

“Perspective by Incongruity”
Applied to Depictions of
Race in the Media

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Introduction

The city of Atlanta has become new center-point of cultural convergence in America. The profile of the city has grown due to the influx of money, flowing from several different areas of commerce. These include increased business ventures in Atlanta's metropolitan area, expanding film production, and the development of a billion-dollar sports stadium. Not only does the city thrive in its business ventures, but music and television production in Atlanta have a profound effect on its artistic community. Artists such as Andre 3000, Migos, and Childish Gambino enjoy commercial success with accolades such as Grammy wins and nominations.

Unfortunately, while Atlanta is thriving in this area of glitz and glamour, poverty still looms with almost three hundred and four poverty-stricken neighborhoods recorded in 2015 (Harvard). High poverty rates persist regardless of the economic growth and continued migration to the city, and these trends have been present since the city's inception. During the first half of the 20th century, jobs with expanding sectors such as plumbing, printing, and factory work were limited to white people due to discrimination against African Americans. As a result, the lack of upwardly mobile vocations has led to stagnant economic capital for African Americans (Wilson, Rushing 2010).

Although Atlanta ranks only behind Dallas and Miami as the most segregated city in the United States with an increase in majority black neighborhoods, the social economic plight of Atlanta should not be stereotyped by portrayals of violence and disorder. African Americans are much more nuanced than their representations on the silver screen. For these exact reasons, Atlanta is the ideal setting in which one can take the false perspectives and ideologies of those who view African Americans as caricatures of poverty, break those falsehoods, and push individuals who hold these viewpoints forward to the simple truth that

African Americans are individuals who hold similar hopes and dreams to all Americans.

Atlanta is a popular comedy-drama produced by musician Donald Glover. The television series captures these exact complexities and contradictions that are so present in traditional portrayals of African Americans. With its original pilot dated September 6th, 2016, *Atlanta* premiered during the Black Lives Matter movement due to increasing tension between African Americans and law enforcement. The show airs on FX and is widely and critically acclaimed with a score of 100% on Rotten Tomatoes, an 8.5 on IMDb, and an average score of 95% from Google viewers. *Atlanta* has earned the praise of countless well-respected critics who make up some of the nation's most prominent media publications, such as *Rolling Stone*, *The New Yorker*, and *TIME Magazine*. The show and its writer's highly-rated success have been praised by nearly every news publication across every major city in America.

The ratings that we see on Rotten Tomatoes and IMDb are an accumulation of these critics' esteemed opinions. Sonia Saraiya, TV critic with *Variety*, made a focal point out of "the show's ability to draw such a spare and strong arc in 10 episodes while navigating the minefield of race, politics, and comedy" (2016). Emily Nussbaum, *The New Yorker*'s 2016 Pulitzer Prize winning critic, praised Glover's ability to fuse comedy with "the conundrum of a society that fetishizes ghetto cool but marginalizes the men who embody it" (2016). Ben Travers, top critic from *IndieWire*, notes Glover's brilliance and the uniqueness of his show as "an honest attempt to recreate what it's like to be black in modern America" (2016). Donald Glover became the first African American to win an Emmy for the category of Outstanding Directing for a Comedy Series. Needless to say, the consensus is that *Atlanta* is a television series triumph thanks to its alternative counter portrayals of African American culture. Being African American himself, Donald Glover is able to use *Atlanta* as a vehicle for creating an innovative experience with his choices in the directing and casting of characters then providing that experience to society through television.

Within the television show I examined depictions of African Americans in addition to how these situations affect the relationship between the black community and white America. This show is a homologue of current reality but offers a glom into an alternative reality. Rather than being strictly entertainment-based, it directly questions the hierarchical structure of race that is prevalent in America today; how the construction of race has impacted societal norms; and the balkanization of, or the fight for, resources among races. In other words, the show is incongruous to previous depictions of blackness produced by the media. Insight into these issues is pertinent due to the lack of control that African Americans have over their own image, which is restricted by the full control that white America has over the media. This results in a recurring cycle of negative portrayals. Given that the media directly impacts our realities, this critique will examine how viewers and their perspectives are often limited to drawing conclusions from symbols in the media that they consume.

Race in Media

Mass media influences audience paradigms, but the extent to which they are influenced is unknown to the scholarly community. Cultural theorist Stuart Hall theorized approaches to how media messages are produced, disseminated, and interpreted. He essentially theorized how humans extract meaning out of characters, setting, and scenes produced by the media. Media is expansive, spanning an endless array of categories, and common themes that are present among these mediums create intersectionality between depictions and ideas. Hall encapsulates the process of interpreting media as a personal experience which differs from person to person:

Further, though the production structures of television originated the television discourse they do not constitute a closed system. They draw topics, treatments, agendas, events, personnel, images of the audience, 'definitions of the situation' from

other sources and other discursive formation within the wider socio-cultural and political structure of which they are a differentiated part. (Hall 1980)

Researcher and Professor Katrin Voltmer states that the media is the driving force in “promoting

exclusionary identities that deepen the divisions between groups, and in many instances, they have been the center of the outbreak of inter-communal violence” (2017). The reality is that when viewing representations of African Americans in the media, audiences view caricatures that are not even produced by African Americans themselves. African Americans have struggled to gain control of their image in mass media, as bell hook notes: “Opening a magazine or book, turning on the television set, watching a film, or looking at photographs in public spaces we are most likely to see images of black people that reinforce and reinscribe white supremacy” (1994).

This victimization is also present in movies. In an interview, she states that in movies the victim who is beaten to death must be a dark-skin black man because antipathy to dark-skinned black is much greater than antipathy to lighter skinned black men (Hooks int). This is due to the institutionalized control that white America has had over the nation since its inception, and the paradigm that this creates is a complete misrepresentation of a race in main stream media.

People comprehend the world by the depicted stories that they view, and every piece of media consumed affects the decisions and values of its consumer. Sillars and Gronbeck speak extensively on the construction of narrative as they note: “When people attach values such as rationality, common sense, or competency to behavior, they identify what actions ‘make sense.’ The understanding of what ‘makes sense’ comes from the stories that are told in culture” (2001). The perception of black men as a threat is internalized by media portrayals.

Disproportionate policing with a greater perception of threat increases negative police interactions, which then transforms the myth into reality. Black men are not able to control their portrayals due to the construction of the hyper-violent, masculine thug that is crafted by the entertainment industry. The image of the thug is so prevalent that it now affects black men of all ages and different walks of life.

Further, this lack of control in creating the portrayals of blackness have a profound effect on the everyday lives of African Americans. So much so that even African Americans in affluent situations are subject to treatment which criminalizes their behavior and forces them into an out-group. During 60 in-depth interviews with middle and upper-class African American mothers, the women spoke about the criminalization of mundane interactions which paralleled civilian police interactions: “A teacher was yelling at my son because some girls reported that he cheated in four-square. I had to let her know ‘don’t ever pull my son out of class for a four-square game again...and don’t ever yell at my child unless he has done something horrible.’ As a mother of a black son, I am always concerned about how he is treated” (2016). The representations of African Americans in the media are damaging and detrimental, as they perpetuate the white patriarchy upon which the United States was founded.

Not only do these negative depictions illustrate the perceptions that white America has of African Americans, but they justify unfair treatment by bureaucracies such as local law enforcement. The effects of TV on white America has been discussed, but these representations have a drastic effect on black men’s own sense of self and their interactions with police. Researchers Sharp and Atherton state, “Black and mixed-race victims were less likely to report crimes compared with white or any other ethnic minority groups” (2007). This representation serves as a hegemonic function to keep the power at the top of racial hierarchy in America.

Urban communities are subject to a much different relationship with police than those of middle and upper-class neighborhoods. Researchers Rod Brunson and Jody Miller state, “Law enforcement strategies in poor urban communities produce a range of harms to African American residents. This includes disproportionate experiences with surveillance and stops, disrespectful treatment, excessive force, police deviance and fewer police protections” (2006). This increased surveillance and prejudicial treatment has affected the psyche of young black men in police-civilian interactions. It is important to understand that race is pertinent to a negative or positive communication result. “White officers used the most positive communication when they talked to white drivers, and Black officers used the most positive communication when they were talking to black drivers.” (2008).

The perception of blackness as a threat is a common factor in police-civilian interactions, and research indicates an association between aggression and blackness: “White people in the United States tend to apply stereotypes of violence and aggression more strongly to black men than black women. In addition, when white people’s self-protective motives are activated, they are biased toward perceiving threat from black men but not from black women. Collectively, this research suggests that perceptions of threat are not uniquely determined by either race or gender but by their interaction such that in the United States, white people tend to perceive black men as more threatening than white men and both black and white women” (2011).

Perspective by Incongruity

Perspective by incongruity is a concept popularized by Kenneth Burke and, interestingly, has rarely been applied to the subject of race. Utilizing this rhetorical concept to analyze race portrayals in media provides a fresh framing for the ideals which Burke has hypothesized. According to Besel and Besel, when the orientation that we have become

accustomed to is against our previous views, a new and incongruent way of thinking becomes prevalent: “incongruity, our perspective on how things were, are, and will be changes. Words and ideas that do not go together are brought together just as words and ideas that do go together are separated” (Besel, Besel, 2010). The Burkeian idea of perspective by incongruity can be explained through the following anecdote:

The Emperor’s New Clothes, where the citizens’ orientation toward their ruler’s nakedness is to believe that he actually is wearing a beautiful new outfit, which only the wise can see. When a small child blurts out that the emperor has no clothes on, he calls the new wardrobe the one thing the others do not believe it is. Through this misnaming, the other subjects change their perceptions and breathe a sigh of relief, for each had feared s/he was the only dullard who could not see the magical garments. In short, they gain a new perspective as a result of the incongruity. (Bosrdorff 1987)

Perspective by Incongruity is used for analyzing ideas in personal or social contexts. The rhetor’s use of oddly juxtaposed symbols affects the audience, offering the opportunity to challenge their traditional ways of thinking with a new perspective. Burke defines the interaction as “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” (1965). What makes perspective by incongruity so powerful is the ability to challenge pieties, which demonizes those who do not look or act like us. Through this trial new realities become available to the audience.

By scapegoating our enemies, we attribute negative traits that are present in all human beings, including ourselves, to a specific group of people. We attempt to stereotype interactions due to the vastness of our relations with the universe, each interaction random and never reoccurring: “We find our way through this ever-changing universe by certain blunt

schemes of generalization, conceptualization, or verbalization... Their very purpose being to affect practical simplifications of reality, we should consider them inadequate for the description of reality as it actually is” (Burke 1965). These shortcuts attempt to ease the stress of rapid, random interactions that humans encounter every day. Eventually this manifests itself into the idea of piety, which is the core belief system for our actions and beliefs.

Piety, defined by Burke, is “a sense of what properly goes with what” (Burke 74). According to Burke: “piety is a system-builder, a desire to round things out, to fit experiences together into a unified whole. Piety is the sense of what properly goes with what and, it leads to construction in this way: if there is an altar, it is pious of a man to perform some ritual act whereby he may approach this altar with clean hands. A kind of symbolic cleansing goes with alters...” (1984). Piety is the basis of the structure that constructs our beliefs. It is the unforeseen force which Burke believes “extends through all the texture of our lives but has been concealed from us because we think we are so thoroughly without religion and think that ‘pious process’ is confined to the sphere of churchliness” (1984). Piety is our way of conceptualizing our interaction with the universe. However, it is not limited to religion and expands through all facets of life. The need for order is threatened when an incongruent situation affects piety.

When a rhetor attempts to explicitly challenge traditional pieties, people may become distraught or angry with the rhetor’s assumptions. A covert way of challenging pieties, which interweave to create our realities, is using perspective by incongruity. Incongruity is a strategy used by rhetors to persuade the audience to analyze media critically. Through analysis a turning point will present itself to the audience: do I acknowledge the incongruity and change my piety, or do I deny the incongruity and continue living life piety unchanged? For example, Disney’s pieties of gender often disempower women, casting them as the damsel in distress in contrast to men who are the heroes that save these princesses. Disney products are ingested at

an incredulous pace. Since the time a child is born, they begin watching programs on Disney channel, buying toys that are Disney-related, and visiting the Disneyland amusement park. This nostalgia or association with happy memories is the main construction of the piety of Disney, which results in an understood piety that women are princesses who are reliant on a man to save them. The piety of Disney is so strong that by the time students reach adulthood any criticism of the construction of Disney films is often met by opposition. According to Naomi Rockler:

Even our own students, occupying a halfway house between film critics and mass audience, are extremely resistant to critique of Disney film. Assigned to read several essays from this collection for a class in cultural studies, our students commonly complained. 'You're reading too much into this film' and 'You can't say that about Walt Disney.' These students consistently cite four easy pardons for their pleasurable participation in Disney film and its apolitical agenda: it's only for children, is only fantasy, it's only a cartoon, and it's just good business. These four naturalizations create a Disney text exempt from material, historical, and political influences. The naturalized Disney text is "pure entertainment" somehow centrifuged from ideological forces. (2002)

Perspective by incongruity is relevant due to the construction of pieties and the power they have over our everyday interactions. Explicit criticism of pieties is not the best way to incur change within an audience; rather, implicit questioning has a more profound effect. I used Disney as the example here because it illustrates how pious a group of people can become when faced with criticism. Piety in other aspects of life such as religion, nationality, and race affect our everyday interactions with the universe.

Media depictions of blackness have contributed to stereotypes of race, as it has been

previously stated in this paper how blackness is perceived as a threat resulting in negative interactions. The audiences who are consuming media view blackness created by white people and often build on stereotypical pieties that are consistent throughout mass media. The belief in these depictions has bombarded the minds of audiences, and it is now their short cut to interracial reaction within the universe. A person who only consumes mass media depictions of blackness can become so entrenched that they will believe it is the reality of the world and will always be such. Shows like *Atlanta* provide an incongruent perspective to crack this pious belief that is held by the audiences via an impious text. Three pious beliefs stood out when analyzing *Atlanta*: race, mental health, and masculinity. I will further analyze these beliefs through the lens of perspective by incongruity.

Analysis

The series follows Earn, a Princeton dropout who struggles to redeem himself in the eyes of his friends and family. Returning to his hometown of Atlanta, Georgia, Earn finds out that his cousin is a spouting rap star. Earn begins to manage his cousin Alfred, also known as “Paper Boi,” believing it to be the best opportunity to provide for his daughter and his way out of poverty. Earn becomes friends with Darius, Alfred’s best friend and partner. Although Alfred is a rap star, he is only locally famous and in order to pay for his bills Alfred and Darius sell weed in their free time. Earn works hard to find fame for Alfred in addition to keeping the drug dealer turned rapper out of trouble.

Mental Health

In season one episode two, Earn is arrested for his participation in an altercation between his cousin Alfred and a random person. This situation escalates past a verbal argument into a standoff between two armed combatants, Alfred and the random man. The shooting occurs, and although we never see the act of violence, Alfred and Earn are arrested

then sent to the local jail house to be processed. Earn has never been in the system, which is reason for the excruciatingly long registration process he experiences in the jail house. The sequence begins with Earn seated in the holding room, accompanied by various criminals. His cousin Alfred is released shortly after his arrest, whereas Earn is stuck in the jail house for an extra day. A mentally ill man dressed in a hospital gown dances around comically in the holding room. A guard laughing asks, “What kind of dancing is that?” while another guard proclaims, “Boy you up in her every week cutting’ up.” Earn hears these remarks and questions, “He’s in here every week?” with an astonished face. To everyone’s amusement, the mentally ill man then proceeds to drink water out of the toilet. Upon viewing the spectacle, Earn exclaims with a concerned undertone, “Why is he in here every week, he looks like he needs help.” The guard replies to him, “Hey man shut up.”

The commanding officer walks into the holding center joyfully proclaiming, “Don’t tell me that’s Lee in here again. Oh, this guy just keeps going.” With a smile on his face, the commanding officer asks Lee, “How is it going buddy?” Lee responds by spitting the toilet water all over the commanding officer. With lightning quickness, the commanding officer retracts his night stick and strikes Lee across the face. Lee screams as cops begin to forcibly restrain him. The mood of the room changes as Lee’s screams are now shrieks filling the hall with despair. The scene ends with everyone averting their eyes and placing their heads down, shocked by what they have witnessed.

In this scene Earn is the portal through which viewers wrestle with the issue of mental illness and society’s treatment of the mentally ill. The piety of mental illness in America is that people are “crazy” by their own volition. Rarely do we see mentally disturbed individuals as individuals with rights or dreams. Rather, they are generalized and placed under the moniker of craziness. Lee, the mentally ill man in the jail house scene, is African American—an excellent selection because mental illness is often never discussed within the black

community. As a strong piety in the African American community, mental instability has been defined as a “white-people problem” that does not affect African Americans. This is evidenced by studies showing that African Americans were less likely to use mental health services compared to white counterparts (Matejkowski, Han, 2017). According to Ballon, media portrayals of mental illness are often dramatic and inaccurate viewing the mentally ill as funny or scary rather than suffering and coping with their conditions (2000). By making Lee’s character a black man, Donald Glover is emphasizing that the issue of mental health has no color and often affects the black community with little to no assistance to help these individuals.

I found it interesting that the police in the station who were predominately black viewed Lee as entertainment, antagonizing him to continue to act “crazy.” Earn’s question of “shouldn’t he receive help” is shot down by a black guard who tells him to “shut up.” This is meant to represent the black community that does not view mental health as an issue that affects African Americans. Even further, the frequency of Lee’s visits inside the jail house illustrate the failed cyclical system which most mental health patients fall victim to, due to the lack of assistance, aid and understanding for mentally ill individuals. It is common for the mentally ill to be mistreated because of the inability to voice their problems and properly communicate with authorities.

The piety of mental health has resulted in the death and poor treatment of the mentally ill by the police. Police interactions with the mentally ill often end in violence, and when a person is viewed as mentally ill they are no longer human in the eyes of society. Instead, they are labeled as a danger, which is remarkable due to the fact that police are the primary responders to mental health crisis. The purpose of this scene in *Atlanta* is to raise awareness about interactions between police and those who struggle with mental health. The main issue is the current status quo, which allows the crisis of mental health to be seen as a crime and the

repeated incarceration of these individuals.

The scene also provides an impious perspective. If the institution that is meant to protect the mentally ill does not care for or meet the needs of those it serves, then who will help these people? Earn acts as the voice of the impious throughout the scene with his inquiries. His question of “Why is he in here every week, he looks like he needs help?” is the voice that the rhetor wants his audience to experience and adopt within their own consciousness. Those who have a pious view of the mentally ill are given the opportunity to gain insight into the trials and tribulations that plague the mentally ill.

Masculinity

The piety of masculinity is one that is deeply rooted within Western culture. The scene in *Atlanta* that directly challenges the conventional construction of masculinity takes place within the jail house as well. Donald Glover uses jail as a proving ground, challenging our pieties of masculinity. By humanizing the faces which construct the numbers in jail statistics, Glover questions a justice system that punishes individuals who are presumed innocent until proven guilty. The scene begins with Earn being sat in another holding room while being processed in the jail. To Earn’s left there is a man wearing a black hood with unkept braids, and to his right there is a transvestite woman. The man wearing the hoodie recognizes the woman as a past lover. The conversation continues in a light playful banter until the man in the hoodie begins to talk about sexual details. The woman encourages the man to stop while blushing, and other inmates around the man begin to laugh. An unidentified voice in the background yells, “That ain’t no girl, that’s a man. If she was a girl she would be on the other side of the jail. Nigga, you gay!”

Shocked by the statement the man in the hoodie begins to get angry and glares at Earn yelling, “What you looking at she’s not a man!” The whole room begins to joke about the

relationship while the man in the hoodie exclaims, “What does it matter? You rape guys in jail. What the difference between you and me?” An old man in the back replies, “Well jail is jail, you were in butthole on the outside.” The holding room erupts into laughter, Earn looks at the man in the hoodie with intent to console him and says, “Actually, sexuality is on a spectrum you can do whatever you want.” The old man yells, “Naaa he gay.” Filled with anger the man in the black hoodie looks at the old man and states with a maniacal glare, “I’m going to stab you in the shower.” The old man abruptly turns around, Earn is left speechless by the interactions staring forward blankly.

The piety of masculinity is rigid, as men demonstrate high levels of desire to abide by social norms and expectations (Murray 2018). The construction of a masculinity is hegemonic, norms of masculinity encourage men to participate in high risk behavior, require men to dismiss fear, attain feats of physical endurance and strength at the detriment to one’s health and a willingness to participate in violence (Courtenay 2000). This hyper-violent person demands respect; wherever he goes an individual is willing to die for respect. The man in black represents all men who try to meet the standards set by the piety of men. At the beginning of the conversation with his lover he smiles and lets his emotions flow freely. He truly enjoyed the time spent with this woman. However, when his masculinity is questioned his demeanor changes. No longer is he a carefree man speaking to a person he loves. The man in black transforms into a being willing and capable of killing another man all in the name of respect.

Although this situation is extreme, Glover’s illustration of the lengths to which men are willing to go to prove their masculinity is chilling. Every man has had to prove their masculinity to the outside world, knowingly or unknowingly. The emotional roller coaster that the man in black experiences is one of happiness, confusion, denial, embarrassment, anger, and sadness. The man in black no longer views himself as a man because of the attack on his

sexuality. Sexuality is directly tied to the perception of masculinity and perspective towards gender. The other men in the scene no longer respect the man in black due to his sexuality regardless of the aggression and ability to engage in sexual interactions. Again, Earn acts as the voice of the impious by stating, “Sexuality is really on a spectrum you can do whatever you want.” This alternative statement is the incongruent perspective that Donald Glover gives the audience to question their own piety of masculinity and heteronormativity.

Transphobia and homophobia are other constructs of masculine men. Masculine men are not gay according to traditional pious beliefs and certainly not transsexual. The rhetor does not wish to actively challenge the transphobia and homophobia but rather to question their origins and relationship with the construct of masculinity. Does society feel this way about gay and trans men because they truly believe it is wrong, or is the piety of masculinity so deeply engrained that any impious constructs of men directly contradict our understanding of the universe? Another important aspect of this scene to note is the setting. Everyone in this holding room is African American. This is due to the importance of masculinity within the black community. Black men try to personify the hyper-masculine male due to the emasculation that occurs through the justice system. The jailhouse is the ultimate emasculation for a black man who is told when to eat, when to sleep, when to shit, when to shower. A gangster does not conform to these rules because he is a man. Donald Glover’s scene illustrates the control the piety of masculinity holds over men’s emotions and actions. Ultimately this forces us to ask ourselves whether it is really worth being a masculine man if we compromise our own individual hopes and dreams.

Race

Race is omnipresent within each interaction in the show, the main cast is made up of African American actors varying in shade, shape, and height. Racism in the show first occurs

season one, episode one when Earn approaches an old friend named Dave who works at a radio station. Earn is attempting to get in Dave's good graces so he can play Alfred's hit "Paper Boi" over the radio waves. Before business is discussed Dave takes the time to tell Earn the story of how he saved his company's Christmas party by reprimanding a DJ who played too much Flo Rida. Dave said, "I pulled him aside and said really nigga." Dave is white and says the n-word to Earn without fear or hesitation. Earn is perplexed by Dave's decision to use the n-word, however, he does not press the issue because he needs Dave's help. Dave goes on to tell Earn that he must pay for "Paper Boi." Meanwhile, Earn goes over Dave's head asking a janitor to let him in and delivering Alfred's mix tape directly to the head of the radio station. Earn, Alfred, and Darius meet up with Dave at a gas station. Earn goats Dave to recite the story he told him earlier on in the day. Dave agrees but hilariously leaves out the "really nigga" part. A smiling Earn can be seen looking at a scared Dave embarrassed Dave leaves the car after realizing he underestimated Earn.

For some, the piety of racism is an issue that is solved, where individuals feel as though the problem of racism in America is gone; opportunity and equality are attainable to all regardless of the color of their skin. Glover challenges this piety by illustrating the covertness of racism that African Americans face in regular daily interactions with "friends." Dave is a caricature of racism from those in command, the gate keeper to opportunity. Due to the power difference between Dave and Earn, Earn cannot communicate his issue with Dave's comment. Dave strategically selects certain situations to use the n-word in *Atlanta*. He uses the word with people he perceives are not a threat to his personal wellbeing. Knowing that Earn was enrolled at Princeton he proceeds to say the word with vigor and confidence. In contrast, when Earn tells Dave to say the story to his cousin Alfred, a drug dealer, Dave comically omits to mention the "really nigga" at the end of the story. Earn does not confront Dave because he knows Dave has something that he desperately needs.

This scenario properly illustrates the struggle minorities face when dealing with racism and power imbalances at the same time. Although there are no chains or whips, it is evident that African Americans in these situations are slaves due to the inability to speak out because of the piety of racism. Speaking out on inequality is seen unfavorably due to the fact it challenges the status quo and makes society uncomfortable. If Glover had shown explicit situations of racism, the audiences may have viewed it with skepticism, taking the media as an exaggeration of what really occurs in the real world. Glover illustrating that racism is covert gives a voice to those cries that have fallen unto to deaf ears and allows the audience to question whether America truly has equality for all.

In season one, episode nine covert racism occurs during a dinner gathering at a wealthy interracial couple's house that Earn and Van, his girlfriend, attend. The celebration is aptly named a Juneteenth party, a celebration of the anniversary of the end of slavery in the United States. The estate is decorated to resemble a plantation with an acapella group draped up on the stair singing negro spirituals. Earn enters the house, looks at the group, and jokes, "Are they up for auction after the party?" Earn and Van are the life of the party due to their youth and obvious chemistry. The owner of the house, an African American woman named Monique, introduced Earn and Val to her husband Craig, who is white. Craig exclaiming, "Happy Freedom Day" proceeds to grab Earn's hand and do a ridiculous handshake meant to emulate the intricate handshakes gang members use when greeting each other.

Earn walks throughout the house to discover a shrine dedicated to black individuals and filled with African artifacts. Craig appears behind reciting a Malcom X quote that inspired his painting on the wall, "Nobody can give you freedom, nobody can give you equality or justice or anything. If you're a man you take it." Earn, now interested, states, "That is an interesting interpretation of the quote. Craig responds stating, "That is the only interpretation of the quote it accurately depicts the plight of the contemporary black man. That

is why I painted it.” Earn replies with an astonished “Wow.” As the conversation continues Craig asks Earn “What do you do for a living,” and Earn replies “Music management.” Craig says with smile, “It’s good to see a brother on the business side of music.” Earn, taken a back, replies, “What do you mean?” Craig states, “Music is such an integral part of the African American culture and expression. And it’s been stripped from you. Black music artists are products for white American consumption and appropriation.”

The drink that Earn was handed now reaches his tongue, and he is surprised by what Craig thinks is good. Earn asks, “Is this Hennessey?” Craig nods, and the artifacts on the wall result in another conversation about Africa. Craig begins to question Earn, “What you’ve never been to Africa?” Earn replies with a blank face “No.” Craig insists, “You have to go! Man, it’s your motherland what are you thinking? What are you? Where are your ancestors from Congo, Ivory Coast?” Clearly perturbed by the situation, Earn replies, “I don’t know. this spooky thing called slavery happened and my entire ethnic identity was erased.”

This conversation with Craig conveys the covert racism that is present within those who tokenize African American culture. Craig believes that he is “woke” due to his expansive collection of African American artifacts, and knowledge of African American culture. Craig’s obsession with African American culture and tokenizes blackness to the extent that it becomes racist. Craig’s attempt to make Earn feel welcome actually pushes him away due to his use of stereotypes. In his first interaction with Earn, Craig attempts an intricate handshake used primarily by blacks to one another. In reality, Craig’s interpretation insults the past culture, in addition to insulting Earn, who in Craig’s mind is supposed to know how to do this handshake due to the color of his skin. Moreover, Craig does not acknowledge his privilege to fly half way around the world to experience the culture of Africa. Craig’s assumption that Earn needs to visit Africa fails to acknowledge the issues that Earn faces on a regular basis, such as buying a car to drive to work instead of taking the bus and having money to provide for his

child.

Regular African Americans who have this rich culture are unable to explore it due to the fight for everyday resources. The Juneteenth party encapsulates the question of what is celebration and what is tokenization. The guests at the party are not racist, but people who refuse to acknowledge that everything is not as great as it seems. Their posh party trivializes the exploits of slaves. The waiters and waitresses who serve as party guests are dressed in house slave garb and do not directly look at guest in the eyes. Although they are not slaves, their treatment is less than human, and they are diminished for show and the amusement of others. Glover's goal as rhetor is to illustrate that racism is not always a white man yelling the N-word at a black person it is much more nuanced. Our pieties of racism affect our interactions with others in the universe to the extent that we believe our own actions are immune to racism because we are black or know a black friend.

The right to own a gun in America is more important than owning it. The gun culture that has been built in America carries adverse effects that are rarely mentioned. Viewing season one, episode five Darius decides to go to a shooting range in his free time. After buying a box of bullets, Darius enters the range and sets up his targets. Darius fires numerous shots into his target only to be approached by two white men. "What do you think you are doing? What do you think you are doing?" screams the white man as the camera now pans to the targets which is a cut out of a dog. Darius replies "Who me? I am shooting." "You can't shoot dogs what are you, psycho?" the white man says. "Why not? The dogs in my neighborhood are a menace. They bite babies." The white man continues to argue, "I don't give a damn my kids could be in here." Darius says, "Why would I use a human target that's weird. Look at that one that is just way too specific." "Well listen here I am not going to let you shoot at a dog" the white man declares. A Pakistani man walks into the conversation and declares, "Leave this man alone you shoot at your racist targets with no problem, I saw you

shooting at that target of Mexican with a knife.” The owner of the store bursts in gun drawn and removes Darius from the store for causing a disturbance.

This scene is not impious to the construct of Americans owning guns. Darius a young black man is a gun owner wanting to participate in the past time of shooting. The impiety occurs with the target. The white man in this scene views the dog target as sacred and confronts Darius, who by gun owners’ standards is merely exercising his right to own and use a gun. The gun owner is so pious that he fails to see the racism in his own target, a Mexican man holding a knife. It is not until a Pakistani man, another person of color, sees this and confronts him is this issue made salient to the audience. The white man’s protest against shooting a dog versus shooting a human target is a piety of race, where he views the dog as innocent in contrast to the Mexican target who must be a villain. Darius is Donald Glover’s voice of impiety. His statement of, “Why would I shoot human targets that’s weird” is the idea that he hopes to convey to the audience.

Previously in this paper I referenced how police interactions with African Americans have an increased probability for violence compared to police interactions with whites. The construction of darker skinned individuals being a threat is a common theme that is prevalent in media, and this situation illustrates the normalization of these views within the pieties of many Americans. Glover’s goal in this scene was to show how the rights of African Americans are not protected as are whites’ rights. Additionally, he illustrates the demonization of minorities to the extent that dogs have more rights than African Americans. Africans Americans can exercise their rights but must use caution because they are constantly perceived as a threat. A simple reach into a pocket to provide a police officer with identification has often ended in senseless violence due to the view of black people as threats rather than human beings.

Glover provides criticism to the hierarchical structure of race that has plagued America since its inception. There are no white targets being shot, rather there are black cut outs and racist depictions of minorities. It is important to note the juxtaposition that occurs at two points in the interaction being triggered by people of color. This is symbolism for the privilege of those who do not have to think about race experiences. Race affects our interactions with the universe, while this social construct empowers and depowers individuals based on the circumstance. I believe that Glover does not want a race-less society but one that celebrates the culture of a people while allowing the individual to be the judge of their own character.

Conclusion

Atlanta is an impious artifact that provides its audience with an opportunity to view salient issues of race through juxtaposition. Kenneth Burke's process of perspective by incongruity and piety allows the rhetor to challenge conventional pieties that are cyclical in media portrayals of African Americans. *Atlanta* has gained critical acclaim due to the variations in character, setting, and theme as compared to traditional depictions of blackness which have dominated media before it. The story was real—Earn is a young black man dealing with an unfair world that only seems to be getting harder. The setting for the show, Atlanta, Georgia illustrates the best and worst that the black community has to offer. From young black men coming from Princeton to drug dealing, it sheds light on the fact that the differences between the two are not that far apart. Critical acclaim further validates the “it” factor that this artifact has. As an African American viewing this artifact I often found myself wondering, “does anyone else understand the importance of this?” IT is refreshing to see an artifact's meaning ingested by its target audience. The impious perspective ultimately challenges conventional pieties of race, masculinity, and mental health.

Perspective by Incongruity has rarely been applied to race and depictions of blackness. As such, this paper attempts to bridge the gap between culture and concept. By applying perspective by incongruity to race I hope to encourage others to apply Burkean ideas to race and culture. It is astonishing that this concept has rarely been applied to race, as race is largely an influential part of an individual's social identity. Piety is a concept that accurately portrays the innate feeling that Americans have when applied to social constructs of race, masculinity, and mental health. Challenging these social pieties is difficult due to their connection with our society. Only by examining depictions of media can we know what is truly salient within our society. *Atlanta* is successful and edgy, and I hope that its success does not become its downfall. I anticipate that the show will continue its impious message while still reaching main-stream audiences. Other shows that use depictions of blackness should take a page out of Donald Glover's book, look to and learn from *Atlanta*, and ultimately utilize it as a template to further permeate false portrayals of African Americans with accurate representations. Hopefully through this impious text perceptions, attitudes and beliefs connected to the piety of race will change in America. I look forward to the ever-expanding voices of African Americans who now create their own stories in contrast to watching depictions of blackness created by the majority. The stories they tell will offer an experience to those who cannot imagine a world different than what they see, hear and feel. Media has long been used to perpetuate negative pieties, through my analysis I view media as the key to unlocking a new level of understanding and permeance in America. The stories we have told have shown how pious we have become, it is time for change.

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