clayton’s skin color all the while Clayton is not. If it were not for the people around him teaching him the race distinctions, he would not even be aware that these race distinctions existed. This skit illustrates the social construction of race; someone who is blind to differences in appearance is not even safe from developing socially constructed attitudes toward race. The sketch also demonstrates how absurd racism can be, when one of the most valued members of the KKK can be a black man and those closest to him who are white supremacists (that are actually white) value his contribution to their movement over the color of his skin. It is ironic that through their support of Clayton Bigsby, these members of the KKK acknowledge that a person’s race does not determine his or her character, even if it flies in the face of everything their organization stands for.

In Chappelle’s introduction to episode four of season one he explains an interview he had for the show *Donahue* and shows clips of what bothered him during it. He explains how political activists participate in shows like *Donahue* to push their own agenda and fail to even address topics presented within the interview. In the clip, Chappelle is listening to the white guest talk about the evils of affirmative action. Chappelle looks visibly angry in the clip, and he even says that at that moment he was at a loss for how to respond. The white guest says that it is problematic to hire black men when people around the office will say, “He’s an affirmative action hire.” Chappelle says on his own show, “That’s a lot better than saying, ‘Hey that nigga is homeless.’” Chappelle then shows a clip of a white guest in the *Donahue* audience explaining that affirmative action is harmful because it forces people to do something against their will. Chappelle comments directly after the clip is shown, “Forced? Oh you mean like slavery

forced?” This creates the perfect segue for the “Reparations 2003” sketch. Chappelle comments that affirmative action does not go far enough and that he wants reparations for slavery. He qualifies that by saying black people need to get together and make a plan for the money or else they will just spend it unwisely because of the consumer driven economy we live in.

The clip “Reparations 2003” is a mock evening news report chronicling the effects of African American reparations. The white reporter (Dave Chappelle) asks the reporter on the scene in the ghetto why there are no banks in the ghetto, she replies, “That’s because banks hate black people, but that’s about to change.” The show then cuts to a reporter on Wall Street explaining how these reparations have changed the economy. He says that Sprint stock has skyrocketed after two million delinquent phone bills have been paid. He also explains that oil prices have dropped, but that fried chicken has risen to \$600 a bucket. The reporter states that 8,000 new record labels have been started in the last thirty minutes, and that three million Escalade trucks have been sold that very afternoon. He says that black people have single handedly ended the recession and that FUBU is now the world’s largest corporation after merging with KFC. The Wall Street reporter also mentions that the crime rate has fallen to zero percent, but Dave Chappelle (as the white news anchor) asks how that is possible and wonders aloud “How could that be, did the Mexicans get money today, too?” Later in the show, they reveal the world’s richest man is now the winner of a dice game in the projects, and the black weatherman, an Al Roker look-a-like, quits after he receives his reparations check. The report ends with the breaking news story that, “Colin Powell just bitch slapped Dick Cheney.”

During the introduction, Chappelle is noticeably upset by the comments made on the *Donahue* show and the fact that he was too stunned to speak up. He finds the views expressed by these two men to be extremely insensitive. The comments come from two men who have

obviously never thought very critically about the problem of racism in this country and where it stems from. Chappelle's stance is that blacks in America are entitled to reparations for the work of their ancestors and he makes a strong argument for this, but as he is still hosting a sketch comedy show, he follows up this thought with a humorous sketch about how frivolously the money would be spent in such a materialistic culture. Chappelle plays with stereotypes again as he portrays a white news anchor on the evening news and shows blacks spending money on lavish items instead of spending it wisely to help their social positions. The sketch documents how those who received the money pull America out of the recession through their careless spending. This skit, combined with the introduction, sends a very mixed message. Chappelle spends so much time setting up this skit and speaking about how deserved reparations are for African-Americans, but then airs a skit that depicts the money being spent outrageously and irresponsibly.

A plane sketch featured on episode five season one, shows two Arab passengers sitting on a plane talking about *American Idol* in another language. The camera moves to two African-Americans sitting directly behind them, with one man questioning why they had to get on a plane with terrorists. Then, the camera pans back to a white man wondering how the black men sitting in front of him could afford a first class ticket, he thinks, "Must be rappers, better keep an eye on Sarah [his daughter]." Next the camera pans to Native Americans sitting behind the white passengers and one of the men tells the man sitting next to him that he needs to go to the bathroom, but that he is concerned about getting up because he is afraid the white passengers will take his seat and call it "Manifest Destiny." Behind the Native Americans, two buffalos are seated commenting that the Native Americans are lucky they got casinos. The last person they

show is Dave Chappelle who is sleeping with a newspaper across his chest with the headline “America United.”

The plane sketch follows the racist thoughts of those passengers on board and ends rather ironically with Chappelle who has a newspaper on his lap that reads “America United.” This is a commentary on post-9/11 America, and how American media framed this tragedy as an event that brought everyone together. Chappelle points out that perhaps it did not bring everyone as close together as we would like to believe. It didn’t erase racism or stereotypes that exist within American culture. While it may have made some people feel more patriotic, we are still very much the same group of people that existed prior to the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Chappelle uses this skit to portray that sentiment.

A recurring sketch on *Chappelle’s Show* is “Ask a Black Dude with Paul Mooney.” This sketch allows people off the street to ask questions they may have about African-Americans that Paul Mooney, a former writer for Richard Pryor, answers. In episode seven of season one Stephen King asks, “Do black people want to go to black dentists and black undertakers?” Paul Mooney replies, “Don’t care, strange question. Horror man coming on to ask about niggas, that’s already scary, here’s an idea for a horror film, nigga with a brain, nigga goes to school, see how that scares people.” Mooney dismisses Stephen King’s question and comments how strange of a question it is coming from someone who writes horror novels. Mooney’s sarcastic suggestion for King’s next horror story has a strong message behind it. Mooney is pointing out that all the while blacks hold a lower socio economic position, whites feel no reason to be threatened, but if blacks were able to receive a good education, it would shake up race relations in America. That would be the white man’s worst nightmare, not a horror film about a killer clown.

“The Mad Real World” was a sketch aired on episode six of the first season that was prefaced with Chappelle discussing black cast members on MTV’s *Real World*. He explained that every couple of seasons *Real World* places a black guy on the show and that he always has a conniption, Chappelle said, “They put one black guy with the craziest white people they can find and of course he’s gonna freak out.” So he produced a skit in which MTV does the opposite, they place one white person with the craziest black people they can find. During the skit the black cast members refuse to work, spend their day doing drugs, and play dice. When the white cast member’s dad comes to visit they stab him, and when his girlfriend visits, the male cast members sleep with her and film it. The skit concludes with black cast members asking the lone white cast member to leave after they feel he was out of line for asking them to quiet down their partying at 3 AM.

During the introduction to the “Mad Real World,” Chappelle observes that the reason the token black guy they cast usually freaks out on the rest of the house is because MTV stuck him with the craziest white people they could find, thereby illustrating how the network antagonizes race relations. Chappelle inverts race relations in this skit by having one white guy cast with the craziest black people they could find. The skit exhibits perspective by incongruity through its reversal of race relations and an example of burlesque as it shows black cast members acting out extreme racial stereotypes. It also shows how both races have not completely integrated with one another when they find it hard, if not impossible, to relate and to get along when an individual is the single representative of his or her race.

### *Theoretical Apparatus*

When considering and/or viewing representations of African-Americans, encoding and decoding difficulties arise. I will now explain the key themes and moments described above

through the lenses of several different communication scholars. It is my hope that these conclusions will aid readers' when encountering stereotypes about African-Americans, be they humorous, "realist," or satirical. First, Denise Bostdorff's writings on the attitude of burlesque and Kenneth Burke's perspective by incongruity help me to analyze the comedic strategies used in these skits. Next, I employ Stuart Hall's encoding and decoding strategies to investigate how these messages might be interpreted by audiences. Finally, I suggest that audience agency can best be maximized by employing insights gathered from Judith Butler about the ambiguous nature of symbols and meaning-making, as well as suggestions from bell hooks about how to confront and challenge entrenched racial imagery.

The use of humor as a coping mechanism is something Denise Bostdorff refers to as the "attitude of burlesque" (46). She comments, "When individuals hold an attitude of aggression or fear...they may tend to lash out at others through humor" (46). This concept appears occasionally throughout sketches featured on *In Living Color*, and precisely characterizes Dave Chappelle's skit. During the introductions to his skits he is usually upset or perturbed by some facet of race relations that motivates him to create a particular sketch. In "Reparations 2003," he is angry at the attitudes and opinions exhibited by the men featured on the *Donahue Show*. Their complete disregard and insensitivity toward the horrific pasts of African-Americans in this country from slavery and through modern day oppression is quite disconcerting. Chappelle is fully aware that he may not be able to change these individual's opinions towards Affirmative Action, but he knows that he can create a powerful indictment of these beliefs through a comedic sketch. His ability to take the anger he feels towards his experience on the *Donahue Show*, and turn it into something funny yet thought provoking is exactly the "lash out at others through humor" that Bostdorff is talking about.

*Chappelle's Show* also embodies this anger present in the “attitude of burlesque” during Paul Mooney’s “Ask a Black Dude” segment. Although Mooney’s answers are always humorous, there is a flippant tone in his voice when he responds. Possibly due to the utter ridiculousness of making him some sort of authority on black culture. That asking Paul Mooney a question is somehow asking the entire black race, is ignoring differences that exist between people within any racial group. bell hooks calls this practice “monolithic constructions of blackness,” and points to the class distinctions that bring about these “constructions of blackness” (*Outlaw Culture* 147). They have much more to do with class identity, than racial identity, specifically associating cultural blackness with the underclass (hooks *Outlaw Culture* 147). Because of this, stereotypical representations of blackness on *In Living Color* and *Chappelle's Show* are of thugs, drug addicts, ex-convicts, and homeless men, not of business professionals, politicians, philanthropists, or doctors. By continually reinforcing an association between poverty and blackness, African-Americans are (unconsciously or not) viewed as being a part of the underclass.

Bostdorff also discusses Burke’s “perspective by incongruity” which Burke looks at in terms of the burlesquer. He claims, “By program, he obliterates his victim’s discriminations” (56). And Bostdorff adds, “The rhetor also suppresses any acceptable reasoning behind actions and takes everything to an extreme – too much of a good thing is a bad thing in this case, resulting in the target’s ultimate rejection” (46). This concept is demonstrated by the *In Living Color* sketch “The Brothers Brothers.” Tom and Tom embody the absurdity of forcing blacks to fit into the white ideal of a black man. Taking this societal concept of white domination to an extreme, Tom and Tom epitomize the “Uncle Tom” stereotype. They pander to white ideals so dramatically, that it becomes impossible to see these characters as anything other than a joke.

A significant issue that arises when dealing with these racial stereotypes is the audience's perception. Stuart Hall notes that the encoder of a message does not have complete control over how the message is decoded by the audience, it is not a one sided process between sender and receiver (172). "Since there is no necessary correspondence between encoding and decoding, the former can attempt to 'pre-fer' but cannot prescribe or guarantee the latter, which has its own conditions of existence" (Hall 173). For shows like *Chappelle's Show* and *In Living Color*, the intended message can never be guaranteed. bell hooks finds the content of *In Living Color* to be problematic because it "is introduced by lyrics that tell listeners 'do what you wanna do.' Positively, this show advocates transgression, yet it negatively promoted racist stereotypes, sexism, and homophobia" (*Black Looks* 34). The promotion of these stereotypes was most certainly not what creator Keenan Ivory Wayans had in mind, but sometimes the mere existence and repeated depiction of these negative images reinforces-rather than challenges the attitudes and thoughts that are associated with them.

Dave Chappelle encountered similar problems with his own show, which he openly voiced during his introductory monologue on many occasions. He admitted to having a white man approach him using the "n" word when referring to his Clayton Bigsby skit. This is an instance where the audience member missed the message. Chappelle was trying to highlight the absurdity of white supremacy, and as a result, had a white fan approach him who felt it was appropriate to use such an offensive racial slur. Chappelle's frequent encounters of misunderstanding occur because, as Stuart Hall reminds us, there is no guarantee that the meaning we intend to convey will be interpreted in accordance with our intentions. Even though Chappelle heavily frames each of his skits to "pre-fer" that the intended message is being sent to

audiences, as the encoder, Chappelle can only create this preferred interpretation, not guarantee that his intended message is being correctly understood by the audience.

The inability to control messages decoding is the underlying theme in Spike Lee's *Bamboozled*. In the film, Damon Wayans plays the role of Pierre Delacroix, an ivy league educated television writer who is described as an "oreo" by his white boss who claims to be "more black" than Delacroix because he has a black wife and two biracial children. His boss asks him to create a new television show and Delacroix proposes a "New Millennium Minstrel Show." Although overtly racist, Delacroix sees the show as having the ability to move America in a new direction. He compares it to Martin Luther King, Jr. having to witness his brothers being brutalized on television by police officers in order to motivate change.

Unfortunately the show that was designed as a satire to change audience perceptions', ends up doing the opposite. Viewers see the "New Millennium Minstrel Show" as a humorous representation of African-Americans, and not as a call to create more positive images, as Delacroix had intended. The show actually resurrects offensive black stereotypes that were born out of 19<sup>th</sup> century minstrel shows. By the end of the film, audience members watching Delacroix's show attend the taping in black face. The host even energizes the audience by asking which of them is "a real coon." The film concludes with a compilation of historical images of racist representations of African-Americans through film and television compiled by Delacroix's assistant (played by Jada Pinkett Smith). These clips tell the tragic history of minstrelsy and the inception of the black buffoon character. Delacroix fails in his call to change as the very harmful stereotypes he was hoping to challenge are actually reinforced through his show.

This issue of re-appropriation versus re-affirmation/entrenchment of racist historical imagery is a very difficult and fine line to walk, as Spike Lee demonstrates through the character of Delacroix. The idea of taking language that was originally meant to hurt and offend, and turning it into a positive term through resignification is an action Judith Butler discusses in her introduction to *Excitable Speech* (15). Similar to the compilation of images shown at the end of *Bamboozled* that reinforce beliefs from earlier eras, Butler describes hate speech as, "...act[s] that recalls [a] prior act, requiring future repetition to endure" (20). Although this statement seems to condemn the use of such language that has such a destructive past, she questions the efficacy of re-appropriation, "Can repetition be both the way trauma is repeated but also the way in which it breaks with historicity to which it is in thrall?" (36). This question identifies and locates precisely the ambiguous nature of language: it can both prevent *and* facilitate change. Attempts to "Censor" representations, may inadvertently give them more power, but by keeping them in our vernacular we are constantly reminded of a destructive, racist past—thoroughly engendering the potential for change.

*Bamboozled* highlights a double bind faced by African-Americans in the entertainment industry. The fictional issues that Delacroix encountered were mirrored by Dave Chappelle during the taping of the third, unfinished season of his show. Chappelle abruptly left after feeling uncomfortable during the taping of a sketch in which he portrayed a minstrel performer in black face. He felt as though one of the white film members was laughing at him instead of with him (*Anderson Cooper 360*). But how much of these negative attitudes can be blamed on television and movies, and how much of it is quite simply a reflection of the culture in which we live? Chappelle remarked in an interview to the *New York Times* regarding the "n" word, "I'm not so concerned when black intellectuals say the N word is awful. If people stop saying the N

word, is everything going to be equal? Is a rainbow going to come out of the sky and all of a sudden things will be better for black people?" (Asim 210). Chappelle makes a very good point, although he's talking about the "n" word specifically, his argument extends to negative depictions of African-Americans in popular media. Removing an offensive word or stereotype from popular culture will not cure racial inequities in this country. So then, what is it that we can do to better interpret these mediated messages in a way that does not further entrench these racist attitudes?

Since there is no way to insure the meaning behind messages through the encoding process, as Stuart Hall, Spike Lee, and Dave Chappelle, all acknowledge, the burden must then be put on the audience, or the decoders, to interpret these messages in socially responsible fashions. Through the theories of burlesque and perspective by incongruity, we can better understand satirical strategies being used by comedians and message makers. By pushing ourselves outside of our comfort level we can come to appreciate the greater significance of these messages. This means not simply taking these images at face value, but decoding the critiques of society that are present within these images. And through an understanding of the historical context within which these jokes are being told, we put ourselves in a better position to correctly decode these messages.

What seems most important in interpreting these messages is a comprehensive historical background. It is important to understand the social and historical context of blackness and African-American experiences when looking at black humor, it is not enough to rely on conceptions that have been born from depictions of a race on television or in movies. One must truly recognize the atrocities generations of African-Americans have experienced, and how those events of the past still affect the present. That means understanding that we live in a culture that

privileges whites even if we have a black president, and that many Americans associate black culture with the poor, urban, and underclass. Popular culture, in many ways, is trash culture. It is not meant to teach or be faithful to reality, but to entertain. When the primary function of popular culture is forgotten, that is when problems arise. Only by being aware of the social context of which the message is a product, can an individual begin to properly understand the meaning behind the comedic depiction that may contain a political message.

Much of what makes this decoding process so difficult when questioning dominant ideologies is that it forces people to go outside of their own comfort level. To confront head on that the world may not be as fair as once thought, and that some people do fall victim to white supremacy or patriarchy is sometimes so difficult to face, that we would rather live in a world of denial. The “Just World Hypothesis” points out that sometimes blaming the individual, or a race, is much easier than examining social inequities that brought about certain misfortune. In terms of decoding a message, Hall divides it into three strategies, dominant, negotiated, and oppositional. The dominant code is used “when the viewer takes the connoted meaning, from, say, a television newscast or current affairs programme full and straight, and decodes the message in terms of the reference code in which it has been encoded” (174). The negotiated code “contains a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements: it acknowledges the legitimacy of the hegemonic definitions to make the grand significations, (abstract), while, at a more restricted, situational (situated) level, it makes its own ground rules – it operates with the exceptions to the rule” (175). And the oppositional code is used when “He/she detotalizes the message in the preferred code in order to retotalize the message within some alternative framework or reference” (175). Examining burlesque using the oppositional code allows the

viewer to see the message on the surface level, but then to also recognize the underlying message that the encoder is poking fun at, or the social commentary that is being made.

Using “Homey the Clown” from *In Living Color* as an example, we see a disagreeable black man who blames his problems on society instead of taking responsibility for his actions if we look at this character through the dominant code. But by taking the oppositional approach, one could interpret Homey as being the poster child for disenfranchised black men who have been victims of the criminal justice system probably through some inability to make a livable wage. Now, Homey is forced to dress up as a clown through his parole agreement and probably make just enough money to survive, while being forced to degrade himself to make that money. Homey is an outrageous character on the surface, but this use of burlesque captures the anger that results from being a victim of racial oppression.

So by taking these messages and forcing ourselves to view them through the sometimes uncomfortable, oppositional code, we can work to prevent further ingraining painful racial stereotypes into our culture. And while this will not “solve” racism, it will be a step in the right direction. In a chapter entitled “Learning to Love Blackness,” bell hooks describes an encounter she had with a white woman that illustrates the importance of our own agency in rejecting racist attitudes and actions:

Recently, I gave a talk highlighting ways contemporary commodification of black culture by whites in no way challenges white supremacy when it takes the form of making blackness the “spice that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture.” At the end of the talk a white woman who sounded very earnest asked me: “Don’t you think we are all raised in a culture that is racist and we are all taught to be racist whether we want to be or not?” Note that she constructs a social framework of sameness, a homogeneity of experience. My response was to say that all white people (And everyone else in this society) can choose to be actively anti-racist twenty-four hours a day if they so desire and none of us are passive victims of socialization. Elaborating on this point, I shared how I was weary of the way in which white people want to deflect attention away from their accountability for anti-racist change by making it seem that everyone has been socialized to be racist against their will. My fear is that this often becomes another

apology for racism, one which seeks to erase a vision of accountability and responsibility which could truly empower. (*Black Looks* 14)

We are not simply victims of our upbringing, and by taking the more difficult path of resisting these representations by forcing ourselves outside of our comfort level we are taking essential steps to rethink our society. We all have a responsibility in changing these racist conceptions, and only by actively engaging that task can we hope to change our own beliefs about society.

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