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The Political Aesthetic of Irony in the Post-Racial United States

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

English

by

Michael R. Jarvis

March 2018

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An early draft of the section of the Conclusion on *Get Out* appeared as a DVD review-essay in the February 2018 issue of *Science Fiction Film and Television*.

For Grandma

我愛你

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The Political Aesthetic of Irony in the Post-Racial United States

by

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Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in English
University of California, Riverside, March 2018
Dr. Jennifer Doyle, Chairperson

This dissertation examines artistic responses to the prevailing racial discourse of the early
21st century United States, i.e. post-racialism. Each chapter explores the work of artists in
various media—film, portraiture, television, and music—with an emphasis on the ways
that their practices of ironic substitution and recontextualization—e.g. parody, pastiche,
satire—work to simultaneously revise previous aesthetic works and modes and to engage
with a hegemonic US post-racial narrative that has at its core the maintenance of white
supremacy and the suppression of race as an avenue through which to formulate
grievance against oppressive state and institutional structures. This project is in dialogue
not only with contemporary critical race theory but also negative valuations of irony's
political efficacy inherited from the late-20th century academic discourse of
postmodernism. Reading the work of artists across various media and engaging with
discourses of race, masculinity, fashion, and ontological dualism, I argue for the
progressive potential of irony and humor, and look critically at the de facto privileging of
sincerity in contemporary socio-political discourse.

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Introduction:

Eirôn Work and Its Discontents

The Legacy of Postmodernist Irony

In "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction," a 1993 essay on televisual

culture and its influence on postmodern literature, novelist David Foster Wallace mourns

the inability of the contemporary intellectual to effectively wield irony in order to critique

an image culture that itself had become increasingly invested in producing ironic images.

Whereas earlier postmodern writers such as William Gaddis, Thomas Pynchon, William

S. Burroughs, and Don DeLillo were able to mobilize the detritus of pop culture

ironically in successful critiques of the earnest, conservative metanarratives of

midcentury politics and culture, the 1990s writer attempting to follow in their footsteps,

according to Wallace, produces work that is "just plain doomed by its desire to ridicule a

TV-culture whose ironic mockery of itself and all 'outdated' value absorbs all ridicule"

(192). Wallace affords television a central role in the advent of cultural postmodernism,

especially in the self-reflexivity of quintessentially postmodern literary genres, e.g.

metafiction:

> Metafiction, for its time, was nothing more than a poignant hybrid of its
> theoretical foe, realism: if realism called it like it saw it, metafiction simply called
> it as it saw itself seeing itself see it. This high-cultural postmodern genre, in other
> words, was deeply informed by the emergence of television. And American
> fiction remains informed by TV…especially those strains of fiction with roots in
> postmodernism, which even at its rebellious zenith was less a "response to"
> televisual culture than a kind of abiding-in-TV. (161)

While he is careful to equivocate on the chicken-egg question as regards these overdetermined cultural systems, he asserts that both postmodernism, in its reflection of/origins in televisual discourse, and television, in its form and content the perfect medium of/for postmodernism, have destabilized meaning through the proliferation of ironic forms, leading to the attenuation of the possibilities for oppositional ideologies as a result of "television's power to jettison connection and castrate protest fueled by the same ironic postmodern self-consciousness it first helped fashion" (161). For Wallace, the critical mode of televisual irony creates an "authority vacuum" (180) through its critique of traditional values, replacing these with an "institutionalization of hip irony" marked by "jaded weltschmerz, self-mocking materialism, blank indifference" (181) and an appropriation of oppositional postmodern elements which become deployed in the service of mere "spectation and consumption" (183). While the "rebellious irony" of canonical postmodern fiction "seemed downright socially useful" in earlier decades, it becomes dangerous in its persistence and contemporary ubiquity, "because irony, entertaining as it is, serves an exclusively negative function. It is critical and destructive, a ground-clearing…But irony's singularly unuseful when it comes to constructing anything to replace the hypocrisies it debunks" (183).

Like Fredric Jameson's critique of the late-capitalist culture of simulacra, which "with its transformation of older realities into television images, does more than merely replicate the logic of late capitalism" and actually "reinforces and intensifies it" (46), Wallace identifies the failure of irony as a productive force for social change, a development tied to its place within a system that commoditizes countercultural critique

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and sells it back to the consumer. His solution, it seems, is a new generation of writers (himself, clearly, and we might add, ex post facto, Jonathan Franzen), "anti-rebels" who "have the childish gall to actually endorse single-entendre values" and "treat old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction" (192-93). Adam Kelly and others have referred to this posture—on the part of American fiction writers of the late 20th century and beyond—as the "New Sincerity."[1]

Nearly thirty years on, Wallace is dead by suicide, that great killer of romantics, and irony has embedded itself so deeply in our image culture that it troubles the very basis of meaning-making. Like Jameson's concept of "pastiche," we might say that irony has become "a neutral practice…amputated of the satiric impulse" (17); it is, instead, today's lingua franca, especially in terms of the *content* of TV, advertising, film, and even social conversation—so much so that deviations in the direction of the sincere still rightly risk "accusations of sentimentality and melodrama" (Wallace 193).

Given his own championing of the "sincere" and the "authentic," it is perhaps no surprise that Wallace, in a series of essays from 1989, finds himself drawn to the burgeoning mid-Atlantic hip-hop scene, at a time when rap was beginning to break into the pop consciousness of America, broadly. While noting the incongruity of his white fandom—"No question that serious rap is, and is very self-consciously, music *by* urban blacks *about* same *to* and *for* same" (*Signifying Rappers* 25, original ital.)—he writes

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[1]Though Wallace doesn't use the phrase in his essay, around the same time the term was being applied to rock groups choosing to eschew both the sneer of punk and the irony of slacker- or avant-rock (we might think of the difference between Pavement and Bright Eyes, for example).

excitedly of the possibility for frank expression and direct cultural communication the

genre presents:

> Serious Hard raps afford white listeners genuine, horse's-mouth access to the life-and-death plight and mood of an American community on the genuine edge of im-/explosion, an ugly new subnation we've been heretofore conditioned to avoid, remand to the margins, not even *see* except through certain carefully abstract, attenuating filters: cop show and news special, crafted commercial fad, the Bush-appointed Drug Czars and sober editorials we demand as 'Concerned Citizens' deeply concerned about the future of urban districts we might, after all, want to build co-ops in someday. (35)

Wallace's positive emphasis on the representational aspect of hip-hop is emblematic of

his conception of the dialectic of sincerity/authenticity versus irony/commodification, and

the wider critical sentiment that "serious" rap's value lay in its "truth" as well as its

resistance to being packaged for a mass audience. Of course, even overlooking the a

priori valorization of the sincere/authentic at work here, this analysis reads as hopelessly

dated, since in the present hip-hop has, like Wallace's televisual discourse, followed a

trajectory from ideological (if not actual) sincerity to a late period of irony and pastiche,

coinciding with its ascendance as the dominant commercial style, especially with regards

to contemporary youth culture. From the revolutionary/gangsta/conscious paradigm has

developed a commercialized mode of neoliberal celebration, an investment in the

aspirational consumer values which were the very antithesis of early rap's zeitgeist when

these were yuppie traits. With the mainstreaming of hip-hop into a commercially-viable

form in the 1990s came a distinct form of racial politics, one which helped normalize the

existing ideology of post-racialism as a new-old way of subverting progressive race

discourse and socio-economically disciplining the black artist/worker.

As this example may suggest, I am interested, broadly, in the role of irony in contemporary social discourse; more specifically, my project explores the presence of irony in both aesthetic production (especially with regard to the humorous/comedic/playful) and the cultural sphere of its circulation. This dissertation is invested in a critique of (M/)millennial post-racialism (along with contemporary moves to de-radicalize feminist and queer identity) as a retrogressive form of structural irony, a status gestured at by Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's incisive phrase "racism without racists." I am further interested in the ways this critique is developed through parodic/pastiching texts that reappropriate hegemonic signifiers in order to counter oppressive ideologies from within their own discursive bounds. The contemporary racial, gendered, and sexual dialectic playing out within popular culture serves as a macro-study of the work irony accomplishes in the social sphere, as well as providing the discursive terrain for artists to stage interventions couched in the hermeneutics of the humorous, the satirical, to inspire the laugh that critiques. I've chosen to focus my project thusly a) to interrogate a broader cultural shift, b) to address the aesthetics of contemporary racial/gendered/sexual politics in America, and c) to discern the role of irony in producing/sustaining a new cultural dynamic.

Pastiche as Critique

I should note that the weltschmerz attending Wallace's consideration of the advent of useless irony conveyed by television and other media is *not* the only reaction possible, nor does my project take a moral stance on this particular mode of expression

(though he might call my position insufficiently pessimistic, to say the least). In the first case, Kathleen Fitzpatrick, in her influential work *The Anxiety of Obsolescence* (2006), argues that the opposition to televisual culture, especially on the part of authors decrying the death of literature (she cites, for instance, Pynchon and DeLillo), actually represents "self-protective and potentially elitist impulses" (7), a seeming retrenchment of the midcentury postmodernist avant-garde against perceived challenges to the central position they themselves once wrested from their literary forebears. Moreover, critics as diverse as Linda Hutcheon in 1988 and Chela Sandoval in 2000 have argued that progressive critique remains uncompromised by the advent of postmodern parody, pastiche, and irony. Hutcheon, for instance, mounts a qualified defense of parody via its "double-voicedness"—it both reinscribes the original text and alters it, a form of conservation *and* critique. Particularly useful to my project's recuperation of irony, however, is Sandoval's oppositional reading of Jameson's conception of postmodern(ism and) pastiche.

Jameson's critique of postmodernism, e.g. his valorization of the sovereign subject/artist of previous eras and his suggestion that postmodern subjectivity is uniquely fragmented, represents at its heart an understandable dissatisfaction with the hyperreal neoliberal society of images and reproducibility. His seminal definition/dismissal of pastiche, in particular, has haunted discussions of the politics of art ever since the first chapter of *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* was published in 1984. Pastiche, according to Jameson,

> is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the
> wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language. But it is a neutral

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practice of such mimicry, without any of parody's ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter and of any conviction that alongside the abnormal tongue you have momentarily borrowed, some healthy linguistic normality still exists. Pastiche is thus blank parody, a statue with blind eyeballs… (*Postmodernism* 17)

Pastiche, according to Jameson, does not enact either the progressive (i.e. satirical) or the conservative (i.e. reinforcing) functions of parody, because, on the one hand, it doesn't provide any critique of contemporary or historical institutions, and, on the other, its blank mimicry denies the existence of any sort of "healthy linguistic normality" beyond the endless recession of image-culture simulacra that provide its raw materials. Instead of the idiosyncratic voice of the virtuosic subject which is "unique and unmistakable as your own fingerprints, incomparable as your own body" (17), in the era of the pastiche aesthetic "the producers of culture have nowhere to turn but to the past: the imitation of dead styles, speech through all the masks and voices stored up in the imaginary museum of a now global culture" (17-18).

This concern, however, conceals both the hidden costs of the system he represents nostalgically and the ideological erasures necessary to produce such a nostalgia in the latter half of the 20th century. In *Methodology of the Oppressed*, Sandoval points to the ahistoricism at work in Jameson's attempt to position the emergence of the decentered subject as a postmodern event, arguing that "'fragmentation' is neither an experience nor a theoretical construct peculiar to the poststructuralist or postmodern moments.… [T]he fragmentation or split subjectivity of subjection is the very condition against which a modernist, well-placed citizen could coalesce its own sense of wholeness" (32). The "healthy linguistic normality" that Jameson associates with the pre-postmodern subject is

a condition of cultural domination, as the modern, civilized subject depends not only on the absent-presence of an other, but also on that other's existence in a state of liminality and unsettled-ness. Or, as Walter Benjamin reminds us, "There is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism" (256).

The "subjectivity of subjection," the underside of modern civilization, engenders what Sandoval calls "survival skills" (35) that allow the oppressed to "bring about forms of being that will be capable of intervening in power"; "[t]his articulation between the self and its absence," she argues, "is a shifting place of mobile codes and significations, which invokes the place of possibility and creativity where language and meaning itself are constituted" (34). She writes,

> What Jameson is unable to detect is that this mutation in culture, which affects all political, social, ethical, and cultural relations and institutions…*also makes accessible, to oppressor and oppressed alike, new forms of identity, ethics, citizenship, aesthetics, and resistance*. (36-37, emphasis mine)

Far from following Jameson's assertion that, in late-capitalist rationality, "not only punctual and local countercultural forms of cultural resistance and guerilla warfare but also even overtly political interventions … are all somehow secretly disarmed and reabsorbed by a system of which they themselves might well be considered a part" (Jameson 49), Sandoval sees the contemporary era inaugurated by the rise (and fall) of the postmodern as precisely the grounds upon which resistance is possible. If, as Jameson argues, the dominant cultural paradigm has become postmodern schizophrenia and fragmentation, according to Sandoval this is merely an instance of the dominant culture being subject to the same conditions of existence historically experienced by the oppressed, and should be considered a "liberatory condition" (25). Postmodernism didn't

start the fire (it was always burning), but merely made it *visible*. Hyperreal fragmentation and our immanence within that "shifting place" allow resistance to take new forms, the effectiveness of which we can't yet be certain.

Sandoval further argues that the specifically maligned practice of pastiche does not resemble Jameson's "insubstantial," apolitical, ineffective little abomination, but rather is "an aesthetic form that is both empty *and full* at the same time, a site of active possibility" in which the "dissolution of subjectivity's wholeness" provides "an empty form capable of constant refilling" (190, emphasis original). The flat, surface blankness of pastiche, the prevailing aesthetic of the postmodern condition, makes it a protean aesthetic form, defined by mobility and adaptation; further, its "neutral practice of…mimicry" suggests that it doesn't carry the ideological baggage of its source text in the same way that parody might. This possibility is central to an understanding of the importance of pastiche as opposed to parody in my own work: while parody must always "reinscribe" a central or dominant discourse even as it alters or challenges it, pastiche, even according to Jameson's pessimistic definition, has no such allegiance to a conserved center. This is further in keeping with a historical understanding of the pastiche aesthetic, which, in Marmontel's 1787 "*Eléments de littérature*," for example, "is seen as taking nothing but the 'feathers,' that is, it is considered as indulging in merely exterior features of the exemplary work copied" (Hoesterey 495-496). Emptied of any responsibility to the "meaning" or ideology of the forms it reproduces, it is able to mount a potentially positive critique without the "one step forward, two steps back" that marks parody's double-voicedness. In aesthetic terms, this not only "has led to the emergence of a

pastiche style as epistemological program that transcends the codes of parody and travesty typical of traditional literary pastiches" (500), but also, by "foregrounding the structures of mediation of older art…[p]astiche structuration lends itself to exposing and rewriting cultural codifications that for centuries marginalized unconventional identities" (507). My project explores what Ingeborg Hoesterey has called "this emancipatory potential of the contemporary pastiche" (507).

The definitional struggle over irony and its associated aesthetic modes, parody and pastiche, performed by Hutcheon (parody's fullness allows both critique and conservation), Jameson (hyper-irony evacuates parody, leading to empty pastiche), and Sandoval (pastiche's emptiness allows for progressive critique) pushes the conversation from the literary/aesthetic to a more broadly social question of the actual effects of hyper/post-postmodernist cultural production on those involved in its consumption. As with any component of an aesthetic work, the presence of irony in (post-)postmodern visual and literary production reflects the social and historical conditions of its manufacture. This project is concerned with the social manifestations and effects of irony, rather than its purely literary/aesthetic use-value. As Mark Fisher notes, the implicit promise of the post-sincere contemporary is that "[t]he attitude of ironic distance proper to postmodern capitalism is supposed to immunize us against the seductions of fanaticism" arising from nostalgic orientations like sincerity and belief (5). However, this mode of "capitalist realism" serves to both hide the structural Real through an investment in naturalized "reality principles" (17) and to create a structure of disavowal in which our inner beliefs (in this case, that capitalism is bad) are contradicted by our consensual

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participation in capitalist exchange, a psychic three-card-monte that is the basic

foundation of late capitalism (13). Fisher argues, "A cynic who 'believes only his eyes'

misses the efficiency of the symbolic fiction, and how it structures our experiences of

reality" (48).

While Fisher's *Capitalist Realism* effectively demonstrates *that* neoliberal culture

creates an ironic restructuring of the lived experience of individuals, my project is more

interested in specific systemic ironies produced by the ideological effects of an

increasingly inescapable media-cultural environment. As Fisher notes concerning the

postmodernist conception of progress through parodic repetition,

> [T]he old struggle between *détournement* and recuperation, between subversion
> and incorporation, seems to have been played out. What we are dealing with now
> is not the incorporation of materials that previously seemed to possess subversive
> potentials, but instead, their *precorporation*: the pre-emptive formatting and
> shaping of desires, aspirations, and hopes by capitalist culture. (9; emphasis
> original)

My project occupies that place between proscription and prescription, closely examining

the reflexive cultural loop between consumer and producer in the contemporary media

environment. Fisher's use of the term "precorporation" indicates an important shift away

from Hutcheon's figuration of parodic potential, suggesting a hyper-ironic distance from

both expressions and origins of subjective desire. One goal of my project is addressing

the (im)possibility of progressive potential in a politics of irony.

Satire

If the pessimism of Marxist critics of late-capitalist/post-industrial/neoliberal

society like Jameson and Fisher with regard to the revolutionary or progressive potential

of the ironic modes of parody and pastiche stands in stark contrast to the work of aestheticians like Hutcheon and Margaret Rose, post/de-colonialists like Sandoval, and scholars of queer and ethnic identity like José Muñoz, this might be conceived of (reductively) as a result of the former's focus on the way that the world-historical situation subsumes or incorporates the individual-as-mass-subjectivity, and the latter critics' conception of the individual's emergent agency within the praxis of quotidian performativity. On the disagreement between Jameson and Hutcheon, for example, John Duvall argues that the polarization stems from the fact that "what they mean by postmodernism is not the same thing: Jameson's postmodernism focuses on the consumer, while Hutcheon's originates with the artist as producer" (372). My own project, as it deals with the oppositional critique performed by a selection of contemporary artists, necessarily endorses the possibility of art as not, or not *entirely*, defanged by the forces of hegemonic precorporation; nevertheless, throughout these chapters I straddle the divide between artist and consumer by focusing on the works as texts, as loci of (failed) communication, taking into account both the work's produced-ness as art and radical instability as media-cultural commodity.

It is precisely this instability which animates the portions of this project dealing with satire, a rhetorical mode possessing an "ameliorative intent" and which "frequently turns to irony as a means of ridiculing—and implicitly correcting—the vices and follies of humankind" (Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge*, 52-53). Satire becomes a site of contestation in the contemporary public sphere via its formal incorporation of "irony's transideological nature," its availability to, like parody, both "reinforce authority" and operate towards

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"oppositional and subversive ends" (29). As Wayne Booth points out in his reading of satires like Johnathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal" (1729), "[I]t is a curious fact that two readers can sometimes feel total confidence in contradictory readings, each reader convinced that every detail in the work confirms his reading, bolted into place by a self-evident interpretation of the literary context" (120). This becomes apparent in what internet commentators have dubbed "Poe's Law" (2005)—the idea that without overt signaling of authorial intent (such as a "winking smiley" emoticon, in the context of a text-based chat forum), any parody of a conservative position (in the original example, Christian Creationist discourse) becomes increasingly indistinguishable from the ideological stance it purportedly mocks.[2] Poe's Law is the populist meme-ification of the critical discourse around irony, concerned as it is with bringing order to the messy interaction of intention, text, and reception.

It seems fitting, then, that a mere two months after Nathan Poe's viral intervention into the double-voicedness of satirical communication acts the US cable television channel Comedy Central debuted *The Colbert Report* (2005-2014), a news and political commentary show marketed to the uber-hip 18-34 (aka "Generation Irony") demographic, in which the host—Stephen Colbert, a veteran of the Chicago comedy

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[2] Poe's law has its genesis on a 2005 chat thread on the *Christian Forums* website. After a Creationist commenter put forth a logically incoherent debunking of evolutionary theory,

> A lot of commenters attempted to explain why this was a complete misunderstanding of how evolution works. While some of them were serious, others just mocked the Creationist, in some cases, by imitating her irrational thinking. After one commenter included a 😉 [winking] emoticon, someone else responded with: "Good thing you included the winky. Otherwise people might think you are serious." (Mehta)

To this, Nathan Poe (in)famously responded: "Without a winking smiley or other blatant display of humor, it is uttrerly [sic] impossible to parody a Creationist in such a way that *someone* won't mistake for the genuine article" (https://www.christianforums.com/threads/big-contradictions-in-the-evolution-theory.1962980/page-3#post-17606580).

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collective Second City, an actor on the cult sitcom *Strangers with Candy* (1999-2000)

and a correspondent on *The Daily Show with John Stewart* (1999-2015)—performs a

blatantly ridiculous species of Know-Nothing conservatism as an implicit rebuke directed

towards the Fox News network and its star personality, Bill O'Reilly. In college at the

time, I had a conservative friend who loathed and avoided watching Colbert's lead-in, the

unambiguously liberal *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, yet diligently recorded and

watched *The Colbert Report* four nights a week. As a viewer of both programs, I

understood them to be politically equivalent, merely using different devices (straight

comedy v. satire) to make the same political points. My friend insisted I was mistaken.

Where I saw an actor pretending, he saw an actor pretending to pretend. "Colbert is

secretly a Republican," he once told me, as if asserting a plain truth, and he could not be

convinced otherwise. Because his engagement was with the de-contextualized show in-

itself, the pastiched source material—i.e. the visual, rhetorical, and ideological tropes of

the straightforwardly reactionary *The O'Reilly Factor*—provided the discursive context

for reading Colbert's character, a character who, after all, explicitly purported to believe

in fundamentalist Christian/socially conservative/neoliberal dogma. My friend's belief

was informed by the straightforward semiotics of the conservative televisual landscape to

which he was accustomed, while my understanding of the performance was informed by

a simultaneous recognition and looking-past of these same tropes, neither willing to

concede the other's interpretation. In the microcosmic public sphere of the dorm room,

satire had brought us to an impasse, and Colbert, Schrödinger's pundit, at once was and

was not a Republican.

Of course, this is not to endorse the relativism of "all truths are equally true," or even the nihilism of "all truths are equally untrue." I was right, and he was wrong. But the real issue is that at a certain point, without recourse to the authorial "winky face" (as a both deliberately produced and noticed/comprehended act), the audience is faced with the extreme illegibility of the satirical text in-itself, the humor of the parody transmuted into (or revealed as) exclusion, condescension, the in-joke, members-only. To put it another way, James T. Boulton argues,

> To write ironically with success a writer needs to be alert to two audiences: those who will recognize the ironic intention and enjoy the joke, and those who are the object of the satire and are deceived by it. This implies that the ironist has ranged himself with those of his readers who share his superior values, intelligence and literary sensibility; together they look down on the benighted mob. (qtd in Booth 105)

It is certainly true that satire, as Booth notes of parody and irony, "has often been attacked as immorally elitist, a game for snobs" (73); it is further true that "satire's efficacy relies on the ability of the audience to recognize the irony that is at the heart of humor" (Coletta 860). However, to the former point, satire has been historically understood as a mode concerned with the material circumstances of existence, focused on "desires, bodies, the actual world and 'man' as a being whose thought is often led or circumscribed by his actual needs and interests" (Colebrooke 119). Seymour Chatman, on the distinction between parody and satire, reminds, "Nonparodic satire can be directed at anything in the world, that is, at any target made up of… 'unmodeled reality.' But parody only satirizes other texts or genres, that is, what has *already* been textually modeled" (30). It is in this sense that satire is often political, that is, it occupies a certain location with regard to the actual institutions and ideas which comprise the public sphere.

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Whereas parody may refer to a (perhaps esoteric) literary or artistic text, satire takes as its object the eminently knowable. Satire, we might say, fashions its audience from the broader sphere of popular discourse, while parody speaks to a necessarily discrete, pre-existing audience—those individuals familiar with the work being parodied. For a concrete example of the way this works, we need only think of Jordan Peele's 2017 film *Get Out* (discussed at length in my Conclusion), a satire with parodic elements (or vice versa): while I, the viewer, may miss out on the element of parody/pastiche because I am unfamiliar with earlier films like *The Stepford Wives* (Forbes 1975; Oz 2004) and *Rosemary's Baby* (Polanski 1968), it should be impossible that I leave the theater without some awareness of the film's *satirical* critique of white America's simultaneous fetishization and consumption/destruction of blackness, even if this reaches me in some inchoate form (i.e. I am aware only that the film is "about race in America"). We might, then, actually say that satire has an *anti*-elitist impulse.

And what if the audience doesn't "recognize the irony that is at the heart of humor," doesn't *get* the critical valence, the meliorative impulse under the laughter? What if the text dissembles too much, muddles the message, doesn't afford the audience an entryway beyond the ludic surface? This project offers two distinct, yet related, answers to such objections. The first involves context/contextualizing, the twinned work of the critic—an awareness of the rhetorical circumstances informing the satirical text and the communication of these to an audience, academic or popular. My contextualization in Chapter 4 of Killer Mike's verse on "Run the Jewels" (*Run the Jewels* 2013) via both the meta-genre of hip-hop in its socio-historical situatedness and

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the music of The Notorious BIG is an example of this; to illustrate the point here, though, I would point briefly to Kendrick Lamar's 2012 album *Good Kid/M.A.A.D. City*. The album-proper is constructed as a street bildungsroman: we follow Lamar from his wild youth as he matures towards a dawning critical/social/ethical consciousness. While the narrative contains a critique of the violence, hedonism, and misogyny of his Compton youth (which in reality included a hazily-defined association with the local Bloods chapter), these became absented from the songs themselves when they were repackaged as Top 40 pop-radio soundbites, denying the audience the opportunity or ability to decode the oppositional message. For example, on the first radio single, "Backseat Freestyle," the chorus invokes a fantastical, cartoonish masculinity intended as self-deprecation of his younger self: "All my life I want money and power / respect my mind or die from lead shower / I pray my dick get big as the Eiffel Tower / so I can fuck the world for 72 hours." On the album, "Backseat Freestyle" is track 3, denoting via the chrono-logic of the narrative his relative youth, also signaled by his titular relegation to the "backseat" of both the car and the masculinist hierarchy; the outro of the previous track, "Bitch, Don't Kill My Vibe," featured a friend asking him to rap for them, and this is the memory of that (kind of) moment. The chorus, then, is the distillation of (pre-)teen Lamar's imitative naivete, the hyperbolic boasts examples both of a juvenile masculinity and his interpellation into the fantasy of the Bad Man street hustle epitomized by the mainstream hip-hop he was listening to at the time. *However*, when "Backseat Freestyle" plays on the radio, denuded of any context beyond the song itself, it becomes merely a mainstream hip-hop single, consumed by the audience as the thing-itself rather than a critical

expression of the experience of *listening to* or *playing with* the thing-itself. The second

single fared similarly: "Swimming Pools," an anti-drinking lament that narrates binge

alcoholism for the purposes of demonstrating its empty, self-annihilatory telos, became

the kind of song you might hear at a bar or kegger, the kind of song that sounds to the

casual listener like a party anthem. If, as Susan Sontag holds, the excavation of a text

typical of the hermeneutic act, the search for meaning, is motivated by a hostility to the

work of art as it is, the critical contextualization of the artwork must represent,

conversely, the ultimate respect for the text both as it exists and as it was intended. This

is not to say, in disregard of Derrida, that a text is *only* its intention, that it can be

mastered, or that an exploration of textual slippage and the promiscuity of rhetoric is not

worthwhile, or that the "taken up" text is inherently less useful; it is merely to say that

context matters, perhaps *especially* in evaluating irony, humor, pastiche, and satire.

 The second answer to the problem of the audience's "missing the point" is simply

to say that, on the one hand, this is an unavoidable part of any artistic or signifying text,

and the experience of the listener/reader/viewer can never be fully accounted for; on the

other hand, there are times when this *meconnaissance* is central to the critical satirical

act. Henry Louis Gates' theory of Signifyin[g], for example, depends on the ability of

language to be appropriated and modified in order to dissemble a critique of dominant

structures. African American Signifyin[g] turns not only on the Bakhtinian double-

voicing of individual words, where the word is "decolonized for the black's purposes 'by

inserting a new semantic orientation into a word which already has—and retains—its

own orientation,'" but also on the rhetorical context of the redeployment of this captured

language. Gates cites Frederick Douglass' autobiography, in particular an account of slaves who "'would sing the most pathetic sentiments in the most rapturous tone, and the most rapturous sentiment in the most pathetic tone,' a set of oppositions which led to the song's misreading by nonslaves," an act that period commentator William Faux referred to as "satire intended for…unkind masters." When Douglass bemoans the fact that this sort of singing was gestured at by northern whites as "evidence of [the slaves'] contentment and happiness," Gates concludes, "This great mistake of interpretation occurred because the blacks were using antiphonal structures to reverse their apparent meaning, as a mode of encoding for self-preservation." Not to understate the particular horror and dangers associated with Gates' slave resistance, but this is in keeping with even canonical understandings of classical satire: as Dustin Griffin points out, historically satire has flourished "in the face of—and because of—threatened censorship or political reprisal"; it is "the limitation on free inquiry and dissent that provokes one to irony—and to satire" (139).

This points to the ways that marginalized voices have used satire and irony to contest oppressive social, political, and ideological systems while remaining within the discursive terrain of same. Hutcheon calls this the "<u>OPPOSITIONAL</u> functioning of irony" which allows for the "undermining-from-within of the politically repressed"; elsewhere this function has been referred to as "'counter-discursive' in its ability to contest dominant habits of mind and expression." She notes a split in the reception of the oppositional text, where, "For those positioned *within* a dominant ideology, such a contesting might be seen as abusive or threatening; for those marginalized and working to

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undo that dominance, it might be **subversive** or **transgressive** in the newer, positive

senses that those words have taken on in recent writing about gender, race, class, and

sexuality" (52 [1994], formatting original). This is the work that Lamonda Horton-

Stallings sees black comediennes doing in their articulation of frank sexuality both in and

against the dominant modes of propriety that police women, and black women doubly,

writing, "Black female stand-up comedy winks, but it also enforces the threat of

subversive potential with its own cultural signifyin[g] that insists upon playing with a

purpose" (144 [2007]). This is further the same ironic play upon and within the terrain of

hegemonic identities signaled by José Muñoz' term "disidentification," which is "a mode

of *recycling* or re-forming an object that has already been invested with powerful energy"

(39, emphasis original). Like Gates' satirical slave songs and Horton-Stallings' female

performance, disidentification, especially via its connection with humor, entails both

oppositional consciousness and self-preservation. "Comedic disidentification," Muñoz

writes, " accomplishes important cultural critique while at the same time providing cover

from, and enabling the avoidance itself of, direct confrontation with phobic and

reactionary ideologies" (119). It is in this sense that it may be ultimately beside the point

to talk about (a certain kind of) audience('s) mis-apprehension of an ironic form such as

satire; that is, there are situations where a text is successful if its critique registers with

only some, and where the ones who don't "get it" were never supposed to in the first

place. It is important to note that this project doesn't primarily engage with satire, irony,

or humor that serves a conservative, reactionary, or hegemonic function; those are the

texts of power and decadence, and if these types of rhetorical and performative modes of

play are to be useful at all, it is only in their "undermining-from-within" of the entrenched viciousness animating the racist and xenophobic hetero-patriarchal nationalism of the 21st century American public.

Method and Chapters

Methodologically, my research bridges the divide between the high-postmodern theorization of irony (e.g. Jameson, Hutcheon, Wallace) and the experience of cultural consumption and performance in the post-postmodern contemporary, with emphasis on Sandoval's construction of spaces of ironic possibility, realized or un-. My sites of inquiry are primarily comprised of the work of black artists, focusing on the ways in which a commercial narrative of standardized identity in contemporary America is critiqued via the logic of irony, misdirection, and play. I work to move the critical conception of irony away from generic strictures and the arch nihilism of (primarily white) performances in order to address the constellational force of on-the-ground ideology, the media products and aesthetic objects consumed in the everyday. My chapters are organized thematically (though not strictly chronologically or causally), focusing on key aspects of the contemporary dialogue on race and popular culture, using primary texts as a way of unpacking the messiness of ideology through precise analyses of media products. I consider each chapter as a case study through which larger thematic concerns around the intersectional constellation of race, gender, sexuality and popular culture may be brought into sharper focus.

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The chapters in this project can be broadly separated by their thematic foci, into both 4 individual works and also 2 halves of a greater question. Chapters 1 and 2 take as their primary objects a film (*The Adventures of Buckaroo Banzai Across the 8th Dimension* [1984]) and a visual artist (Kehinde Wiley [1977-]), each demonstrating the work of critical pastiche practices and delving into the politics of ornament and fashion. Chapters 3 and 4, focusing on a television sketch comedy (*Key & Peele* [2012-2015]) and a hip-hop group (Run the Jewels [2013-]), build on the earlier chapters' treatments of pastiche to make an argument for the possibilities and limits of contemporary satire in the public sphere. Each necessarily deals with irony both in the broadest sense—a disjunction between what is said and meant, what is seen and what is—and in the artist's/work's relationships to specific socio-historical moments (The Cold War), movements (the Black Arts Movement), ideologies (US post-racialism) and genres (popular hip-hop). Each of the artists/works, also, is marked by a subversive humor that takes as its object structures of racial, gendered, sexual, or class oppression. If these texts contain or produce or function through laughter, this pleasure not only rewards in-itself, but further provides the ludic externality belying the razor's edge of critical consciousness.

Chapter 1, "'Wherever you go, there you are': Post-Futurist Pastiche and the Oppositional Vision of *The Adventures of Buckaroo Banzai Across the 8th Dimension*," examines the eponymous 1984 film, focusing on the ways in which its pastiche of Cold War-era science fiction cinema provides an apparent, allegorical meaning which is undermined by the film itself. That is to say that *Banzai* is cobbled together of elements and tropes already invested with a clear and defined ideological valence, easily

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recognizable by a then-contemporary audience, yet uses these genre commonplaces in service of a critique of those same ideologies. This is, in the first place, made possible by the ability (as discussed above) of pastiche representation to invoke the form or style of a previous text without necessarily endorsing the meaning or ideology of said text. For example, a Cold War filmic text like *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) provides both a visual surface and a de facto ideological accompaniment (the infiltration of American society by aliens who look just like "normal" citizens and the fear of communist influence, respectively). *Banzai* recreates the generic surface of an earlier film like *Invasion*, but its vision is, if anything, *anti*-anti-communist, demonstrating the way that pastiche satire becomes effective via its play upon audience expectations, and the way that satire depends implicitly upon proper contextualization for its success.

I further conceptualize the film as actively engaged in a strategy of anti-dualism in its affinity for the pure visual surface of its pastiche style. This is both because of its playful rejection of an allegorical or depth reading (i.e. the alien Red Lectroids should be, but are not, symbols of communist threat), and also because of its engagement with the politics of appearance, mainly in terms of race and clothing. For example, the titular Buckaroo Banzai (Paul Weller), a chameleonic jack-of-all-trades, is shown in a series of heterogenous roles—scientist, neurosurgeon, commando, race-car driver, rock star—with the only explanation for his abrupt shifts being his change in attire. The Red and Black Lectroids, lizard-like aliens who are disguised as humans, make race and ethnicity into visual ornaments, disconnected from any underlying essence or truth. In fact, their human visages, as white businessmen/agents of the law (Red Lectroids) and black Rastafarians

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(Black Lectroids) are, to quote Susan Sontag, "disguises which reveal"; that is, like Banzai, their outward appearance does not dissemble their actual role in the film's visual cosmology, as the "disguise" of the body-snatcher or communist agent might. Rather, it is their outward appearance, through the signifiers of fashion and race, that denotes their "true" positionality. It is in this sense that we might both say the film is ironic in the bait-and-switch of its non-allegorical pastiche structure, the disjunction between audience expectation and the film's ideology, and *anti*-ironic in the flat visuality of its satirical humor, a humor which, per Gilles Deleuze, is "the art of the surface, which is opposed to the old irony, the art of depths and heights" (9). This focus on what Sontag calls "the sensuous surface of art" is one through line for this project as a whole, in that I contest dualist notions of art and hermeneutics that divorce meaning from its intelligible expression.

Chapter 2, "Painting Grace: Kehinde Wiley's Pastiche and the Ornamental Construction of Post-Black Visuality," forms a conceptual bridge between the discussion of pastiche and ornament from Chapter 1 and the critical engagement with post-blackness and post-racialism of Chapter 3. This second chapter deals with the work of painter Kehinde Wiley, whose monumental portraits juxtapose an art historical mise-en-scene with contemporary black bodies in a manner that plays with canonical signifiers, critiques the overwhelming whiteness of fine art institutions, and gestures towards a complex interplay between subjectivity and neoliberalism as mediated by the artifacts of consumer culture. Wiley's early work is a fascinating blend of classical and postmodern. His models are primarily young black men, often discovered at random on the streets of New

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York City; they are then posed in a manner echoing a work by one of the Old Masters of European art (e.g. Johannes Cornelisz Verspronck or Peter Paul Reubens). The contemporary subject of the portrait appears attired in his own clothing, casually hip streetwear with brand labels meticulously represented, while the backdrop either recreates (with subtle differences) the pastiched work or dissolves into a gorgeous mesh of period ornament, whether floral, arabesque, or abstractly repetitive ala the wallpapers of William Morris. Wiley has referred to this reimagination of the portrait's backdrop and his subject's imbrication within same as a "state of grace" (USA). His aesthetic draws parallels between the accumulation of authority and identity through display of the body and wealth in Renaissance portraiture, and the hip-hop and more generally neoliberal ethos of style and accessorization, commodity fetishism and performance, an ornamental ideology that suggests, in short, that (with echoes of Weller's Buckaroo Banzai) "you are what you wear."

Aside from (but also as a result of) his formal painterly methods, Wiley has most often been associated with a loosely-defined group of contemporary black artists gestured at by Thelma Golden's controversial designation "post-black," a term she introduced in the catalogue for the 2001 "Freestyle" exhibition at Brooklyn Museum.[3] Golden finds post-black useful as a rubric for understanding and evaluating the artistic productions of certain young, African-American visual artists who were "adamant about not being labeled as 'black' artists, though their work was steeped, in fact deeply interested, in

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[3] Derek Murray notes that "Art historian Robert Farris Thompson was first credited with using the term in a 1991 *Artforum* article" (3-4 [2016]); however, Thompson's use of the term is not etymologically significant as he deployed the term uncritically in a hypothetical aside.

redefining complex notions of blackness" (14). The "post" of the term therefore does not suggest strong alterity but rather an iterative subsequentiality which conserves the original, overdetermined term "black" in some sense even as it is being critiqued. We might understand post-black as being triangulated by the polar ideologies of a racially essentialist black cultural nationalism and a post-racial/colorblind narrative. There are two discursive spheres in which the term has been deployed, the aesthetic and the social. The former is in line with the genesis of the term, while the latter is an extension of loose aesthetic observations onto the material experience of everyday life.

Aesthetically, the term has been used to describe a break from a Black Arts Movement (ca. 1965-1975) ethos of cultural production which valorized positive representations of black folks and experiences as a means of combatting the pervasive racial prejudice of mid-20th century USA. In the view of Golden and those aligned with her reading, to be a "black artist"—that is, to be an artist who is black, who must therefore necessarily produce work which primarily reflects an essential racial identity— amounts to a reduction of the possibilities of meaning in an artist's work, an elision of the specificity of the person and the work in the irreducible individuality of each. Darby English suggests that dealing with this problematic assumption "necessitates a view that recognizes the multiple meanings of blackness and the plurality of ways of living under the black sign but also sees beyond them to another realm of complexity. It requires a broad view in which race yields something of its boundedness in its collision with differences and circumstances that engender other kinds of affiliation and desire" (17). Derek Murray conceives of post-black art as an oppositional/ambivalent stance towards

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the black aesthetic movement's "compulsory solidarity, insularity, and the intra-community demands to maintain a sense of racial pride," as well as a "broad rejection of the generational passing down of racial trauma" as artists "seek to escape the limitations imposed by race" (25 [2016]). Artists associated with the term include (but are not limited to) Glenn Ligon, Kehinde Wiley, Mickalene Thomas, Kara Walker, and Kalup Linzy. Golden suggests that the generational aesthetic divide has to do with the continuing saturation of American culture with black-specific subcultural forms, e.g. hip-hop: "This post-black generation of artists saw themselves working with black subject matter as the generations before but they were working in a world that understood that subject matter as being cultural in a general way" (qtd in Touré 43).

Murray makes even more plain the generational and ideological antagonisms animating a post-black orientation: "The dogma of black cultural nationalism was…repressive in its marginalization of any expression of African-American identity that was antithetical to a hetero-patriarchal value system" (7 [2016]); thus Golden's work around post-blackness is "unapologetically queer in [its] effort to radically re-envision blackness beyond compulsory heterosexuality" (15). The work of (especially queer) black artists like Wiley seems unconcerned with Black Arts Movement-era solidarity and positive representation, instead pointing to a shifting terrain of intersectional identity produced within, against, and through the extreme commodification and marketability of images of blackness, especially within the simultaneously exclusionary and fetishistic discourse of the art museum. Like Wallace's lamented post-sincerity, post-black denotes a contested space of identity, aesthetics, and ontology, framed not only in the fine art

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portrait, but also in the hypervisibility afforded to these as they enter the popular cultural sphere (Wiley has produced a number of commissioned works for hip-hop artists and celebrities, as well as for the television show *Empire* [2015-], for example).

My third chapter engages with the concept of post-blackness as it has entered the discourse of popular culture, especially via its confusion with "post-racialism" and its comparison to the ascendant discourse of "afro-pessimism." Socially, post-black has been used to express the same break with a sense of Civil Rights generation solidarity and racial responsibility, but rather than being expressed in aesthetic production, social post-blackness seems to be a privileging of a neoliberal individualist ethos and an anti-essentialist approach to identity and lifestyle at odds with black nationalist/power movements. Ytasha L. Womack treats post-blackness as a movement away from the politics of racial trauma evident in, for example, news stories about "drug kingpins, crack addicts, gang violence, or unemployment in the inner cities" (1), and towards a recognition of the economic, aesthetic, and socio-political progress being made by black individuals, and their status in society as other than stereotypically abject. The journalist Touré, while noting that "post-black cannot be used as a replacement for black or African-American," suggests that "in a post-black era…our identity options are limitless" (12). Responses to this individualist ideology often fall along generational lines, with commenters such as Harvard Law's Randall Kennedy arguing for the necessity of policing racial/ethnic boundaries in order to preserve cultural authenticity and safeguard against dominant-culture threats (Murray 12 [2016]).

Derek Murray provides the best critique of the discourse of social post-blackness when he considers that what the discussion has failed to account for is the dimension of queer sexuality in both the genetic history of Golden's definition and the artists she and others have pointed to as being prototypically post-black. BAM and black nationalism, per Murray as well as EP Johnson and Kobena Mercer, were "visually defined by depictions of black hyper-masculinity" (5), promoted as a counterweight to the centuries of white supremacist discourse aimed at denigrating black manhood and embodied in the socially-conservative essentialism of nationalist leaders like Eldridge Cleaver and Stokely Carmichael. This valorization both implicitly and, often, quite explicitly marginalized and marked as inauthentic the figures and cultural production associated with a feminine or queer blackness. Queer artists such as Kehinde Wiley, Murray suggests, produce work that specifically targets the alienating masculinity at the heart of that earlier version of cultural blackness. Meanwhile, pro post-black positions such as Touré's are "more concerned with healing the racial wounds of privileged African-Americans who have found themselves thrust outside the comforts of authenticity and membership…devoid of the black cultural distinctiveness necessary to be down" (15). Further, I would add that formulations like Touré and Womack's are marked by the absent-presence of socio-economic class in their celebration of those individuals who have access to the "open-ended and open-source and endlessly customizable" (12) version of black identity, adoption of which is figured through their free movement in the neoliberal corporate and social space; in this formulation, the blackness being transcended is implicitly figured as (financial, cultural) lack. So, on the one hand the term

is useful in identifying a progressive critique of retrograde ideologies, one which is bound up in the production of visual art, a traditional object of close-reading. On the other, this critique needs to be differentiated from the neoconservative/neoliberal privileging of post-racialism, which, as Michael Omi and Howard Winant noted as early as 1985, represents an attempt to undo racial progress by dissolving the discursive space available for political attempts to seek redress for the effects of white supremacy on racialized groups. In short, this term should be understood at its core as "post black nationalist," as an awareness of the intersectional/constellational nature of identity rather than a repudiation of race as an aspect of identity.

This commingling and contrast between the cultural expressions of post-black and post-racial ideologies is the focus of Chapter 3, "They Didn't Get Us: Post-Black Satire and *Key & Peele*'s Critical Humor." In this chapter I examine a selection of sketches from the acclaimed comedy series *Key & Peele* (2012-2015), highlighting the ways that they speak to a progressivist, post-black satirical impulse. Well-known sketches like "Obama's Anger Translator" (2012), in which the measured neutrality and politeness of the president's public address is "translated" by a highly emotive aide, point to the limiting scripts available for the expression of blackness within a hostile, white supremacist public sphere. This is a satire which "makes meaning of black racial identity in an era where the meanings of race have been willfully hidden and ignored" (Guerrero 276). As discussed above, satire flourishes in a cultural space where artists have reason to fear political or social reprisal, where the artist is potentially subject to censorship, where certain ideas, views, or concepts are repressed or invisible within the commons of public

discourse. Though contemporary US policy is not so draconian, relative to other eras and regions of the world, in its overt policing of speech, there are certainly implicit limits on speech, not just in terms of decorum, but also in terms of what space is available for counter-hegemonic speech; that is, given the prevalence of certain types of discourse, contrarian ideologies are de facto discouraged to varying degrees. The post-millenial surge in satire by black artists (see also, for example, *The Boondocks*, *The Chappelle Show*, Colson Whitehead's *Apex Hides the Hurt*, or the novels of Paul Beatty) is not simply an effect of the increased prominence of and opportunities for black actors, comedians, writers, directors and executives in the culture industry landscape, but also, I would argue, directly reflects the mainstream quasi-prohibition on the direct confrontation of white supremacist institutions and ideologies coinciding with the "freedom" to be post-racial.

While the 2008 election of Barack Obama, movements like Black Lives Matter (circa 2014 -), and the wider dissemination of (pop-)academic understandings of intersectionality and white privilege have increasingly pushed back against a hegemonic post-racial consensus, these are relatively recent developments in even progressive American public discourse. As recently as 2004, for example, MTV—like *Rolling Stone* magazine an influential bastion of white liberalism within popular culture—censored Kanye West's music video "All Falls Down," not for cursing or violent or misogynist language, but for its perceived anti-whiteness. The song, a personally and culturally introspective critique of the connections between commodity fetishism and contemporary (especially young, black) identity, featured the lines "Drug dealer buy Jordans, crackhead

buy crack / And a white man get paid off of all of that." The second line was cut entirely

from the broadcast version of the song, while the preceding line, despite its reference to

illicit drugs, was left untouched, becoming not the first half of a pointed joke to be

immediately ironically undercut, but a (seeming) statement of plain fact, a grotesque

caricature of street economics without the critique that it exists to presage. More than just

noting the de-contextualization and disruption of the ironic text, I raise this as an example

of a "liberal," "progressive" media institution unambiguously repressing a (quite mild)

critique of (some version of) whiteness.

 The perhaps unintended effect of the MTV decision was the creation of a

discursive vacuum—literally an unexplained few seconds of silence in the middle of the

verse—which served to highlight the decontextualized image of (a certain kind of) black

experience in the preceding line, in a manner similar to the way that blackness becomes

in-itself pathological once the efforts and effects of white supremacist policies have been

elided from the historical and contemporary discourse. As demonstrated by a popular

internet meme after an infamous foul at the 2006 World Cup Final, if you photoshop the

headbutting Zinedine Zidane out of the photo/video, you're left with the ridiculous image

of Marco Materazzi throwing himself to the ground, apparently of his own volition. How

do you give a red card to an absence? A form of social photoshop, post-racialism

becomes merely the removal of (the possibility of) racial critique (especially of

whiteness) from the public consciousness, creating the conditions of possibility for the

maintenance and extension of the manifest destiny of white supremacy. Post-black (or,

"post-soul") satire is a response to this elision, a way of forcing the conversation and coming to terms with the national investment in the illusion of whiteness.

Chapter 4, "'No Respect for the Thrones': Disidentificatory Pastiche and Revolutionary Camp in Run the Jewels' *Run the Jewels* and *Run the Jewels 2*," addresses the discursive system of mainstream hip-hop, emphasizing the ways in which it mirrors certain regressive ideological tendencies found in US public discourse more generally, and the possibilities available for resisting/revising these from within the genre itself. Born of a techno-aesthetic *detournement* which saw the repurposing of both ostensibly single-function musical apparatus and previous songs themselves, hip-hop is, from its inception to the present, the pastiche genre par excellence. For example, the "break beat," an innovation widely credited to DJ Kool Herc, is an isolation of a brief section (the "break") of a song on a vinyl record and the extension of that section by cutting the audio back and forth between two turntables playing the (same section of the) same record, creating a single, seamless percussion track. Beyond the obvious pastiche quotation de/re-contextualization of the earlier work, is the notable transformation of the turntable and vinyl record, intended as static technologies of reproduction, into modes of producing original sonic compositions, the scraps of earlier genres mixed into a new coherence by an innovative few, "constitut[ing] a reversal of the traditional modes of production and consumption that have fueled the music industry in its exploitation of African-American music" (Potter 36).

This chapter, however, focuses its attention not on the well-worn territory of hip-hop's genesis (see Dick Hebdige, Imani Perry, Tricia Rose, Jeff Chang, etc.) but on its

late-contemporary, post-aughts iteration, which, in terms of the genre's mainstream, corporate-hegemonic incarnation, has been largely marked by a move away from the overtly political mode (ala Public Enemy or Dead Prez, for example) upon which most hip-hop scholarship of the 1990s was based. If the dominant (i.e. Top 40, radio singles) expression of the genre in the current moment is largely apolitical and celebratory, it is perhaps not an entirely new development, but rather a cyclical expression of market dynamics, corporate interests, and audience expectations, mirroring the primal ideological shift apparent in the genre's development between the late 1970s to the mid 1980s. As Russell Potter notes of this early period, "Within the brief span of two or three years, hip-hop had gone from being party music with PSA add-ons to an angry, minimalist-with-a-vengeance rhythm of revolution; the change was so sudden that at least one fan was heard to protest that Public Enemy wasn't hip-hop at all, but 'black punk rock'" (51). The difference between the "party music" of early hip-hop and today, however, could be explained, reductively, as an investment in the neoliberal ideologies of accumulative wealth and personal sovereignty, what Ismail Muhammad memorably refers to as "fantasies of conspicuous consumption" (which, to be clear, in his argument constitute a critique, via their lavish spectacle, of the illusions engendered by quotidian capitalism). I argue that the waning of progressivist, political (aka "conscious" or, per Lester Spence, "argumentative realist") rap's popular influence turns on its over-investment in the rhetoric of sincerity. By failing to navigate the genre's inherent irony— what Potter, reading Henry Louis Gates' Signifyin[g], calls its "doubleness"—conscious hip-hop was hindered by "naïve strategies which assume somehow that their message can

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get through the media simply on account of its innate justice or truth value" (134). As Andre Gide admonishes, "One cannot both be sincere and seem so" (qtd in L. Trilling, 70).

Run the Jewels, I would argue, represents a return to the "black punk rock" mode of aggressively political hip-hop, a return marked by pastiche recuperation of previous hip-hop texts and occurring not in spite of but precisely *through* an investment in irony, satire and mocking laughter. The work of Run the Jewels, a pairing of underground/alt rappers Killer Mike and El-P, gives the lie to the litmus test of political correctness in music, the idea that serious problems must always be addressed with a sober sincerity, lest the critique be undercut by the great sin of irony. In terms of the "purity test" model of public discourse, Run the Jewels fail spectacularly; however, at times this seems to be precisely the point. They are as likely to engage in the hyperbolic rhetoric of ever-more-creative masculinist self-aggrandizement (e.g. "My dick got a Michelin star," El-P, "Talk to Me," *Run the Jewels 3* [2016]) as they are to reference the social death of blackness ala Orlando Patterson's *Slavery and Social Death* (1982) in the context of current political unrest ("Born black, that's dead on arrival / My job is to fight for survival / in spite of these #AllLivesMatter-ass white folk," Killer Mike, "Talk to Me"). A white New Yorker and a black Atlantan, they not only model racial solidarity, but point to the inefficacy (or limits) of sincerity as a progressive discourse in a hostile/post-sincere public sphere.

Another way of saying this would be to take the example of the rapper/poet/activist Common (Lonnie Rashid Lynn, Jr.), an influential proponent of "conscious" rap, who has received a great deal of praise for the sensitive and nuanced

treatment of race, gender, sexuality, and state violence in his work. When President

Obama invited him (among others) to the White House in 2011 for "An Evening of

Poetry," political opponents expressed outrage over the appearance, citing his 2000 "A

Song for Assata" [Shakur], an inoffensive meditation on the exiled activist, as evidence

of his (and other rappers', implicitly) violent anti-law enforcement rhetoric. A spoken

word performance from the perspective of a young man trapped in a cycle of gang

violence was taken out of context, with detractors referring to Lynn as "vile,"

"controversial," and a "nitwit," and Republican political adviser Karl Rove calling him a

"thug." ABC News, coming to his defense in a particularly tone-deaf (and curiously

alliterative) manner, insisted that "he raps about racial relations rather than rims," as if

that were ever the point. In reality, Common—a Grammy-winning, college-educated,

Christian, Jonas Brothers-collaborator who was for a time the celebrity face of banal

white-yuppie standard Gap—had become a useful means of attacking Obama for his

blackness without committing the then-unthinkable act of openly espousing white

supremacist views. Writing of the Birther movement (i.e. the claim that Obama was not a

natural-born US citizen), Whitney Phillips notes the discursive transference at work in

seemingly post-racial critiques of the president:

> It was angry. It was xenophobic. But it was smart enough to keep its racism
> inferential. Instead of directly addressing the president's race, protesters deployed
> more TV-friendly allegations, most notably challenges to his citizenship and
> associations with Hitler and socialism. Because unlike other epithets, you can still
> say "Hitler" and "socialist" in public. (102)

Like the criticism of Common, "these not-so-subtle dog whistles" formed an acceptable

substitute for a repressed (not to say "cloaked"/"hooded") white supremacist pique at the

elevation of a black man to the nation's highest office. The anti-white holocaust of Far Right fever dreams never materialized under Obama, but his overtures to conservative fundamentalists, compromises, and expressions of sincerity did nothing to quell the seething antiblackness animating American history to the present. Like Obama, Common's visible blackness, not to mention his association with the uber-black trope of hip-hop, rendered him always-already discredited, a forever-thug, in the subtextual public discourse of white chauvinism, his compassion, intellect and sincerity notwithstanding.

The solution evinced by the work of RTJ is a general rejection of the politics of sincerity and respectability, an abandoning of the no-win scenario of political correctness, an ironic performance that may afford them residence in Sandoval's "shifting place of mobile codes and significations, which invokes the place of possibility and creativity where language and meaning itself are constituted" (34). By couching their anger in the ludic rhetoric of the boast rap, Run the Jewels are able to both revise harmful/regressive ideologies present in the discourse of hip-hop and attack sedimented structures of domination from a position of relative powerlessness in terms that the neoliberal politics of sincerity and status are least equipped to combat: to put it another way, "I'm dirt, motherfucker, I can't be crushed" (El-P, "Talk to Me"). I argue that in this sense they are aligned with José Muñoz's discussion of disidentification, a term "meant to be descriptive of the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative subjectivity" (4). In the context of RTJ, disidentification joins together two key elements of their performance:

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pastiche and camp. The former is (self-)evident in the aspect of disidentification which

"is about recycling and rethinking encoded meaning":

> The process of disidentification scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message
> of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message's
> universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recircuits its workings to
> account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications. Thus,
> disidentification is a step further than cracking open the code of the majority; it
> proceeds to use this code as raw material for representing a disempowered politics
> or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture. (31)

Run the Jewels is further camp in the vein of Susan Sontag's insistence that "[t]he whole

point of Camp is to dethrone the serious," as well as Muñoz's claim that camp's

"[c]omedic disidentification accomplishes important cultural critique while at the same

time providing cover from, and enabling the avoidance itself of, scenarios of direct

confrontation with phobic and reactionary ideologies" (119). This chapter reads the irony

of Run the Jewels' performance as a form of genre subversion that works to critique both

the systemic violence of American hegemonic structures and the very discursive medium

of hip-hop itself. As in previous chapters, this is an art of doubleness and misdirection, an

attack on hetero-patriarchal and post-racialist complacency and the whitewashing of US

public discourse, couched in singularly indecorous rhetoric, a "serious unseriousness."

    The chapters of this project proceed as exploratory circlings around key concepts,

whether they be formal (pastiche, ornament), generic (satire, comedy), social (race,

masculinity) or theoretical (postmodernism, dualism). The chapters telescope outward as

they progress, both in terms of their length and in focus. While Chapter 1 considers *a* film

and its relationship to a proscribed Americanist genre (Cold War SF), Chapters 2-4 each

engage with portions of artistic oeuvres (of Kehinde Wiley, Keegan-Michael Key and

Jordan Peele, and Run the Jewels, respectively), situating these in increasingly complex relations to both similar artistic practices and to the ever-shifting ideological terrain of the 21st-century United States. My goal is to understand and communicate not just how irony, humor, pastiche and satire intersect with anti-racist and anti-hegemonic praxis in the works at hand, but how these point to a fundamental shift in US popular discourse, and offer possibilities for moving forward into an uncertain future.

Chapter 1:

"Wherever you go, there you are": Post-Futurist Pastiche and the Oppositional Vision

of *The Adventures of Buckaroo Banzai Across the 8th Dimension*

> It is a very good sign when the harmonious bores are at a loss about how they should react to this continuous self-parody, when they fluctuate endlessly between belief and disbelief until they get dizzy and take what is meant as a joke seriously and what is meant seriously as a joke.
>
> - Friedrich Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments* (1797)

> "Comfort the afflicted, afflict the comfortable."
>
> - Buckaroo Banzai, *Pinky Carruther's 47,000 Unknown Facts* DVD subtitle track (2005)

Introduction: An SF Anti-Allegory

In a chapter added to the second edition of her seminal treatment of mid-20th century US science fiction cinema, *Screening Space* (1987), Vivian Sobchack considers the emergence of a new subcategory of SF films which she refers to as both "marginal" in terms of their relationship to mainstream cinema and "post-futurist" in terms of their formal qualities. Drawing extensively from Fredric Jameson's conceptualization of postmodernism in his influential 1984 essay "Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," Sobchack's discussion of post-futurist SF cinema provided an important categorical niche for a number of innovative B-movies that might otherwise be dismissed as "merely" kitsch, including cult films like *Repo Man* (Cox 1984), *Liquid Sky* (Tsukerman 1982), *Brother from Another Planet* (Sayles 1984), and, indeed, *The Adventures of Buckaroo Banzai Across the 8th Dimension* (Richter 1984). These post-

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futurist films—so dubbed because their weak historicity, or "lack of temporal imagination," is "paralytic in regards to envisioning a future" even as it "is dynamic in the intense attention it pays to the spatialized present (302)—were quintessentially postmodern works marked by, in addition to ahistoricity, a "liberating equivalence" (302) with regard to (alien) otherness, a reflection of late capitalist sensibilities in "visualizations that valorize the cluttered abundance of consumer culture" (300), and "episodic, fragmented" narratives (279). Most importantly for this discussion, she especially highlights the presence of pastiche, or "the de-historicized postmodern logic of cultural 'recycling,'" as well as the rendering of screen space "as superficial and shallow, as all surface" (229).

In this chapter I take seriously Sobchack's claims regarding post-futurist/postmodern SF cinema as they relate to *The Adventures of Buckaroo Banzai Across the 8th Dimension*, especially with regard to the film's imbrication in an economy of pastiche, and its privileging of an epistemology of visual surfaces. While the former quality imbues the film with an ostensible ideological structure, the latter functions as a subversive re-coding of generic deployments of xenophobic nationalisms and the dominant racial hegemony, ultimately rendering the film a critique of the very fabric of Reagan-era multinational corporatism and Cold War jingoism. That is to say, the "meaninglessness" of *Buckaroo Banzai*'s farce is a product of an allegorical model of reading; its meaning resides in the always-apparent play of surfaces elided by the hermeneutics of depth. I argue that, like Friedrich Nietzsche's exemplary "Greeks" who

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"stop bravely at the surface, the fold, the skin," WD Richter and Earl Mac Rauch's

Buckaroo Banzai is "superficial—out of profundity!" (8)

In beginning this discussion, it might be best to provide a brief synopsis of the

film, inasmuch as such a thing is at all possible. The film's critical reception is a record

of the difficulty of such a project, as it was uniformly censured for its lack of exposition,

campy visuals/dialogue, and general senselessness. In a 1984 review, Vincent Canby of

the *New York Times* dismissed the film as a "sci-fi farce" in which "absolutely

nothing…is quite clear, nor is it supposed to be" (Canby); *Variety* complained that it

"violates every rule of storytelling and narrative structure," providing instead a "comic

book world chock full of references, images, pseudo-scientific ideas and plain mumbo

jumbo" (*Variety* Staff); Pauline Kael, meanwhile, found the "unmoored hipsterism"

"somehow likeable," despite the fact that "the characters don't develop and the laughs

don't build or come together" (6). Nevertheless, some general remarks on the plot are

necessary for this discussion, incoherent as they might appear. To wit: *The Adventures of*

Buckaroo Banzai Across the 8th Dimension, a cult film written by Earl Mac Rauch and

directed by WD Richter, is a madcap send-up of SF and B-movie tropes that follows the

eponymous jack-of-all-trades Buckaroo Banzai (Peter Weller) and his ragtag group of

international crimefighters, the Hong Kong Cavaliers, as they attempt to mediate an inter-

dimensional/planetary dispute between two alien species, the Red and Black Lectroids,

which threatens to destroy the United States, if not the Earth itself. The Red Lectroids—

who are disguised as white businessmen/federal agents (i.e. black suits and black ties)—

are the film's antagonists, a warmongering species bent on the destruction of their

peaceful counterparts, the Black Lectroids. The Black Lectroids—disguised, for some

reason, as Rastafarians—have, at some point in the film's past, imprisoned the Reds'

leader, Lord Whorfin, in the Eighth Dimension. However, in an early flashback the

audience learns that the experiments of one Dr. Lizardo (a brilliantly deranged John

Lithgow) involving a dimension-spanning device referred to as an "Oscillation

Overthruster" have allowed Lord Whorfin to take control of Lizardo's mind, rendering

him prone to sinister mumblings but, until now, thankfully impotent via his imprisonment

in what appears to be a psychiatric ward. Lizardo/Whorfin's escape from said ward

provides the film's conflict, as he attempts to rally undercover Red Lectroids to retake

their home planet (or take over Earth, it's never quite clear). The Black Lectroid leader

eventually contacts Banzai, informing him that were Whorfin to gain control of an

Overthruster prototype, and thus gain the power to travel between dimensions, the Black

Lectroids would have no choice but to destroy some or all of the Earth in self-defense.

Given this ultimatum, Banzai and the Cavaliers race to stop Whorfin's evil plan, pausing

only to give press conferences on trans-dimensionality, perform as a band at a nightclub,

fall in love with a dead ex-wife's doppelganger, and perform brain surgery, among other

things.

In the terms of a straightforward allegorical reading, the film adheres to a fairly

traditional Cold War-era structure of signification, and the characters and the central

conflict become metaphors for otherness and the "containment" that such difference

requires.[4] Indeed, in 1984, as the Reagan Doctrine of "rollback" saw the heightening of tensions between the US and the USSR—including, for example, the proxy-war in Afghanistan pitting Soviets against American-funded *mujahideen*, each side's boycotting of successive Olympic games in Moscow (1980) and Los Angeles (1984), the deployment of Pershing II missiles in West Germany, the announcement of the Strategic Defense Initiative (or, SDI, aka Reagan's "Star Wars" missile defense system), repeated displays of military force, and the rhetorical re-branding of the USSR as the "Evil Empire" (1983)—an American audience would be hard pressed not to see in *Banzai*'s conflict the same archetypal binaries animating the U.S./us versus Them struggle defining then-contemporary existence. The basis for such a reading is in many respects that of the anti-communist xenophobia of a film like *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Siegel 1956), the standard SF "invasion" narrative which plays on fears about infiltration by sinister forces who look just like "normal" Americans—ideology, after all, is invisible, and McCarthyist paranoia is our only defense. The Red Lectroids, in both their "red"-ness and their insinuation into various levels of society, become clear stand-ins for the communist threat, positioning Banzai as the Real American Hero tasked with the unmasking, and subsequent defeat, of this existential threat. The suggestion of a

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[4] Though Michel Foucault's insights into the genealogy of institutional control and the production of otherness through enclosure and discipline throughout his works (for example, in *Discipline and Punish* or *Society Must Be Defended*) apply well enough here, the specific ideology of "containment" as it concerns US foreign policy is generally considered to have its genesis in a 1947 essay by George Kennan, "The Sources of Soviet Conduct," which argues for a fundamental impossibility of coexistence between US and Soviet cultures, and the necessity to contain the "flow" of communism throughout the world. This highly influential essay was inspiration for Eisenhower's "Domino Theory" and a host of other binary ideologies which (not to be reductive) essentially determined the course of US international policy in the second half of the last century.

connection between the Red Lectroids and Soviet power is underlined by the film's treatment of their leader, Lord Whorfin, who is too powerful to be confronted directly, and must rather be "contained" in the Eighth Dimension. The progressive scientific impulse of Dr. Lizardo, whose work on the Oscillation Overthruster has opened the door to the possibility of unimaginable destruction, is another archetypal Cold War SF invocation of the Pandora's Box of atomic power. That we see Banzai, in the film's opening scene, utilizing a more-developed version of the *same* Overthruster technology to bridge the dimensional divide demonstrates the possibility of responsible (i.e. United States-esque) handling of dangerous technology, in stark contrast to Lizardo/Whorfin's deranged performance, an allusion to the Soviet Union's unpredictable and frightening (to a Western audience, in any case) stewardship of its nuclear arsenal. In short, the film's allegory functions as a rehashing of the tired Cold War binaries underwriting virulent nationalist sentiment, via, in a more metaphysical sense, primal human fears about the limits of the visual episteme, the threat lurking beneath the neighbor's friendly smile, the quotidian paranoia of a Manichaean worldview.

To be clear, this is *not* the thesis of this paper. An allegorical reading of *Buckaroo Banzai* adheres to what Stuart Hall referred to as the "dominant-hegemonic position," a de-coding of a communicative transmission that makes sense of new information by fitting it into existing structural models, i.e. dominant, hegemonic, or "preferred meanings." He explains, "The domains of 'preferred meanings' have the whole social order embedded in them as a set of meanings, practices and beliefs: the everyday knowledge of social structures, of 'how things work for all practical purposes in this

culture,' the rank order of power and interest and the structure of legitimations, limits and sanctions" (134). In the case of an invasion-type film of the science fiction genre released in the year 1984, the audience's "everyday knowledge of social structures" points them ineluctably towards understanding the film as an allegory for US/USSR relations. However, reading the film according to an "oppositional code," one which "detotalizes the message in the preferred code in order to retotalize the message within some alternate framework of reference" (138), suggests that this commonsense Cold War reading is a mere ruse. The surface epistemology of the film, I will argue, *actually* targets the burgeoning neoliberal logic of the Reagan and Thatcher administrations, which privileges multinational corporate capital above human interests. The film's hegemonic allegory is a *parody* of the Cold War SF allegory, and a meta-joke at the expense of an unwary audience.

A Play of Surfaces

One of Vivian Sobchack's main contentions with regard to the class of late-1970s through 1980s SF films she identifies as post-futurist is their surface quality, their flat expansiveness. Her reading, primarily influenced by Fredric Jameson's explication of postmodern culture's "new depthlessness" (*Postmodernism* 6), includes a number of observations essential to any reading of a film like *Buckaroo Banzai*. Most post-futurist SF films, she argues, "construct a generic field in which space is semantically described as a surface for play and dispersal, a surface across which existence and objects kinetically dis-place and dis-play their materiality" (227). This visual field is "filled with

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curious things," and the subgenre "evidences a structural and visual willingness to linger

on 'random' details, takes a certain pleasure (or, as the French put it, *'jouissance'*) in

holding the moment to sensually engage its surfaces, to embrace its material collections

as 'happenings' and collage" (228). Films like *Banzai* evoke a "playfulness and pleasure"

which stand in stark contrast to the "cool, detached, and scientific vision" of traditional

SF cinema. This *jouissance* of "curious" or "random details" is evident, for example, in

the film's (in)famous watermelon scene: in the middle of a tense gunfight at the Banzai

laboratory, New Jersey (Jeff Goldblum) points off camera and asks, "What is that

watermelon doing there?" (The watermelon was visible in the clutter of a previous mise-

en-scene). Reno Nevada (Pepe Serna) answers, "I'll tell you later." Of course, he never

does.

This development in post-futurist/postmodern SF cinema leads to a visual excess

that locates meaning in the present moment, as everything becomes a given-to-be-seen,

items marked, like the watermelon, by both a pure availability to vision and a refusal of

deeper meaning. Sobchack insists that this postmodern mode is a simultaneous "spatial

deflation and inflation, emphasizing both the value of a surface detail that lacks

dimension and text-ure and the value of an excess scenography that substitutes quantity

for depth and accumulation for movement" (269). She explains further,

> Often, the visual excess of activity and scenography makes us want to see [post-
> futurist] films…again. But our perceived sense of "lack" has nothing whatever to
> do with concealment, with cinematic or narrative "depth," with "hidden"
> meanings that must be teased out. Rather, it has to do with the sense of having
> "missed" something. In these films, spectatorial desire is constituted from excess
> rather than from deprivation. There is more than meets the eye here, but the
> "more" is always available to vision, not hidden from it. What we see is precisely
> what we get—and so we want to exhaust our curiosity in the surfeit of this new

surface space, to see everything that is displayed and dispersed there, to generate meaning from the absolutely visible flux of material and action in complex but superficial relation. (270)

This location of meaning on the visual surface privileges the apparent over the hidden, the signifier over the signified. The "clues" to the production of meaning primarily come not from external hegemonic codes but from the given images and their diegetic "complex but superficial relation."

One moment which seems to unite Sobchack's conceptions of the excessive visual field, the pleasure of the random detail, and the production of meaning via non-contingent sight comes late in the film, when the camera lingers briefly on a billboard advertising Yoyodyne Propulsion Systems (Fig. 1.1), an aerospace firm and Defense Department contractor that the audience by now understands is a shell corporation for the evil Red Lectroids. The billboard is an overdetermined sign, both extra- and diegetically; it is a fully-loaded signifier, and an instance of the film's oppositional visual rhetoric. The diction and syntax ("…a growing excited company") are first of all a joke at the expense of the aliens, whose mastery of the English language is less than perfect.[5] The rest of the image, however, plays on the tropological substance of Cold War USA, providing visual touchstones and commonplaces that both recreate and humorously subvert the ideologies undergirding the Military Industrial Complex—that is, it is a parody of a straightforwardly allegorical image. The name Yoyodyne already invokes the actual Rocketdyne, a division of North American Aviation formed to study the German V2

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[5] Later, an "official" sign in their headquarters will designate an area as off-limits by proclaiming: "Nobody Cumz in Here…Sekrit".

immediate post WWII, so the satirical treatment of the brand here, along with the ugliness of the New Jersey industrial landscape the sign rises from, serves to comment unfavorably upon actual players in the development of US nuclear technology.[67] The company's motto, "The Future Begins Tomorrow," is an straightfacedly vacuous example of the empty signification that Edward Schiappa has linked to the Cold War phenomenon of "nukespeak," noting that the rhetorical strategies of "domesticization" and "bureaucratization" serve to "trivialize," "normalize," or obscure the power and human cost of missile technologies (134-5). The image of the white, smiling soldier waving an American flag evokes the spirit of victory and the mythological national unity manifest in the afterglow of WWII, an unbridled optimism closely connected to the conservative and white supremacist nostalgia for the 1950s and the "simpler times" of the "Leave It To Beaver" era; he also functions as the racist/capitalist image-apotheosis of the "American"—white, male, patriotic, obedient, exuding a cheerful "up-by-the-bootstraps" capitalist subjectivity. Further, the logo itself is visually suggestive in its rendering of the tropes of American exceptionalism and omni-potence, depicting the circular flight path of an orbiting rocket being penetrated by the phallic symbol of the triangle. Superimposed onto this is what appears to be the Earth's silhouette, apparently

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[6] Rocketdyne was an easy target already in 1984, since its Sodium Reactor Experiment in eastern Ventura county was "the site of an uncontained partial meltdown in 1959 that released hundreds of times more radiation into the environment than the Three Mile Island meltdown did 20 years later." Unsurprisingly, a 2012 EPA report confirms that sites like these remain highly toxic even into the 21st century, pointing to the ripples of Cold War events (and ideologies) that still afflict the nation. http://www.vcreporter.com/cms/story/detail/rocketdyne_still_hot/9658/

[7] Yoyodyne is further a direct reference to a fictional corporation featured prominently in Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* (1963). Fans have speculated that Pynchon returned the favor by alluding to the film's rock band—Buckaroo Banzai and the Hong Kong Cavaliers—in 1990's *Vineland*, in the passing reference to a band called "Eddie Enrico and his Hong Kong Hotshots" (78).

being held tightly between the clamps of a vise, signaling the state or potential state of American mastery at the global level. The joke is, of course, that the corporation, however imbricated in the tropes of nationalism, is a metonym for the nation-state only insofar as their interests align, that is, as long as American political policy encourages favorable economic conditions (which, in a neoliberal society, is, by definition, increasingly often). That this *particular* corporation is actually working in the interests of an extraterrestrial warlord is relevant, but ultimately beside the point. The final double-entendre the logo presents critiques neoliberalism and the MIC in a way that is simultaneously the most subversive and the most juvenile—while the indeterminacy of the controller of the vise (despite the juxtaposition with the American soldier) suggests that it is corporations (or "aliens-as-corporations") who control the planet, it is the indeterminacy of the globe itself which makes the point more crudely or viscerally: "They" have got our ball(s) in a vise.

As Sobchack notes, the xenophobic nationalist ideology that provides the foundation for traditional (Cold War) narratives of invasion or infiltration by a singular outside force (i.e. the Soviets or the Red Lectroids) becomes an ineffectual manner of understanding the new era of global capital, and this is represented in the depthless form of post-futurist films themselves. She writes, "A space perceived and represented as superficial and shallow, as all surface, does not conceal things: it displays them. When space is no longer lived and represented as 'deep' and three-dimensional, the '50s concept of 'invasion' loses much of its meaning and force. The new electronic space we live and figure cannot be invaded. It is open only to 'pervasion'—a condition of kinetic

accommodation and dispersal" (229). This narrative of "pervasion" is key to understanding the socio-political function of neoliberal corporatism in the postmodern age: "The electronic and 'nuclear' proliferation of multinational capitalism has increasingly concentrated and centralized control over the world as marketplace, but that center now appears decentered, occupying no one location, no easily discernable place" (234); rather, "[t]he 'multinationals' (as we have come to familiarly call them) seem to determine our lives from some sort of ethereal 'other' or 'outer' space" (234). The billboard is a symptom of the pervasive presence of the "ethereal," trans-dimensional alien-as-capitalist, the quotidian structures of corporate influence that shape our lives. To read the Red Lectroids as Soviet agents is to "lose the plot" in perpetuating the misunderstanding that our enemy is the Foreign Other, rather than an intrinsic part of our socio-economic and political structure.

The Pastiche Style

The ephemeral presentation of this billboard is part of the film's charm, the tendency of its cluttered surface to evoke our curiosity, the sense of having missed something. Importantly, a cursory examination of its basic attributes allows the audience to safely categorize it as run-of-the-mill Cold War rhetoric, with its 1950s-era animation style and juxtaposition of non-threatening military presence with inoffensively vague slogan. In this way, it becomes a representational microcosm of the film itself, which uses the formal generic trappings of traditional invasion-type SF cinema to the ends of ideological misdirection. In the above discussion I referred to *Buckaroo Banzai* as a

parody of an allegory, but it would be more apt to say that it is a *pastiche* of the Cold War

SF allegory, in that it is an imitation not of "a single text but of the indefinite possibilities

of texts" (Hutcheon 38 [1985]); that is to say, *Buckaroo Banzai* operates in the style of

the genre's past, rather than mimicking any previous film in particular. Indeed, "an

embrace of *pastiche*—a nonhierarchical collection of heterogenous forms and styles from

a variety of heretofore distinguishable spaces and times" is another key criterion in

Sobchack's production of the bounds of post-futurist SF film (230). Importantly, she

refers to this as "a literal (rather than ideological) conservatism" (230), implicitly

contrasting pastiche with parody, which, as Linda Hutcheon reminds, can "function as a

conservative force" (20 [1985]) by retaining and redeploying aspects of the original; "In

imitating, even with critical difference, parody reinforces" (26).

Given that *Buckaroo Banzai* is quite plainly a work of pastiche, any reading of it

via an oppositional code—a reading, that is, which suggests that it possesses some

subversive or progressive ideology—must implicitly contend with the Jamesonian

neutering of pastiche as a critical form. Since Sobchack's critical usage of pastiche

derives primarily (as does much discussion of pastiche post-1981) from Jameson's

seminal definition of the practice as the quintessential postmodern form, the points made

in my Introduction regarding Sandoval's critique of Jameson apply equally to her

reading. In short, pastiche, the prevailing aesthetic of the postmodern condition, is, in

Sandoval's reading, not Jameson's "insubstantial," ineffective, apolitical mode, but rather

"an aesthetic form that is both empty *and full* at the same time, a site of active

possibility" in which the "dissolution of subjectivity's wholeness" provides "an empty

form capable of constant refilling" (190). The flat, surface blankness of pastiche makes it a protean aesthetic form, defined by mobility and adaptation; further, its "neutral practice of…mimicry" suggests that it doesn't carry the ideological baggage of its source text in the same way that parody might. Thus, a film like *Buckaroo Banzai* might reproduce the surface narrative of a Cold War invasion movie without reproducing the ideologies of the Cold War, allowing it to critique both those mid-century ideologies and their then-contemporary progeny, all without ostensibly appearing to do so.

The Banzai Style

Buckaroo Banzai repeatedly thematizes both the formal mode of pastiche and the emphasis on the surface play of meaning through its construction of identity as a shifting and mobile plane of appearance, making ornamental motifs of clothing, and even race. Sobchack identifies the pastiche in the (non-)development of Banzai's subjectivity, which "foregrounds the heterogeneity of its cultural accumulations": "Born of an American mother and Japanese father, Buckaroo is an accomplished race-car driver, neurosurgeon, inventor, rock star, and adventurer, who lacks 'personhood' in any psychological or coherent developmental sense; he is all 'image and action,' 'made up of pieces of the pop cultural landscape, and…defined moment by moment—each one erasing any smudges of history from the last—by aggressive actions" (254, quoting Aufderheide, ellipses in original). This, she argues, is an effect of the heterogenous kineticism of the surface aesthetic of the post-futurist screen space, in which "constant busyness and motion are enhanced by the material clutter of excess scenography to distract the eye from locating

itself in the fixed position from which the conception of personal movement, depth, and interiority (or subjectivity) becomes possible" (270).

I would argue that this lack of subjectivity afforded to the post-futurist Buckaroo may be read productively as an oppositional mobility which allows Banzai to act in relation to a context, rather than merely executing a singular ideological mandate. Importantly, he is a national and ethnic hybrid figure—the first thing the film audience sees is an expository text explaining, "Buckaroo Banzai, born to an American mother and a Japanese father, thus began life as he was destined to live it…going in several directions at once" (ellipses original). While the film here seems, counter-intuitively, to identify national/ethnic ancestry as essential or a type of fate, what is notable is that a) Banzai is explicitly given a partially non-American background (of an Axis power, no less), and b) he is narratively endowed with a certain kind of simultaneity, given his ability to act "in several directions at once." While the first point places him at odds with a straightforward rendering of the archetypal American Cold War protagonist, the second gestures at what seems to be a type of superpower, his embodiment as the apotheosis of catholicity, the ultimate Renaissance Man. By explicitly figuring him as co-constituted, the film attempts to grant its protagonist an untheorized capacity for a politics of self— and indeed, a self—that is not limited or singular; further, it does this through identifying in him a type of racial marginality seemingly precluded by any narrative steeped in a Cold War xenophobia, flying in the face of sociohistorical and genre anxieties around otherness.

The film supports Sobchack's claims regarding the post-futurist elimination of "interiority (or subjectivity)" in its portrayal of Banzai's "several directions at once" ontology. What she doesn't ever note in her discussion of *Buckaroo Banzai* is the specific manner of the film's production of depthlessness, which is depicted as abrupt shifts in context, accompanied by equally abrupt shifts in sartorial style. Clothes become visual markers which translate the character's malleable flesh from scene to scene, granting him a pseudo-identity that could not reasonably be equated to some sort of "core self," since he finds definition only in extreme fungibility. To give a few examples: he is a neurosurgeon in scrubs and a headlamp; he is a physicist in a lab coat; he is a race-car driver in goggles and a ninja mask with a Japanese headband; he is a rock star in a disheveled slim blue suit with an upturned collar and loosened necktie; he is a celebrity-scientist media darling ala Neil deGrasse Tyson in a bowtie and thick-framed glasses; he is a commando in combat boots and a cargo vest. Since we have no conception of an essential "Buckaroo,"[8] it is through these shifts in clothing that he "becomes" these different versions of himself, a visual rhetoric of clothing which must be regarded as ontological, rather than an epiphenomenon of some "naked" or "true" self. Edward Schiappa, in his study of the philosophical limits of legal rhetoric, suggests that linguistic contingency prevents us from ever asking "What is X?"—which ultimately represents an

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[8] Surely, also, that *can't* be his "real" name. More likely it is another identity motif, an expression of self which is commonly understood to be essential, personal, but which is rather purely rhetorical, pure language. However, even in recognizing its rhetoricity, the name—especially the *chosen* name—is as much an ornament as a visual sign or style, and thus part of the constellation of discourse which constitutes the individual as such. That is, we don't need to know his "true name"; the effects of the juxtaposed national and pop cultural tropes invoked by "Buckaroo" and "Banzai" already give us access to his being, the actuality of his character. The alias, in this sense, is yet another "disguise which reveals."

inquiry into metaphysics and Platonic essences—but rather forces us to formulate definitions as "X counts as Y in context C" (xi). In terms of this film, we might productively adapt Schiappa's rhetorical relativity into the cinematic realm given the surface-oriented ontological conditions of our hero—"X appearance counts as Buckaroo Banzai in scene C."

We might think of this as an "ornamental" ontology, one which takes as its end the apparent, visual qualities which a depth-ontology or an allegorical hermeneutic relegate to a starting point, something to move beyond. David Summers' discussion of rhetorical style notes the de-valuation of the ornamental and the visual-material in a classical metaphysics, writing, "The 'ornaments' and 'colours' of rhetoric, like colours in general, were perennially associated with surfaces and with the 'superficial', therefore not only with sense and feeling rather than reason, but with seeming rather than being" (99). However, in a post-futurist/postmodern aesthetic characterized by "depthlessness" and a privileging of surface, it is what Susan Sontag called the "sensuous surface of art" ("Against" 13) that provides the only possible locus of meaning, or of being. Sobchack suggests as much in her discussion of the superficial and heterogenous logic of post-futurist screen space: "Confronting all this visual excess and its competing demands, the spectator's attention skims over and across the surface of space and things. Being itself is decentered and dispersed, and the identity of both spectators and characters again becomes constituted as 'terminal'—flattening residual psychic depth into the visibility of convulsive action displayed on complex space" (270-271). While I would hesitate to extend the cinematic logic of surface dispersal to the identity of the *spectator* of a film

like *Buckaroo Banzai*, the characters themselves are paradigmatic instances of the "flattening [of] residual psychic depth," as their identity becomes a matter of pure visual display, especially via the visual ornament of clothing. This is in keeping with the theoretical treatment of fashion as a visual logic of being put forth notably by Cristina Giorcelli, who suggests that "if dress is the *appearance* (or outer layer) that masks an *essence* (or inner content), then it can also be viewed as an epiphenomenon of a lack of essence, of a lack of being" (2). Manuela Fraire, continuing in this line, argues that "the naked body lacks meaning: it can only acquire meaning, and become human, once it is veiled and/or unveiled" (8). There are echoes here of Susan Sontag's Aestheticism, as when she writes, "Even if one were to define style as the manner of our appearing, this by no means entails an opposition between a style that one assumes and one's 'true' being…In almost every case, our manner of appearing *is* our manner of being" ("Style" 18). This is very close to Judith Butler's discussion of the performativity (as opposed to expressed-ness) of gender: rather than any concrete internal essence or subjectivity being given expression,

> Acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this *on the surface* of the body.…[These] are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality. (136, italics original)

Though the film figures Banzai's performance of self as social/occupational/political rather than gendered (by which I mean that his masculinity constitutes an uninterrogated, naturalized constant), his bodily surface is similarly a site of discursive play, and perhaps dispenses even further with the illusion of interiority in its meaninglessness prior to the

contextualization of action and ornamentation. To restate this point a bit differently, the style of one's appearance, encompassing the visual ornament of clothing, not only places the individual in "relations of status and social power" (Summers 98), but also affords the spectator a best-guess at some hypothesized interiority or being; when the extreme flattening of the cinematic space removes the possibility of that interiority, appearance/performance becomes being itself, as Buckaroo Banzai demonstrates in his kinetic sartorial role-play. Weller's Banzai is the apotheosis of that favorite cliché of grandfathers and suit salesmen: "The clothes make the man."

What becomes interesting, then, is that in addition to its ornamental theorization of Banzai-as-clothing, the film plays with race in a way that constructs it as a visual ornament, one which constitutes certain innate antagonisms. It is through the film's treatment of race that the narrative challenges most explicitly any purported association with the familiar Cold War binary opposing (white) America to the Foreign or Soviet Other. This is accomplished in the first place through the film's emphasis on Buckaroo's hybridity (as discussed above), his foundational racial/national ancestral *bricolage* which provides either the impetus or the ability for his occupation of a multiplicity of roles. The white actor, Peter Weller, marks his alterity for the audience via his donning, in the opening scene, a bandana depicting the red circle of the rising sun, superimposed onto which are a few Japanese characters.[9] By briefly ornamenting himself thusly, Weller's

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[9] A bonus track included on the DVD, "Pinky Carruthers' Unknown Facts," claims that the characters translate as "Beauty in everyday life."

ancestry is "proven" in the only way that matters to the film. We might say, "Buckaroo Banzai wearing an Oriental(ist) headband is Japanese in Scene 1."

I would stress the imperfection/inadequacy of this moment of racial performance, specifically as it applies to Weller. For a film that structures itself according to a strict logic of appearance, the expository text (read by the audience at the film's outset) constructing Weller as bi-racial becomes too important to a critical experience of the character. That is, without the express knowledge of Banzai's Japanese ancestry, the film's association of Weller with Japanese iconography becomes, as I suggest at the end of the previous paragraph, an orientalist move, the production of a certain type of connotative hip techno-futurity for which "Japan" had become shorthand in the 1980s US (see, for example, the fiction of William Gibson, or Ridley Scott's dystopian Los Angeles in 1982's *Blade Runner*). Even given the exposition, though, the moment still remains at odds with the balance of the film's surface episteme, as it asks the audience to approach the visible image bearing in mind a certain in-visible datum which renders the donning of the Japanese headband an act not of appropriation, but of *expression*. And this is precisely the problem—in this instance, a non-apparent, genetic, racialized self is posited as the *a priori* from which Banzai's performance proceeds. Thus, as a prolepsis against accusations of a colonialist/orientalist relation to a fetishized Japanese identity, the film must undercut one of its organizing principles via the incorporation of a racially essentialist exposition. I would, however, argue that this is an exception to what is elsewhere a consistent diegetic onto-epistemology.

That order is apparent in the visual logic of race around the aliens—the Red and Black Lectroids—which works to subvert the national/ethnic binaries of the Cold War narrative being pastiched, amounting to a trenchant critique of the Military Industrial Complex. To wit, the warlike Red Lectroids, identified in a stock allegorical reading as manifestations of anxieties around communist infiltration, should more appropriately be read as exactly how they appear, and how they function in the context of the film; this would be reading them according the film's own surface, ornamental logic. The Red Lectroids[10] are "disguised" as white, middle-aged men in dark suits, all sharing the first name "John."[11] They are variously mistaken by other characters for both FBI agents and businessmen; which, in a manner of speaking, they *are*. Later in the film, we find that they have brokered *actual* defense contracts with the Department of Defense to provide the US government with some sort of weapons technology, and have therefore been receiving taxpayer funds for an unknown number of years. What is important to note here is that the dissimulation of their "real," non-human appearance is *not* a dissimulation of their identity and place within the social structure—they are disguised as what they are, essentially government-affiliated corporate henchmen. Thus, the Red Lectroids are metonyms (not "symbols") for capitalism, as well as bureaucracy, the industrial war machine, and racial and class privilege. The repetition of the first name John is a

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[10] We later learn that the Red Lectroids infiltrated the US on October 30, 1938, the date of Orson Welles' infamous "War of the Worlds" radio broadcast, which is recontextualized as an *actual* news broadcast (albeit one which he was later hypnotized into retracting).

[11] Though their first names are all "John," the movie takes a juvenile delight in providing the Red Lectroids with a number of silly last names, including "Ya Ya," "Small Berries," "Littlejohn," and "Bigboote." A recurring joke sees the latter, played by Christopher Lloyd, hailed as, phonetically, "John Big Booty," which he is forced to angrily correct: "It's 'John Bigboo*TAY*!'"

demonstration of their stock white-Americana fungibility, while their identical suits

position them in the orbit of federal and financial power. This is to say that the Red

Lectroids—the film's villains—are, despite their dog-whistling "redness," conceived of

as domestic, rather than foreign, oppressors. They suggest not the infiltration of a

righteous or pure American polis, as in the symbolic logic of US diplomat George

Kennan's (in)famous imagery of contamination and containment, but rather a neoliberal

pervasion of the nation's core discursive structures. This alone works to shift the filmic

intervention from a Cold War critique of otherness to an indictment of the systems of

power and oppression that operate, by government mandate, as hegemonic logics in the

domestic sphere.

The Black Lectroids further reinforce this point. Their human disguises are as

implicit Rastafarians—they are all black men, wearing long dreadlocks and speaking in

thick Jamaican accents. In terms of a Cold War allegory, their opposition to the Red

Lectroids-as-Soviets would situate them in a structural position within the narrative as

"American"; however, their hair, accent, and race are audio-visual signifiers that

immediately locate them as not only "foreign" in terms of nation or geography, but as

always-already outside of the hegemonic image-trope of the "American" illustrated so

aptly by both the Yoyodyne billboard and the Red Lectroids' disguises (i.e. a buttoned-up

bourgeois whiteness). The simple fact of their appearance—their presence in the film as

they appear—portrays their resistance to the Red Lectroids as precisely the resistance of

the other to evil *American* forces. This works both in terms of an African-American

blackness under siege via the socio-juridical agenda of the Reagan administration, and in

terms of the Jamaican Rastafarian tradition of opposition to the materialism and greed of the modern-day "Babylon." That last, of course, is often understood as thinly-veiled reference to the United States, but applies more broadly to a swathe of US-backed neoliberal ideologies that have devastated Jamaica (in itself and as a Global South or Third World metonym), via, for example, the actions of the International Monetary Fund, whose predatory loans effectively held Jamaica hostage after the oil crisis of the 1970s— in the period between 1977 and 1986 the nation's debt repayments to the IMF soared from 16% to 35% of exports (as of 2013, the nation was still spending "twice as much on debt repayments as…on education and health combined" [Dearden]).

If the "masks" worn by the Black Lectroids place them in the structural position of the formerly-colonized, this is, again, not a dissimulation of their meaning, but only in keeping with their function in the narrative itself: they are the liberated subjects of the oppressive Lord Whorfin, whom they have expelled from Planet 10 in an act of self-determination. Reading them as performing an anti-/de-coloniality explains not just their resistance to the Red Lectroids, but their seemingly unrighteous threat to destroy the USA/Earth if its citizens don't prevent Whorfin from gaining the dimension-spanning Overthruster technology. This, in fact, marks a radical politics of accountability, a refusal to stand silent in the face of the First World's export of neoimperialist ideologies and military forces across their (dimensional) borders, an insistence that the society which has historically fostered these problems take responsibility for the mess it has created. This is precisely why the film never faults the Black Lectroids for their apocalyptic menace, why Banzai and his team work alongside them even as they promise annihilation—they are

the voice of those trampled underfoot in what Walter Benjamin called the "triumphal procession" of history (256), the return of the Empire's repressed, and their demands are just.

This is all to say that the appearances of the aliens are, quite literally, disguises that reveal, taking the unreadable, lizard-like alien body and making it legible within the discursive field of visualized (non-)American identity. By attending to the film's ornamental surface text, an oppositional reading counters the comfortable displacement of the film's domestic critique onto an overseas other. This aligns with Sobchack's discussion of the treatment of the alien in post-futurist film, a figure that "no longer poses the political and social threat it did in the SF of the 1950s" (292). She explains that the otherness of the alien becomes less remarkable via its being subsumed into the logic of "postmodern culture's paradoxically totalized heterogeneity" (293); that is, if alienation is posited as the essence of identity in postmodern culture, then aliens become less figures of unknowable alterity and increasingly reflections of ourselves. As she puts it, "Today's SF film's either posit that 'aliens are like us' or that 'aliens R U.S.'" (292). The foundation of the disguised Black Lectroids' common ground with the protean Buckaroo Banzai is precisely in this shared sense of liminality and multiplicity, the fragmented self of the alienated subject. They further share a sense of moral purpose in their guerilla resistance to the dominant forms of violence and oppression. The Red Lectroids, for their part, fall into the 'aliens R U.S.' category, in their embodiment of the American transnational character, neoliberal stooges propping up the MIC. After all, though Sobchack argues that "most of the new SF films do not represent alien-ness as inherently

hostile and Other," she clarifies that "[t]his is not to say that alien Others are never represented as threatening and villainous in contemporary SF, but rather to emphasize that if and when they are, it is generally within a narrative context in which other aliens are shown as friendly and 'humane'" (292). The Red Lectroids are, as Banzai exclaims, "Evil! Pure and simple from the 8th dimension!"; however, they are still recognizably us/U.S. in their participation in and support for the structures of global capital. This is a mark of sameness, not difference—as Sobchack explains, post-futurist films "dramatize the *familiarity* of multinational capitalism, and represent its totalized domestication, commodification, and pervasion of worldly space" (300).

This familiarity of multinational capital is key to understanding the ways that the Red Lectroids are integrated seamlessly into the movie's representation of America. The Black Lectroids (having only recently arrived on Earth, in the narrative context) wear their disguises uncomfortably, loping awkwardly around, setting themselves apart from the crowd. This, of course, is only in keeping with their endlessly reflexive otherness in the film's logic, their accumulatively subaltern status as black, as foreign, as citizens of the Global South, all of which set them outside of the scopic-discursive space of The American. The invisibility of the Red Lectroids as such, their ability to not merely infiltrate, but *participate*, speaks to their imbrication in the fabric of the social order, and to the markers of neoliberalism and the MIC as the very quintessence of the American experience. This dynamic calls to mind the film *They Live* (Carpenter 1988) that four years later would develop this motif through a pair of Ray-Ban sunglasses which allow an

everyman construction worker, John Nada[12] ("Rowdy" Roddy Piper), to perceive not

only the capitalist aliens running society but also the omnipresent imperatives to

"consume" subliminally embedded in mass media and urban infrastructure. The

sunglasses, visual symbols of white privilege and Yuppie culture, become

recontextualized as tools for the oppressed subject to navigate the distortions of ideology,

the latter visualized as explanatory texts hidden within the overt symbols and concrete

manifestations of the capitalist order (a dollar bill, for instance, seen through sunglasses,

reads "This is your God"; a billboard featuring a swimsuit model reads "Marry and

Reproduce"). This is similar to the cinematic motif in *Buckaroo Banzai*, in that the

quotidian appearance comprises a mediation between the human subject and some

underlying truth. However, while both films include aliens whose human appearance

dissembles a true, monstrous/inhuman form—fleshlessly skeletal, in the later film, as

opposed lizard-like in *Banzai*—*They Live* stands in contrast to *Buckaroo Banzai* in its

theorization of meaning as concealed beneath the surface appearance of commodities and

advertisements, locating the de-coded ideology at some deeper, obscured level. In

Buckaroo Banzai, visual recognition of the Lectroids' non-human true physiognomy is

not explanatory; rather, the "truth" of the Lectroids' socio-ideological function is

contained in their *human disguises*, which index them within/without the dominant

discursive paradigms of 1980s American society. Though Team Banzai is eventually able

to visually penetrate the Lectroids' human façade, it is that surface which remains the

ultimate site of meaning in the film's superficial narrative epistemology.

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[12] A moniker that would fit seamlessly into *Buckaroo Banzai* as a Red Lectroid name.

An (Anti-)American Hero

By acknowledging the contingent, performative nature of power, Chela Sandoval argues that under a postmodern discursive regime, there are opportunities for "individuals and groups seeking to transform dominant and oppressive powers" to implement "subjective forms of resistance other than those determined by the social order itself" (54). This is accomplished through the navigation of mobile structures of signification and a denial of fixed or singular essence, through the adopting of "orientations," or "repositories within which subjugated citizens can either occupy or throw off subjectivities that at once enacts and decolonizes their various relations to their real conditions of existence" (54). In other words, by removing the onto-epistemological center which both subjects and subjectifies, the (post-)postmodern experience opens up a space for subjectivity to be performed across a broad range of what Gayatri Spivak has called "strategic essentialisms," roles which are available to address concerns and modes of power which are contingent or hidden. Per Jameson, the advent of postmodernity marks the end of the era "when it was possible to apprehend clearly who were the rulers and who the ruled and to look clearly into the face of one's enemy" (24). Therefore, in defining her conception of "oppositional consciousness," what Sandoval stresses is that just as oppressive power is decentered and mobile, so are its forms of resistance.

Buckaroo Banzai, serially "X in context C," performs just this type of mobile, contingent subjectivity, and this, coupled with his burgeoning awareness of the conditions of his oppression (an ability to see through the Lectroids' human disguises

granted when the Black Lectroid leader, a uniquely female Lectroid character named John Emdall [Rosalind Cash], zaps him through a payphone), allows him to enact resistance against the Red Lectroids as neoliberal metonyms. In his occupation of different positionalities he is able to access various locations of power, including both the office of the US Presidency and a decentered network of reserve guerillas called "The Blue Blaze Irregulars." It is in scenes involving the former that the audience sees just how compromised the government has become: the American Commander-in-Chief is trapped in a ridiculous form of traction, suspended in what looks like a giant metal hamster wheel. This visual appearance of physical impotence is, again, not contradicted by any "deeper" character traits—President Widmark (Ronald Lacey) is an ineffectual simpleton literally immobilized not only by his bad back, but by indecision. His response to hearing the details of the acute existential threat posed by (the Black Lectroids' resistance to) Lord Whorfin is stammering befuddlement: "Buckaroo...I, uh...I don't know what to say. Lectroids? Planet Ten? Nuclear extortion? A girl named John?" His nonetheless casually apocalyptic power—he subsequently requests and begins filling out a "Declaration of War…the Short Form"—is an indictment of the centralization of power in an American political system which privileges corporate capital (in his dependence on the Red Lectroids, aka Yoyodyne Propulsion Systems, for his "Truncheon bomber") and defers to belligerent military interests.

These aggressive proponents of militarization are represented here by the stubbornly pugnacious Defense Secretary (Matt Clark) who provides an explicit contrast to Banzai's oppositional heterogeneity. He warns the President against trusting the

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protagonist and his team: "It's not Buckaroo Banzai *per se*, Mr. President. It's his *men*. Foreigners, some of them! Oh, their names have been changed. Their *true* backgrounds are shrouded in secrecy!" This nationalist rhetoric of othering and the anxiety about the hidden essences of those around him marks the apotheosis of the Manichean, dualist discursive structure which is both (neo-)Platonic and quintessentially Cold War. The Secretary's suspicion of otherness, his distrust of the surface level of appearance, has no rational resolution, as he cannot ever gain unfettered access to another person's interiority. Instead, this idea that a person's "true" character is somehow not comprised by their outward performance—not just their appearance, but their actions in the world—but by an unaccountable interiority legitimizes an exclusionary and racist rhetoric. That is, if *nobody* can be trusted, then those who are already at the margins of society are doubly-excluded, as they are always-already disqualified from the preconditions of American-ness (nationality, ethnicity, race, religion) that constitute the mere possibility of being a full citizen, a sovereign subject, a human. For his part, the Secretary's suspicions are de facto unjustified in the film's logic, and he is shown to be morally bankrupt when he declines to intervene in Lord Whorfin's torture of Buckaroo's love interest, Penny Priddy (Ellen Barkin).[13] Pointing at the restrained and battered woman, he

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[13] Penny is another great example of the surface logic of the film. When he meets the suicidal woman while he's performing at a nightclub, Buckaroo is intensely taken with her; later we learn that this is because she is the twin sister of his dead wife, Peggy (a name he calls her a few times by mistake). Picking her up from the jail after she pulls a gun at the show, Banzai quickly determines that Penny and Peggy shared a birthplace—Cody, Wyoming—and infers that they must have been twins. Penny's confession, "I always felt that there was an…another part of me somewhere..." (ellipses original) creates the conditions of possibility for the audience, along with Banzai, to perceive her as not merely identical to, but *literally* the dead Peggy (who was "part of her"). Rather than any innate qualities or essential subjectivity, it is her appearance itself that allows her to occupy the role of Banzai's lover, an appearance that is the sum total of her value in the film's logic. Peggy remains the locus of libidinal investment; it is she who, we imagine,

demands the contracted-for military technology from the Red Lectroids, yelling, "Your private life, that's your own concern, but I'm here to see a *bomber*, and I'm damn sure gonna see it *now*!" His willingness to overlook a concrete instance of human suffering in pursuit of techno-capitalist and nationalist gain is the definition of the kind of ideological fixity comprising the dominant paradigm of Americanist teleology to which Banzai's humanist quest for justice—to "comfort the afflicted [and] afflict the comfortable"— stands in opposition.

The Secretary's dualist conception of a separate interiority or "private life" is not just at odds with the surface-oriented visual-discursive structure of the post-futurist film in which he appears; it is further a manner of thinking which allows for the separation of ethics from ethical action, of self from the style in which you engage the world, of ends from means. It is a manner of disengagement from the world as it exists. The surface, ornamental onto-epistemology of Buckaroo Banzai, conversely, denies the dualism that informs racist nationalisms and passive rationalizations, and instead embraces action, intervention, and the actual performance of resistance as the criteria for evaluating his ethico-political terrain. Like the Lectroids' non-disguises, Buckaroo's visual ornamentation and inhabiting of differential, potentially oppositional consciousnesses, in the plural, are the means by which he produces meaning, or produces himself as meaningful. Thus, Banzai—a mobile, hybrid bricolage of ethnicity, nationality, and positionality—is not an American hero, but rather a postmodern/post-futurist hero. That

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engaged in the work of courtship, had distinct non-visual qualities, etc. Penny is merely a doppelganger allowed to inhabit pre-existing structures of meaning via the meaninglessness of her appearance.

is to say that being identifiably American under Cold War discursive regimes implies a certain SecDef-ish constellation of unresolvable antagonisms and unmentionable entanglements. The film's (mostly consistent) discourse of contextual subjectivity allows Banzai to retain some sort of non-complicity with the neoliberal/neocolonial project, demonstrating that his ability to work within and through an American nationalist structure is only contingent upon its temporary alignment with his greater project of humanist resistance, and that he and his fellow travelers are not beholden to either xenophobic bureaucrats or some American-exceptionalist telos of anti-human domination.[14] When, towards the end of the film, the Secretary of Defense steals the Oscillation Overthruster, it is a recently deputized Blue Blaze Irregular, the black pre-teen Scooter Lindley (Damon Hines), who holds him at gunpoint, firing a few rounds into the air to cow him and ignoring his threats and bribes, until others come along to hold the sputtering military man accountable for his crimes. You get the sense that, for all its kinetic inanity, the film offers this moment as a microcosmic hypothesis, crystallizing in stark opposition to the grim reality of early 1980s America, of some other national order, one devoutly to be wished.

What is this science fictional social/racial order being gestured at here? To put this in the terms of the following chapters, is this other America one that we might call "post-racial"? It may seem so, in that race has no bearing on the essential value of an

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[14] Banzai often demonstrates a marked lack of reverence for the trappings of American bureaucratic power. At one point, Ed (Kent Perkins) arrives to inform Banzai of a phone call, saying, "President's calling, Buckaroo." Banzai responds, unimpressed, "The president of what?" His response, as well as his hybrid national identity, suggests his construction as a cosmopolitan figure, unaffected by the simplistic binaries animating exceptionalist American ideologies.

individual, or in the sense that whiteness is displaced as the visual locus of authority and blackness as the dermal signification of suffering and lack. However, this film, as I discuss above, seems in fact deeply invested in race-as-appearance (i.e. rather than, say, ethnicity), maintaining a consistent discourse of racialized oppositions between white (the Red Lectroids, US government officials), black (the Black Lectroids, the only members of the Blue Blaze Irregulars we meet), and "hybrid" (Banzai) characters. The ease with which the Red Lectroids move within and through the corridors of American power and the suspicion with which the Black Lectroids are greeted (by the president, and even by the gate guard at Banzai Headquarters) points to a world in which race-thinking is very much at the fore.

The values undergirding the American racial-patriarchal paradigm are, however, inverted as a form of resistance. The Anglo-European/white masculinity associated with Enlightenment rationality and techno-corporate control is shown to be irrational, violent, instrumentalizing, and cruel, with a self-annihilatory telos. The characters associated with blackness and the Global South are threatening, yes, but the danger they propose is reluctant, defensive, and oriented towards a morally-upright justice that the American-affiliated humans and aliens ignore in their self-interested pursuit of power. As opposed to the on-screen torture and murder committed by the Red Lectroids, the potential anti-American violence offered by the Black Lectroids remains abstract throughout, as a result of their otherness as Third World metonyms, the undemonstrated capabilities of their space-weapons, and the fact that they're really quite nice in person. Scooter's confrontation of the military man is, however, a return of that potential for violence to a

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specifically US American context, a fantastic one in which institutional power is not sacred, but is held to account by those it has dismissed as being epiphenomenal to the American-qua-white-supremacist project. The image of a young black boy pointing an assault rifle at the (white) US Secretary of Defense is, in itself, a thrilling moment, made all the more so because of its affirmation within the diegetic logic. It is a credit to the film's satirical inertia that though the audience may not quite know how we got here plot-wise, they know exactly who to root for now that we've arrived (we might say as much about the paradigmatic figure of the "woke"-yet-ahistoricist Millennial). This is to say that, after all, the film is not post-racial in the least; rather, it is anti-racist, anti-white supremacist.

The difference between post-racialism and the film's position might be illustrated by the contrasts between Paul C. Taylor's three options for the future of critical race theory in a contemporary world that recognizes the effects of "classical racialism" on creating and naturalizing oppressive social hierarchies:

> Some argue that race-thinking is obsolete and indefensible, and should give way to some variety of nonracial humanism, universalism, or cosmopolitanism. Others argue that race is a storehouse of social meaning that we can appropriate and play with as we see fit. And others argue that race-thinking remains a useful tool for navigating and understanding the world that previous race-thinking has made. (638)

While Chapter 3 contains an extended critique of the first option (post-racialism), the latter two seem to illustrate both the post-black discourse of Kehinde Wiley and *Key & Peele* (Chapters 2 and 3, respectively) as well as the much earlier intervention of *Buckaroo Banzai*, a film which plays with the connections and disconnections between bodies marked by race and the social meanings attached to these bodies, in a way that

maintains an existing discursive terrain while modifying the racial text produced within that terrain. Whereas the post-racialism discussed in Chapters 2 and 3 works to decenter race as a relevant discourse—a move associated with the suppression of targeted social reforms, one that masks white supremacy as the subtext of a feel-good discourse of universal humanism—here race remains a contested field of disputed definitions and values. Just as *Buckaroo Banzai* works to evacuate surface appearance of essentialized meaning or subjectivity, so too does it attempt to evacuate racialized appearance of the sediment of antiblack valuation accrued via the aggregated instances of mass-mediated amplification of white chauvinist fantasy. Race has never been a matter of essence except in its deployment via the white supremacist discourse of classical racialism (e.g. "race science"), but it is essential to understanding a contemporary American moment shaped by that discourse, whether that moment is 1984 or 2018. Rather than ignoring race as a category of meaning, the film constructs it as an ornamental logic capable of both signification and meaninglessness; that is, race tells us nothing in itself, but our (American) reaction to the visual fact of racialized appearance tells us quite a bit about ourselves, our individual and national character, those unpleasant parts that must be addressed rather than swept under the post-racial rug. *The Adventures of Buckaroo Banzai Across the 8th Dimension* may not be the venue for that conversation, but it is a provocation illustrating how necessary such a reckoning was, and remains. It's not a revolution, but it's not nothing, either.
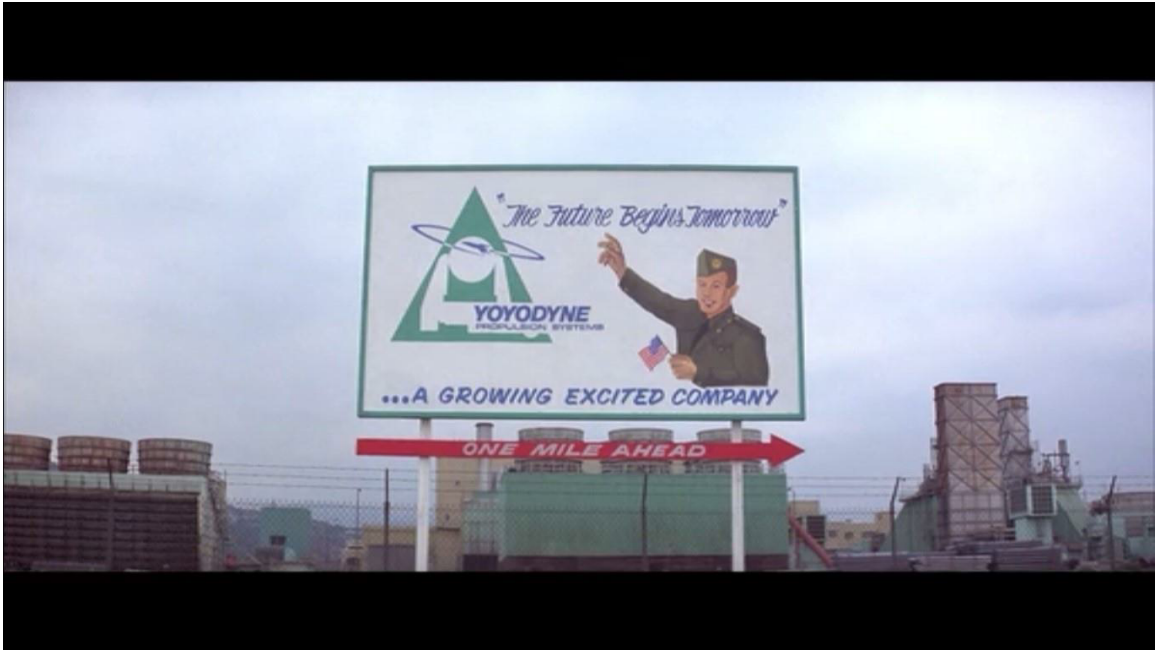
1.1 Screen capture from *The Adventures of Buckaroo Banzai Across the 8th Dimension* DVD

Chapter 2:

Painting Grace: Kehinde Wiley's Pastiche

and the Ornamental Construction of Post-Black Visuality

> [T]he essentialist question—"what is black art?"—is the wrong question to ask, for it implies a search for a set of immutable qualities. Rather, once "black" is understood not as a category of identity given by nature, but as a subject-position historically created by discursive regimes of power and knowledge in the social domain of "race," then the goal is to explore how art produces a signifying difference in the cultural codes of collective consciousness and thus has the potential to alter or modify prevailing consensus in the symbolic construction of reality.
>
> - Kobena Mercer, "Tropes of the Grotesque in the Black Avant-Garde" (2007)

Introduction: *Portrait of Andres Stilte* (c1639/2006)

In Johannes Cornelisz Verspronck's ca. 1639 work *Portrait of Andries Stilte* (Fig. 2.2), the audience is confronted by the cool stare of an unsmiling aristocratic gentleman clad in sophisticated finery which catches the light and sets him apart from the drab earth-tones of his surroundings. A feathered hat sits tilted rakishly upon his long dark hair; a lace collar around his neck is tied at the front with a small bow, matching the larger sash about his stomach, gathered at the small of his back like a blooming flower, fringed with gold. Lace embellishes his cuffs, his glove, his boots, all bone-white, immaculate, unspoiled by the cluttered, ramshackle poverty of the room. His affected pose is casually arrogant, watching from the sides of his eyes, body facing our left, gloved left hand on his hip and naked right hand holding a thin cane, with one foot angled towards the spectator in an attitude of display. He is both at the forefront of the scene and

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elevated above it, by virtue not only of the brilliant sheen of his clothing material but also the difference in height between his dog and, more absurdly, a servant or lesser man at his side. Standing together on the same platform, the dog watches from knee level, while the companion, carrying a rich crimson cloth but clothed in dull matte black, is awkwardly disproportioned in order to portray him as no taller than the small of the aristocrats back. The hierarchy is clear, and the presence of the animal naturalizes this difference as an ordering cosmology, rather than merely an accident of economics or birth; that is, the aristocrat is not merely a better or more accomplished human, but is rather placed upon an inevitable continuum sanctioned by the natural or divine principle, from the inanimate to animal to man to aristocrat, and so on. More than a mere display of wealth or vanity, the portrait is ideological, a statement about the onto-epistemological grounds of that historical moment.

Almost four centuries later, Kehinde Wiley's 2006 *Portrait of Andres Stilte II* (Fig. 2.3) presents the audience with a young black man dressed in hip casualwear— extra-large white tee, baggy jeans patched with recognizable NBA team logos, and gleaming brown leather Timberlands—posing imperiously, lightly grasping the top of a gold cane, surrounded by a wallpaper-like floral pattern teeming against a flat pastel backdrop, all couched in an overly-ornate gold frame embellished with elegant patterns, an ostentatious suggestion of wealth and decadence. His posture is reminiscent of Verspronck's gentleman, but exaggerated to such a degree that it becomes mocking, hyperbolic, even effeminate, highlighting the oddness of the 17th-century dandy's body language: his head is thrown back so far that we see only the slits of his eyes as he looks

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down his nose at us; his hips are thrown wide to accommodate feet set nearly

perpendicular to each other; his left hand is bent unnaturally at the wrist with fingers

splayed, while his right hand holds the cane in a manner made all the more suggestive by

the addition of a glans-like jewel at the top, the tip of which rests at the entrance to a

suggestive folding of skin created by the contraction of thumb and forefinger. There are

no other bodies in the painting, and the lively ornament which swirls behind and in front

of the young man belies the seemingly flat backdrop, adding the suggestion of depth to

the two-dimensional design. Potentially unnoticed, at the four corners of the frame are

decorative objects resembling eggs, each teeming with sperm-like embellishments in

relief.[15] The portrait references, mocks, and one-ups the earlier work, reappropriates an

exclusionary visual historical mode through substitution, and glorifies black masculinity

while at the same time subverting heterosexist narratives through the innate femininity of

ornament/decoration and the sexual ambivalence of the portrayed bodies. Somewhere

between kitsch and protest, Wiley's parody/pastiche methodology is anything but neutral.

Kehinde Wiley has made his career on precisely these types of juxtapositions,

contradictions and open-ended questions. Raised in lower middle-class East Los Angeles,

his mother enrolled him in private arts programs in order to keep him from falling in with

the prevalent gang culture of 1980s LA. By his own admission an "overweight, nerdy

boy" (Landi 87), he spent afternoons at The Huntington Art Gallery, marveling at the

works of the Old Masters while wondering at the exclusion of bodies that he could

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[15] cf *Alexander the Great Variation*, 2005 (Fig. 2.4): a frequent motif—on different occasions Wiley has explained it as a reference to aerial views of troop movements, thus a masculine signifier (Thompson 495), or, more entertainingly, "a send-up of old master painting as the ultimate cum shot" (Lewis 124).

identify with as a black man, even as his interests, education (later, an MFA from Yale) and queerness distanced him from certain inter- and intra-culturally enforced notions of traditional black masculinity. His practice of subverting the traditional process of commissioned portraiture—he often approaches anonymous "alpha males," strangers, on the street to ask them to model for him—has often been likened to a pickup, and easy notions of his work's didacticism—substitutions as visibility, critiques of European cultural hegemony, celebration of black masculinity—are troubled by his refusal to be limited by racialized identity politics, to be (merely) a "Black Artist" who makes "Black Art." He says, of his early artistic career,

> I always felt directly or indirectly encouraged to make work that referenced a negative history and that critically evaluated black history in America as it related to any number of atrocities…in the end, it took me through a concourse where I had to develop something on my own thing, related and unrelated to expectations, European art history, colonialism, modernism, representation, identity. Something had to come out of the discussion of blackness as a presupposed project. I had to look deeper and wider for my own heroes and processes of negotiation. (*Black Romantic* 50)

The eventual realization of his now decade-plus-long project is a result of his desire to treat the signs and symbols of History's visual rhetoric as "plaything[s]" in order to "brutalize the language of eminent visibility." This is an exposure and critique of the central function of portraiture, which by "depicting the figure in all his glory, stature, and rank" (48) served as an act of imagination and invention that consolidated power in the hands of the European aristocracy and erased non-white bodies from the historical narrative. He seems at times to be pulled in two, three, or no directions, wanting, "to aestheticize masculine beauty and to be complicit within that language of oppressive power while at once critiquing it," however "without answering any questions…." (53)

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This position points to what Linda Hutcheon refers to as the "paradox of parody," that dual movement through which, "even in mocking, parody reinforces" the dominant artistic convention or ideology (75 [1985]). Wiley's portraiture is a parody (or, as I prefer, pastiche) which both subverts and conserves hegemonic cultural norms; further, through his playful alteration of the West's European visual heritage he delivers complex political statements in codes and elisions, and uses the visual rhetoric of ornament and excess to both critique and construct a contemporary neoliberal visual subject whose ontological premises extend beyond the limits of an essentialist epidermalized identity, a move which is in accord with Thelma Golden's conceptualization of the aesthetic movement of "post-blackness".

The Post-Black Aesthetic

In the catalogue for the Studio Museum of Harlem's 2001 "Freestyle" exhibition, Thelma Golden, the show's curator and the museum's then-Deputy Director of Exhibitions and Programs (she become Director and Chief Curator in 2005), introduced the term "post-black" as a means of understanding and evaluating the artistic productions of certain young, African-American visual artists who were "adamant about not being labeled as 'black' artists, though their work was steeped, in fact deeply interested, in redefining complex notions of blackness" (14). For some, being a "black artist"—that is, an artist who is black, who a priori makes work which primarily reflects that essentialized racial identity—amounted to a limiting of the possibilities of aesthetic meaning, an elision of the specificity of the person and the politics of the individual work. In his

writing on the complex relationship between black cultural identity and the work of black

artists, Darby English suggests that dealing with the tendency to reductive categorization

of work by black artists "necessitates a view that recognizes the multiple meanings of

blackness and the plurality of ways of living under the black sign but also sees beyond

them to another realm of complexity. It requires a broad view in which race yields

something of its boundedness in its collision with differences and circumstances that

engender other kinds of affiliation and desire" (17). This emphasis on the "plurality" of

black experience pushes against monolithic understandings of racialized groups

(produced from both without and within the community), and speaks to the contemporary

understanding of identity ("affiliation and desire") as intersectional, multivalent, and

strategic. English's rejection of "boundedness" echoes the post-black refusal of a certain

type of racial identity which has been allowed to explain (e.g. "art by a black artist is

black art") or dictate (e.g. "art by a black artist is about blackness") the terms of both the

artist's and the audience's relationship to a work or body of work.

As I discuss further in Chapter 3, while Golden and English are concerned with

aesthetic representational spaces, the journalist Touré finds the term "post-black" useful

for discussing not only the cultural production but also the self-construction and

worldview of a new generation of African-American elite, neoliberal subjects in a

multicultural society who use the fluidity and multifacetedness of their respective

identities in order to question repressive or limiting conceptions of an automatic

"community" and move past skin color as an essentializing signifier. Using Comedy

Central's *Chappelle's Show* as "the clearest example of post-Blackness ever seen on television," he explains,

> A show like "Grey's Anatomy" gives us postracialism: It's filled with characters who are Black (as well as Asian and Latina) but race is almost always of no importance. Any of the characters could be switched to another race with little or no change to the character or the storyline…"Chappelle's Show" gives us post-Blackness: a vision of race that is as complex and messy and fluid as it is in modern America…[which] confronts the complexity of racial identity in a multiracial and multicultural society, explores the joys and pitfalls of having multiple ways of performing Blackness at your fingertips, and dives into the cross-pollinization of contemporary Black and white culture. (58-9)

Shows like *Chappelle's Show* and the Comedy Central sketch-comedy *Key & Peele*, heir to the post-black timeslot mysteriously abdicated by Chappelle, illustrate the same "allegiance to…comedic and artistic vision and…independence from a need to advance the race with [their] work" (57), and work to display the tensions and ruptures inherent in the "homogenous" black community, and the violent reduction and limitation of identity in positing an essential, normative, and all-explanatory Blackness. Thus, as with Golden's formulation, a cultural understanding of post-blackness is not a rejection or repudiation of blackness, but rather a recognition that there are sets of normative assumptions embedded in the term/category—akin to the way that biological sex is saddled with gendered socio-cultural expectations—which have gone uninterrogated for too long, as a result of white supremacy and black solidarity alike.

Chapter 3 goes further in distinguishing the terms post-black and post-racial, but here it may be enough to say that the work loosely organized under the rubric of post-blackness constitutes an aesthetic critique of existing currents in black art and culture without aligning itself against blackness per se, while post-racialism performs as an

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apologia for a dominant white supremacist paradigm by purporting to ignore difference in

a way that 1) normalizes whiteness as a universal racial script, and 2) uses the rhetoric of

universality to elide the historical and contemporary effects of racialized forms of

oppression. In the latter sense, post-racialism becomes a useful tool for the neoliberal

privatization/individuation of socio-economic risk, as it removes the onus from

oppressive structures and places it squarely on the individual, whose success or failure

thus becomes entirely a matter of their own effort or innate characteristics (e.g. both the

celebration of the success of exceptional individuals, and the ascription of others' lack of

success to X cultural pathology). The slippage evident in the discourse around these two

terms points to the necessity of proper contextualization; this chapter's discussion deals

primarily with the aesthetics of post-blackness in Kehinde Wiley's work, while Chapter 3

looks at the way Golden's ideas permeated the larger popular cultural sphere in the

following decade(s).

The Commodification of Post-black

Wiley is oft-cited (along with Kara Walker) as "the prototypical exemplar of this

new Post-Black avant-garde" through "his envisioning of blackness beyond abjection and

racial trauma" (Murray 92 [2007]); further, like the above theoreticians and comedians,

he rejects the idea of a single-note, exclusively dermal definition of community, along

with the policing of those community borders, arguing,

> This notion of being authentically Black is comforting. To be down is to be with
> it, to be with your people, to be part of the collective. But I think it's time to grow
> out of that. The cult of the individual is something that is going to be a rescuing
> point for the Black people…[y]ou have to see the whole field of options and

professions and fields of inquiry that exist in the world like one big buffet court. (Touré 8)

This spirit of striking out on your own is in direct contradiction to the ideals of "solidarity" and "*We* shall overcome" of earlier generations' struggles for civil rights (African-American, feminist, queer, etc). In a 2007 article published in *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, Derek Conrad (aka "DC") Murray narrates the criticism of this position through its economic narcissism, commodification of the black body, and unapologetic neoliberal stance:

> Post-Black has little use for Du Bois's double consciousness, or Alain Locke's pragmatic New Negro romanticism. Kobena Mercer's burden of representation is for naught in the Post-Black Era, since many black artists within this sphere appear to have rejected commmunity loyalties for rugged individualism. Taking its cue from hip-hop, Post-Black has begun to acknowledge the extreme marketability of abject black corporeality. Politicized, intellectual defiance has thus given way to resistance through economic gain and social climbing. Ultimately, Post-Black is a region of contradictions where hip-hop's street nigger archetype is the "new Nike Swoosh"—a sphere where the black male becomes a brand—and is indeed marketing gold—trapped within the panoptic house of mirrors that is multinational capitalism. (97 [2007])

Wiley's glorification of the black male body cannot be untangled from the large sums which these portraits fetch in the world of elite art, and his own fame, growing through museum shows, celebrity commissions, and poster-child success. However, I would argue that his art works within these structures not only out of necessity, but also because these structures are precisely what his portraits are *about.* The oft-critiqued materialist nihilism associated hip-hop artists (from whom, as Murray notes, Wiley's post-black art was "taking its cue") is reframed by Ismail Muhammad in a piece for the *LA Review of Books*; for Muhammad, the choice to "dwell in the strangeness of black wealth" in contemporary hip-hop is actually an oppositional stance with regards to neoliberalist

structures, enacted through the construction of a "Fantasy [which] blows the idea of

wealth and accumulation up to widescreen, cartoonish proportions so rappers can poke

fun at the duty to represent either lack or its flipside, responsible black artistic

consciousness." Like the hip-hop artists who pose for commissioned portraits and adorn

their walls with his works, Wiley's celebration of always-already-racialized excess

through his embrace of market rationalities functions as critique inasmuch as he is able to

beat the system at its own game, to reframe the art historical conversation, moving away

from the distinction between high/canon versus low/popular cultures and histories, and

towards an investigation of the ways in which these binaries are precluded by a late

capitalist sensibility which filters and constructs our experience. At some fundamental

level his work is *as* or *about*, rather than within, this market paradigm.

Murray's position in his incisive 2016 monograph *Queering Post-Black Art* seems

amenable to such a reading, without completely reversing his prior critique.[16] Comparing

Wiley's to the work of Kerry James Marshall, Murray notes that, "[a]s a pre-Civil Rights

generation artist, Marshall's engagement with blackness is more recuperative and

committed to creating dignified and uplifting images of African-American life" (82), in

contrast to Wiley's "cheeky satire" which "directs a sarcastic wink and a smirk back at

those who would demand that he create uncritically devotional and reverential images of

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[16] "I have written before about Wiley's branding of 'hip-hop's street nigger archetype,' transforming it into an economic symbol akin to the Nike swoosh. I admit, that assessment is rather strong, although as a polemical device, it gets to the core of the potentially bad taste that hovers awkwardly around the artist's work and career. Wiley is known for his embrace of marketing, extending his reach into design: he worked with Puma to design shoes for the South Africa World Cup. And in 2005, he was commissioned by VH1 to create portraits of rap artists for its programme *Hip-Hop Honors*." (Derek Conrad Murray, *Queering Post-Black Art*, 95)

black folks. There is no essentialist impulse in Wiley's work, no romantic nostalgia for a mythic black authenticity" (80). It is in noting the formal mode of this satire, however, that Murray points to a key element of critique embedded in Wiley's project: specifically, the fact that "[w]hen viewed in person and close-up, Wiley's paintings have a cheap plasticity about them, with a formal competence reminiscent of good sign painting…they have none of the surface complexity and dense layering of the masterworks they seek to emulate…they look and feel like mass-produced knock-offs of European paintings" (84). Despite what at first might seem an attack on the artist, Murray praises the formal quality of Wiley's painting as signaling engagement with "an intentionally constructed mode of satirical kitsch" (86) which engages with "the marketability and commodity fetishism of the black body" by "'literally producing' black males as objects to be branded and traded as high-priced luxury goods" (85) while simultaneously attacking "art history's theological adherence to questionable standards of excellence and rigid formalist conventions" (86). Both the images and their means of production—Wiley has multiple production studios around the globe which employ teams of assistants in a way that blurs the notion of authorship—point to a practice with a complexly layered critique of those institutions and ideologies within which it often transparently resides: blackness, cultural commoditization, the museum, art history.

Ornament as Ontology

If, at a formal level Wiley's art works to both perform and critique the commoditization of aesthetic virtuosity in the larger art world, the content of his paintings

points to the shifting terrain of neoliberal subjectivity, figured as visualization within the sphere of consumption. As discussed above, seeking in his work to place young black men in "positions of power," he reproduces the clothes and accessories of his subjects in high detail.[17] As Krista Thompson suggests, one touchstone for his practice is in the Surfacism of Van Eyck and other Dutch masters, so named because in crowding the canvas with material objects and detail, it "hindered a visual recession into the painting." This aesthetic practice involved a "concentration on the materiality or visual texture of objects within or of the picture plane," which often included the use of shellac to produce a "shiny effect" that in terms of the emerging market economy made "commercial value seem innate." Most importantly, Surfacism "historically articulates a way of seeing and describing that constitutes an alternative to, and perhaps a repudiation of, Cartesian perspectivalism, the most dominant and normalized scopic regime in modern history," suggesting an association with a subversive, counter-hegemonic visuality (485-486).

Wiley's intense focus on the materiality of his subjects includes using rapturous over-lighting, unreal digital color enhancement, and Rococo ornament in order to manifest his subjects within/as a "state of grace" (his words, USA). The men's skin itself seems lovingly embellished to a bright glow, catching and holding the light, or emitting it from within. There is a magnificence, heightened by the fact that most of his portraits feature figures painted 1:1 scale or even larger, looming like the demigods of a past civilization. Simply read, this methodology is a corrective for the exclusion of the black

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[17] See, for example, *After Van Dyck's Charles I and Henrietta Maria*, 2006 (Fig. 2.5)

body from portraits of great men. It grants the mostly-anonymous (Wiley tends to reinscribe the classical portrait title) men access to the same sort of spectacular immortality enjoyed by European aristocracy—as Wiley quips in a characteristic tone of sober almost-laughter, "Andy Warhol said that we would all have our 15 minutes—fuck the 15 minutes. I'm gonna give you a painting that'll make you live forever" (USA). Furthermore, his aesthetic draws parallels between the accumulation of authority and identity through display of the body and wealth in Renaissance portraiture, and the post-black, hip-hop and more generally neoliberal ethos of style and accessorization, commodity fetishism and performance, in a way that forces the audience to consider the possibility of ontology as in some way *ornamental*.

This is not to say that this is a new or revolutionary understanding of the relationship between subject and object, between accessory and accessorizer, between clothing and the body. In her analysis of Boethius' 6th century text *Consolatio Philosophiae* (c. 525), Andrea Denny-Brown persuasively argues that the author's preoccupation with "the trope of stripping and adorning" suggests "

> a particular cyclical human habit of thought and practice regarding the human accumulation of and attachment to material goods, one that constructs the self in terms of its embodied acquisition of external goods and that experiments with the interrelated concepts of having, wearing, and being (from Latin *habere*: to have, to wear, to be). (21)

Referencing Pierre Bordieu's concept of "*habitus*,"[18] Denny-Brown notes that the use of the term in Boethius's text—where "*habitus* connotes simultaneously the subject's

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[18] Or, "the way society becomes deposited in persons in the form of lasting dispositions, or trained capacities and structured propensities to think, feel and act in determinant ways, which then guide them" (Wacquant 316).

garments and his overall condition of being"—serves to "muddy the subject/object divide" in a way that "forcefully suggests the extent to which *wearing* is semantically and conceptually inseparable from *being*" (32).

This sort of anti-binary "muddying," however, has historically been anathema to a certain orientation towards materiality, especially as expressed in, for example, gnostic and (neo-) platonic thought, through, as Webb Keane notes, Thoreau's transcendentalism, 19th century Protestantism, and Adolf Loos' modernism. Each of these are invested in dichotomies which devalue appearance, exteriority, surface, and style, in terms ranging from the metaphysical (e.g. gnostic/platonic understanding of appearance as, to varying degrees, illusory/deceptive) to the aesthetic/utilitarian (e.g. Loos' insistence on function over form) to the social (e.g. Thoreau's "attack on fashion, which forces us to acknowledge the authority of others, whether that be the distant arbiters of style or the opinion of our neighbors" [Keane 184]). While Thoreau, for example, proceeds from "a particular understanding of the subject's fundamental interiority…[in which objects or material] signs are viewed, like other people, as thoroughly external to, or even at odds with, that interiority" (184), cultural theorists still make the (some would say) mistake of treating "signs as if they were merely the garb of meaning," i.e. extrinsic to meaning, something to be discarded or pushed past. The sign, however, is necessary for the manifestation of meaning, its immanence. It is the rhetoric of visuality.

The Derridean reconceptualization of the *parergon* is one instance of pushing back against a naturalized subject/object divide in aesthetic terms, with especial relevance to Wiley's work. The Greek concept of *parerga* refers to "embellishments, marginal

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additions subsidiary to the main work" which could take on a prominent role as "free displays of wit and skill" (Summers 102). Jennifer Anger uses Derrida's reading of Kant to make a compelling argument concerning the centrality of the *parergon* to an understanding of the aesthetic. As a detail or ornament, the *parergon* may either enhance the beauty of the work by "taking part" in it, or distract the viewer from the work by calling attention to itself (she uses Kant's example of a gold frame). She concludes,

> [T]he *parergon* plays in a liminal space where it can either merge for the viewer with the object itself, making it greater than it would be alone, or it can rupture the object, depleting it of its beauty. In the former case, the frame enters art and provides aesthetic pleasure. In the latter, the frame recedes into the world of things (signified in Kant by "gold frame"; as is traditional, color for him is specifically material and earthly). This is the mystery of the *parergon*: It is apparently detachable, yet it augments the purportedly autonomous art object as it can simultaneously convey art back into the world of things. The *parergon* vacillates between form and matter – even as Kant set up the latter as untransversable fields. [19] (8)

Vorris Nunley reads the latter role of the *parergon* as an instance of "mere decoration" in which the adornment is "self-referential or object-referential in that it seems to function in, of, and for its own sake." He opposes this to the concept of "ornament" which serves to "order, frame, distinguish, and enhance the meaning of an entity" (91). This distinction is useful for understanding the integrative role of the *parergon*. Here, the ornament, as *parergon*, far from being extrinsic to some essence of "Art," serves in a vital capacity, heightening the beauty of the artwork by serving as the vehicle to "convey art back into the world of things"; that is, make it present for the viewer, either materially or ideologically. Wiley's ornate gold frames, then, might be considered not merely

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[19] Anger's "form" is Kantian/Platonic, in contrast to the way that I will always use the term to suggest materiality and appearance.

decorative or extrinsic to the painted canvas, but as central to the work itself. The frames call attention to the work, they mark its boundaries, they offer social, economic, and historical connotations, they mark the canvas as High Art; further, in the example of the sperm and egg shapes in "Portrait of Andres Stilte II," Wiley's frames are in some way a continuation or a summation of the tropes, themes, and signifiers set out on the canvas.

I want to think of both the frame and the category of *parerga* as particular instances under the (rather broad) umbrella of the ornamental, a key lens through which to understand Wiley's work. James Trilling notably defines ornament as "elaboration in which the visual appeal of form takes precedence over the emotional or intellectual appeal of content. Or, to focus on the kinds of form that usually serve this purpose, *ornament is elaboration that relies primarily on the appeal of stylized or non-representational forms* (13-14, original italics). Importantly, Trilling stresses that ornament-as-such requires a "functionally complete" object which it relates to as an addition or epiphenomenon. This apparent disagreement with the way I have discussed the ornamental as being constitutive rather than extraneous to a subject/object/phenomenon might be resolved by following Nunley in separating this definitional aspect off as an instance of the decorative or "self-referential" mode (in any case, rejecting a strict subject/object binary renders the point moot). Ornament, argues Trilling, is further "the only visual art whose primary if not exclusive purpose is pleasure" (14), a point that becomes less apt as we move away from thinking of ornament in terms of painterly or architectural flourishes and start to look at especially vestimentary ornament.

The way I am considering the ornamental is not solely in terms of aesthetic

jouissance, but as a means of aggregating socio-political signifiers and moral/hegemonic

logics. David Summers, for example, writes that ornament "serves the purpose of

evaluation, adding to the force of artifacts by distinguishing and heightening them. Kind

and degree of ornamentation typically make social hierarchy clear, in costumes and

furnishings, and in the social spaces in which all these distinctions are evident as part of

the enactment of relations of status and power" (98); "ornament…serves necessary

purposes of making it evident and clear what people, things, places and structures 'are' in

the social worlds to which they belong" (101). However, even beyond the visualization of

social status, ornament expresses a *moral* register. Commenting on both the rhetorical

(e.g. "flowery" oration) and visual arts, he notes that ornament has historically been

"perennially associated with surfaces and with the 'superficial,' therefore not only with

sense and feeling rather than reason, but with seeming rather than being, and with those

people led by sense, passion, and emotion rather than by reason. (Ornament is often more

or less explicitly gendered as feminine)" (99). I am interested, here, in this "morality" of

the ornamental, the way in which it is rendered other in the masculinist discourse of

unadorned rationality. Summers makes the connection between the social/political and

moral ordering functions of ornamental signification more explicit:

> Usually ornament is used in a direct proportion to the hierarchical status of what
> is ornamented, and ornamentation in the service of the articulation of status is
> permitted a high degree of redundancy. It is possible, however, to be ornamental
> to the point of "unseemliness," and, again in the Western classical tradition, the
> critical language surrounding ornament is often highly moralistic, linking
> simplicity with probity, uprightness, and the straight path; or complexity with sin
> and decadence, the errant and crooked, the fantastic, the effeminate, serpentine
> and labyrinthine. (101)

This bristling at "unseemliness" and excess is echoed in the early 20th century in Adolf Loos' influential "Ornament and Crime" (1910), a manifesto championing the bare, functional form of industrial design. Ornament/decoration, according to Loos, was a "childish" endeavor; the pejorative becomes a metaphor to argue for a spectrum of relative civilizational attainment, with the "Papuan" people representing the lower pole and enlightened Europeans the higher. Ornament is like children scribbling on walls or Papuan "negro tribesmen" covering their bodies in tattoos—in civilized society, these are acts for "criminals" or "degenerates." Loos' racialist moralizing becomes faux-messianic as he envisions a Europe scrubbed of uncivilized excess, one of "plain, undecorated simplicity" that is "beyond ornament": "Behold, the time is at hand, fulfillment awaits us. Soon, the streets of the cities will shine like white walls! Like Zion, the Holy City, Heaven's capital." Here, the connection between functionalism and whiteness is made explicit, ornament associated with the dark, cannibalistic other whose influence has defaced the alabaster towers of Europe, thinly veiled symbols for an imagined racial homogeneity. The racialized terms of Loos' moral critique are consistent with historical attitudes towards (rhetorical) ornament, as Summers notes, "Classical rhetorical writers often associated excessive ornament with the 'eastern' and 'Asiatic,'" an understanding that "shaped the Western classical tradition in basic ways" (101). Foregrounding ornament, or recontextualizing the (for example) Surfacism of the Old Masters as expressly ornamental, challenges the racist and heterosexist legacy of neoclassicism and visual modernity.

Naomi Schor's writing on the "detail" has important correlations with the concept of the ornament I'm developing here, with emphasis on the gendered valence of the discussion around these terms. She conceives of the detail as operating in two prominent discursive contexts: "on the one side…the *ornamental*, with its traditional connotations of effeminacy and decadence, and on the other…the *everyday*, whose 'prosiness' is rooted in the domestic sphere of social life presided over by women," making the detail "gendered and doubly gendered as feminine" (4, original italics). She reads the recuperation of the detail in late-20th-century critical discourse as not only tied to the evolution/rejection of the Modernist and/or neoclassical aesthetic but also to the "erosion" of "dominant forms of patriarchy," especially as expressed in hegemonic binaries. To think about ornament and detail as associated with a disavowed femininity and projected onto (for example) black or Asian subjects or aesthetic forms—or, to define negatively, as associated with non-masculine and non-white/-European epistemes—opens up the possibility for conceiving of these terms as functioning in or through some space of opposition to a dominant white, hetero-patriarchal discourse. This might occur in terms of the sensual pleasure afforded by the ornamental detail as a counterpoint to the discourse of masculinist rationality, or in the ability of the ornament to (dis)order hierarchical structures in the (in a US context) predominantly white visual sphere through the aesthetic-affective register of *style* (here, as opposition to *meaning*). When they are marshalled to address systemic inequity and erasure, ornament and detail become *methods*, ones marked by an anti-essentialist and anti-binary emphasis on surface and materiality. I would like to think of these as tools in service of Sandoval's conception of

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differential tactics, discussed in Chapter 1; as she notes, "All social orders hierarchically organized into relations of domination and subordination create particular subject positions…[which] once self-consciously recognized by their inhabitants, can become transfigured into effective sites of resistance to an oppressive ordering of power relations" (55). Ornament and style, disavowed by a prevailing Western/European dogma and projected onto masculinist white supremacy's various others, are potentially the tools for dismantling these oppressive discursive structures.

I have argued that ornament and detail, as concepts which move in and around a subordinated logic of style, comprise oppositional logics through which a "mobile, kinetic" individual or ideology can navigate and negotiate a particularly American patriarchal/racialized system of oppression. I would like to think of these especially in relation to the pastiche of Buckaroo Banzai in Chapter 1, i.e. as a visual performance of the self. However, as in the negative, Jamesonian conception of pastiche, the anti-essentialist emphasis on style also results in the production of the neoliberal homo economicus who depends on hegemonic capitalist structures in order to "be" in any meaningful way. Trilling seems to get at something like this point, even from his neutral-presenting art historical frame:

> Nowadays almost all our accessories are bought ready-made. Whether the items we seek are clothing, jewelry, furniture, decorative objects or means of transportation, we look at a range of products, choose the ones we like an can afford, bring them home and add them to the cumulative, symbolic images of ourselves that we all construct, with varying degrees of diligence, throughout our lives. In this system we are free to choose and combine, but have no influence at all on the creation of the objects themselves, the building-blocks of our external self-images. This probably does not disturb most people, since even without such influence the possibilities for self-expression are almost infinite. (16)

If, as Daniel Miller notes in a discussion of materialism and anthropology, ours is "an economics that sees humanity as a capacity that is developed by its possession of commodities" (19), if appropriation of objects affords "the capacity for self-creation by a society or individual" (20), then what is the effect on subjectivity of pastiche recycling, of consumerist ornamentation? This, then, is an existential irony at the foundation of consumerist post-identity discourse: an "infinite" array of possibilities for self-construction, almost uniformly compromised by the precorporation attending a ready-made set of ideologically-saturated materials. While this project discusses the ornamental/pastiche subject position in terms of the possibilities for oppositionality it affords the individual or discourse, implicit in any such discussion is the radical disjunction between the concept of freedom and its actual expression, i.e. the freedom to consume.

As the above example of Denny-Brown's reading of Boethius suggests, I am specifically interested in the relation between the materiality and aesthetics of clothing and fashion accessories and the experience of subjectivity. As Daniel Miller argues, a depth ontology tends to define the relation between inside/outside, surface/depth, and subject/object as one of representation; that is, "we often assume that a material form makes manifest some underlying presence which accounts for that which is apparent" (29), a result of a Western cultural heritage that "denigrates surfaces as against a greater reality" (32). Applying this recontextualization to clothing, he criticizes "an older social anthropology, [where] clothes are commonly signs of social relations"; however, "if you strip away the clothing, you find no such 'thing' as society or social relations lurking

inside. The clothing did not stand for the person; rather, there was an integral

phenomenon which was the clothing/person." He continues, "These material forms

constituted and were not just superficial cover for that which they created, in part through

enclosing and giving shape" (32). This returns to and builds on the discussion of clothing

from the last chapter, including the theorizing of Cristina Giorcelli and Manuela Fraire.

Giorcelli criticizes the distinction between being and appearing as a fiction enforced by

"upholders of normative identity" (1), noting, in a discussion of clothing versus identity,

"[I]f dress is the *appearance* (or outer layer) that masks an *essence* (or inner content),

then it can also be viewed as an epiphenomenon of a lack of essence, of a lack of being"

(2). Connecting her argument to the concept of the *parergon*, she writes, "for the

parergon to exist, the *ergon* must lack something" (4). Manuela Fraire, continuing in this

line, argues that "the naked body lacks meaning: it can only acquire meaning, and

become human, once it is veiled and/or unveiled" (8). This emphasized "lack" is the

absence of an essential "soul" or identity, as something disembodied or immaterial. There

is no complete inner identity without form, without the appearance in which it is

immanent; an appearance, according to Fraire, which is *not* the naked body, in and of

itself apolitical before being thrust into the symbolic—not inherent/essential—realms of

(racialized/gendered) semiotics. Even if we admit the binary, it still remains that "the

accessory…presents itself as an epistemological knot, tying the essential and the

inessential in a necessary relationship, while at the same time it underpins how

inadequate each is on its own" (Fraire 10). The binary thinking underpinning a Western

depth ontology, with its complex yet reductive system of morality, ignores the ways in

which materiality, surface, appearance, ornamentation are central to the experience of selfhood, in completely non-metaphorical terms and beyond their status as (mere) signifiers. Whether in the not-quite-exteriority of his frames or in his vivid recreation of contemporary fashion in the context of classical art, Wiley's work suggests a parallel discourse of reorientation towards the primacy of visuality in what it means to exist, to be present in the world.

There is further a whole critical discourse around the accessorized body as central to the construction of the subject in neoliberal society in terms of hip-hop culture. In an echo of David Summers' discussion of the social hierarchization of ornament, Herman Gray explains, "black youth constantly use the body, self-adornment, movement, language, and music to construct and locate themselves socially and culturally" (149). As Miles White notes, "In hip-hop, the body is privileged through motion and gesture that subvert the regulation of the bourgeois body and its normative vertical axis" (41); however, the hip-hop body is foregrounded precisely through the exteriorization of the self through ornament and accessory:

> The wearing of ostentatious jewelry, including expensive chains, earrings, and "grillz" (full-frontal dental overlays, often made of gold and encrusted with diamonds), tattoos, stylized athletic apparel or brand-name urban street wear, as well as the display of the shirtless torso are ways that visually display masculine power and sexuality by privileging the objectified and spectacularized body. (25)

Murray makes the connection to Wiley explicit when he suggests, "The kind of cheap, kitschy glamour of hip-hop's new money aesthetic personifies Wiley's aesthetic choices, most notably the iconic branding of black male bodies within the dubious logics of multinational capitalism" (95 [2016]).

Two important things to comment on here are the relationship of this accessorization/spectacularization to an anti-human capitalist order and the connection of this aesthetic to masculinity. The reintegration of "hip-hop's nouveau riche"—who, it hardly needs saying, often ascended through performance of a rebel, anti-corporate aesthetic—into a spectacular capitalism of "rapacious…decadence and conspicuous materialism" (*Queering* 95) is not unique to hip-hop, or to the visualized commoditization of blackness. This within/without of capitalist self-fashioning is the same bemoaned by Thomas Frank, who sees "the frenzied ecstasies" of mid-20th century counterculture "becom[ing] an official aesthetic of consumer society" (33). Kobena Mercer, however, points to the ways that the homo economicus status extends beyond the "sell-out" phase of self-commodification, informing even the basic mythos of countercultural activity. He writes,

> The figure of the ghetto "hustler" is often almost romantically depicted as a social outsider at odds with capitalist conformity, whereas in fact this mode of survival involves an essential investment in the idea that a "real" man must be an active, independent economic agent, a notion with forms the cornerstone of capitalist patriarchy and its ethic of success. (144-145 [1994])

My argument here is merely that the imbrication of the visualized, accessorizing subject within the logic of neoliberal capital is not in and of itself a critique of a figuration of ontology as fundamentally ornamental. The prominent designer labels and bling found adorning Wiley's subjects are, like his kitsch mass production, a comment on contemporary aesthetics and social relations under late capitalism as they are, not as they might be. Given my emphasis on visuality as the preeminent mode of meaning-making, as well as the exclusion from the static space of the traditional portrait of

movement/language/music, the ornamented body becomes the primary means of

fashioning and presenting the self, becomes essential to the performance of self, within

the frame or without. That this is a discussion occurring around the black body is

concerning, as Murray, Greg Tate (calling Wiley, for instance, an "urban fetishist") and

others have noted; however, I argue that the spectacle of/as self is not a racially

proscribed phenomenon, but rather a more general cultural episteme that has become

visible around the discourse of hip-hop and the black body because of particular histories

of subjugation and resistance filtered through a neoliberalist consumer ethos.

Though I will discuss in depth the relationship of the post-black aesthetic to

masculinity in Chapter 3, it is important to note here that Wiley's work both recreates the

material significations of masculinist identity and pushes back at their hegemonic status

as racially representative forms. As Mercer argues, there is a "landscape of stereotypes"

organized around white supremacist desire; black men "'fit' into this terrain by being

confined to a narrow repertoire of 'types'" (133 [1994]). Wiley's portraits of black men

risk invoking the racist legacy of indexical spectacularization of the black (masculine)

body which serves to justify and legitimize a discourse of black, urban otherness, with all

of the divergent socio-juridical effects that entails. However, Wiley chooses to engage

directly with the legacy of social constructions of black masculinity, addressing both the

white supremacist fantasies of hyper-violence and -virility and the heteropatriarchal

discourse of masculine power and agency emanating from mid-century black leaders like

Stokely Carmichael and Eldridge Cleaver. That is, while the macho swagger and street

fashion of his subjects are clearly confrontational with regard to white supremacist scopic

delicacies, the soft beauty of the men's forms and their kitsch immanence within the signifiers of effete decadence are aspects of queer play with the tropes of naturalized heterosexual masculinity. As Murray argues, Wiley's work "critically converses with both fantasy and the stereotypical conventions of racial and sexual representation," "skewer[ing] very *straight* signifiers of black masculinity" and "[b]lurring the lines between the threatening symbolism of the inner city black male and the petulant swishiness of the queen" (94 [2016]). Murray's general thesis is that "the art of Wiley is able to 'respond to the hurtfully exclusionary obsessions of the black nationalist movement' by constructing a counter-narrative that embraces the ambiguity and ambivalence of queerness" (92, quoting EP Johnson 3). Thus, Wiley's portraits invoke the aggressive posturing of hip-hop while refiguring the image of black masculinity to allow space for all that has been excluded from that discourse; as Murray puts it, "his pictures always engage critically with the hyper-masculine pose of hip-hop—revelling in its majesty while exposing the fragility and vulnerability at the heart of its artifice" (95). This complex, ambivalent movement between celebration and critique points to the importance of context in preventing Wiley's work from being considered "merely" a joke, a sight gag staged for "those who think it's hilarious to put black dudes in do-rags on horses carrying scepters" (Beam).

The Parodic Refrain/Reframe

        In his earlier article for *Nka*, Murray notes that Wiley's artworks "epitomize postmodern appropriation and the sampling of hip-hop culture," suggesting that they are

parodic in that they are what it would look like "[i]f racial caricatures and stereotypes could dream" (92 [2007]). Though it seems his critique is rooted in a (quite valid) anti-capitalist ideology and a politics of representation that are not central to the post-black aesthetic, I want to think about what it means to talk about this work as "postmodern appropriation," or, as I would posit as a more useful term, pastiche. What are the inherent stakes of working in this mode? Why would a (post-)black artist choose to create works like this? Is this just the high art version of photoshop kitsch?

As I discuss in the previous chapter and the introduction, I am interested in reclaiming the progressive potential of pastiche from its postmodern/Jamesonian nadir, preferring it to the term parody because of its "blank" reinvocation of previous work as opposed to parody's (at the genetic level) conservative impulse. Pastiche is an art of surfaces, eliding the distinction between meaning and appearing, an imitation of style rather than text. Thus, a) pastiche does not recreate the politics of its source material, and b) pastiche is capable of being a style of political critique/resistance. Work like Wiley's can recreate the surface form and content of canonical works which functioned to establish and maintain an exclusionary, racist discourse without reinvoking that same cultural paradigm.

Kobena Mercer suggests something similar in his analysis of the dialogical nature of certain works by black avant-garde artists, noting that the "pre-existing text of blackness" (143 [2007])—the social meanings attributed to blackness as the always-already Other—acts in concert with black artistic production. "Rather than two fully formed languages confronting each other in a single utterance," he writes, "the entry of

African Americans into the realm of 'high' culture was a socially dialogic process from the start" (145). Referencing both the Bakhtinian idea of appropriation and Henry Louis Gates' Signifyin', Mercer sees the potential, for example, in Robert Colescott's *George Washington Carver Crossing the Delaware: Page from an American History Textbook* (1974-75) (Fig. 2.6), for art to "deconstruct[] the master codes of the national culture to lay bare the structured absence of a black voice in the encoding of foundational narratives" (150). In Mercer's formulation, black artists of the 1960s (e.g. Colescott, Betye Saar, David Hammons) who appropriated the "iconography of the grotesque" (144), a white supremacist aesthetic of abject blackness, were directly confronting the "signs of blackness in American visual culture," creating an "intervention that unmasks the authority of what is always already said" (147). Reading Hutcheon, he notes that in this parodic mode, the "key issue is the degree of stylistic distortion that interposes a knowing distance between the source or the target and the enunciative intent of the authorial voice" (147).

As I discuss above, Wiley's work contains many of the hallmarks of Mercer's formulation, especially in regard to its direct engagement with the antiblack subtext of spectacularized images of US blackness. Of course, in Wiley's portraits, this dialogue is entirely absent of the grotesque as an ordering principle. In fact, Wiley's emphasis is on "grace," what we might interpret as a trans/ahistorical model of signification, a neo-platonic ideal which apotheosizes his subjects in a transcendent gesture. That he pastiches works by the Great Masters of the art historical canon, however, should make us wary of any valorization of the aesthetic as non-ideological—these works are precisely moments

of crystallizing power and privilege by means of an aesthetic language of display which naturalizes hegemonic structures. Thus the metaphors which make men great become the truths by which we understand what greatness is. The importance of Wiley's work may be its ability create a spectacle of mastery and possibility for his subjects via the very system of visuality he is simultaneously revealing to be hollow, heterosexist, white supremacist. That his work utilizes the signifiers, but not the signified, of this symbolic discourse makes it the perfect example of the sort of oppositional pastiche I am conceptualizing here.

Capture of Juliers (c1622/2006)

I argue that Wiley's work uses both pastiche and the onto-epistemological register of ornamentation in order to create an oppositional "counter-grotesque" (i.e. "grace") through not only his painstaking recreation of his sitters' clothing, jewelry, tattoos, and so on, but also the symbolic alterations of signifiers from the original portraits and his envelopment of his subjects in ornamental motifs, which many critics dismiss as "merely" decorative, akin to "wallpaper,"[20] or as simply an appropriated symbol of wealth. In his *Capture of Juliers* (2006) (Fig. 2.8), part of his "Rumors of War" series which updates military scenes featuring figures on horseback, Wiley's use of symbolic erasure and ornamental substitution suggests a parallel or alternate construction of the subject through portraiture. In the Peter Paul Rubens original (c1622-25) (Fig. 2.7), Maria

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[20] It is true that many of Wiley's backdrops are direct copies of William Morris' iconic wallpaper designs, but that simple fact is not the entire story of the motifs' function in the works.

d'Medici sits astride an oddly beautiful white horse, her pale face topped by a fancifully

martial helmet of precious metal and feathers, in shining robes resplendent with gold trim

and a *fleur-de-lis* pattern, in the sartorial mode of a French monarchist fantasy. In the

distance is a walled city captured from the Austrian army, possible remnants of which

mingle with her triumphant troops, the perspective placing them all almost level with the

ground beneath her stallion's hooves. She is attended by the allegorical figures of

Generosity (leading a tamed lion, demonstrating her magnanimity in triumph) and

Victory who, angelic, flies above her and is in the act of placing a crown upon her head,

signaling the divine right of the monarchy.

Wiley's alteration of this image is telling. The ubiquitous Informally Attired

Young Black Man sits astride an identical horse, albeit in an over-lighting that makes

both the horse and his skin and clothes gleam. This treatment of the horse is especially

interesting, as Wiley is able to highlight the feminine/fantastic elements in Rubens'

otherwise realistic treatment of the figures: Wiley's horse has a kitsch, "My Little Pony"

affect. This altered echoing disrupts the viewer's subsequent examination of the original

mount, which cannot now be seen without an eye to its peculiarity. The model mimics the

side-saddle positioning of the Queen's body; however, his chin is held up higher, and he

looks defiantly at the viewer, adding a confrontational gravitas that is in contrast to the

graceful, almost bemused, detachment of the Queen.[21] Once again, we see that his grip

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[21] Commenting on the contrast between another work in Wiley's Rumors of War series, *Equestrian Portrait of the Count-Duke Olivares* (2005) and the original, Diego Velazquez's *Count-Duke of Olivares* (1634), Murray writes,

> A lot is conveyed in Gaspar de Guzmán's gaze as he peers backwards defiantly at the viewer. However, Wiley's figuration arguably possesses greater narrative power because of the rhetorical and confrontational force of a young black man in the act of returning the gaze. His processed and

upon the martial baton has been altered, cradling it in a manner that suggests a masturbatory stroking along the length of the golden shaft.

Most interesting, however, are the alterations to the mise-en-scene. Though the horse and the ground beneath its feet are reproduced almost exactly, Wiley removes the figures whose relation to the central subject demonstrate her mastery and divine authority. His contemporary figure on horseback lacks the constitutive symbols of the defeated/triumphant army (martial prowess, brute power, tactical intelligence, master/servant dynamic), the castle or town (legislative mastery, infrastructure, "landed" aristocracy). Nowhere to be found are the allegorical angels, whose presence in the original served as an outward manifestation of virtues possessed by Maria d'Medici the individual, personifications of virtues naturally coincidental with her political role as Queen, and signifiers of the naturalization of the aristocratic institution through an appeal to divine/cosmic order (I say "appeal", but note that Generosity is attending the Queen, and while Victory is flying above, it is only to bestow the crown upon her, an act which complicates divinity, at least in its lesser manifestations, as both guarantor of and servant to the monarchy).

Instead, the subject astride the horse becomes the sole recipient of the viewer's gaze, as the distant ground is empty and indistinct, and the backdrop is a flat ruby or blood red. The figure's arbitrary placement upon this depthless scarlet field complicates the pastiche of the ground beneath the horse's hooves, both in terms of the earth's visual

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slicked-back hair, close-cropped goatee, and defiant countenance represent distinctively black countercultural codes of street style, elegance, and swagger. (*Queering* 97)

recession towards the depthless "horizon" and in its incommensurability with the overall

aesthetic, as Rubens' busy and dark landscape was of the same character as the brooding,

clouded sky. The gilt *fleur-de-lis* from the queen's robes have been detached,

"brutalized" perhaps, and hover in a decorative repeating pattern throughout the entire

canvas. The ornament gives the surface, flattened perspective a limited suggestion of

depth, as the symbols are sized according to a logic of foreshortening and are alternately

behind and in front of the subject, enveloping him as if they were a literal atmosphere of

opulence—or, as Wiley would have it, grace. Further, what for Rubens was a vertical

rectangular portrait has been transformed into, if not quite a square, then at least a

horizontal rectangle; the vertical space has been so flattened that both the man's head and

the horse's hoof seem in danger of running out of room, resulting in an uncomfortable,

almost claustrophobic affect.

This reshaping of the portrait precludes the opportunity for the establishment of

vertical hierarchies (army – Queen – God), and places the man outside the field of

interpellated subjectivity/subjection. Rather, the subject is constructed through Wiley's

obsessive, fetishistic rendering of the branded clothing, commodities that define the

subject within a space of contemporary urban masculinity. However, the horse, the baton,

the reference to the original portrait, and the ornamentation all work to call this

masculinity into question. This is perhaps not a critique of the Alpha-male institution

itself, as Wiley is clearly drawn to these subjects, but an opening up and unveiling of the

process of the construction of masculinity, and of blackness, as categories which circulate

as essential but which come to be seen as crafted, performed, and enforced—as Murray

notes, "In Wiley's world, the symbolic power of the masculine pose is just that: symbolic," referring to both the original and contemporary models' masculinity as "performance" which "serves to both ideologically and historically solidify a set of power relations utilizing the visual image" (101 [2007]). The infusion of the portrait with ornamental markings disrupts the realism of the scene and brands it as constructed, thereby "making overt the artifice that in fact defines all art" (Hutcheon 83 [1985]). This could be a commentary on the originals—are great men painted, or are men great because they are painted? But it is also an incisive commentary on a "fetishized, black male urban spectacle" in neoliberal visual culture that has become essentialized through the shorthand of hip-hop culture, a self-reflexive construction of identity that is "routinized, brand-able, and culturally ritualistic" (Murray 99 [2007]).

Wiley's ornament is simultaneously an appropriation of the symbols of power, an unmasking of culture and history as products of a mutable visual rhetoric, and an acknowledgment of the craft of art itself, it's materiality and made-ness. Further, he valorizes the insufficiency of the artwork through the parergonal relation between painting and frame, suggesting that art is precisely what is framed, and that the signifiers of authority, dominance, and identity don't end at the canvas. The ornamental motifs, then, are not only abstractions signifying the artistically-heightened glory and power of the contemporary subject, but also a reminder that, while the divine or personified signifiers of identity have been removed, the subject is never sufficient unto himself as racially black, as gendered masculine, as heterosexually desiring, but is rather enmeshed in not-always-comprehensible constellations of historical, cultural and market relations

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which are made visible in works of art through both the rhetoric of art history and the exchange-value of the canvases themselves. The capitalist reaction to or appropriation of the contemporary demand for hip-hop culture allows the post-black/neoliberal subject the freedom to construct the self, but conditions and limits the possibilities of this self-fashioning through the control of methods available for this project.

While some have found this intersection between High Art, commodity valuation, and the black body highly disturbing,[22] Murray, playing his own devil's advocate, suggests it may be viewed as a liberating move away from the canon's reliance on the abstraction of Kantian *a priori* aesthetic valuations. In the work of these post-black artists, "there is little separation among aesthetic judgment, capitalism, and other valuing structures like art history. High art (as an apparatus of social division) is not immune from commodification; its judgments can be equated with cultural, economic, and political forms of valuation operating in society at large" (101 [2007]). By laying bare the oft-disavowed association between Art-making and production of a commodity, "urban fetishists" like Wiley demonstrate that "aesthetics—when coupled with production, distribution, exchange, and consumption—form a conceptual unity that lifts the art object beyond aesthetic provincialism and connoisseurship" (101). The desire to make high art accessible or relevant to individuals outside of a small circle of elites may indeed be what is driving Wiley; it would be more accurate to say, however, that he reveals that there is no inside/outside divide. Just as the socio-political history of European imperialism does

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[22] See Greg Tate's "Wherein Lies the Wealth Of This World?" (2004)
To borrow from Murray's pithy summary, "Greg Tate appears to suggest with trepidation that, given the dominant culture's absorption of oppositional efforts, the minority artist/subject is only left with the market and the spectacle of their bodies is their greatest asset" ("Splendid" 94).

not need to be painstakingly researched in order to recognize its definite impact on contemporary global culture, so too has the portraiture inscribing dominance and authority to the European aristocrat been our visual heritage, whether we are versed in art history or not.

Wiley's work is subversive and forward-looking in its treatment of neoliberal ontology, but, if you don't quite buy my argument for pastiche and want to consider the works in terms of garden-variety parody, its counter-impulse is conservative and laudatory, establishing and conserving his inspirations as great Art. This movement is inevitable in parody: as Hutcheon writes, "Even in mocking, parody reinforces; in formal terms, it inscribes the mocked conventions onto itself, thereby guaranteeing their continued existence. It is in this sense that parody is the custodian of the artistic legacy, defining not only where art is, but where it has come from" (75 [1985]). By keeping the original titles, Wiley's parodic approach ensures that the viewer will spend time looking up the source painting; in this sense, his work serves a pedagogical function, mainstreaming an awareness of art history. The presence of Wiley's work in the lead-up to the South African 2010 World Cup in partnership with athletic apparel giant Puma or hanging visibly in the homes of members of the Lyon family on hit TV drama *Empire* (2015-) suggests a desire to reach new audiences, ones not necessarily on the donors lists of hallowed art institutions, audiences not reflexively hailed by the conservative Europhilia of major museums.

This pedagogy may ultimately result in a privileging of the canon; however, it seems to serve the greater purpose of making spectators aware of the forces that have

shaped and defined the scopic regime of subjectivity throughout history. "Art" does not

exist in a vacuum, but functions as the visual rhetoric of power and dominance, helping

construct and reinforce historical narratives of otherness that continue to justify neo-

imperialism and white supremacy. Here, parody enshrines the original as a canonized

visual object, but forever changes the viewers' understanding of both the socio-political

function of that object in the public sphere and the rhetorical force of supposedly neutral

ideals of beauty, Art, or humanity. These sorts of open-ended revelations and

provocations are provided in place of any sort of master narrative of race, colonialism, or

gender—as Wiley states, "I'm not particularly interested in providing answers to

questions of morality, I'm more interested in creating situations…" (*Black Romantic* 53);

at a recent retrospective at the Brooklyn Museum, he insisted, "I hope my work doesn't

do harm, but I don't necessarily design it to do good" (Guzman). Like his "collages" of

pastiched poses, brutalized symbols, and anachronistic bodies, Wiley invites the viewer

to draw from diverse and supposedly-discrete fields of knowledge in forming their own

conclusions, thus revealing *and* enforcing the bricolage construction of neoliberal

subjectivity and epistemology, all while celebrating the paradox of the image of

blackness transcending the visual logic of white supremacy through the visual logic of

white supremacy.

  This ideological provocation and fraught identity politics in Wiley's work, let

alone its pop hipness, made his 2017 selection by President Barack Obama to paint the

latter's official likeness for the National Portrait Gallery seem apt, not to say a bit on the

nose. Both Wiley and Obama had become emblematic of a certain mainstreamed hip-hop

aesthetic that spoke to the shifting conditions of possibility for people of color in America while simultaneously working within and to maintain exclusionary class structures founded in a legacy of racialized economic exploitation. Like Wiley's side-gig as portraitist to hip-hop royalty, Obama's pop-political positionality made him a frequently alluded to figure in, for example, the rags-to-riches neoliberal hustler narratives of rap icon Jay-Z which, post-2008, often included lyrics gesturing at his friendship with the president as a sign of the entertainer's rarefied socio-economic status. Obama's image had become symbolic of that "new," hip social mobility gestured at by the term "post-black," especially in the ways it had played out in Wiley's early work. This image circulated effectively because President Obama the man seemed to be the thing-itself, the dream made flesh, the end of history, a black man wielding the full power of a racist nation. Or, as many were wont to argue, a *post-racial* nation, an America that in that one grand electoral gesture had shed centuries of structural white supremacy; a tabula rasa, a ledger wiped clean.

Of course, as I discuss in the Introduction and throughout these chapters, the idea of a post-racial America—whether as a result of Obama's election or as a result of generational shifts on civil rights issues—is one that, as Ta-Nehisi Coates notes, is never invoked "in earnest" (2015); it is rather a racially-motivated, bad-faith mythologization attempting to rhetorically elide race from public discourse, to imagine a United States separable from the histories, events, and ideologies upon which it was founded, precisely at a historical moment when there are more avenues than ever for addressing the nation's ongoing history of racial oppression. That is to say, it is a way of avoiding payment on a

collective debt, not through frank negotiation, but by moving across town and throwing

on a dime-store Groucho disguise then clumsily reintroducing yourself to old

acquaintances by a new name and acting surprised and hurt when nobody trusts you. As I

discuss in the Conclusion, Jordan Peele, among others, has singled out Barack Obama's

presidency in particular as "the era of the post-racial lie," the moment when it was easiest

for Americans across the political spectrum to ignore racial inequality, to point to the

(admittedly not-inconsequential) presence of a black man in the White House as a self-

evident counterpoint in any discussion of the nation's trans-historical socio-juridical

tendencies toward white supremacy.

It is fitting, then, that the portrait Wiley produced (Fig. 2.9), unveiled in February

2018, should abstract the image of the president from its material political context,

instead seating him before a lush, flowering bush that encroaches playfully onto the

foreground, vines seeming to creep up Obama's pantlegs. He is both emerging from and

being drawn into the depths of this dark green space, his static image arrested and

preserved out of time amidst some continuing natural process. Wiley's ornamental style

is strangely dissociative, yes, but this work is meant to engage with the symbolic register

of the hagiographic image, the flesh made dream. As an inversion of the way he props up

his anonymous subjects with the glossy accoutrements of socio-economic status, here the

subject is offered as an always-already emblem, denoting the prominence of this

particular president in the psyche of the millennial US, its racial unconscious. The

painted president does not smile at his supporters or scowl at his opponents; it does not,

as would the man, celebrate his achievements or apologize for his failures. Obama's

image is neither haughty nor gracious, but blankly resolute, as the man might have been but the image must be, a mute cathexis for the American struggle to contain, expel, and reorganize racial meaning in a contemporary haunted by race's ostentatious absent-presence. Wiley's portrait is not of a man but of a collective fantasy, the presiding avatar of an imaginary nation: the post-racial United States that never was.

Fig. 2.2 *Portrait of Andres Stilte* (1639), Johannes Cornelisz Verspronck

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Fig. 2.3 *Portrait of Andres Stilte II* (2006), Kehinde Wiley
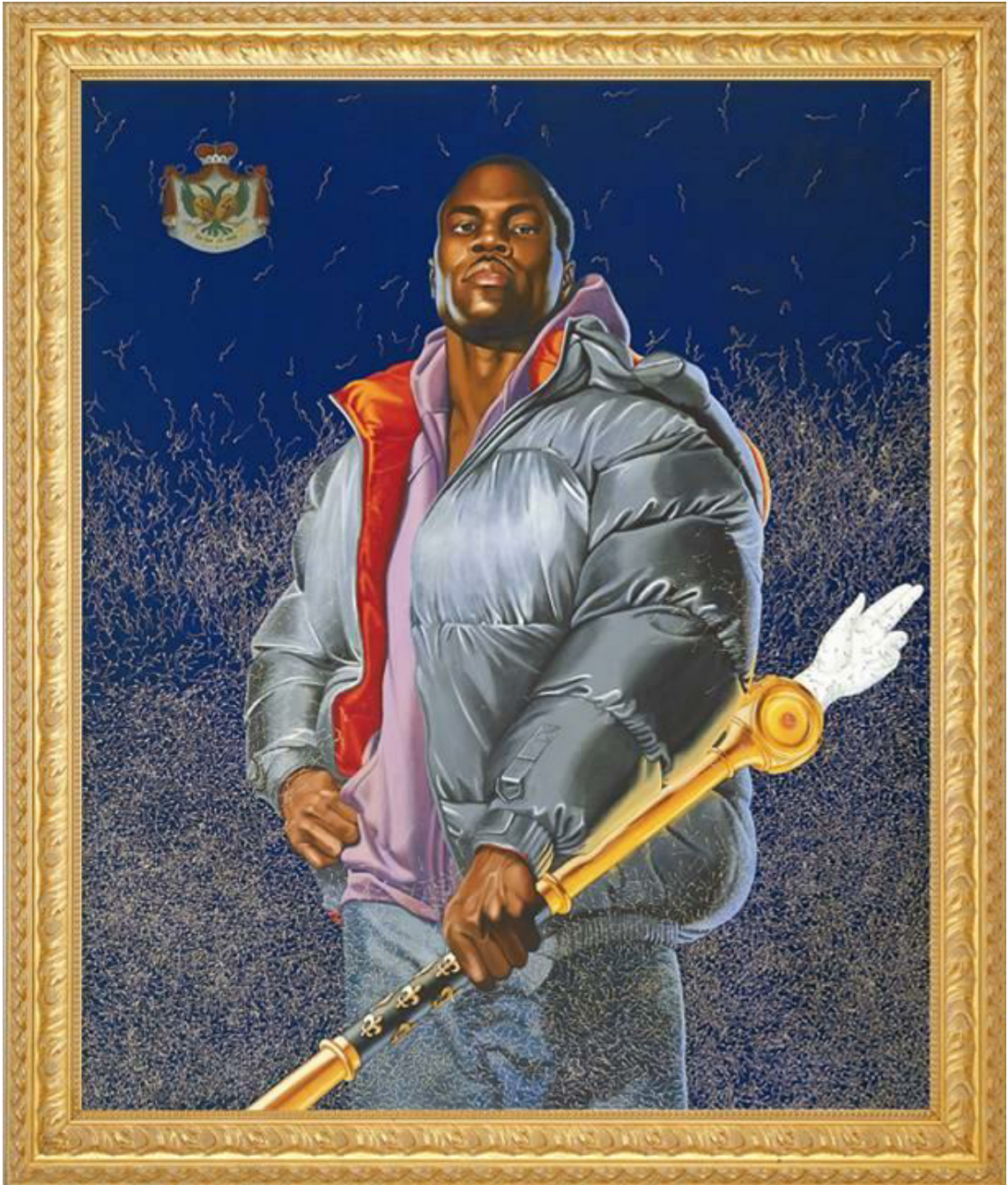
Fig. 2.4 *Alexander the Great Variation* (2005), Kehinde Wiley

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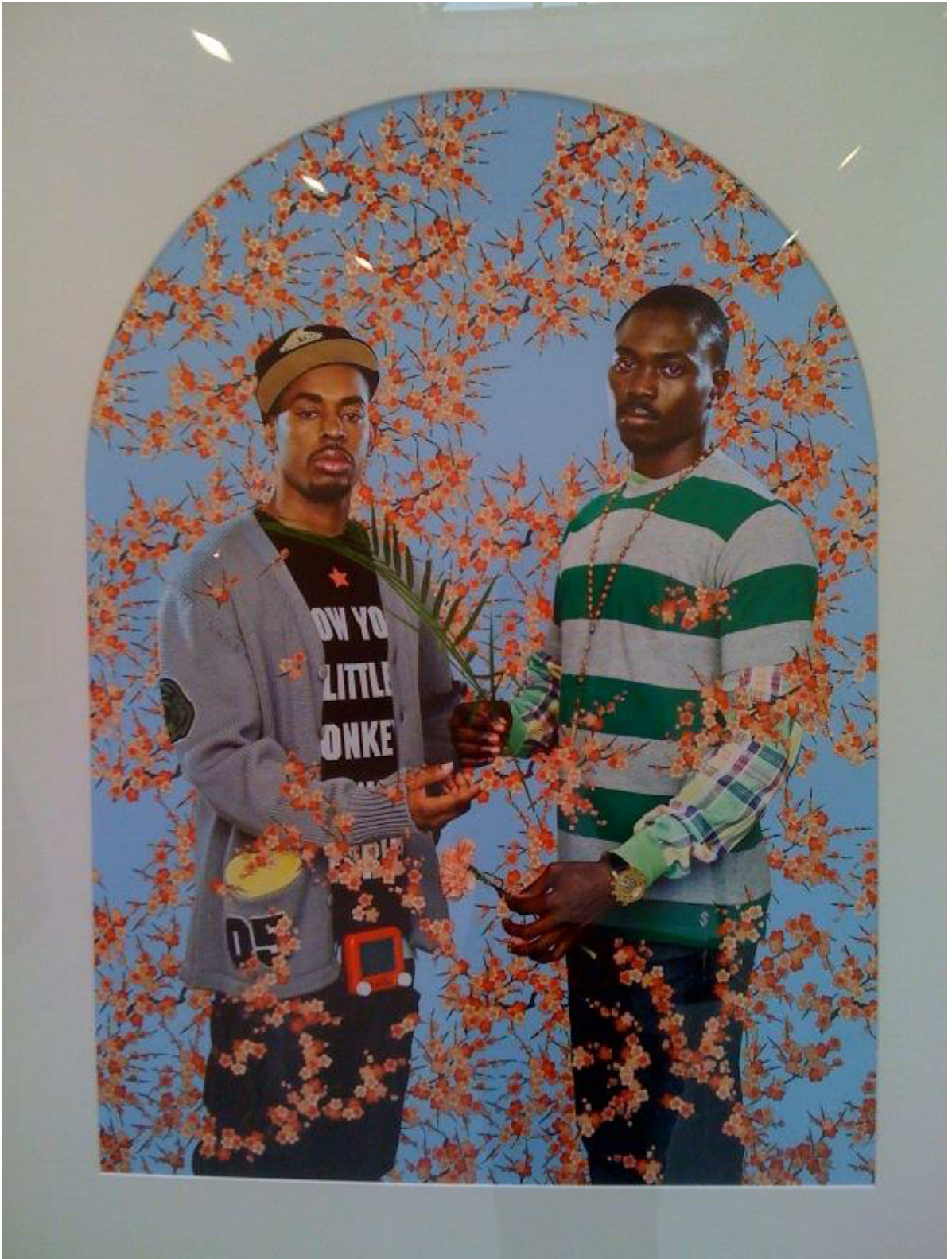
Fig. 2.5 *After Sir Anthony Van Dyck's "Charles I and Henrietta Maria"* (2006), Kehinde Wiley

Fig. 2.6 *George Washington Carver Crossing the Delaware: Page from an American History Textbook* (1974-75), Robert Colescott

Fig. 2.7 *Capture of Juliers* (c1622-25), Peter Paul Rubens

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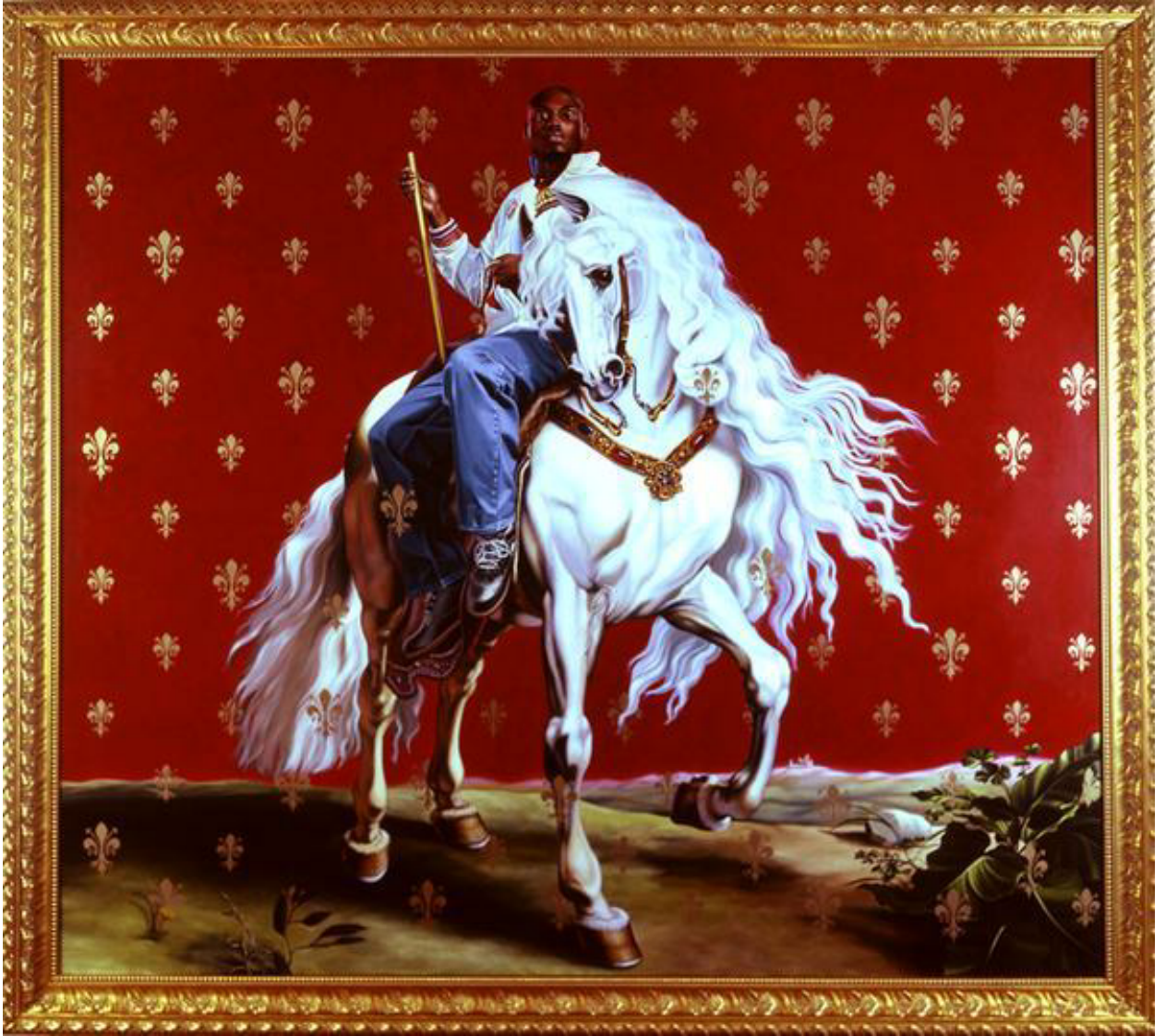
Fig. 2.8 *Capture of Juliers* (2006), Kehinde Wiley
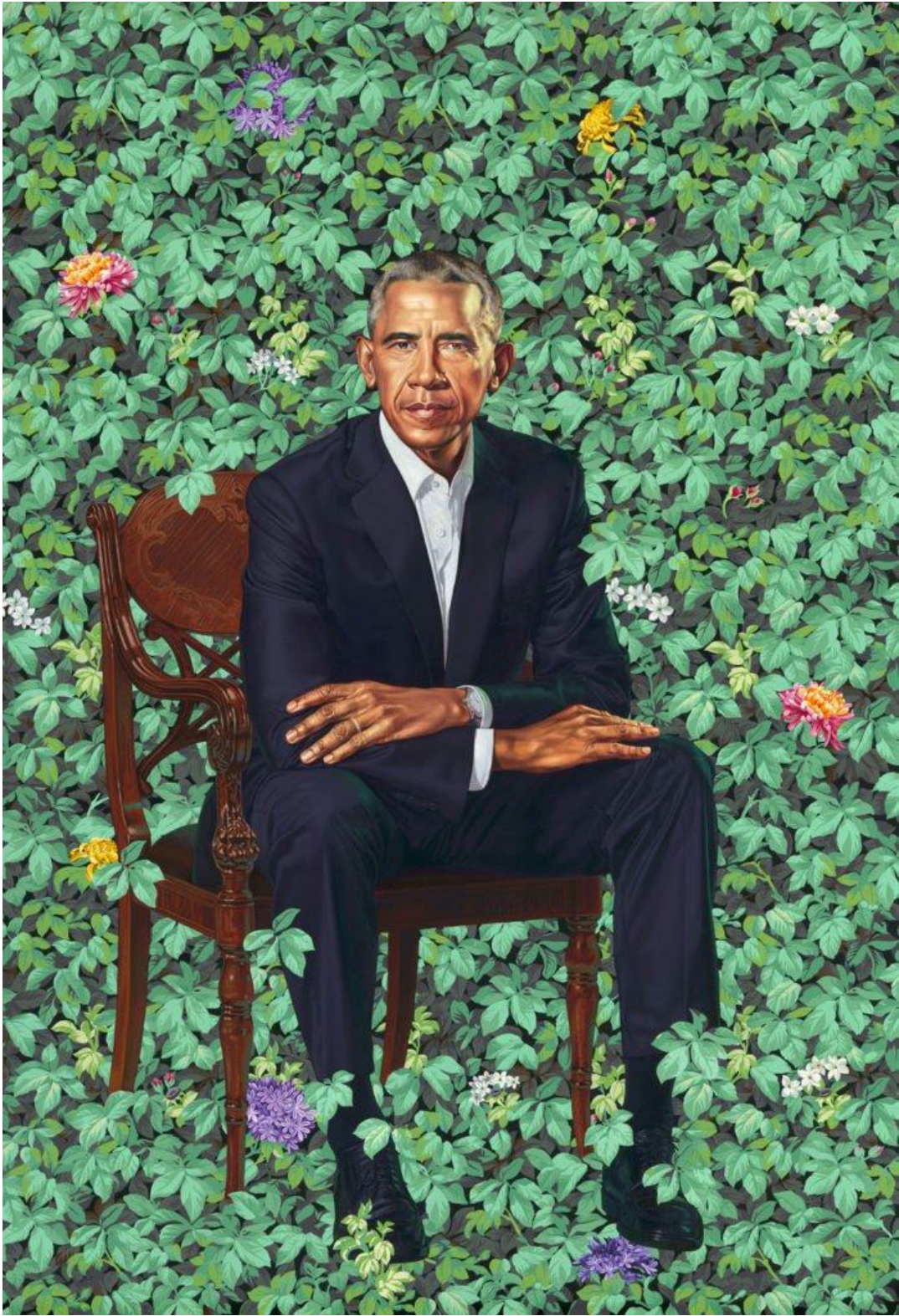
Fig. 2.9 *Barack Obama* (2018), Kehinde Wiley

Chapter 3:

"They Didn't Get Us": Post-Black Satire and *Key & Peele*'s Critical Humor

I was the only cool black guy at Mestizo Mulatto Mongrel Elementary, Santa
Monica's all-white multicultural school. My early education consisted of two
types of multiculturalism: classroom multiculturalism, which reduced race, sexual
orientation, and gender to inconsequence, and schoolyard multiculturalism, where
the kids who knew the most Polack, queer, and farmer's daughter jokes ruled. The
classroom cross-cultural teachings couldn't compete with the playground blacktop
lessons, which were cruel but at least humorous.

- Paul Beatty, *The White Boy Shuffle* (1996)

Am I going to forget where I came from? Of course I am. Like almost
immediately. Like, I don't even like the term "give back to the community"
because it implies the community gave me shit in the first place. It didn't. The
community didn't give me shit. The community stole my bike. Fuck the
community.

- Jerrod Carmichael, "Love at the Store" (2014)

Introduction: "White Zombies" (2012)

The scene opens with a shaky handheld camera trained on a suburban 2-

car garage, its pristine façade marred by a splatter of bright crimson; rounding the

corner, out of breath, are a white man with a handgun, followed by two terrified

black men, played by comedians Keegan-Michael Key and Jordan Peele.

Surveying his surroundings, the armed man turns back to his companions.

"Alright, listen up," he tells them confidently. "The sheriff's department's

close by—we'll be safe there."

"OK," responds a visibly reassured Key.

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"Stay close," commands the first man, square-jawed and self-assured, Hollywood's action-hero archetype. "I'll get you out of here."

He turns around and is immediately set upon by two ravenous zombies, as Key and Peele yelp in horror and flee clumsily to hide behind a parked car.

"OH MY GOD!" Key screams high-pitched and breathless, near tears. "They got Brad!"

"They didn't get us, they didn't get us," Peele tells his friend, shaking him by his shoulders to calm him. "We're still alive. Keep it together. We gotta make it to that sheriff's station."

Calmer, they peek over the hood of the car, and their faces drop.

"Oh my god," moans Key.

The camera affects a 1970s low-budget film flicker as it shows us what they see: a middle-class suburban street teeming with shambling zombies, each a sartorial stereotype of whitebread Americana—a policeman in uniform, a doctor in labcoat with a stethoscope, a teen girl in cheerleading uniform, a woman in a housecoat and slippers.

"We gotta go through them," mutters Peele, taking charge. "Just stay together, keep moving, and don't get bit!"

They set off sprinting as the score pounds ominously, dodging between the policeman and doctor, past the cheerleader, past the housewife…suddenly Peele stops running and turns to look at the woman. When she makes no effort to bite him, he reaches gingerly towards her face.

"Ehhhh," groans the zombie, recoiling from his hand.

Shocked, he looks at his partner. "Are you getting this?" he asks.

"Yeah, *what* is *up*?" replies Key.

They jog off, but slow to a walk as they realize that none of the zombies are moving towards them. Peele waves at an orthodox Jewish zombie, who stumbles away. As they walk by a sedan occupied by two elderly zombies, the one in the driver's seat reaches out and locks the car door.

"Ohhhhh, ain't that some shit," Peele mutters.

"These are some *racist* motherfucking *zombies*," exclaims Key, incredulous.

Further on a family of undead—two parents and a small girl—passes them on the sidewalk. The child moans and reaches out towards them, but the parents pull her away.

"What is that?!" yells Peele.

"They seriously wouldn't let her eat us," Key complains.

A stout black man with a case of beer saunters over to the duo.

"Hey guys!" he says cheerfully. "Isn't this great? These racist zombies are leavin' us *alone*. Come on, we havin' a party."

As they enter a nearby backyard, bright disco-funk plays and a gathering of about 20 black men and women are casually chatting and dancing. A cheer goes up from the crowd as they wave hello. Smiling, they all beckon Key and Peele to come join them. Confused they look at each other, shrug, and walk

towards the group. The final shot shows them joining the fun, while in the foreground a white zombie in a suit and tie struggles desperately to climb the fence to escape the party.

The preceding sketch, "White Zombies" from Season 2 of the Comedy Central series *Key and Peele* (2012-2015), provides a formal pastiche of traditional horror tropes. The makeup, the uncanny movement, the camera work, the juxtaposition between the quaint domestic setting and its violent denizens—all these are eminently recognizable. The sketch does not, however, get its comedy from skewering the genre to which it alludes formally, as in parody, but rather uses these quintessential signifiers of the American culture industry to forward a critique of contemporary racist micro-aggressions in order to expose what Frank Wilderson calls the "libidinal economy" of racism, the persistent structures of feeling that undergird antiblack modern society. The figure of the zombie becomes a means of bypassing the layers of rhetoric insulating avowedly post-racial white Americans from the affective or physical register of their racism. Without speech, we are left with the bare acts animating the interactions between the black men and the white suburban homeowners—drawing back, crossing the street, locking the car doors, keeping the children at a safe distance. Just as the pop-cultural zombie archetype remains largely self-explanatory despite variations on the theme in individual films, TV series, or video games, so too are these gestures of white passive-aggression eloquent on their own. They may be (un)dead, but the dictates of propriety remain central to their

decaying ontology, the politics of bourgeois respectability necessitating the "containment or expulsion of blackness required to maintain the integrity of whiteness" (Hartman 163).

But what does it mean to be a "*White* Zombie"? That is, to hold tightly to whiteness even as the trappings of civil society and personal identity are relinquished? Given, I mean to say, that these accoutrements of/and whiteness are a product of chattel slavery; that the "slave is the object or the ground that makes possible the existence of the bourgeois subject and, by negation or contradistinction, defines liberty, citizenship, and the enclosures of the social body" (Hartman 62), that "where the enslaved was, the white subject came into being" (R.L.)? If socio-juridical blackness gestures eternally towards the slave via its history as a "status-race…ascribing slave status" (Hartman 162); if the American myth of blackness is thus similarly a form of social death which is a precondition of white *life*, the conceptual object required for the production—the *imagination*—of the (redundant) white Human subject; then what is a White Zombie? Can Humanity ever become Humanity's Other?

Key and Peele's own empirical research into these meta-ontological hypotheses— presented here as burlesque—suggests no: white zombies never stop being white, and thus make pretty terrible zombies. Traditionally, the zombie narrative tends to function through or as a narrative of infection or contamination. The viral spread of the disease through bite or bodily fluid renders the victim unreasoning, near-invulnerable, bloodthirsty, and inhuman—we might as well say "abject, threatening…dangerous… irrational, and infectious," i.e. the postbellum cultural narrative produced around blackness in order to effect the "resubordination of the emancipated" (Hartman 116). The

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genius of this sketch, then, is that it demonstrates the ideological zombification of blackness in the white bourgeois unconscious. Within the discursive bounds of the suburban setting, the "monsters" are not the flesh-eating zombies, but the black men who have intruded into this domestic space, prompting visible displays of avoidance and fear, as if of some *other* sort of contamination—of the *social* body, an assault on the integrity of whiteness itself. The scene's reduction of the white characters to what audiences recognize as a form of categorical inhumanity, coupled with their continued insistence that the black men are *more inhuman still*, points to the foundational role of black abjection in creating and sustaining the illusion of white identity, the primal relations of power and domination that are as American as the backyard barbecue. The skit's utopian coda imagines the telos of antiblackness as self-destructive, annihilatory of a white population intent only on the self-sustaining act of othering, rendered self-devouring, while the partygoers, absent the white gaze, are at long last free to visualize their own structures of social meaning.

Before proceeding, it might be useful to lay out some basic underlying assumptions around the deployment of certain key concepts, e.g. race and blackness. My discussion of race aligns with Michael Omi and Howard Winant's seminal definition: "race is a concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies" (55). Though certain characteristics of human appearance appear to give objective, trans-historical bases for the indexing of individuals according to race, their "selection...for the purposes of racial signification is always and necessarily a social and historical process." Thus, there is no biological or

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essential justification for race; however, the ideology of race becomes concretized in socio-political structures and hegemonic beliefs which "are central to everyone's identity and understanding of the social world" as well as "structuring and representing" that world. Neither essential/biological nor imaginary, race inhabits a conceptually hybrid zone, being "a matter of both social structure and cultural representation" (56), and is produced through what the authors call "projects," but what I will continue to refer to as, following Michel Foucault, "discourse," or "ways of constituting knowledge, together with the social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations which inhere in such knowledges and relations between them" (Weedon 108). This is to say that the fiction of race is produced as a type of knowledge by individuals and institutions who benefit from the creation and maintenance of racial categorization, and so gains legitimacy, making it function as a "real" or "effective" or "true" system.

Another way of saying this is that, as Frank Wilderson puts it, there is both a "political and libidinal economy" (alternatively, "political ontology") of race (7).[23] Jared Sexton explains,

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[23] Methodologically speaking, this expresses his exploration of the concept of race via the relationship between Marxism and psychoanalysis. The distinction Wilderson draws between political and libidinal economy is not central to my discussion, but is compelling enough to reproduce here at length:

"Charles S. Maier argues that a metacommentary on political economy can be thought of as an 'interrogation of economic doctrines to disclose their sociological and political premises…in sum, [it] regards economic ideas and behavior not as frameworks for analysis, but as beliefs and actions that must themselves be explained.'

Jared Sexton describes libidinal economy as 'the economy, or distribution and arrangement, of desire and identification (their condensation and displacement), and the complex relationship between sexuality and the unconscious.' Needless to say, libidinal economy functions variously across scales and is as 'objective' as political economy. It is linked not only to forms of attraction, affection, and alliance, but also to aggression, destruction, and the violence of lethal consumption. Sexton emphasizes that it is ' the whole structure of psychic and emotional life,' something more than, but inclusive of or traversed by, what Antonio Gramsci and other Marxists call a 'structure of feeling'; it is ' a dispensation of energies, concerns, points of attention,

> Political ontology is not a metaphysical notion, because it is the explicit outcome of a politics and thereby available to historic challenge through collective struggle. But it is not simply a description of political status either, even an oppressed political status, because it functions *as if* it were a metaphysical property across the *longue durée* of the premodern, modern, and now postmodern eras. (36-37 [2010])

Wilderson and Sexton are aligned with a loose school of thought in Black Studies dubbed "afro-pessimism" which sees the structures of civil society as reconfigurations of a foundational rupture/relationship represented by slavery and the socio-juridical establishment of the fact of blackness. "[T]he Slave," writes Wilderson, " is not a laborer but an anti-Human, a position against which Humanity establishes, maintains, and renews its coherence, its corporeal integrity" (11). The systematic enslavement of African peoples should be considered as *the* paradigmatic instance of modernity and the establishment of the always-already-racialized concept of the Human; further, it occupies a unique position among the atrocities of recorded history as the "*singular commodification of human existence*" through a "structure of gratuitous violence in which a body is rendered as flesh to be accumulated and exchanged" (Sexton 38 [2010]). The ontology of blackness is troubled precisely through its genesis in the slave's inhuman existence as property, fit only for "accumulation and fungibility" (Wilderson 37). Not only is there no "distinction between Slaveness and Blackness" (Wilderson 11), but this Slave [anti-]ontology continues to structure contemporary discursive relations, even in the absence of overt institutional mandates (e.g. the material practice of antebellum slavery): "In Wilderson's terms, the libidinal economy of antiblackness is pervasive,

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anxieties, pleasures, appetites, revulsions, and phobias capable of both great mobility and tenacious fixation.'" (7)

regardless of variance or permutation in its political economy" (Sexton 37 [2010]). Akin

to the Marxist "structure of feeling," this "libidinal economy" is described by Wilderson

(quoting Sexton), as "a dispensation of energies, concerns, points of attention, anxieties,

pleasures, appetites, revulsions, and phobias capable of both great mobility and tenacious

fixation" (7); understood more reductively, though more to the point at hand, this

libidinal economy is the persistent affective/ideological register of what we call "racism."

As Sharon Patricia Holland puts it, "Racism can…be described as the emotional lifeblood

of race; it is the 'feeling' that articulates and keeps the flawed logic of race in its place"

(6).

Like Nietzsche's heavily scare-quoted "truths"—illusions that we have forgotten

are illusions—blackness and race are irresistible fictions, having their foundations not in

essential facts or physiognomies but on economic and political expediency, and their

continued maintenance in hegemonic commonplaces, America's white supremacist

macro-libido. Bryan Wagner puts it best when he reminds, "Blackness does not come

from Africa. Rather, Africa and its diaspora became black at a particular stage in their

history. It sounds a little strange to put it this way, but the truth of this description is

widely acknowledged. Blackness is an adjunct to racial slavery" (1). This not only points

to the imaginary nature of these concepts, but simultaneously indicts the idea of the

Human, founded upon otherness and exclusion. It is in this sense that "colorblind" and

post-racial ideologies miss the mark in their insistence upon a "common humanity," for

the very concept of humanity inaugurates an antiblack world-system, one in which the

impact of racialized oppression doesn't fade from existence as it fades from the front

pages of newspapers. Blackness, the founding condition of modern civil society, is a form

of (conceptual) social death, even as it remains part of the (actual, practical) social life of

individuals:

> Nothing in afro-pessimism suggests that there is no black (social) life, only that black life is not social life in the universe formed by the codes of state and civil society, of citizen and subject, of nation and culture, of people and place, of history and heritage, of all the things that colonial society has in common with the colonized, of all that capital has in common with labor—the modern world system. Black life is not lived in the world that the world lives in, but it is lived underground, in outer space. (Sexton 28 [2011])

The question at hand, then, is how to make this whole terrible structure legible, to create

from within a position of blackness when that position is beset dually by a) the inherently

white supremacist/antiblack dominant cultural paradigm, and b) the foundational loss of

ontological essence wrought by the violent assimilation/exclusion to and from same?

How to speak to a world which has afforded you neither presence nor history? How do

you make someone listen from outer space?

I will argue that one possible answer lies in the work of postblack satire,[24] that

dually critical engagement with extra- and intra-community logics of power and

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[24] Jared Sexton's "The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism" is an attempt to account for the seeming incompatibility of afro-pessimism of Wilderson, Hartman, and their loose cohort with "black optimism," an approach Sexton associates primarily with the work of Fred Moten (but which gestures at performance studies more broadly) that valorizes black performativity, the social *life* of black culture (as opposed to afro-pessimism's focus on the always-already social death of the same). While the efficacy of his reconciliation between the two positions is debatable, I proceed in agreement with his basic premise that the afro-pessimist position does not constitute a fundamental rejection of the possibilities inherent in black performativity; rather it is a critique of the ontological foundations of naïve constructions of American blackness, and remains similarly invested in the liberatory potential of racial critique. That is, the "pessimism" of afro-pessimism, its insistence that performativity does not in itself redeem social death, its focus on the primal rupture of slavery rather than the ongoing production of cultural blackness, is not defeatism; rather, "slavery must be theorized maximally if its abolition is to reach the proper level" (33), and afro-pessimism's "most radical negation of the antiblack world is the most radical affirmation of [the] blackened world" of black optimism (37).

domination. While Thelma Golden's—and DC Murray's—theorization of the post-black

concerns itself with the aesthetics of contemporary black visual artists and their works,

non-academic social and cultural thinkers such as Ytasha Womack and Touré have found

the concept useful in discussions about black identity in contemporary society.[25] A

decade on from Golden's conceptualization, some of the key ideas contained in the post-

black aesthetic—especially the "desire to question constructions of African-American

identity that negate forms of difference" (Murray 2 [2016])—have become apparent in

the work of black artists engaged in pop cultural production in an ostensibly "post-racial"

era, especially in the realm of satire. Post-black, or "post-soul," satire further functions as

a corrective to the silencing of black voices effected by the elision of discussions of racial

inequality as extraneous to the "colorblind" US society, and represents what Terrence

Tucker refers to as a "comic rage" that "aggressively explores the wide-ranging impact of

institutional racism in post-integration American culture" (22). The two-fold process of

post-black satire speaks to both its necessity and its capacity to be problematic—while its

critique of systemic racism has been critically lauded, its propensity to hold retrogressive

tendencies within the black community to account has put it at odds with those valuing

the more traditional solidarity and politics of representation of civil rights-era progressive

movements, or "soul culture." Paul C. Taylor explains, "Where soul culture insisted on

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[25] I will continue to use Thelma Golden's term "post-black" to maintain consistency with my earlier chapters. However, it should be noted that theorists have offered terminologies, including "post-civil rights" (Tommie Shelby), and, notably, "post-soul" (Nelson George, Mark Anthony Neal, and contributions to the collection *Post-Soul Satire* [2014]). Though Paul C. Taylor sees the strategic benefit of differentiation, he notes that "However one understands the ideas of post-soul culture, post-civil rights politics, and post-black identity and aesthetics, there is considerable overlap between them. We might take these expressions as synonyms, as different names for the same complex reality" ("Post-Black, Old Black").

the seriousness of authenticity and positive images, post-soul culture revels in the contingency and diversity of blackness, and subjects the canon of positive images to subversion and parody—and appropriation" (631).

This is not to say that post-blackness or post-black satire represent a post-racialist abandoning of the specificity of black life. Taylor, attempting to situate the post-black moment in relation to blackness writ large, cites the art critic Arthur Danto's reading of the Hegelian end of history to suggest that there are two routes to the resolution of a discursive regime: "*historical inadequacy*—the inability of some practice to carry history forward—and…a *closed cognitive circuit*—the completion of a quest for self-knowledge in the realization that all knowledge (in the relevant domain) is self-knowledge" (637). Considered in this light, he argues that "Western race-thinking has…proven itself inadequate" to move history forward, given that it was animated by an attempt to link race and "social stratification," either as a way of explaining existing differences between peoples (e.g. anthropology) or producing these (e.g. white supremacy). Since "classical racialism" has given way to "critical race theory," he suggests that

> race theorists came to realize that their history…had, in point of fact, been about overruling, appropriating, and distorting other mechanisms for producing diversity and stratification to *create* new forms of difference and inequality—and about hiding its work by pretending that the social arrangements it helped create were part of the natural order. (638)

Now that classical race-thinking has reached its end-of-history, so too has blackness, which "is one of the racial positions that racial ideology uses to do its work" (639). He suggests that there are three options for the future of racial meaning, implicitly connected to potential work of the post-black—we can consider that "race-thinking" is "obsolete

and indefensible, and should give way to some variety of nonracial humanism, universalism, or cosmopolitanism"; we can consider "that race is a storehouse of social meaning that we can appropriate and play with as we see fit'"; or we can consider "that race-thinking remains a useful tool for navigating and understanding the world that previous race-thinking has made" (638). While he neglects to elaborate on the specific qualities of post-blackness as they align with the options for the future of racial thinking, these categories do resemble the ways that I talk about the politics of racial identity in this chapter and elsewhere. The first option, for example, with its emphasis on universal humanism, is found in post-racial thinking. The second and third are connected to what I would call post-black, in the vein of Thelma Golden's formulation and the work of post-black (or post-soul) satire. The acknowledgment of race as simultaneously illusionary/constructed and materially effective is expressed most trenchantly in the discourse of afro-pessimism, and is also a hallmark of contemporary satirical engagements with race, as is the play of racial signifiers (which can be appropriative or critical, depending on the context). The final point to make is that post-blackness, in this way of thinking, becomes not a repudiation of blackness, in the way that we think of postmodernism as a form of anti-modernism, but an evolution of its historical conceptualization. Taylor writes,

> We have heard from people who worried that being post-black means rejecting one's African heritage, or that "the new black" must be something other than black (for example, "trans-inter-multi-cultural-ism"). But the neo-Hegelian approach shows that post-black *can* be the new black, and that it need not jettison the content of the "old" black. Post-blackness is blackness emancipated from its historical burdens and empowered by self-knowledge—the knowledge that race-thinking has helped create the world with which critical race theory and liberatory notions of blackness have to contend. (640)

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This is an important point to make, because of the ways that the terms post-black and post-racial become confused in popular discourse. For all the ways that post-blackness constitutes a critique of traditional conceptualizations of "authentic" blackness, it is, as Golden reminds, committed to the "ongoing redefinition of Blackness in contemporary culture" (qtd in Touré 22).

This redefinition is occurring not solely in the High Art spaces of curators and artists like Golden and Kehinde Wiley, but also in the media productions of popular culture, that mass-mediated space where, as Stuart Hall opines, "we discover and play with the identifications of ourselves, where we are imagined, where we are represented, not only to the audiences out there who do not get the message, but to ourselves for the first time" (Hall 32 [1992]). I am especially interested in the production of discourse around identity—whether racial, gendered, or sexual—as it occurs in these hyper-public spaces, and the ways in which the audience is hailed by the formal use of irony, satire, and humor in the presentation of oppositional ideologies. By examining a sampling of the televisual works engaged in post-black satire, including sketch comedy *Key & Peele* and primetime sitcom *Black-ish*, I unpack the discourse of the post-black as it moves from museum to mainstream aesthetic, as well as the ways in which it gets confused with reactionary post-racial ideology. Further, I will argue that despite its imperfect relation to some pure form of progressive action, it constitutes an important and effective front in the cultural critique of institutionalized white supremacy, and marks a shift in the contemporary politics of representational discourse.

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Post-Black Rage

Created by the comic duo Keegan-Michael Key and Jordan Peele, *Key & Peele* was a sketch comedy series that aired on the cable network Comedy Central for 5 seasons, spanning January 2012 to September 2015. The series was something of a spiritual successor[26] to the network's cult classic *Chappelle's Show*, cut short in 2005 when co-creator and star comedian Dave Chappelle abandoned the show—and a $50 million dollar contract—at the height of its, and his, fame.[27] Both shows follow the trajectory of ground-breaking black sketch comedy *In Living Color* (1990-1994), an eclectic, exuberant, and decidedly non-PC program which offered "an intervention in television constructions of blackness…that, at its best, disturb[ed] existing regimes of representation of blackness and, at its worst, provide[d] the cultural terms through which racial subordination is legitimated and reproduced" (Gray 132). Like *In Living Color*,

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[26] While later seasons of *Key and Peele* abandoned the quintessentially-*Chappelle's Show* format of sketches interspersed with brief live-audience standup segments, along with numerous critics Chappelle himself noted the similarities between the programs, telling the audience at a 2016 tour date, "Y'all don't know what I've been through, watching Key and Peele do my show the last five fucking years" (Justin Davis "Was Dave Chappelle Right About Key & Peele?" *Complex*, 10/3/2016 http://www.complex.com/pop-culture/2016/10/dave-chappelle-disses-key-and-peele)

[27] While Chappelle has since asserted in interviews that his decision to leave was based on a desire to focus on his family, the abrupt nature of his departure inspired a number of theories over the years, ranging from relatively plausible rumors of a stress-related breakdown to the wholly paranoid conjecture that he had been threatened by members of "the Black Illuminati"—a sinister cabal of A-list black celebs (e.g. Oprah Winfrey and Bill Cosby) overly concerned with respectability politics and his popular show's influence on the cultural image of the black community. The guess which has gotten the most traction over the years, however, has to do with comments he made in 2006 to Oprah Winfrey about his personal comfort with portraying what were at times overtly racist images for a mainstream white audience. During the taping of one sketch in which he played a minstrel-type pixie who acted as a sort of bad racial conscience, he recalls, "somebody on the set [who] was white laughed in such a way—I know the difference of people laughing with me and people laughing at me—and it was the first time I had ever gotten a laugh that I was uncomfortable with" (Staff, "Chappelle's Story" Oprah.com, Feb. 3, 2006). This points to the complex process of encoding-decoding ironic performance, a process which can wound indiscriminately depending on the relationship between comedian and audience.

Key & Peele provides a complex social satire that "depends on historical and contemporary stereotypes, white spectatorship, idealized visions of a multiracial order, and role reversals for its humor, modes of address, and cultural meanings" (138); unlike the earlier show, however, *Key & Peele*'s contemporary sociohistorical situation allows it to "min[e] the specificity of post-racial blackness" (Guerrero 270) in order to give "voice and legitimacy to black rage" (276).

One well-known example of the way in which *Key & Peele* used satire to render legible the discourse of black rage (literally, in this case) is through the recurring character of Luther, introduced in the first episode as President Obama's "Anger Translator." Obama, played by Peele, sits in an high-backed leather chair, modelling a presidential fireside address. He speaks to the audience: "Now, before I begin I just want to say that I know a lot of people out there seem to think that I don't get angry. That's just not true. I get angry a lot. It's just the way that I express passion is different from most. So, just so there's no more confusion, we hired Luther here to be my anger translator." The camera slowly pulls back to reveal Key standing next to Obama, wide-eyed and glaring, his interlaced fingers covered in rings. "*Hi*," he growls, confrontational. As the sketch begins, he is a portrait of barely contained energy, jaw clenched, doing his best to respect the decorum of the moment. The address proceeds; after every statement coolly delivered by a calm President Obama, Luther recasts the content of the diplomatic rhetoric into antagonism, using a full range of vocal inflection, physical gestures, and menacing affect.

> Obama: First off, concerning the recent developments in the middle-eastern region, I just want to reiterate our unflinching support for all people, and the right to a democratic process.
> Luther (stepping toward the camera and pointing forcefully): Hey, all y'all dictators out there, keep messing around and see what happens. Just see what happens. Watch!

As the address continues, Luther becomes visibly agitated, pacing behind the president and off-camera, muttering to himself and inserting his own expressive punctuation for each presidential statement, culminating in a moment of sheer inarticulate fury born of abject frustration:

> Obama: These achievements should serve as a reminder that I'm on your side.
> Luther (yelling into a bullhorn): I am not a Muslim!
> Obama: And that my intentions, as your President, are coming from the right place.
> Luther: They're coming from Hawaii, which is where I'm from, which is in the United States of America, y'all. Okay? This is ridiculous. I have a birth certificate! I have a birth certificate! I have a hot diggity-doggity, mamase mamasa mamakusa, birth certificate, ya dumbass crackers!

At this point, Luther has stepped directly in front of the camera, effacing a view of the president behind him, fists alternately clenched and pointing angrily at the viewer, hunched aggressively, punctuating his words with two-footed stomping leaps. At the end of the outburst Obama must intervene, prompting the embarrassed Luther to straighten up and point an accusing finger directly into his own face: "Dial it back Luther, damn!"[28]

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[28] The recurring joke of Luther's escalating fury being reined in by Obama was given a surprising and hilarious twist on the occasion of the 2015 White House Correspondent's Dinner, where Keegan-Michael Key was invited to reprise his role in support of the actual President Obama. The bit proceeded according to the template established in the original Comedy Central sketch, until the end, when the President himself begins to raise his voice and become incensed over political inaction on climate change. The normally aggressive Luther looks increasingly uncomfortable as Obama continues, "…what kind of stupid, short-sighted, irresponsible bull—…" Suddenly it is Luther grabbing the president, trying to calm him down, even playing fearful as Obama turns on him. "All due respect, sir," he says meekly, hands in front of him in a defensive posture, "you don't need an anger translator—you need counseling. I'm outta here man; I ain't tryna get into all *this*." The flipside of the successful joke is the tragedy of the President needing 7 years

Luther, argues Lisa Guerrero, functions as "Obama's black conscience,

embodying signs of blackness that the post-racial myth renders off-limits to Obama"

(270). The president's range of critical affect is curtailed not merely because of his

elevated public office, but because of the ways that his blackness signifies in the

American racial discourse. Marvin McAllister correctly notes that "at the heart of this

embodied-disembodied conversation on race, representation, and politics is a

signification cultural truth: the first black/biracial president must remain circumspect

because he is working against the cultural imaginary of Luther" (252), i.e. the trope of the

Angry Black Man. Guerrero further explains,

> This version of the mind/body split of black masculinity is necessary because, while Obama and Luther exist as a singular identity in the public's imagination, the performance of that integrated blackness is disallowed in the actual public sphere. Even as rage is projected onto black bodies within the social imaginary (including that of the President of the United States), its actual articulation must be continually denied to black people (*especially* the President of the United States), because an articulated black rage forces the nation out of its post-racial pan and into its racial fire. (270-271)

Luther, the "embodiment of a dominant simulacrum of blackness," simultaneously offers

the audience "a humorous confirmation of the character of blackness that has been

constructed within the social imaginary" while, for the repressed Obama-figure he

"enacts the opportunity to bridge the mind/body split demanded of black bodies in the

United States, and experience a moment of integrated blackness" (271). Clearly, the

character manages to hail diverse socio-political positions, ones that might be roughly

sketched onto a structure of movement, e.g. essentialism/stasis vs. complexity/change:

and an elaborate contextualization (in both venue and skit) before he was able to even *play at* a public expression of righteous anger.

the audience who sees in Luther the essential character of blackness that Obama can't

escape, or the audience who sees Luther as one option for performing black identity

foreclosed upon by popular discursive structures. In other words, the mere existence of

the first audience makes the public performance of anger untenable for black individuals,

because that emotion is always-already never the thing itself, but rather tied to what many

consider to be the inalienable fact of blackness. In a white supremacist discursive regime,

Obama's rage is not merely impolitic, it is atavistic.

This then, is one of the ways in which post-black satire functions as a corrective

to the implicit policing of black identity, through challenging the dominant mythologies

animating repressive constructions of blackness. Further, it gives expression to

performances of blackness subject to erasure in an ostensibly colorblind era. As Guerrero

argues,

> Black satire in the post-racial age gives voice and legitimacy to black rage—not
> the black rage that post-racial white America has imagined to justify racial
> violence and injustice against black people, but rather the black rage that gives
> form to the black subject in a time and place that have rendered all aspects of
> black life to be invisible, unimaginable, or wholly impossible. Contemporary
> black satire makes meaning of black racial identity in an era where the meanings
> of race have been willfully hidden and ignored. (276)

Guerrero's analysis of *Key & Peele*'s satire effectively points to the ways in which the

show challenges the comfortable elision of non-white presence in the public sphere, but I

am also interested in the ways that the show pushes back against traditional constructions

of blackness from within the community. That is, the ways in which the satire is

specifically "post-black satire."[29] The opening sketch from the series' first episode, "Phone Call," will provide a better object for examining the complexity of the show's engagement with the politics of the post-black aesthetic.

<u>"Phone Call" (2012)</u>

The scene opens at the corner of a crosswalk in suburban Los Angeles. A thirty-something black man (Keegan-Michael Key) dressed casually in a retro track jacket and jeans is on the phone with his wife, letting her know that he's gotten her tickets to the theater for her birthday. A second black man (Jordan Peele) in a puffy black down vest and turtleneck sweater combo walks up to the crosswalk—noticing him, in mid-sentence the first man changes the inflection of his voice from thin alto into a bass drawl, his pronunciation, grammar and syntax switching from primly Standard to vernacular English ("Unfortunately, the orchestra is all filled up, but they do have seats that are still left in the…uh, dress circle, so, uh, yeah, if you want me to get them thee-ater tickets right now, Imma get 'em…"). The second man, also on the phone, looks stern, and his first lines are almost growled: "Wassup dawg? I'm about 5 minutes away." We watch them talk on their respective phones—Key's character maintains his altered speech pattern, which becomes increasingly humorous in light of his topic, and Peele's character offers a few monosyllabic replies. They briefly make eye contact and

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[29] Guerrero refers to the show as "post-soul" (270), using the term in a manner that aligns with the ways that I will be discussing post-black, though not making the same connections to an aesthetic tradition as I am attempting to in this chapter.

offer each other the slightest of nods. When the walk light comes on Peele

crosses towards the camera, allowing him to deliver the sketch's final

punchline—in the lilting whine and exaggerated facial movements of a

stereotypically effeminate queer masculinity, he tells the other end of the line,

"Oh my *god*, Christian! I almost totally just got *mugged* right now!"

The humor in this sketch is deeply layered. For most of the skit, it functions as a

kind of dramatic irony, a result of audience's knowledge that the first man (Key) is

performing a certain kind of blackness—tough, unrefined, vernacular—which is at odds

with both his demeanor as it is first introduced and the conversation he is having (to his

wife, about taking her to a play). The second joke occurs when the second man (Peele),

who has provoked Key's "code-switch" by his presence, is revealed to be a) fearful of

Key's performance of blackness, and b) located in a generalized zone of queer

subjectivity. The latter, of course, is implied in all the traditional ways that cinema and

televisual culture have historically queered characters via the epistemology of the raised

eyebrow: his speech patterns, his timidity, the suggestive fact that his telephonic partner

is not a wife (as she is for Key, his in-sketch foil) but rather a *man* named *Christian*.

Importantly, both the men's contemporary casual garb and the street corner where they

meet are rendered entirely neutral, devoid of socio-economic or ethnic markers,

suggesting an inherent association with middle-class whiteness. Peele's character, whose

appearance (i.e. both his arrival and the way he looks) invokes a sort of authentic

blackness which imposes itself upon the first man's self-presentation, is revealed to be

not an arbiter of black masculinity, but rather a mincing dandy in "black drag." The joke

loops back around on Key, who has reflexively defaulted to what he thinks of as a

performance acceptable to Peele, when in fact this is precisely what made Peele

frightened. For his part, Peele affects his terse tough-guy act in order to ward off what he

perceives as a potential threat; both men are caught in an echo chamber of expectation

and performance.

At the most reductive level, this sketch is, or is *about*, the cultural experience of

post-blackness because of its refusal to allow that racialized appearance is the key to

meaning, whether in an artist's work or an individual's subjectivity. That is, each man

sees not a black man but a "Black Man," the mythological figure of community or

cultural imaginary, and they make assumptions about each other—Peele, that Key is

dangerous, and Key, that Peele would disapprove of his initial performance. The skit, I

would argue, treats these misrecognitions differently, as a result of the intended audience

of the critique: we might map these structurally as surface/apparent vs.

submerged/implicit, and further associate these poles with extra-community/white vs.

intra-community/black critiques, respectively. The myth of the dangerous black man

whose "physical presence can be enough to invoke fear, regardless of actions and

intentions" (Collins 153) becomes a naturalized commonplace in the mind of white

America via the latent white supremacy of media discourse, and is deployed to justify

police violence and policies such as racial profiling, these made necessary by "the

potential threat caused by African American men's bodies" (153). The sketch disrupts

this shorthand for black masculine embodiment by contextualizing each man's posturing

within framing glimpses of their lives outside of the brief interaction depicted: Key is a loving husband, and Peele is more afraid of others than they should be of him. The reified "potential" for violence is rendered wholly imaginary and inconsequential. Importantly, the characters' misrecognition of the other constructs them as stand-ins for *white* audience members, who would presumably share these de facto racial biases; then, the joke is that these two have internalized the prejudice of the dominant antiblack cultural imaginary. The performance of the black actors allows the white audience to accept the silliness of this discursive regime without feeling directly targeted. This is a subtextual critique of the interpellating white gaze (e.g. Fanon's "Look, a Negro!") accomplished without mentioning whiteness or featuring white characters, and works as a contrast and complement to the explicit confrontation of Luther's cathartic invective—"ya dumbass crackers!"—later in the same episode.

However, there is a further critique of these two as out of touch with some "authentic" version of blackness. This certainly occurs in their white-aligned positions within the antiblack prejudicial imaginary, and is further developed in both their assumptions about each other and the sketch's best-guess as to audience assumptions regarding their respective claims to blackness. Key's lack of authenticity is demonstrated by his need to perform for a black stranger; importantly, this performance of blackness is ultimately ironized not only because it is revealed to have contributed to Peele's fright, but because Peele has no claim to authentic blackness which would warrant such a performance. This is the intra-community critique intended for the black audience, and, like those artists and works that Golden initially termed "post-black," this second critique

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is "a threat…to the hegemony of hetero-patriarchal expressions of blackness that, in their essentialist logics and racial nostalgia, relegate African-American identity to a series of limiting scripts" (Murray 3 [2016]). The sketch works to undermine a reflexive valorization of essentialist racial authenticity by prompting the audience to "disqualify" each of the men in turn; that is, by setting up blackness as a performance, the audience is asked to notice the aspects of each character that are set outside this performance, and to either a) judge these aspects as essentially non-black or b) judge black essentialism as imaginary, a "limiting script" for individual experience. The first possibility forces the audience to allow for difference, e.g. multiculturalism; the second is a post-black critique that attacks the masculinist dogmas of black nationalism but also flirts with a colorblind post-racialism and the conservative politics of cultural stigmatization, depending on who you ask.

What is important about this second critique is the sequential iteration of everything *excluded* from the "authentic" performance of blackness: types of diction, aesthetic appreciation, feminism/femininity, and queerness. In the first case, as EP Johnson notes, speech patterns are an important signifier of authenticity in the black community—"talking 'white' is equivalent to speaking Standard English and talking 'black' is equivalent to speaking in the black vernacular….The black American who either chooses not to or simply cannot speak in the (black) vernacular is cast as a traitor to the race—indeed, as 'white'" (5). "Whiteness" here is made equivalent to an elevated educational and class status, against which blackness must be defined by a lack of these, a conceptualization which reinforces white supremacist assumptions while

simultaneously functioning as a mark of belongingness. Key's character's attempt to lay claim to a (presumably shared) black identity through audibly deploying vernacular speech is prompted by nothing more than the presence of Peele's man; this may be, as in Peele's case, a moment of defensive posturing designed to foreclose the possibility of violence threatened by the other's black body, but Johnson reminds us that this speech act is bound up in a demonstration of shared community as well. Key's code-switch then becomes an act tied not to fear of the other (as the white audience's identificatory position might suggest) but to fear of *being other*, of being not sufficiently black in the esteem of the intra-community policing gaze. As noted above, the switch to vernacular is especially humorous in this situation because the modulation in tone is not matched by change in the content of the conversation—the first man is still talking about a space in which "High Art" is consumed, but in speech which is not typically associated with a refined aesthetic appreciation. Does a vernacular blackness, conceived of as an essentialist politics of authenticity and lack, permit visiting, perhaps even *enjoying*, the bourgeois, "white" space of the theater?

The theater possesses further significance: namely, that inasmuch as blackness has been equated with masculinity in the construct of the sketch, the theater also represents a *feminine* space. The sketch opens mid-conversation, Key telling his partner that he's prepared the outing "…because you're my wife, and you love the theater, and it's your birthday." Though evincing a fairly "standard" heteronormative domestic situation, the evident care in his attention to detail and his softer tone construct the relationship as woman-oriented, in both the elevation of her happiness and the possible

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subordination of his own (that is, if the reasons in the above quote are reasons why he would go to the theater even though he hates it). The relationship is heterosexual, but not hetero-*patriarchal*, which leaves his masculinity vulnerable to accusations of being "whipped"; in homosocial company he must defend himself from these. Thus, with the change in dialect comes a change in tone towards his wife: "OK, Imma pick ya ass up at 6:30, then," he tells her, communicating his patriarchal authority through the casual misogyny of quotidian masculinity. This is not to say that blackness is simply hyper-masculinity, rather that his demonstration of masculinity prevents his blackness from being dismissed out of hand. This is clearly demonstrated in Peele's character's queerness, which is clearly meant to be received as de facto at odds with the sort of traditional black identity that found its misogynist/homophobic apotheosis in the philosophies of mid-century black nationalists like Stokely Carmichael and Eldridge Cleaver—as Murray notes, "The dogma of black cultural nationalism was…repressive in its marginalization of any expression of African-American identity that was antithetical to a hetero-patriarchal value system" (7 [2016]). Further, as Johnson and Mae G. Henderson explain, the mid-century discourse of early Black Studies engaged in "the deployment of a sexist and homophobic rhetoric in order to mark, by contrast, the priority of race"; therefore, "homosexuality was effectively 'theorized' as a 'white disease' that had 'infected' the black community" (4). As an archetypal figure, Peele's gay man becomes subject to a double prohibition, his homosexuality figuring him as at once not-black and simultaneously located within the mutually-exclusive category of whiteness, just as does Key's Standard English speech. Each character's self-positioning as adjacent

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to the Black Power-model of racial identity is undermined; the final joke suggests not only that they have been performing for each other, but that neither of them has any claim to an authentic blackness, that they are either too white or too gay, too compassionate or too sissy, to ever be capital-B Black. The sketch's pathos, then, is that they are each as yet marked by blackness under the epidermalized regime of white supremacist American signification, and therefore find themselves trapped in a "without/within" of Black/black identity.[30]

The characters' attempts to appropriate a mythological Blackness, within the 45 second universe of the skit, may all seem quite silly. They have each stereotyped and performed for the other, have each equated melanized skin to an idea of blackness made up of a constellation of white supremacist and masculinist ideologies. In the skit, blackness is a fiction enforced within the group by machismo, and the fear of the other or of being a community traitor. The white audience is critiqued for their maintenance of cartoonish stereotypes of the black man as threat made flesh; the black audience is critiqued for the ways that intra-community performances contribute to the maintenance of same. On the surface, the real "winner" here seems to be the contemporary post-

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[30] A wonderful satirical bit on the first season of Donald Glover's FX comedy *Atlanta* (2016-) recently pointed to the inadequacy of social construction paradigms to account for the maintenance of race as a "fact" of embodied appearance in the US visual sphere (akin to what Elizabeth Alexander has called "a bottom line blackness"). In the mock news segment, Antoine, a young black man, discusses his "transracial" identity as "a 35-year old white man" named "Harrison." There is obvious humor in the discrepancy between his proclaimed identity and his appearance (dark skin, medium-length braids), and the sketch mines this through Antoine/Harrison's adoption of "white" behaviors, such as drinking IPAs and wearing Patagonia brand clothing with "thick brown belts," discussing *Game of Thrones*, and racially profiling black people. Asked for his message to other young black men, Antoine advises, "Be you. At all costs. But also, stop dressing so crazy," brilliantly combining the feel-good messaging of mainstream liberal (white) LGBTQ media with a white-aligned, Cosby-esque politics of respectability. The sketch doesn't have a clear thesis, and can be read as many things, among them a transphobic dig at transition narratives, but the most important question it raises is, why not?

racialist audience, able to laugh uncritically at it all, content that they've moved past such divisive nonsense. Just Be Yourself! they might tell the characters. It's What's on the Inside That Counts!

However, a so-called "colorblind" ideology ignores the sources of power and domination which structure interpersonal relations even between individuals of the same race, class, and gender. To consider identity as a fiction which can be assumed or discarded within different contexts merely through the will of an individual or community is to deny the historical construction and enforcing of antiblackness by the dominant (white, hetero-patriarchal) group and ideology. More than simply "reveal[ing] the semantics of blackness as internally heterogeneous" (Mercer 139 [2007]), the logic of the skit, in the post-racial lens, seems to suggest that the two men could choose to stop performing the inherited racial script, that acknowledging blackness as fictional could allow them to relate to each other in a neutral, "human" manner, that they are the only things holding themselves and each other back. At best, a post-racial reading of this sketch ignores the structural systems of inequality that don't disappear simply through demystifying them as "fictions"; however, such a reading has the further effect of actually *enhancing* racial pathologization through a particularly neoliberal version of respectability politics. Tim Wise, referring to post-racial discourse as "the rhetoric of racial transcendence," explains,

> [I]f the rhetoric of racial transcendence gives the impression—as it does, almost by definition—that the racial injustices of the past are no longer instrumental in determining life chances and outcomes, it will become increasingly likely that persons seeing significant racial stratification in society will rationalize those disparities as owing to some cultural or biological flaw on the part of those at the bottom of the hierarchy. In other words, racial bias would become almost *rational*

once observers of inequity were deprived of the critical social context needed to understand the conditions they observe. Whereas a color-conscious approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of racial inequities and how they've been generated, colorblindness encourages placing blame for the conditions of inequity on those who have been the targets of systemic injustice. Ironically, this means that colorblindness, often encouraged as the ultimate non-racist mentality, might have the consequence of giving new life to racist thinking. (18-19)

Indeed, the ultimate irony of this sketch may reside not merely in the difference between what the characters say and what they mean, what they see and the "truth" of the other, but in its discursive availability to a post-racialist ideology. Any reading of the sketch—that is, its reception or "decoding"—becomes subject to what Stuart Hall refers to as the "dominant cultural order," which, while not functioning as an absolute determinant in a message's reception, results in "preferred readings" which adhere to "common-sense constructs"; he explains, "The domains of 'preferred meanings' have the whole social order embedded in them as a set of meanings, practices, and beliefs: the everyday knowledge of social structures, of 'how things work for all practical purposes in this culture,' the rank order of power and interest and the structure of legitimations, limits and sanctions" (134 [1980]). The "dominant-hegemonic" decoding of any mediated work, then, is largely structured by the prevailing cultural understanding of the audience, the critical path of least resistance. An audience whose default analytical mode includes a core belief in post-racial culture could be expected to find in this work an incisive justification for same.

This becomes exponentially more problematic as we move away from Hall's ideal media product—his primary examples come from the fairly straightforward discourse of

professional televisual journalism[31]—and into the realm of irony as invoked through satire or comedy. In the first place, irony "is neither the property of works, nor the creation of an unfettered imagination, but a way of reading, an interpretative strategy" (Stanley Fish 91); thus it depends overmuch on audience disposition to even be noticed, let alone successfully decoded. Further, because it is "the making or inferring of meaning in addition to and different from what is stated, together with an attitude toward both the said and the unsaid" (Hutcheon 11 [1994]), there is always-already an element of misdirection, akin to a dissimulating surface hiding something unexpected behind or beneath. So the interpreting/decoding audience must both already be looking for it and then choose the correct meaning from a set of conflicting meanings.

A good example of the fraught practice of decoding irony is in Lisa Colletta's critique of Stephen Colbert's television persona on *The Colbert Report*, character and show both ironic send-ups of politically conservative news media, straightfacedly reproducing the reactionary discourse of Far Right punditry. While his character's know-nothing political philosophy and exaggerated (a)moral claims were designed to mark the performance as Leftist satire of figures like prominent Fox News host Bill O'Reilly and President George W. Bush, he was curiously beloved of both sides of the political spectrum.[32] Colletta argues that this *meconnaissance* is inherent in the formal mode of his

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[31] Not to suggest that news media a) is not inherently subjective, as if its pure essence were direct communication of unfiltered, pre-discursive data, or b) has remained, in the years since Hall's seminal piece, even as relatively objective-adjacent as the halcyon days before its Mephistophelian compromise with corporate interests and submission to the dictates of capital-E Entertainment, or before "alternative facts" and "fake news" became common parlance.

[32] Colbert was even invited to host the 2006 White House Correspondents' Dinner by the Bush II establishment, which had long been his primary object of satiric scorn. Though he remained in the conservative drag of his TV persona, his performance was transparently tongue-in-cheek, and to the

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performance: "his irony, like all good postmodern irony, can be seen as confirming whatever angle of vision a viewer brings to the show at the same time it confirms the viewer's cynical reading of all political argument" (863). In other words, not only does the ambiguity between said/meant make mutually-exclusive interpretations available to the audience, but it models a political discourse which actually proceeds to *undermine* a belief in unironic communication. Colletta suggests that this is perhaps even a function of the televisual regime, that "the irony which is necessary for satire to succeed is undercut by the very form of television itself" (863); "Television's goal is to entertain, and in comedy shows it is to make people laugh, but people cannot be counted on to laugh at the 'right' things" (864). She elaborates,

> Television programs self-reflexively cite the situations and gestures of other television programs, undermining the "seriousness" of meaning in contemporary culture, turning everything into pastiche. Savvy television shows…satirize the blurring of the real and the virtual, the political and the parodic, but they do it within the same self-reflexive, mediated space of television, and therefore, *like all pastiche*, the seriousness of their critique is undermined. (866, italics mine)

Obviously, my own work is concerned with this reflexive "like all pastiche" move, the knee-jerk dismissal of a prevailing mode of expression and meaning-making. The success, I would argue, of any specific critical work or act is not reducible to some purported genetic flaw in its formal presentation; there is no original sin of aesthetics.

Though curiously not cited in her article, this critique of postmodernism and pastiche via televisual culture seems indebted, to say the very least, to David Foster

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discomfort of the audience at the traditionally collegial event he roasted the President and prominent attendees mercilessly.

Wallace's championing of literary sincerity in his 1993 essay "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction," which I discuss in my Introduction. Indeed, both Wallace and Colletta are fellow travelers in the particularly Jamesonian critique of postmodern(ism and) irony and pastiche discussed in the Introduction and Chapter 1. The associative linkage between pastiche and both postmodernism (proper, as well as anything that can be gestured at as such) and television has the consequence of rendering each a priori ineffectual as modes or venues of critique. Each discourse falls short in failing to invoke the "healthy linguistic normality" linked to the "formerly centered subject" (Jameson 15), and acts of resistance either to or through these modes "are all somehow secretly disarmed and reabsorbed by a system of which they themselves might well be considered a part, since they can achieve no distance from it" (49).

However, as I have discussed, this construction of "normality," linguistic or otherwise, marks an elision of oppressed subjectivities in favor of a nostalgic yearning for some imaginary prelapsarian bourgeois ego-ideal which provided an Archimedean point from which to survey the world as a coherent totality, a subject position made possible, per Sandoval, precisely through the "subjectivity of subjection" experienced by modernity's others.[33] Considering this modernist human subject in the context of the discussion of afro-pessimism earlier in this chapter, this further represents a white fantasy of mastery which depends on the social death of blackness for its relative elevation. Further, as Lisa Guerrero notes, many critics "have argued that for people of African descent postmodernity is a condition catalyzed in slavery. In other words, African

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[33] As well as through the irony of "depths and heights" discussed in this chapter's conclusion.

Americans are inherently postmodern subjects whose condition has consistently been one of dislocation—from society, from self, from humanity" (267). In sum, as the subjective normality alluded to by Jameson's invocation of linguistic normality has been thoroughly critiqued as it relates to the minoritarian subject, it is surprising that theorists continue to take as axiomatic the devaluation of the oppositional potential of pastiche, and irony, in the post-postmodern media-cultural system.

Which still, however, brings us back to the problem of "Phone Call" and the availability of its critique for appropriation under a dominant discourse of post-racial colorblindness. While in a broader view of the cultural production of Key and Peele this skit becomes contextualized as one comment among many other critiques aimed at white supremacy and the messiness of postmodern racial hybridity, on its own, is it too overwhelming a statement, too invested in the implication of African-Americans as producers of the black myth? Does its televisual irony, its ambivalence, inherently negate its subversive commentary? Are we long overdue for a more generalized politics of sincerity and "single-entendre values" (192) that Wallace argued for almost three decades ago?

Black-ish (2014-)

By way of pondering this, I'd like to consider the pilot episode of *Black-ish* (2014), a primetime network sitcom created by Kenya Barris and premiering on ABC in September 2014, critically-acclaimed for its representation of race and contemporary society. While the show attempts to martial a post-black critique, its embrace of sincerity

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and pedantic refusal of productive ambivalence initially situate it in the discursive realm of post-racial ideology.

The episode begins with a montage introducing us to the Johnson family through a voice-over provided by the show's lead, Andre "Dre" Johnson, Sr, played by actor Anthony Anderson. As the martial beat of Kanye West's unmistakable "Jesus Walks" (*The College Dropout* 2004) plays, Dre turns off his iPhone alarm, rolls over in bed, and introduces us to himself—"your standard, regular ol' incredibly handsome, unbelievably charismatic black dude"—his wife (Tracee Ellis Ross), whom he notes is "mixed race" and "a doctor"; and his "four great kids" who, along with his father (aka "Pops," played by Laurence Fishburne), live with him in "a great house," pictured as a palatial Mediterranean-style home with a semi-circular driveway and manicured lawn. His life story is figured as a succession of photographs. His present success has placed him "a far cry from where it all began," depicted in a photo of a young black boy superimposed in front of a one-story house covered in illegible graffiti; the bridge between past and present is a picture of him in college graduation robe and mortar. "I guess for a kid from the hood, I'm living the American Dream," he says as he strolls into a walk-in closet filled with dress clothes, shot from a low angle, the hallway of white drawers and cabinets framing the space like a Greek temple altar; a shot of a floor-to-ceiling collection of shoes flashes on screen. There's just one problem: "When brothers start gettin' a little money, stuff starts gettin' a little weird." He imagines a tour bus driving by, the guide pointing out "the mythical and majestic black American family, out of their habitat, but still thriving." He feels a loss of identity in the new multicultural social space:

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Sometimes I worry that, in an effort to make it, black folks have dropped a little bit of their culture and the rest of the world has picked it up. They even renamed it "Urban." And in the "Urban" world, Justin Timberlake and Robin Thicke are R&B Gods, Kim Kardashian's the symbol for big butts, and Asian guys are just unholdable on the dance floor. Come on! Big butts? R&B and dancing? Those were the black man's go-tos!

He doesn't want "to go back to the days of being the big scary black guy," but "it did kind of have its advantages," he admits, as the audience sees a young white woman brazenly steal his parking space and raise her middle finger at him. Even though he's about to become "Senior Vice President" at his advertising firm, his father chides him for not "joining that black firm" where he would have "been Mr. President five years ago"; "Yeah, but for half the money," Dre retorts. His wife is hoping there's a salary increase. His son reveals that instead of basketball he wants to play field hockey, which Dre considers "a woman's sport." At work, he shares an intricate handshake with a young white man, whom, he tells the audience, he considers "an honorary brother"; he is visibly annoyed when another white man, *not* an honorary brother, addresses him as "Dr. Dre" and solicits help with an advertisement script, asking Dre how "a black guy would say 'good morning'" ("Probably just like that," he responds stonily). Later, at a very white staff meeting, Dre's boss informs him that the anticipated promotion has made Dre, in a racist dogwhistle, "SVP of our new *Urban* Division," prompting him to spend the rest of the episode in an attempt to negotiate the terrain of his black identity and the way it intersects with the expectations of himself and others. His tactic is to adopt the mantra "Keep It Real."

Keep It Real, of course, should be a red flag to the audience. Take, for example, the *Chappelle's Show* sketch "When Keepin' It Real Goes Wrong" (2004), which I would

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hold *Black-ish* pastiches almost plagiaristically, were it not for the ubiquity of this sort of

"black-guy-white-workplace" scenario in popular cultural representations of blackness.

Chappelle plays Vernon Franklin, "an exceptional young man" who was "the

valedictorian of his high school class, won several scholarships and became the first

person in his family to attend college." As Franklin cheerfully goes about his workday,

the True Crime-esque narrator tells the audience how Vernon "got a good job and worked

14-hour days, six days a week, quickly becoming the youngest vice president in the

history of the Viacorp corporation, ending the cycle of violence and drug addiction that

had plagued his family for generations." At a meeting, a white executive blithely

patronizes him: "Vernon, great job, buddy. You da man! Give me some skin, huh?" The

camera freezes on Chappelle's face, eyes shut and mouth beginning to open in reply.

"Vernon got along with all of the people he worked with, which, in his heart of hearts,

made him feel like an Uncle Tom," the narrator tells us. "Though he could've ignored the

simple comment his mentor made, Vernon decided to Keep It Real." For the next 42

seconds, Chappelle rebukes the room full of white executives, giving vent to a jumble of

confused emotions and stereotypes that are alternately aimed at the white men and at the

ludicrousness of his own bricolage of black pop cultural signifiers. He mocks the men by

playing minstrel—"You want a little soft shoe? Should I juggle some watermelons for

you, boss?" he asks them as he performs a shuffling dance. "Rap music is dangerous!" he

tells the men, leaving the audience unclear as to whether this is something that he

believes, or something he thinks they believe and is mocking, or something he wants

them to believe. While the others watch in amazed horror he devolves into an

increasingly random series of rap tropes and call-outs, citing Jay-Z ("'My name is HOV,' nigga! Never heard that before, have you?"), Tupac ("Thug life!"), the Wu-Tang Clan, and DMX ("Arf! Arf! Arf!"). The skit ends with Vernon's inevitable termination, and subsequent career as a gas station attendant, which the narrator tells us is "as Real as it can be." The ostensible lesson is that the gangsta authenticity of Keepin' It Real is counterproductive in non-gangsta social climes, and that you never know what you'll unleash once the dam of repression starts to leak. More disturbing, though, is the portrait of utter alienation in Chappelle's Vernon Franklin, whose revenge upon the quotidian racism of his coworkers is to perform a schizophrenic embrace of the racist cultural imaginary. That is, it is left unclear precisely whose Real was being ventriloquized in Franklin's hall-of-mirrors performance of blackness, whose racial unconscious is sated by his Pyrrhic victory.

The other major invisible/inevitable influence on *Black-ish* is the journalist Touré's widely discussed work *Who's Afraid of Post-Blackness?* (2011), the second chapter of which is aptly titled "Keep It Real Is a Prison." A number of specific social anxieties and fears around authentic identity expressed by Kenya Barris' Dre—from the disconnect he feels from his father's strong civil-rights era black identity, to the argument over the appropriateness of fried chicken, to the fear of being too white, to affording certain white friends honorary brother-hood, to workplace microaggressions—are present in Touré's book. Though he is careful to distinguish it from post-racialism, for Touré post-black means, in short, "that identity options are limitless" (12); the book celebrates the freedom from restrictive community norms and the burdens of racial representation

and shared historical suffering that the contemporary black individual experiences. It is

no coincidence, then, that his examples are drawn from the ranks of celebrities and the

wealthy; his is primarily an economic freedom, a hybridity that expresses itself in the

code-switching of Oprah and Obama and Jay-Z. Randall Kennedy notes as much in a

review of the work, tying the book's message to the "anxieties over racial loyalty"

generated by the community "scrutiny of prominent blacks" which prompt these

individuals "especially those in elite, predominantly white settings, to signal

conspicuously their allegiance to blackness." While I disagree with Kennedy's ultimate

claim—a doubling-down on the conservative racial politics of "boundaries and

discipline"—he draws an important line in the sand for theorizing the social valence of

post-black, which, if it is to be anything, shouldn't just be a refused-apology for class

status. DC Murray's critique of the work's theorization as an incomplete construction of

post-black epistemology makes a similar point, but goes further in making the term

productive as a socio-political stance:

> Post-blackness, as it has been constructed in the writings and curatorial efforts of Thelma Golden, are [sic] perhaps more productive and politically urgent than the recuperative efforts of Touré, precisely because they are more unapologetically queer in their effort to radically re-envision blackness beyond compulsory heterosexuality. *Who's Afraid of Post-Blackness?* is more concerned with healing the racial wounds of privileged African Americans who have found themselves thrust outside the comforts of authenticity and membership: those individuals who, for one reason or another, are devoid of the black cultural distinctiveness necessary to *be down*. Touré's message is an important one and speaks to an enduring intra-cultural challenge that is certainly destructive, if not also self-annihilating. However, despite its more meaningful interventions, it does not acknowledge what [EP] Johnson calls the "imperialism of hetero-normativity" that continues to plague conceptualizations of black authenticity. (15 [2016])

Indeed, as Murray points out, "Even in Touré and Kennedy's contentious debate, there is no mention of the fact that the origins of post-blackness lie in the aesthetic and conceptual dimensions of mostly queer artists" (14), a fact which does as much in itself to state that "queerness seems to always fall outside the auspices of normative blackness" (14); and, in some cases it seems, post-blackness as well.

These critiques of Touré's work map perfectly onto the scenario constructed in Barris' *Black-ish*. Dre's alienation from his fantasy of authentic black identity is shown to function entirely via his socioeconomic standing; his house and expensive clothes become metonyms for a new subjectivity incommensurate with blackness, which is figured implicitly as suffering and lack. His quest to Keep It Real consists of invoking patriarchal privilege and laying out a series of "strict guidelines" for the maintenance of blackness. His wife's advice is ignored, as she is, according to Dre, "a biracial or mixed or omni-colored-complexion, whatever-it-is-they're-calling-it-today woman—who technically isn't even really black" (her response, "Okay, well, if I'm not really black, then could somebody please tell my hair and my ass?" only further muddles the discussion by invoking the specter of race science). He is relieved when he learns his son's preference for field hockey is actually in service of making varsity so that he can "hold…[his] first boob"; not, as he imagined, connected to "turning into a white boy" or being excited about a "women's sport," both loaded signifiers for a waning of black(ness and) masculinity.

The show further mocks the possibility of both traditional and oppositional formulations of black subjectivity. When Dre's son, jealous of his Jewish classmates,

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requests his own Bar Mitzvah, Dre's Keep it Real response is to hold an "African rites of passage ceremony." As Ugandan folk music plays, the camera pans over a hodgepodge of loosely African signifiers: woven baskets, hand drums, a jar of dried herbs labeled "water lilly" [sic], a statuette of smiling black figure with tongue extended, and books titled *African Tribal Traditions* and *The Guide to an African Rites of Passage Ceremony*. The wide shot reveals Dre reading from an instruction manual, shaking a colorful rainstick-type instrument while his son dejectedly holds a long staff. They are each dressed in dashikis with matching kufi, and the backyard has been filled with an assortment of pots, baskets, drums, and drapings. Dre takes a handful of small bones from a glass jar and throws them into his son's face, before using his thumb to daub a brown substance onto Andre Junior's forehead. When Dre's father questions him about "this mess," he responds, "This ain't no mess, Dad. This is our culture." "This ain't *our* culture," replies the grandfather. "We black, not African. Africans don't even like us."

The absurdity of the scene turns on Dre's attempt to appropriate and render productive a culture he knows nothing about; the cruelty of the scene is the rendering of that culture as a) his only available cultural touchstone, and b) utterly, laughably primitive. That is, the laughter of the audience is at the expense of the primal ontological rupture wrought by chattel slavery's creation of blackness as pure fungibility, and the simultaneous severing of the African people from a connection to Human history in the form of ethnic-cultural heritage. Even recent history is unavailable as a foundation for Real identity, as the show similarly forecloses on the ability of characters to draw upon the civil-rights tradition in the character of Pops (Laurence Fishburne), whose invocation

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of mid-century activism is made meaningless by his insufficiency as spokesman for that history. Disgusted with a show of affection between his son and daughter-in-law, he counters with a non-sequitur seemingly designed for the sole purpose of disrupting his socio-historical credibility: "Oh, why don't y'all go get a room? I can't believe I marched on Washington and fought for my country to watch y'all do that mess." Dre is indignant—"You shot yourself in the foot to get out of the army. And you were in DC for an Isley Brothers concert." Dre's own attempt at a revolutionary subjectivity is to submit, as his first project heading the Urban division, a Los Angeles tourism commercial soundtracked by Dead Prez's "Hip Hop" (*Let's Get Free* 2000) and featuring television news footage of civil unrest—arrests lit by helicopter spotlights, crowds of faceless black citizens confronting officers, OJ Simpson's white Bronco being pursued on the freeway, burning buildings—intercut with a brief image of Malcolm X and video of boxer Sugar Ray Leonard knocking out (the white) Donny Lalonde. The video closes with the text-graphic "Los Angeles: KEEPIN' IT REAL," the letters of the latter phrase being digitally sprinkled with bullet holes as the advertisement ends. The audience is meant to understand this as mere petulance, the potential critique of state power residing in the images themselves left unrealized while blackness again is figured as suffering, lack, and, as with Chappelle's Vernon Franklin, a hodgepodge of pop cultural signifiers unredeemed by any unifying logic.

The episode, then, after its efforts to point out the insufficiency of traditions of blackness, is left with a singular avenue for mounting a positive critique of subjectivity: the ideology of post-racialism. The youngest children, it becomes clear, don't "see race,"

a quality which the show valorizes as the implicit inverse of their father's explicitly idiotic obsession with Realness. They don't know that Obama is the nation's first black president, which their mother defends by pointing out that he is the "only" president they know. Later, when the youngest daughter tries to explain the identity of a classmate by referring to her "Nemo shoes," "polka-dot backpack," and odor of "turkey burgers," Dre becomes incensed that she didn't just note the girl's race, since she is "the only other little black girl in your class." His wife intervenes: "What? Don't you think that's beautiful? They don't see color." The children's innocence of race is presented as an unqualified good, and a lesson that their father might learn. Later, when Dre decides to throw his son a "Hip-Hop Bro Mitzvah," it is clear that racial identity has become a free-floating signifier, without essence, and available for donning or discarding at will, in the socio-economic utopia of Touré's post-racial post-blackness where "identity options are limitless." Dre's final decision, to settle into his role as SVP of the Urban Division in order to "do whatever he [has] to do for his family," again points to the mutually exclusive structures of community and corporation, and the way that black identity in neoliberal society is commodified for maximal availability for consumption while being repressed as the expression of the subjectivity of an actual racially black individual. The show's message seems to be that blackness can be anything, as long as it's not black.

I have argued that the pilot episode of *Black-ish* presents a scenario which favors a post-racial understanding of racial politics; that is to say, in seeming contradiction, that it presents a post-racial version of blackness. The show's difficulty, then, is that it means to have a frank yet accessible conversation around the shifting cultural codes and

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structures of racial identity, but the grounds of that conversation are shaped by an ideology inimical to the conversation itself. Herman Gray notes that

> In order for television to produce cultural effects and meet its economic imperatives (that is, to produce identifications and pleasures necessary to maintain profitability), it has to operate on the basis of a popular awareness and general common sense about the currents adrift in society. To do this, commercial television must constantly negotiate and renegotiate, package and repackage, circulate and recirculate this common sense; it must, of necessity, frame its representations in appropriate and accessible social terms that express the shared assumptions, knowledge, and experiences of viewers who are situated along different alliances of race, class, and gender (and, increasingly, sexuality). (58)

Increasingly, the "common sense" that animates the televisual cultural system is a post-racial one in which blackness is situated as merely historical; in other words, as a holdover from a past when it had meaning. To be fair, in subsequent episodes *Black-ish* has proven to be less clumsy around matters of race in the social sphere than depicted here, taking on important contemporary issues like police violence, racial epithets, and presidential politics in a complex and thoughtful manner. My point, however, in discussing the pilot episode at length, is to speak to the discursive grounds that a) may well implicitly animate the show going forward, and, more importantly, b) are required of the show as a condition of its presence on network television. As Gray explains of the televisual landscape of the early-nineties, though groundbreaking representations of black life were beginning to be seen,

> For many shows based on the situations and experiences of blacks, the conventions of television production (especially collaborative writing) serve to discipline, contain, and ultimately construct a point of view. Not surprisingly, this point of view constructs and privileges white middle-class audiences as the ideal viewers and subjects of television stories. (71)

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The production of cultural work as intended for a white viewership necessitates that the work in question be, at the very least, palatable to bourgeois white sensibilities; this is exponentially more true in works dealing with race, since sociological studies have shown that "whites' greater unfamiliarity and/or discomfort with racial issues…cause them to be more sensitive and cautious than African Americans in their analysis of what is racially (in)appropriate" (Green and Linders 251). Thus, network television tends to avoid challenging core hegemonic values of the dominant audience. This is to say that while a show like *Black-ish* might well achieve its intended disruption of a viewer's understanding of blackness as monolithic, it does not disrupt the centrality of whiteness, which is assuaged in both the privileging of the white middle-class as aspirational model par excellence[34] and the favoring of the white "progressive" post-racial ideology.

De-stabilizing Irony

What I've attempted to demonstrate in the preceding section is a problem of what I would like to call "sincere comedy"; that is, the pedantic use of comedy in order to communicate fixed meanings to the audience. In the establishment of its own discursive bounds as both episode and series prototype, the episode of *Black-ish* discussed above fails to truly engage with the meaning of blackness in contemporary society as a result of

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[34] Gray's critique of *The Cosby Show* is an apt summation of my views on *Black-ish*'s post-millenial iteration of the network primetime black family: "The show seemed unable, or unwilling, to negotiate its universal appeals to family, the middle class, mobility, and individualism on the one hand and the particularities of black social, cultural, political, and economic realities on the other. While effectively representing middle-class blackness as one expression of black diversity, the show in turn submerged other sites, tensions, and points of difference by consistently celebrating mobility, consumerism, and the patriarchal nuclear family" (81-82).

its own de facto acceptance of bourgeois values and the a priori Good of post-racial

thinking. The show's insistence on a post-enlightenment, neoliberal Humanity as the final

arbiter of its critique compromises its ability to present an oppositional take on

contemporary racial politics. This, I would argue, is tied to its formal production of/as

"stable irony."

What I am gesturing toward in the term stable irony is no more than what we

generally accept as ironic, i.e. the disjunction between words and meaning; importantly,

though, this disjunction contains within itself its own resolution, requiring only that the

audience recognize it as ironic. Stable irony, according to Wayne Booth, is marked by

four principles: it is "*intended*" by its author (5); it is "*covert*, intended to be

reconstructed with meanings different from those on the surface" (6); it is "*finite* in

application" (6); and, most importantly for my own discussion, it is "*stable* or fixed, in

the sense that once a reconstruction of meaning has been made, the reader is not invited

to undermine it with further demolitions and reconstructions" (6). Though allowances

must be made for what Hall refers to as "the dominant cultural order" in the reception of

ironic encodings, stable irony gestures at singular meanings; that is, it points at fixed

interpretations, not allowing for the play of signification necessary for the rendering of

oppositional epistemologies. Further, as Claire Colebrook points out via a reading of

Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, stable (or "traditional") irony is the formal basis in

language for the construction of the Western idea of subjectivity, the modernist human

normality in Jameson's text. This is because of the Socratic conception of irony, which is

"tied to the disjunction between what is true eternally and our contingent definitions"

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(134) and functions through "metaphors of height" (135). "Irony," she writes, "is the

adoption of a point of view 'above' a context, allowing us to view the context from 'on

high' (135), and reflects the tendency to manufacture representational concepts—such as

Man—which effectively reverse-engineer the idea of Enlightenment subjectivity. She

notes,

> Traditional irony, for Deleuze, takes this tendency to representation to its infinite
> extension; instead of forming concepts of this or that thing, and instead of locating
> ourselves within the flows and durations of life, we try to think the viewpoint of
> life as a whole, the point of view of conceptuality in general. Irony does not just
> form a concept of this or that thing; it strives to create a concept of the subject as
> such—that point from which all concepts emerge. In so doing, irony is reactive; it
> takes one of life's creations—the concept of the subject—and views that
> particular event of life as some ultimate condition or origin. (138)

The problem, then, in this "creat[ion] of the subject" is that "the image of the subject is

the governing image of capitalism" (149); this is because under capitalism, "[e]ach agent

is nothing more than a power to exchange and communicate, not a body with specific

desires, but simply the desire to operate in systems of relation. The original collection of

desiring bodies eventually understands itself as the expression of a 'subjectivity,' which

is nothing more than the capacity to relate and exchange" (140). Rather than an organic

expression of a unified self, "The subject is just that capacity to adopt any and every

persona or value; the undetermined ironic subject who exists behind determined values is

an effect of the dominance and immanence of the capitalist system, a system that

precludes any outside" (150). We need only consider *Black-ish*'s Dre, whose play with

the signifiers of his own racial identity is both enabled by the commodification of the

signs of blackness and always ultimately in service of producing himself as the good

neoliberal subject. The show's invocation of "Keep It Real" demonstrates its investment

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in the stable irony of fixed interpretive stakes: when Dre says "Keep It Real," the audience understands with utter clarity that this is the exact opposite of the show's pedagogical stance. It is via this irony, which tends "to set itself up in judgment of life" (149) that the structures of capitalism are produced and maintained.

In the terms of this discussion, a more hopeful alternative may exist in what Booth calls "unstable irony" and what Deleuze calls "humor." Though these are not equivalent terms, their juxtaposition may prove useful in moving beyond the various critiques of irony leveled in the chapter so far. Easiest to gesture toward is Booth's unstable irony, being that it is defined via its divergence from his conceptualization of stable irony. The unstable sort are

> ironies in which the truth asserted or implied is that no stable reconstruction can be made out of the ruins revealed through the irony. The author—insofar as we can discover him, and he is often very remote indeed—refuses to declare himself, however subtly, *for* any stable proposition, even the opposite of whatever proposition his irony vigorously denies. The only sure affirmation is that negation that begins all ironic play: "*this* affirmation must be rejected"… (240)

Importantly, irony of this sort doesn't render the hermeneutic move meaningless by affording equal standing to infinite interpretive possibilities; rather, it is a refusal to limit meaning to a singular pedagogical point. By absenting the author-figure as god-like locus of meaning, cultural products open themselves to the play of signification inherent in their location within language. It is only through this opening up that works become tools for what Sandoval calls "oppositional consciousness": the "shifting place of mobile codes and significations, which invokes that place of possibility and creativity where language and meaning itself are constituted" (34), and which "makes accessible, to oppressor and oppressed alike, new forms of identity, ethics, citizenship, aesthetics, and resistance"

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(37). The availability of work like the *Key & Peele* sketches discussed above to

multiple—including contradictory or conservative—readings is, in a certain way,

precisely the point, the thing that makes their irony unstable, and therefore productive. It

is only through abandoning the one, or fixed, meaning that art can destabilize the rigid

structures of hegemonic thinking.

Humor, in Deleuze's *The Logic of Sense*, is "the art of the surface, which is

opposed to the old irony, the art of depths and heights" (9), and is associated with the

Stoics, and also with satire (246). Humor is a putting aside of (a certain kind of) irony

altogether; rather than the depth model of Socratic irony which implies the Archimedean

point outside of our experience of life, humor functions on the flat surface of existence

and foregrounds the body, instead of abstracting it via the production of subjectivity.

Deleuze refers to "verbal representations" as a "secondary" order, an "aggregate of

surfaces"; it must be distinguished from a primary, embodied ground because "it

concerns an incorporeal event and not a body, an action, a passion, or a quality of bodies"

(245). "Verbal representation," he writes, is

> The representation which enveloped an expression. It is made of what is
> expressed and what is expressing, and conforms itself to the twisting of the one
> into the other, it represents the event as expressed, brings it to exist in the
> elements of language, and, conversely, concerns on these elements an expressive
> value and a function as "representatives" which they did not have by themselves.
> The whole order of language is the result of it, with its code of tertiary
> determinations founded in turn on "objectal" representations (denotation,
> manifestation, signification; individual, person, concept; world, self, and God).
> (245)

He distinguishes this field of abstraction, or "sense," from the primary order of sensation,

or "nonsense," "the preliminary, founding, or poetic organization—that is, this play of

surfaces in which only an a-cosmic, impersonal, and pre-individual field is deployed,"

and where "words are directly actions and passions of the body" (246). He notes that

"[o]bscenities and insults" gesture at this primary order, because "the obscene word

illustrates the direct action of one body on another which is acted upon, whereas the

insult pursues all at once the one who withdraws, dispossesses this one of all voice, and is

itself a voice which withdraws. This strict combination of obscene and abusive words

testifies to the properly satiric values of language," values which are disrupted by

classical irony's establishment of linguistic height and association with "eminence,

equivocity, or analogy" (246). Humor is the return of language to the surface of

existence, and "allows for the joyous eruption of life" (Colebrook 149). Humor, for

Deleuze, seems to act as a mediation between sense/subjectivity and

nonsense/embodiment:

> Nonsense and sense have done away with their relation of dynamic opposition in order to enter into the co-presence of a static genesis—as the nonsense of the surface and the sense which hovers over it. The tragic and the ironic give way to a new value, that of humor. For if irony is the co-extensiveness of being with the individual, of the I with representation, humor is the co-extensiveness of sense with nonsense. Humor is the art of the surfaces and of the doubles, of nomad singularities and of the always-displaced aleatory point; it is the art of the static genesis, the savoir-faire of the pure event…with every signification, denotation, and manifestation suspended, all height and depth abolished. (Deleuze 141)[35]

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[35] It may be worth mentioning some synonyms from throughout the "radically heterogenous vocabulary" of his oeuvre that help contextualize some of these terms. From Gregory Flaxman and Abe Geil's review of Joe Hughes' *Deleuze and the Genesis of Representation*, which they quote from:

> The basic structure of the progressive genesis is comprised of two parts, a "dynamic genesis" and a "static genesis." The dynamic genesis is so-named because it begins "where there is only movement and not time" (24). As Hughes argues, in *The Logic of Sense* this stage is called "dynamic genesis"; in *Anti-Oedipus* it's called "desiring production"; in *Difference and Repetition* it's called the "production of time." Whatever the case, the structure of this stage is comprised of three passive syntheses that produce the movement from the "primary order" of *sensation* (i.e. "corporeal/material depths," "body without organs," "schizophrenia") to the "secondary organization" of *sense* (i.e. "the aleatory point," "univocal being," "empty form of time") (46). At the stage of *sense*, dynamic genesis gives way to static genesis because

By abolishing "all height and depth," humor becomes a tool for opposition to models of domination that rely on abstraction and metaphor to create the conditions of subjection (e.g. nation or race, or the divine guarantor). If classical irony, in its production of "some point beyond any particular context or value" becomes a linguistic analogue to capitalism's "tendency…to cross contexts and produce a universal point from which all values can be exchanged," then Deleuzian humor, or satirical irony, "is…opposed to the politics of capitalism, communication and subjectivity" (Colebrook 150). Colebrook explains,

> Far from establishing some point outside difference from which life might be judged, humour allows the chaos of life and difference to disrupt any elevated value. According to Deleuze, a revolution can occur only in moving away from irony and the emptiness of subjectivity to humour. Here, instead of positing a form—the subject—that can remain above and beyond any identity, humour presents the singularities and differences from which general forms such as the subject of man emerge. (151)

This displacement of "elevated value[s]" represents the core element in the successful deployment of any form of satirical irony; further, the use of humor might be considered inherently oppositional in its disruption of the very grounds upon which repressive social, economic, and political institutions organize themselves, i.e. the masculinist logics of rationality and domination. The instability of meaning which attends satire may indeed

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sense is not, like the mixture of bodies in depth, defined by movement, but by time, and specifically by 'the empty form of time' which Deleuze describes elsewhere, following Kant, as the form of everything that changes, but which does not itself change. It is, therefore, static (24).

Like its dynamic antecedent, static genesis is given different nominations in *Anti-Oedipus* and *Difference and Repetition* ("social production" and "differenciation-individuation," respectively) in Hughes's schema, but across all three texts and all three semantic fields, static genesis gives way to a "tertiary order," the third and final level of genetic constitution.

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muddy the waters of critique, but this seems preferable to the alternative, a monolithic

discursive order enforcing an exclusionary meta-narrative of capital-T Truth.

It may be true, as Kevin Dettmar argues, that "[s]atire is only a step from

farce…[which] primarily reinforces prejudices rather than challenges them" (104), but

this is not the entire story of satirical irony, nor of oppositional humor. Especially in a

contemporary social sphere that denies the complicity of institutionalized antiblack and

white supremacist ideologies in the actual life outcomes of black and minoritarian

individuals, it is necessary to engage with the formal tools of resistance wherever they

can be found. Popular culture is one such tool, or site, a place where racial meanings are

contested and reified via the work of artists, writers, and even comedians. It is also,

however, or perhaps therefore, a place where the ideology of post-racial colorblindness

serves to sever, once again, the ontological foundations of the black individual,

abstracting the signifiers of race into radically fungible commodities for white cultural

consumption, becoming what bell hooks calls "an alternative playground where members

of dominating races, genders and sexual practices affirm their power-over in intimate

relations with the Other" (425). This is a fashioning of otherness into fashions, and the

result is that "actual black lived experience has been subsumed by the socially created

symbols of black life"; thus, "black life ceases to be meaningful both in the sense of

having meaning, and also in the sense of being a mechanism that makes meaning

(Guerrero 277). Lisa Guerrero, reading Baudrillard, further explains,

> As a result, the locus of black identity in the public imagination is a simulation of
> blackness that can neither be denied nor fully embraced by black subjects, since
> doing either would guarantee the complete disintegration of a black subject into a
> mere collection of signs of blackness that could be socially deployed but could

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never enable a social actor. For black people, especially black artists and performers, this means abandoning the notion of somehow preserving and representing the real, and instead focusing on animating how black experience in the twenty-first century exists in the interstitial space between the real and the hyperreal: the postmodern version of double consciousness. (277)

This "interstitial space between the real and the hyperreal" is perhaps, in Deleuzian terms, precisely that place where "sense and nonsense" are "coextensive," the radical disjunction between concrete materiality and abstract signification generative of disruptive humor, of a satirical irony. The "notion of somehow preserving and representing the real" becomes, in this formulation, not resistance to the forces of commodification that threaten cultural resources, but rather a lingering-in oppressed subjectivities. Deleuzian humor and satirical irony stand, along with the post-black aesthetic, in opposition to the grim seriousness of the Keep It Real depth-model of authenticity and essentialist identity. To take seriously Guerrero's conclusion, then, that "postmodern blackness is…very much a satiric condition" (278), would be to position the oppositional humor of satire at the very center of the onto-epistemological concept of contemporary (post-)blackness. Post-black satire, in all its comic rage, and in (spite of) all its racist motherfucking zombies, would transcend mere farce or even critique; it would become a fundamental reorganization of the hierarchical ironies of white supremacy, all racial height and depth abolished, an attack on social death itself.

Chapter 4:

"No Respect for the Thrones": Disidentificatory Pastiche and Revolutionary Camp

in Run the Jewels' *Run the Jewels* and *Run the Jewels 2*

> Don't everybody like the smell of gasoline?
> Well burn muthafucka burn American dreams
> Don't everybody like the taste of apple pie?
> We'll snap for yo' slice of life I'm tellin' ya why
> I hear that Mother Nature now's on birth control
> The coldest pimp be looking for somebody to hold
> The highway up to heaven got a crook on the toll
> Youth full of fire ain't got nowhere to go, nowhere to go

> -   Andre 3000, "Gasoline Dreams" (*Stankonia* 2000)

> [I'm] Awesome, the Christian in Christian Dior
> Damn, they don't make 'em like this anymore
> I ask, cuz I'm not sure
> Do anybody make real shit anymore?

> -   Kanye West, "Stronger" (*Graduation* 2007)

Introduction: Crashing the Party

In August of 2011, Jay-Z and Kanye West, two of the most recognizable artists in the rap industry, not to say the pop cultural landscape more generally, collaborated on an album which seemed to distill the "conspicuous consumption" strain of hip-hop to its most fantastic essence. *Watch the Throne* represents a high-water mark in the celebration of a politics of capitalist accumulation which had become the genre's shorthand for the American Dream, the duo's "boasts of obscene wealth" (Breihan) delivered like "showers of gold-leaf verbal confetti" (Roberts) creating a discourse of opulence and mobility wedded, superficially perhaps, to a version of social justice which takes access to

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progressively more elite socioeconomic spheres as synonymous with a more general

racial uplift. *The Observer's* Kitty Empire notes that "*Watch the Throne* is about black

power, although the Black Panthers might not recognise it as such. Power here is

conceived as a swaggering taunt of achievement, in line with both men's previous works,

which routinely double as shopping guides." Lead single "Niggas in Paris" is emblematic

of the cosmopolitan decadence held up as a version of peak status, made all the more so

by the always-implicit contrast to the social assumptions surrounding black achievement

in America: from Jay's verse,

> (Ball so hard) Got a broken clock, Rollies that don't tick tock
> Audemars that's losing time, hidden behind all these big rocks
> (Ball so hard) I'm shocked too
> I'm supposed to be locked up too
> If you escaped what I've escaped
> You'd be in Paris getting fucked up too
> (Ball so hard) Let's get faded, Le Meurice for like six days
> Gold bottles, scold models, spillin' Ace on my sick J's

Here, the paradigmatic boast of the artist's wealth (as elsewhere, gaining efficacy through

both the listener's only partial familiarity with the name-dropped status symbols and the

assumption that, at least in the case of rap mogul Jay-Z, these are not fantastical

projections of the aspirant but the actual material conditions of his existence) is coupled

with an assumption of the audience's inclination towards empathy and approval. That is,

the listener is interpellated as a willing celebrant via the narratives of wealth-as-corrective

for social injustice and the racialized individual-as-collective in terms of achievement;

similar to Barack Obama's election, the classed or racialized subject of lack is expected

to both identify with the artists (as black, as formerly-disenfranchised economically) and

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also experience the various aspects of the public figures' personas which should preclude positive identification (wealth, power, mobility) as vicariously fulfilling.

As a title, "Watch the Throne" functions as a performative command establishing the respective structural positions of the artists as metonyms for the spectacle of power, and the audience as passively participating through a complicit spectatorship which both establishes and maintains that hierarchization. As Frank Ocean sings on the album opener "No Church in the Wild," "Human beings in a mob / What's a mob to a king? What's a king to a god? / What's a god to a non-believer who don't believe in anything?" While the bounds of traditional hierarchy are questioned, the move can only be accomplished by erasing the concrete bodies of the "mob" undergirding the structure of power and relying on the abstract cosmology of a pre/early-modern conception of divine guarantee—in terms of the non-metaphysical, material conditions of existence, the only question that matters is the first ("What's a mob to a king?") along with its implicit answer: Nothing. Thus, we are left with something less a challenge than an affirmation of aristocratic privilege, which, along with the rappers' titular enthronement, suggests that the existing system of class exploitation is only a subject of critique inasmuch as it functions as a racially motivated gatekeeper to the delights of the metaphorical VIP suite. On "Murder to Excellence," which describes the rappers' transition from dis- to enfranchised members of the upper class, Jay-Z ends a discussion of his exalted circumstances ("Tuxes next to the president, I'm present") with the perfect example of this line of thought: "Only spot a few blacks the higher I go / What's up to Will? Shout out to O / That ain't enough, we gonna need a million more." Kanye's follow-up is a bit more trenchant:

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> In the past if you picture events like a black tie
> What the last thing you expect to see, black guys?
> What's the life expectancy for black guys?
> The system's working effectively, that's why!

Taken together, Jay's position—i.e. his desire for *more* engagement, quantitatively speaking, with an existing system defined by its quality of white supremacy—becomes akin to the Woody Allen joke from *Annie Hall* about the two airplane passengers: when one complains about the abominable quality of the food being served, the other responds, "Yes, and such small portions!"

Kanye has arguably always been the more astute observer of structural inequality and the connections between racism and capitalist systems of domination. His first ever single, "All Falls Down" (2004), discusses the limits of hip-hop narratives of economic empowerment: after observing acidly (pun notwithstanding) that "Even if you in a Benz you still a nigga in a coupe [coop]," he raps,

> I say fuck the police, that's how I treat 'em
> We buy our way out of jail, but we can't buy freedom
> We'll buy a lot of clothes but we don't really need 'em
> Things we buy to cover up what's inside
> Cause they made us hate ourself and love they wealth
> That's why shorty's hollerin' "Where the ballers at?"
> Drug dealer buy Jordan, crackhead buy crack
> And the white man get paid off of all of that[36]

As incisive as this critique is, the lines that follow establish the central paradox in West's persona, the generalized irony on display throughout his oeuvre if not always in the larger genre of spectacular consumerism that became (to a greater degree) mainstream in his

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[36] The final line ("And the white man get paid off of all of that") is notable for MTV's decision to censor it when airing the music video, in that it violates not FCC standards of obscenity but rather some sensitive version of privileged whiteness that still held sway at the network as recently as the mid-oughts.

wake: "But I ain't even gonna act holier than thou / Cause fuck it, I went to Jacob with 25 thou / Before I had a house and I'd do it again / Cause I want to be on *106 & Park* pushin' a Benz." Kanye West, more than any other figure in contemporary pop culture, embodies the messy confusion at the heart of rap's economic and social aspirationalism—he seems to understand the basic conflict between the twin American ideals of equality and exceptionalism, yet this doesn't prevent him from wanting to "buy 80 gold chains and go ign'ant" ("Clique" *Cruel Summer* 2012). This orientation is all in keeping with the "cultural arm of neoliberal economics," which, as Rinaldo Walcott explains, is maintained in part by an investment in "[p]ersonal managerialism, competitiveness, and audit and performance indicators, all measured by accumulations of wealth and material consumption" (78). As these neoliberal mandates intersect with the racialized discourse of personal responsibility and positive representation, Walcott argues that

> conversations concerning black manhood are premised on neoliberalism's new managerial regime in which black masculinities are understood to be underperforming, in need of programs of efficiency and better management. Such is particularly so for poor, redundant, and 'wasted' masculinities that appear to have nothing to contribute to the global engines of capitalism. In this instance managerialism as both discourse and practice seeks to control and conduct how these wasted persons, often reduced only to a body, might be understood in light of the numerous contradictions that plague the wealthy West. (79)[37]

The extravagance of hip-hop's pornography of wealth and *nouveau riche* ascendancy can be read, then, as a prolepsis against accusations of failed (black) masculinity generated by the particular union of race and economics in the neoliberal US.

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[37] "…in light of the numerous contradictions that plague the wealthy West" would fit perfectly in an article about Kanye as well.

Similarly, Ismail Muhammad argues convincingly that "popular rap's investment in fantasies of conspicuous consumption" is not merely economic nihilism, but actually constitutes an intervention: "In dislodging blackness from its symbolic position as representation of lack, an enthusiastic embrace of commodity allows rappers to interrogate the nature of a society that systematically condemns blacks to poverty," and is a means to imagine "alternatives to [the contemporary moment]" as well as "poke fun at the duty to represent either lack or its flipside, responsible black artistic consciousness." Kanye West, specifically, is

> the bad child who intentionally learned the wrong lesson, who takes neoliberalism's faith in accumulation at face value, but only to dramatize the almost extraterrestrial nature of any black representation that doesn't harp on tragedy or make a pathos-laden play for white audience's hearts. His 80 gold chains become an expression of the drive toward ignorance—willed ignorance of the roles blacks are supposed to play in America, and of the positive/negative dichotomy that too often dominates discussion of black representation and of the structured behaviors bequeathed to us via neoliberalism. Kanye demonstrates that the fantasy of accumulation's garishness—and the ugliness with which rappers come by both their fictional and literal money—is the engine that powers rap's critique of capitalism.

Whether or not this critique is intended by Kanye and other artists (e.g. Jay-Z, Rick Ross, A$AP Rocky) is debatable; it's also moot, given that the whole point is the material effects of this spectacular performance in the hegemonic field of cultural vision. Nevertheless, Muhammad's excellent point could be bolstered by a consideration of the non-fantastic aspects of this fantasy; that is, does the critique depend on a distance from the actual circumstances of neoliberal accumulation (i.e. Kanye in 2004) versus achievement of a metonymic status in relation to the system of exploitation as capitalist-par-excellence (Kanye and Jay-Z of *Watch the Throne*)? The intent here is not to disarm a

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necessary hip-hop apologist stance which offers valid critique of an essentialist black politics of uplift and realist representation (the same discursive structure resisted in the works of Kehinde Wiley). Rather, I want to think of the *Thrones* model, inasmuch as it is a social critique and not simply celebratory, as limited by the artists' particular confusion of the abstract and material conditions structuring their systemic positionalities (i.e. the non-believer's negation of a god doesn't account for the king to which she is still subject in the circular logic of the album's epigrammatic introduction), as well as their focus on sincerity and authenticity (i.e. these are the actual lavish conditions of their lives that they attempt to reconcile with their participation in a racially exclusionary system). As to the politics of representation being resisted by artists like Kanye and Jay-Z—that is, the replacing of the visual/discursive image of blackness as lack with the image-text of their wealth—this is, again, a fetish of exceptionalism, and further one that elides the quotidian struggles of those forcefully held down by a racist, heteropatriarchal neoliberalism, all while holding up a mirage of attainable glory for the proletariat. Frankly, unless you're already sold on the dubious merits of lifestyles-of-the-rich-and-famous-style reality television, the politics of conspicuous consumption perhaps fail to even inadvertently provide effective social critique.

Furthermore, despite its sleek hedonism, it's not even all that *fun*. Obviously, despite the line of questioning I've pursued thus far, and despite a critical insistence (which I share) on the material, anti-hegemonic effects of music, popular music's central function in the cultural sphere is as entertainment (the essential merits of which I'll leave for Adorno). The false binary between producing works as pleasurable versus as social

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commentary has been a central animating feature of hip-hop's inter- and intra-generic

critique since its inception, and can be described, reductively, thus: progressive, social

justice-oriented music doesn't sell. Jay-Z addresses this widely-accepted "fact" of the

industry by reference to two of his contemporaries, Common (aka Common Sense) and

Talib Kweli, socially-conscious MCs whose work, while critically acclaimed, never

granted them ascent into the same dizzying heights of cultural and economic recognition:

> I dumbed down for my audience to double my dollars
> They criticized me for it, yet they all yell "holla"
> If skills sold, truth be told
> I'd probably be, lyrically, Talib Kweli
> Truthfully I wanna rhyme like Common Sense
> But I did 5 mill'—I ain't been rhyming like Common since
> ("Moment of Clarity," *The Black Album* 2003)

Lester Spence, reading Imani Perry's discussion of the relationship of black aesthetic

production to "the real," identifies two key modes of "realist"—that is, concerned with

the construction and representation of some version of urban black authenticity, often

characterized by social disenfranchisement and extralegal activity—hip-hop, namely

"descriptive realism" and "argumentative realism." Descriptive realism "creates a world

for the listener in which he or she can experience the neighborhood on its own terms

through the eyes of the MC," while argumentative realism "critiques the reality that MCs

depict" (Spence 20). It should go without saying that this "realism" is a motivated

construction designed to heighten the stature of the artist and promote record sales;

ironically, the necessity of the claim to authenticity is precisely, as Perry notes, a result of

"the removal of rap music from the organic relationship with the communities creating it"

as artists had to demonstrate that they were not "selling [their] soul to the devils of

capitalism or assimilation" (Perry 87). The descriptive realism of an artist like Jay-Z, whose narratives detail the "hustler" rags-to-riches telos via first criminal then musical entrepreneurship, reinforce the centrality, according to Spence, of neoliberal ideology in that it constructs the artist as the homo economicus refining his human capital through technologies of subjectivity. In terms of content, "descriptive realist records are much more likely to emphasize narratives that laud violence, crime, and drug use rather than critique them or address the causes for them" as argumentative realism tends to (Spence 27). In Spence's random sampling[38] of hip-hop songs from 1989 to 2004, he found that 36 percent of the tracks could be classified as "realist" (as opposed to "nonrealist," what we might think of as "party music," and which for all intents and purposes was the *only* hip-hop at its inception until the mid-to-late 80s, and could be reductively aligned with the rap focused on accumulative capitalism)(23); however, within the realist category, only 24 percent could be classified as "argumentative realist" (46)—that is, engaged in some form of social critique as opposed to neutral constructions of street authenticity or celebration of the hustler-as-neoliberal subject. This smaller subgenre—"conscious rap," in common parlance—may engage with the same tropes as descriptive realist rap, but the

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[38]"I selected a random sample of 478 lyrics (by 337 different artists) taken from singles realeased between 1989 and 2004….the lyrics were analyzed line by line and coded for the presence of various ideas and words.

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…I labeled records that dealt chiefly with urban life as realist, records that depicted urban reality without critique as descriptive realist, and records engaged in critique as argumentative realist" (23).

While I think the results of Spence's sampling are likely approximately representative of the genre and the conclusions he draws are productive, his survey is by no means rigorous or definitive; though, to be fair, the point that he makes does not hinge, as does mine, on the relative prevalence of different expressive forms within the genre, even if his inclusion of numerical data may implicitly suggest the relevance of such an analysis.

MCs tend to occupy the position of "*critical participants* or *journalistic witnesses*" (46, italics original) in order to critique the oppressive social organization which constructs the hustler figure. Spence argues that this subgrouping fails to implicitly reproduce the market logics animating descriptive realism; however, often (45 percent of the time in Spence's survey) argumentative realist tracks focus on "black *cultural* factors" (50), reiterating the respectability politics that depoliticizes and naturalizes race by severing it from the institutions that create and enforce subjugation. I would further add Walcott's insight to Spence's, and suggest that even these social critiques of black communities are part and parcel of a cultural neoliberalism that prizes self-managerialism and competitiveness, traits which are demonstrably externalized in accumulation and bourgeois respectability, the implicit teloi of any "if only you/you all did/didn't do X" cultural critique.

However, Russell Potter notes that this macrocosmic paradigm of apoliticism, like the one suggested by Spence's unscientific sample over a 15 year period, is not static, but rather a cyclical expression of a complex interplay of industry and audience expectations. Writing in 1995, he notes,

> Within the brief span of two or three years, hip-hop had gone from being party music with PSA add-ons to an angry, minimalist-with-a-vengeance rhythm of revolution; the change was so sudden that at least one fan was heard to protest that Public Enemy wasn't hip-hop at all, but "black punk rock."
> And so it was, but with this difference: it was no longer at the edge but at the *center* of hip-hop culture and attitude; whereas before music critics went to some lengths to remind listeners that there was a serious message in that stuff they were dancing to, they now had to go out of their way to explain that "rap music"…was not *only* the music of angry, political, polemical poets and gat-toting gangstas with an attitude. (51)

While what Muhammad calls "fantasies of conspicuous consumption" have largely animated popular hip-hop since the last years of the 20th century and shifted the needle away from social agitation, in the early 90s it was precisely a "turn towards a more politicized, uncompromising ethos [that] ended up *broadening* its audience" (Potter 51). Over-investment in sincerity, however, was, I would suggest, a factor in the waning of "conscious" (or argumentative realist) hip-hop's influence, as Potter argues that it lacked the successful navigation of the ironic "doubleness" (reading it through Henry Louis Gates' conception of Signifyin[g]) that was a discursive feature of popular hip-hop. The ironic double discourse of popular rap made it "far more effective than naïve strategies which assume somehow that their message can get through the media simply on account of its innate justice or truth-value" (134). In contemporary popular hip-hop, in fact, the generic and personal designation of "conscious rap/per" is something of an albatross, leading an artist like A$AP Rocky to undercut a rare moment of social critique by emphatically pre-empting any attempt on the part of critics to label him as such: "Don't view me as no conscious cat, this ain't no conscious rap / Fuck the conscious crap, my Mac'll push your conscience back" ("Suddenly" *LONG.LIVE.A$AP* 2013). A moving quasi-autography about the struggles of growing up poor becomes a bit too sincere; the moment must be disarmed via, oddly enough, a becoming-armed, the threat of violence a performative utterance which effectively forecloses the meddling critic's attempt to relegate him to the financial purgatory attending the "conscious" moniker. Here, as in other discursive spheres, sincere expressions of "innate justice or truth-value" are akin to

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naiveté, what the narrator of David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* called "the last true terrible sin in the theology of millenial America."

If Kanye West and Jay-Z's *Watch the Throne* represents—by virtue of its lavish production, thematic content, spectacular marketing and release (including an A-list celebrity-filled listening party at New York City's Hayden Planetarium), and the pop cultural stature of the duo and the featured artists—the quintessential document of the rap world's celebration of conspicuous consumption (leavened with a dash of sincere politics-lite), 2013's eponymous release by Run the Jewels, a collaboration between Atlanta rapper Killer Mike—Michael Render, a genre veteran affiliated with such seminal Southern rappers as Outkast and T.I.—and New York rapper/producer El-P— Jaime Meline, aka El Producto, a mainstay of the independent/alternative hip-hop scene via his record label Def Jux and his work with underground sensations Cannibal Ox— was the return (with a difference, importantly) of that angry "punk rock" ethos of late- 80s, early-to-mid-90s hip-hop.[39] The duo brandished a middle finger at elite economic, moral, and cultural individuals and institutions in their quest to weaponize working class and minoritarian values through an aggressively ironic reappropriation of generic tropes and commonplaces, couched in a ludic rhetoric of parody representing both Signifyin's "history of serious unseriousness" (Potter 15) and also the "partial disavowal of [a] cultural form that works to restructure it from within" (Muñoz 28) characteristic of José Muñoz's theory of disidentification. This chapter reads the irony of Run the Jewels' performance as a form of generic subversion that works to critique both the systemic

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[39] An affect also gestured at by Andre 3000's fiery hook in the first of this chapter's epigraphs.

violence of American hegemonic structures and the very medium of hip-hop itself, defying formal generic distinctions such as Spence's descriptive/argumentative/non-realism. As I hope to make clear, the group represents the apotheosis of a certain kind of post-postmodern (for lack of a better term) or contemporary dependence on the politicization of the oft-maligned formal techniques of pastiche and humor/satire, employed in a Janus-faced assault on the systemic inequality of the neoliberal era and the oppressive discourses that underwrite its exploitation.

After collaborating on Killer Mike's 2012 album *R.A.P. Music*, itself a bold political and genre-referential statement,[40] the artists adopted the moniker Run the Jewels and put out an eponymous record in 2013. Released as a free download,[41] the album[42] offered a pointed rebuke to the excesses of mainstream hip-hop,[43] a reactionary stance

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[40] For example, Mike, a vocal opponent of organized religion, reflecting that the "closest I've ever come to seeing or feeling God is listening to rap music; rap music is my religion" ("R.A.P. Music"); or the track "Reagan," which samples the former president's speeches to paint him as simultaneously an antichrist figure and "…an actor / not at all a factor / just an employee of the country's real masters."

[41] As all their subsequent albums have been, including 2014's *Run the Jewels 2* and 2016's *Run the Jewels 3*.

[42] The pair have insisted in interviews that it is an album, as opposed to a "mixtape", which is a collection of songs commonly released for free online as a means of generating an audience in anticipation of the release of a paid album. The distinction may ultimately be beside the point, but the goal seems to be an attempt to call attention to the unified thematic nature of the songs, versus what is often a hodgepodge of castoffs and B-sides assembled in mixtape form. Though free, *Run the Jewels* was the event itself, not the harbinger of a commoditized offering to come.

[43] The hip-hop genre is rife with divisions and subgenres describing variations in lyrical focus, musical style, and geographical origin, with various designations often entangled in one another (such as the umbrella formed by the geographical frame of "Southern rap" which encompasses the musical styles of "trap" or "screw"; and the more specific associations of those styles with the cities of Atlanta and Houston, respectively). To write about "the genre of hip-hop" is, admittedly, to be reductive, though not, I would argue, unforgivably naïve. I will attempt to contextualize as much as possible; however, my focus is ultimately at the level of discourses which are hegemonic. These discourses, while made immanent in the particularity of expressive events, ultimately transcend these discrete instances. While the designation is imperfect, I'll continue to use the qualifiers "mainstream" or "popular" to refer to performances which

that is evident even in the title itself, a clear echo of the earlier Kanye and Jay-Z album's imperative statement-as-appellation. While the injunction to "watch the throne" both performatively elevates the artists to a plane of contemporary myth or quasi-aristocracy and positions the audience as passive consumers of lavish spectacle, the formally similar command to "run the jewels" is a call to revolutionary action which constructs the audience as a kinetic oppositional force deployed against structures of exclusion and domination. The latter phrase is taken from the LL Cool J song "Cheesy Rat Blues" (*Mama Said Knock You Out* 1991), and in its original context is a pointed interruption of the "party music" aesthetic:

> Just throw your hands in the air
> And wave 'em like you just don't care
> Keep 'em there
> [Aside] Yo, run the jewels, run the jewels, run the jewels

The command by the MC to "throw your hands in the air" is one of the most oft-repeated lines in hip-hop, its first mainstream/recorded appearance coming on 1979's seminal "Rapper's Delight," and connotes a party atmosphere of dancing and carefree abandon. LL Cool J, himself hardly considered a "gangsta" or "hardcore" rapper, inexplicably subverts the familiar trope in the song's narrative by using the opportunity presented by the bacchanalia to identify the members of the crowd wearing flashy or expensive accessories ("jewels"), instructing his associates to rob ("run") them. The celebratory "hands in the air" of the dancers becomes the "put your hands up" of the stick-up artist, an irruption of a hard-knocks street "Real" into the imaginary space of the club or house

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participate uncritically in dominant discourses such as neoliberalism, hetero-patriarchy, and racial supremacy/essentialism (usually, of course, not all at once).

party. As I will demonstrate, Killer Mike and El-P's appropriation of the phrase takes the personal antagonism of the mugger-victim relationship and blows it up to cartoonish proportions, making it a macro-critique of not only individuals associated with the fantasy of accumulative and gaudy wealth (such as popular rappers and the fans who identify positively with the lifestyle promoted in the Tiffany's-window analogues of music videos or MTV's *Cribs*), but also the metaphorical "jewels" held by the aristocracy-by-any-other-name, those individuals, systems or discourses that collectively comprise our contemporary Moloch, sustained through the actual and ideological violence of the plunder of the subject(ed).

In concluding this introductory section, I want to make manifest Run the Jewels' critical reference to *Watch the Throne*—the *shade*, if you will—a commentary which thus far has been merely implicit in the suggestive phrasing of their respective album titles. To wit, on the second verse of *Run the Jewels* standout track "Sea Legs," Killer Mike (so-called, he once reassured a white CNN reporter, because he "kills" the mic[rophone]) makes the connection, and its tenor, explicit in a ferocious verbal takedown of, among others, the earlier duo and their work:

> Real shit, I came for the jewels
> I'm the killer of kings and fools
> I'm the reason the season for treason starts this evening
> And this evening the odds ain't even
> People praying to the gods but the gods ain't even listening
> Don't matter if you're Muslim, Hebrew, Christian
> When death runs in the distance
> There will be no Mercy me's
> There will be no reprieve for the thieves
> There will be no respect for The Thrones
> No master mastered these bones
> Your idols all are my rivals

> I rival all of your idols
> I stand on towers like Eiffel, I rifle down all your idols
> Niggas will perish in Paris, niggas is nothing but parrots
> I write for the writers that write for the liars that impress you and your parents

Here, Mike invokes the divinely-guaranteed aristocratic cosmology established by Jay-Z and Kanye in order both to mock it as utterly naïve relative to a rational atheist/materialist worldview and to redefine the security offered by privileged positionality as a lack within the context of revolutionary anarchism. As in Shakespeare's *Lear*, the "king" becomes indistinguishable from the "fool," and both fail to be sustained by fictions of religion or tradition. The lyrics move back and forth between figurative language and direct reference—the metonymic "thrones" are both synonymous with "thieves" as subject positions based on oligarchal plunder of the underclass and also a direct reference to *Watch the Throne*, as made evident by the subsequent play on the title of Jay and Kanye's hit single "Niggas in Paris." This is followed by the almost-taboo (outside critical/industry circles) airing of the open-secret of many prominent rappers' (including Kanye West and Dr. Dre, for example) use of uncredited "ghostwriters," which is an unsubtle refutation of the up-by-your-bootstraps neoliberalist ideology of the hustler.[44] That is, it wasn't the artists' skill (as in Jay-Z's claim above) that brought them to the top; they're merely "parrots," repeating the words that individuals who actually possess talent have written for them—hence Mike's claim that he's the one that ghostwriters go to for help, so virtuosic that he's not one but two steps beyond the "liars"

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[44] For a recent example of a very public feud based on accusations of utilizing ghostwriters, see Drake and Meek Mill's 2015 conflict, which polarized fans, generated a series of "diss tracks," and afforded not a small measure of grist for the punditry mill.

celebrated by popular media (as well as by "your parents," whose sincere appreciation remains the kiss of death for all things [formerly] cool). Rap royalty, actual monarchs, and the concept of royalty itself are all being critiqued simultaneously, along with the unquestioned assumptions undergirding the particularly American conflation of capitalism and Protestantism—that achievement is the same as right, that wealth and power are marks of divine favor, that there is an innate reverence owed to the way things are.[45] As El-P's beat swells to the edge of climax, Killer Mike delivers a moment of astonishing lyrical play, repeating and inverting his meticulous syntax and stomping breathlessly down on the image of symbolic violence that he's patiently set his marks up for: "Your idols all are my rivals / I rival all of your idols / I stand on towers like Eiffel, I rifle down all your idols." The propulsive rhetoric moves him from peripheral/absent ("your idols" and "my rivals" being the same critiqued Others), to displacing center/subject ("I rival"), to finally righteous iconoclast whose presence does not merely supplant but obliterates. As he signs off at the end of his verse, the production gathers momentum towards an unexpected second climax, and El-P joins him on backing vocals to focus the critique squarely where it belongs, on *ideology itself*, pettier intra-genre rivalries forgotten, in a perfect crystallization of the project and their partnership, a moment of aggression and solidarity that feels like a pledge, a promise, a threat:

> Made in America, home of the (Eagle!)
> Home of the (Anger!)
> Home of the (Evil!)
> Do what I do for the love of my people!

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[45] See both Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1930) and Sacvan Bercovitch's *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (1975).

Hip-Hop's Pastiche

Hip-hop, as a genre, has, from its inception, functioned via a logic of pastiche and quotation, both at the level of production in the mixing and re-mixing of available sounds, accomplished through repurposing extant technological apparatuses, and in the appropriation of the lyrical content of previous MCs which was expanded upon, responded to, or stolen outright. In its earliest form, the sound of hip-hop depended on the availability of pre-existing songs, the vinyl recordings of which could be cannibalized for the beat. Recounting the innovations of pioneer DJ Kool Herc, who spun records at house parties in New York City in the mid-1970s, Dick Hebdige explains,

> Gradually he developed a style that was so popular that he began buying records for the instrumental breaks rather than for the whole track. The lead guitar or bass riff or sequence of drumming that he wanted might only last fifteen seconds. Rather than play the whole record straight through he would play this same part several times over, cutting from one record deck to the other as he talked through the microphone. This meant buying several copies of the same record. And it also meant that Herc had to have a very precise sense of timing. He used the headphones that djs [sic] can use to cue up their records so that he could cut from one copy of a record to another at exactly the right point. (137-138)

Initially unrecorded, solely available as live performances, early DJ mixes transformed the turntable and vinyl record, intended as static technologies of reproduction, into modes of producing original sonic compositions, the scraps of earlier genres mixed into a new coherence by an innovative few, "constitut[ing] a reversal of the traditional modes of production and consumption that have fueled the music industry in its exploitation of African-American music" (Potter 36). As Tricia Rose notes, "Hip hop transforms stray

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technological parts intended for cultural and industrial trash heaps into sources of

pleasure and power" (22). Further, as Potter observes,

> Such a cut-and-paste valuation of the hitherto unvalued put hip-hop in a unique
> relation with commodity capitalism, and concomitantly with cultural production
> in general. If consumption could be productive, it could never again be regarded
> as merely passive; at a stroke, hip-hop framed in acutely materialistic terms a
> question that had hitherto been thought merely philosophical. Or perhaps, in a still
> more revolutionary sense, hip-hop simply made visible (and profitable) a
> productivity of consumption which had been there all along, albeit in a more
> diffuse form. (36)

Alexander Weheliye, however, following Kodwo Eshun, pushes back against the

reference to this practice as specifically "pastiche," associating the term with the sort of

valueless postmodernity signaled by, as I have discussed elsewhere, Fredric Jameson's

seminal definition of the mode as "blank parody." Acknowledging the centrality of "the

mix" in black literature and "the construction of twentieth-century black culture," he

writes,

> As a mode of cultural criticism and practice, the mix brings together disparate
> elements, but not in the manner suggested by the notions of "pastiche" and
> "bricolage" as they appear in postmodern literary theory; the mix offers a strategy
> for the construction of modern temporality that results not from the randomness or
> irony evoked by these terms. Instead it creates a transversal, nonempirical space
> that coexists with its other components. Kodwo Eshun marks the main
> distinctions between "the mix," or what he refers to as "remixology," and more
> postmodernist-oriented variants of these forms as follows: "The idea of quotation
> and citation, the idea of ironic distance, that doesn't work, that's far too literary.
> That assumes a distance, which by definition volume overcomes. There is no
> distance with volume, you're swallowed up by sound….It's impossible to stay
> ironic, so all the implications of postmodernism go out the window." (83 [2005])

Both Weheliye and Eshun seem implicitly concerned that black aesthetic production not

be subsumed under the rubric, and the rhetoric, of postmodernism qua postmodernism,

the theoretical approach and canon which has historically privileged the thoughts and

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works of overwhelmingly white and male subject positions. Eshun argues that prominent

postmodernist theoretical commonplaces are invalidated by the actual praxis of musical

subcultures; for example, in the case of the aura—"one of [Walter] Benjamin's main

points (or the one his admirers use over and over again)"—by the underground

circulation of the "dub plate," an acetate disc used for test or temporary (the acetate disk

wears out much faster than vinyl) pressings, which he argues creates

> the one-off remix…the track that there's only one of in the world, but it's *not* an
> original, it's a copy, a third copy. So you've got this thing that's never supposed
> to exist in Benjamin's world: you've got the one-off copy, you've got the one-off
> fifth remix, you've got the one-off tenth remix, you've got the one-off twentieth
> remix. There's only one of it. So the dub plate means that the whole idea of the
> aura being over doesn't make any sense, because the aura is reborn in the middle
> of the industrial reproduction. (187-188)

As for the portion of Eshun's argument that Weheliye finds relevant, the affective

resonance that accompanies the materiality of a sound's "volume" may preclude irony

and distance, but only as an experience of reception; I would not, in fact, agree that this

extends to the *production* of aesthetic forms, musical or otherwise. Further, while the

always-embodied act of listening is certainly relevant to the circulation and effects of a

piece of music, few would argue that the work it does occurs *only* on the affective level,

rather than acknowledging the affective as one aspect of reception.[46] In the end, the

simplest explanation for my disagreement is methodological, however trite—this chapter

concerns itself primarily with the rhetorical content of hip-hop rather than its

formal/sensual qualities of embodied performance and reception, its materiality as sound.

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[46] Even William Connolly, perhaps the most prominent of the voices calling for an assessment of the
political role of affect—as "micropolitics"—notes that the presence and force of the affective register in no
way "carries the implication of eliminating argument, rationality, language, or conscious thought from
political discourse" (*Why I'm Not a Secularist* 36).

As to Eshun's greater point, I have no argument with the idea that academic theorizations often compare unfavorably with the material conditions of human existence. Eshun's point lines up, in fact, with my citation in earlier chapters of Chela Sandoval's critique of Jameson's version of postmodernism as a neo-logic ordering late-20th century subjective experience, when in fact the positionality he describes is precisely "the kind of psychic terrain formerly inhabited by the historically decentered citizen-subject: the colonized, the outsider, the queer, the subaltern, the marginalized"; further, the general advent of postmodernist subjectivity offers not only the powerlessness of fragmenting "psychopathologies," but "also the survival skills, theories, methods, and the utopian visions of the marginal," making postmodernism "another architectural model for oppositional consciousness" (27). The goal, I would argue, is not to reject wholesale problematic theoretical models, but find ways to productively engage with epistemic structures in order to effect change from within—as I will discuss below, José Muñoz, with regard to dominant ideologies, refers to these options as "counteridentification" (reading Michel Pecheux) and "disidentification," respectively (11). Pastiche and irony, with or without their associations with postmodernism, figure as key terms in my own discussion, as I perform an analysis both *of* and *as* disidentificatory practice.

While the genre of hip-hop often still features pieces of earlier works incorporated in the genetic material of new songs in the form of "samples," advances in production and recording technology mean that producers no longer depend exclusively on either vinyl records or earlier songs in creating music. On the one hand, this means that producers are no longer constrained by the existence of or their access to existing

material; on the other hand, it means that the direct incorporation of or sonic allusion to earlier songs becomes much more obviously motivated or ideologically pointed, as in the case of Run the Jewels' "Early" (*Run the Jewels 2* [2014], discussed in-depth below) echoing the formal structures and sounds of The Beatles' "A Day in the Life" (*Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* [1967]). This is even more apparent in the lyrical appropriations and revisions that remain prominent in the genre. Often these are neutral repetitions of particular phrases or idiosyncratic deliveries originating from another MC (in a negative sense this might be referred to as "biting," as in "don't bite my style"). However, more interesting are the motivated recurrences of another rapper's words or ideas, either to call back to a popular or familiar strand of genre DNA (as in the "put your hands in the air" discussed earlier) or to rework the earlier words or ideas in a reverential or insulting manner. In fact, in the case of Eminem's (aka Slim Shady, Marshall Mathers) well-known attack on Ja Rule, all of these modes are simultaneously at play: using the beat and lyrical cadence of Tupac Shakur's "Hail Mary" (*The Don Killuminati: The 7 Day Theory* [1996]), the rapper mocks Ja Rule's own self-proclaimed status as heir to the deceased Tupac's musical legacy. The original song's unmistakable hook,

> Come with me!
> Hail Mary, nigga, run quick, see
> What do we have here now?
> Do you wanna ride or die?
> La-lalala-la-la-la-la-la

an undirected self-aggrandizement celebrating the quintessential ready-to-die nihilism of the "gangsta" lifestyle, becomes, in the underground diss track ("Hail Mary" [2003]),

> Come get me
> If you motherfuckers want Shady

> If Pac was still here now
> He would never ride with Ja
> Nah-nanana-na-na-na-na-na

The quotation extends to the verse as well, notably the iconic first lines: Tupac's "I ain't a killer, but don't push me / Revenge is like the sweetest joy next to getting pussy," is weaponized against Ja Rule, becoming "You ain't no killer, you a pussy / That Ecstasy done got you all emotional and mushy." Here, there is an appeal to the audience's knowledge of the original track, and their likely attitude towards both it and the canonized Tupac, creating a positive association with the new track through repetition and familiarity. Ja Rule's intent to bolster his own credentials via a posited association with the epitome of "gangsta" masculinity is turned against him, as Eminem reworks Shakur's track, both resurrecting the rapper as an ally and demonstrating to the audience, through a skilled and nuanced appropriation, that his own claim as rap royalty's heir apparent is the more valid. This is a moment that bridges the gap between the modes of signifying in hip-hop that Potter gleans from Gates' original formulation: pastiche reference can be either "'motivated' Signifyin(g), which is parodic and agonistic," or "'unmotivated' Signifyin(g), which is empathetic and reverential" (Potter 28). Tupac's boast is in fact *parodied reverentially*; the violence and heterosexual virility posited in the original are held up as comprising a quintessential standard of masculinity, one inaccessible to the target of the lyrical remix, Ja Rule, who is positioned as passive/feminized/object in the sexual logic borrowed from the original, which is reproduced without critique.

This seems to get at the heart of certain distinctions around pastiche and parody, in both their relationship to the original text and their social function as such. According to Linda Hutcheon, parody is "repetition, but repetition that includes difference; it is imitation with critical ironic distance"; "ironic versions of 'trans-contextualization' and inversion are its major formal operatives, and the range of pragmatic ethos is from scornful ridicule to reverential homage" (37 [1985]). Like signifyin(g), the attitude to the original is foregrounded, in that it is that relationship which determines the parodying text's position on the scorn-ridicule continuum. However, in hip-hop's "ongoing, productive troping…which takes the *same* and returns it as *difference*" (Potter 63, italics original), there is a continuous play of signification which complicates appropriative modes by (dis)entangling the aesthetic and the ideological valences from the performance itself. We might look at, for example, a moment of allusion in "Run the Jewels," the opening track from *Run the Jewels* by Run the Jewels (admittedly unwieldy, but intended to preclude confusion going forward). Killer Mike, extending a metaphor started in El-P's preceding verse, adopts the guise of predator:

> …we the wolves that's wilding
> We often smile at sights of violence
> Acting brave and courageous
> Ain't advantageous for health and safety
> So when we say "Run the jewels"
> Just run them baby, please don't delay me
> And that goes for a guy or lady
> The fam, god damn we fuckin' crazy
> I'll pull this pistol
> Put it on your poodle or your fuckin' baby
> She clutched the pearls, said "What the world!"
> And "I won't give up shit!"
> I put the pistol on that poodle
> And I shot that bitch

Note that the rhetorical mode shifts from speculative to narrative as the verse closes, an undirected boast of toughness (the duo's favored strategy) becoming concretized in the first-person singular account of an actual robbery, the future tense shifting to past. There are three ways to read this moment: as a text in-itself, as allusory-reverential, and as ideological-parodic-reverential. In the first case, the insertion of narrative serves an exemplary function in the verse, backing up the threat of violence with actual violence. There is the flicker of a failed joke in the play on the dual meaning of "bitch" in both its literal/denotative and genre/connotative/discursive form, but the audience could be forgiven for failing to see the humor in the tired misogyny at work here.

To view it as allusory-reverential (i.e. "unmotivated" signification) would be more to the point, but it would entail an awareness of rap history that can't necessarily be assumed on the part of the artist-encoder. That is, while The Notorious BIG's (aka Biggie Smalls) album *Ready to Die* (1994) is a seminal hip-hop text, the album's third track, "Gimme the Loot," was (for good reason) never squarely in the public eye in the same way that radio-friendly tracks like "Juicy" and the Grammy-nominated "Big Poppa" were. The song, both critically celebrated for its demonstration of Biggie's skills as a rapper (the song is a dialogue between two characters, both performed by the artist in distinct vocal styles) and excoriated for its reproduction of the worst excesses of the amoral and violent "descriptive realist" mode, is notable for its "uncensored censoring"— that is, for reasons not related to its a) release as a radio single, b) need to soften lyrics in order to get use-permissions from sampled artists, or c) direct threats of violence towards law enforcement (as on subsequent track "Machine Gun Funk"), the song features edited

lyrics, even on the unedited version of the album. Even within the hardcore rap genre and

the gangsta robbery narrative that comprises the song, the two censored lyrics, in brackets

below, were deemed by record label executives as indefensible:

> Then I'm dipping up the block and I'm robbing bitches too
> Up the herringbones and bamboos
> I wouldn't give a fuck if you're [pregnant]
> Give me the baby rings and the #1 Mom pendant

and

> Man, niggas come through I'm taking high school rings too
> Bitches get [strangled] for their earrings and bangles
> And when I rock her and drop her, I'm taking her doorknockers
> And if she's resistant: blakka, blakka, blakka[47]

The parallels to Killer Mike's verse are clear—the stick-up narrative, the claim to gender-

inclusivity regarding choice of targets, the resisting woman, the "baby" (fetal, canine, or

otherwise), and the resulting gunfire. As an allusion the later verse recreates in miniature

the relevant material conditions present in the earlier text, paying homage to a classic of

gangsta rap and aligning the later artist with the "hardcore" sensibilities of The Notorious

BIG, like Tupac Shakur a martyr figure central to hip-hop's mythological bent.

However, when examining the original lines what stands out more than the

censored lyrics is the futility of the entire meta-rhetorical endeavor—the omission of the

two words in themselves ("pregnant," "strangled") has almost *no* impact on the entire

ideological *Lebenswelt* constructed in the gritty crime narrative. The misogyny is in no

way tempered by the censorship—the "bitches" are still being robbed, "rocked" and

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[47] The specific form of censorship the label opted for were judiciously placed record scratches that obscured all but perhaps the first consonants of the offending words.

"dropped," and the onomatopoeic results of their "resistance" ("blakka") are not

somehow less explicitly gunshots for their approximation in language. Without debating

the moral and artistic merits of the lyrics themselves, it is safe to say that the ethical

"lines in the sand" imposed on the record by label executives are laughably ineffectual,

and represent not a principled stand against shock-rap depravity but a weak compromise

with the interests of capital. Less "offensive" music tends to sell more as a function of

both radio and retail regulations (WalMart, for example, is the largest brick-and-mortar

retailer of physical copies of recorded music, and refuses to sell unedited, "explicit"

versions of any album, hip-hop or otherwise), but the self-appointed arbiters of good taste

seem at a loss as to how to deal with records where offense is precisely the point, where a

lack of decorum is itself a central factor in the generation of cultural value for a

commodity.

This, in short, is where Killer Mike's recycling of the earlier material leads us in

the end: not to either a simple critique or celebration of the earlier lyrics, but to a meta-

commentary on the genre itself, contextualized as an ideological intervention. The 1994

Smalls album—released two years before Hillary Clinton, in a speech at New

Hampshire's Keene State College supporting her husband's anti-crime policies, would

use criminologist John Dilulio's term "super-predators" to refer to urban juveniles who

were "not just gangs of kids anymore" (Drum)—was the most mainstream (in sales and

radio play) example of the "descriptive realist" rap ethos, and therefore a key catalyst in

the crystallization of the reactionary stance assumed by leaders and publics across the

ideological, class, and racial spectrum, in the mode of what Simon Watney discusses as

"moral panics":

> It is the central ideological business of the communications industry to retail ready-made pictures of "human" identity, that thus recruit individual consumers to identify with them in a fantasy of collective mutual complementarity. Whole sections of society, however, cannot be contained within this project, since they refuse to dissolve into the larger mutualities required of them. Hence the position, in particular, though in different ways, of both blacks and gay men, who are made to stand outside the "general public," inevitably appearing as threats to its internal cohesion. This cohesion is not "natural," but a result of the media industry's modes of address—targeting an imaginary national family unit which is both white and heterosexual. All apparent threats to this key object of individual identification will be subject to the kinds of treatment which [Stanley] Cohen and his followers describe as moral panics. (42-43)

Though it has historically functioned as an othering discourse of white (and heterosexual) privilege, the logic of the "moral panic" as productive or predictive of group cohesion should not be considered solely as a racially-exclusive discourse of dominance. As Spence argues, critiques from within both black communities and the "argumentative realist" rap genre which single out the tropes of hip-hop as blameworthy for a variety of negative outcomes often

> reproduce neoliberal narratives by focusing on internal cultural failures—the failures that justify their position in the racial hierarchy, failures that can only be solved by cultural regeneration. Either blacks in general (or subgroups of blacks) work as the exception, as populations that must either be disciplined, at best, or expunged, at worst, to regenerate black society….[T]he solution reproduces neoliberalism by emphasizing neoliberal trickle-down economics over politics. (53)

The emphasis on the personal responsibility to "represent" appropriately acts as an implicit legitimation of market-oriented ideologies which displace or elide structural and political contexts. The logic of representation replaces, for example, a critique of media-

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visual practices engaged in the proliferation of racist images with, instead, a critique of

the individual or group whose image has been appropriated and circulated.

In fact, however, the oppositional discourse of hip-hop depends, in part, on

precisely such reactionary politics, as well as the modes of exclusion to which artists and

communities of color have historically been subject. It is true, as Miles White notes, that

> The (re)circulation of representations of urban black males that reify the ideal of
> hypermasculine hardness has also become a multidimensional index that
> distinguishes the grittier, more graphic, and provocative styles of hardcore rap
> that appeared in the 1980s (new school) from earlier (old school) styles of 1970s
> party rap. What these representations commodify and (re)present back to
> adolescent males are essentially decontextualized images, codes, and symbols
> around what it means to be black, male, and authentic in an urban environment;
> qualities that include emotional rigidity, a rejection of the feminine acted out in
> misogynistic behavior, nihilism, an adherence to a code of the street that
> prioritizes illicit material gain, ostentatious consumption and the defense of
> territory defined as both personal and geographical space….[T]he association
> between harder styles of rap music and violence came to be embodied by the
> young black male, who was seen "as exotic, dangerous, and feared, yet
> simultaneously appealing and marketable." (25, quoting Dawn Norfleet's "Hip
> Hop and Rap" 362)

White's analysis productively locates the intersection between rap and black identity in

the production of visual commonplaces which connote authentic blackness and become

"displaced onto black male bodies without discrimination" (24). However, there needs to

be a consideration of the ways in which the discourse embodied in rap performance is not

merely "identificatory" or imitative, but rather an expression of conscious

oppositionality, in the way that "[h]ip-hop acts as the cultural marker of a decolonization

process" (Stallings 187 [2003]). The violent, the misogynistic, the broadly antisocial:

these may be considered, at least in part, as prolepses deployed against the always-

already negative reception of the spectacularized black presence. In this sense, hip-hop's

"strategy has been that it is just as effective to pump up the volume, to magnify (and distort) the image of white America's fears as it is to displace them with accurate descriptions of urban reality" (Potter 129). It is in this way that Killer Mike's verse (as well as Run the Jewels more broadly) signifies upon the legacy of hardcore rap as a meta-discourse implicating both the production and reception of cultural myths around the implicitly-raced hip-hop artist.[48] The identity of "wolf" assumed in Mike's verse is in fact an acknowledgment of the always-already "predator" status ascribed to the black male, especially in the figure of the rapper, who is simultaneously productive of and caused by his essentialized blackness: both a subcultural figure embodying the most feared excesses of black men *and* indistinguishable from the larger community to which he is supposed to represent the exception. The call-back to the Biggie verse in the stick-up scene functions not (or not only) as an expression of associative masculinity or threat, but as an evocation of the entire socio-political discourse for which it becomes a metonym. Further, even if the listener were unaware that Killer Mike considers the poodle breed in particular symbolic of or shorthand for "snobbery" and "the bourgeoisie,"[49] the re-literalization of analogy/cliché as the woman "clutche[s] the pearls" signals that the narrative has

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[48] I am concerned here with the politics of reception by audiences extrinsic to the discursive sphere of hip-hop, i.e. those arbiters of taste and culture engaged in either a politics of respectability or reductive analyses equating hip-hop with blackness or vice versa. While there is certainly a politics of listening specific to the white, black, Asian, latinx, queer, young, etc. *fan* of hip-hop, these won't be considered here. However, work like Bakari Kitwana's *Why White Kids Love Hip Hop* (2006), Charles Aaron's "What the White Boy Means When He Says Yo" (2004), or Jeffrey McCune, Jr.'s "'Out' in the Club: The Down Low, Hip-Hop, and the Architexture of Black Masculinity" (2009) are examples of useful texts focusing on audience identifications within the discursive sphere of hip-hop fandom.

[49] "Run the Jewels Interview pt. 3" MySpace, 2013
https://myspace.com/myspace/video/run-the-jewels-interview-pt.-3/109396508

transcended the merely "descriptive realist" space of the original. The woman's "pearl clutching"—to be clear, a phrase "which means being shocked by something once-salacious that should now be seen as commonplace" (Bosch)—is an unambiguous move away from the literal to the abstract, from the stick-up to ideological critique. The woman's "jewels" are not only, as mentioned earlier, metaphors for capitalist plunder elided and naturalized as spectacular status symbols, but also her moral sensibilities which the song itself has offended or threatened via the rappers' performance. This, in sum, is the real joke: not the failed pun coarsely playing on the dual meaning of "bitch," but rather the interpellation of a certain type of listener as censor, the history of moral panic around the genre from the 1980s to today in microcosm, and the way that neoliberalism and decorum are mutually indicative of one another as each work to curb the performance of "excessive" identity.

It is in light of this that I again wish to return briefly to the distinction I've made in earlier chapters around parody and pastiche. Here, we might say that the original text has been parodied; however, as discussed above, parody seems to take as its primary logic an attitude towards the earlier text. In the case of Killer Mike's verse, his repetition of key aspects of the earlier narrative does not produce or imply a coherent attitude towards The Notorious BIG, the song "Gimme the Loot," or the lifeworld constructed in the narrative. Further, I would argue that the earlier text is in many ways beside the point: violence, concrete amorality (i.e. the threatened feminine presence as a marker of the criminal-without-boundaries), and the stick-up have all become thematic commonplaces in the genre, so there is not necessarily any of that conservative impulse noted by

Hutcheon in the way that the parodied text is preserved and foregrounded discursively by its invocation within the parodying text. While even in Hutcheon's exhaustive taxonomy the distinction between parody and pastiche is left unclear, in one instance she suggests that "Pastiche will often be an imitation not of a single text but of the indefinite possibilities of texts. It involves what Daniel Bilous calls the interstyle, not the intertext" (38 [1985]). It is in this sense that I would consider Run the Jewels as functioning through pastiche, in their surface appropriation of genre styles rather than the direct quotation of parody. And, as Chela Sandoval notes, the surface reference of pastiche makes it an ideologically versatile mode, as it is "an empty form capable of constant refilling" (190). Thus, Killer Mike's anecdote reproduces the surface of the robbery narrative without being beholden to the nihilism of the trope's hardcore genesis, and the (not to say) cliché can be mobilized as structural critique rather than mere self-aggrandizement. The lines in question, as a microcosm of Run the Jewels' methodology writ large, suggest a disidentificatory stance with regard to the genre which contains them, one which recognizes that, in an Age of Irony where sincerity and authenticity are often rendered meaningless as critique by their ubiquity as commodities, the serious is less important than its disruption, and that hegemonic reverences are best undermined by a laughter which does not replace but rather complements the muscular confrontation of trenchant critique—perhaps the reason why they're "the type to greet the preacher with a grin *and* a gun" ("Close Your Eyes [and Count to Fuck]" *Run the Jewels 2*).

An Enemy Within: the Performance of Disidentification

In José Esteban Muñoz's 1999 work *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, the author explores the ways minoritarian subjects navigate hegemonic social and ideological spaces via the reworking of dominant narratives as an act of subversion. The term "[d]isidentification," he writes, "is meant to be descriptive of the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative subjectivity" (4). These survival strategies entail not the simple rejection of dominant structures and narratives which attempt to construct the subject as normative, but rather are notable for a performance of identity that "tactically and simultaneously works on, with, and against a cultural form" (12). Importantly, the move of disidentification does not involve sanitizing or censoring the cultural form within which the queer (or queer*ing*) subject performs identity; to disidentify

> is not to pick and choose what one takes out of an identification, it is not to willfully evacuate the politically dubious or shameful components within an identificatory locus. Rather, it is the reworking of those energies that do not elide the "harmful" or contradictory components of any identity. It is an acceptance of the necessary interjection that has occurred in such situations. (12)

Disidentification, for Muñoz, involves "an active kernel of utopian possibility" (25) as "active participant spectators" work to "mutate and restructure stale patterns within dominant media" (29). It is a critical practice involving both a sophisticated cultural hermeneutics and an oppositional re-working of both existing knowledge and epistemologies themselves. Disidentification, in fact, reads very close to the theoretical understanding of pastiche performance that I've attempted to valorize here:

> Disidentification is about recycling and rethinking encoded meaning. The process of disidentification scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message's universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recircuits its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications. Thus, disidentification is a step further than cracking open the code of the majority; it proceeds to use this code as raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture. (31)

This "disempowered politics" which emerges from the (re)*assemblage* of existing practices and forms of knowledge works to defamiliarize or denaturalize the assumptions of the dominant mode, in the familiar way that cultural theory has worked to disenchant the interpellated subject throughout the (long) 20th century; its exceptional quality seems to be its unique *performance* of that critique both within and *as* a hegemonic paradigm.

As I have argued, Run the Jewels engages in an ideological performance that occurs within and through the dominant tropes of hip-hop, tropes which in essence align with dominant structures in the larger American cultural sphere, especially with regards to the celebrations of conspicuous consumption and a certain type of sometimes-violent virility associated with ostentatious masculine heterosexuality. The re-deployment of this discursive mode is continuously undercut, however, through ironic formal techniques at both the lyrical, formal, and ideological levels, essentially rendering it a camp discourse, queering the dominant masculinity of the genre while engaging in a critique of abstract systems of power. Run the Jewels is camp in the vein of Susan Sontag's insistence that "[t]he whole point of Camp is to dethrone the serious," as well as Munoz's claim that camp's "[c]omedic disidentification accomplishes important cultural critique while at the same time providing cover from, and enabling the avoidance itself of, scenarios of direct

confrontation with phobic and reactionary ideologies" (119). Take, for example, the

formally exaggerated violence of El-P's taunt:

> You don't wanna look into my big crystal balls ([suss? suck?] the future)
> We'll moonwalk through flames with a brain on stupid
> Camouflage toughies'll touch your tufts roughly
> Fluff your flat permanent, lump you up ruthless
> Then laugh while you're humming the tune of bruised movements ("DDFH" *Run the Jewels*)

The logic of the lines begins with a typical boast regarding the rapper's "big…balls,"

seemingly moving to the intimation of violence from "toughies" directed against an

opaque second person pronoun ("you"). The violence itself is rendered in a baroque

language of assonance, alliteration and internal rhyme, an overdescription which still

remains impressionistic and analogical (especially "humming the tune of bruised

movements"). The lines are further complicated by the possibility that the "big crystal

balls" work not merely as a useful comparison to the artist's anatomy (in the discourse of

juvenile masculinity where "balls" of any type are always-already testicle-analogues), but

also as a narrative device which places the subsequent lines into the futurity of prophetic

time. That is, the violence presented is not an aspect of the extended present, with the

artists as its authors or enablers, but belongs to a dystopian future, perhaps signaled by

the revelation, via the chorus, of the titular acronym DDFH: "Do dope, fuck hope." The

"camouflage toughies," then, are not surrogates for or henchmen of the artist, but rather,

as suggested by their attire, paramilitary forces engaged in the violent suppression of the

"you" that is "us." The aporetic doubleness of meaning in this moment reflects the formal

use of impressionistic language by which it is conveyed, as well as being a result of the

audience's knowledge of generic tropes which create the conditions of hearing, the epistemological possibilities typically contained in the boast rap.

Sontag's discussion of camp's tendency to "dethrone the serious" continues, "Camp is playful, anti-serious. More precisely, Camp involves a new, more complex relation to 'the serious.' One can be serious about the frivolous, frivolous about the serious"; further, "One is drawn to Camp when one realizes that "sincerity" is not enough. Sincerity can be simple philistinism, intellectual narrowness." Both camp and disidentification (as well as disidentification's use of camp) can be formal responses to the limits of the serious as a discourse of critique, but this does not indicate that there is not, as in signifyin(g), a "serious unseriousness" (Potter 15) in play. The humor of Run the Jewels is not exclusively of the disidentificatory sort—the straightforward "punchline" of Mike's greeting, "Top of the morning, my fist to your face is fuckin' Folgers" ("Blockbuster Night Part 1" *Run the Jewels 2*), for example—but as a formal technique it gets at the fantastical nature of hip-hop's rhetorical foundations while simultaneously reifying abstract systems of domination in order to make them accessible to assault via those same grounds. In the same song, for example, El-P's verse begins with a parody of boast rap's penis-fixation, blowing it up to absurd proportions before re-contextualizing it as an ideological critique:

> I'm the foulest, no need for any evaluation
> I'm a phallus, a Johnson, a jimmy spraying faces
> Any cow that is sacred will get defac-ed
> Like any tyrant murdered gets replac-ed
> Face it
> The fellows at the top are likely rapists
> But you're like, "Mellow out, man, just relax, it's really not that complicated"
> Well pardon me, I guess I'm just insane as you explain-ed

        Or maybe sanctifying the sadistic is derang-ed

While a more traditional boast would highlight the qualitative or quantitative dimensions

of a rapper's sexual physiognomy as a metonym for virility, El-P's claim at the beginning

of the verse moves straight to the implicit foundations underwriting the trope's

prominence in rap and in the patriarchal American culture more generally: namely, the

associative equivalence which slides back and forth between the physiological

manifestation of the penis and the abstract power-analogue of the phallus. By embodying

the physical "phallus" here, the artist essentially cuts out the middleman and makes direct

claim to the metaphysical potency which is only hinted at in the penis-as-signifier. This

shift a) bolsters his claim to the dubious achievement of being "The Foulest," b)

recontextualizes the meaning of "spraying," a prominent genre verb usually associated

with the firing of bullets, another key trope in establishing "gangsta" masculinity, and c)

moves the action of the lines into the realm of abstraction. The latter point is key, as the

moment works as a bridge between the interpersonal dynamic of boast rap and the

ideological critique of "conscious" rap, yet while maintaining the same rhetorical grounds

present in hip-hop's "unmotivated" language of masculinist self-aggrandizement. The

"sacred cow" is another metaphor doing the same work, as it is a concrete manifestation

of an absent power, making any violence directed against it primarily symbolic. The lines

close with a posited interlocutor pointedly resisting this shift to abstraction, insisting that

"it's really not that complicated"—the "it" here implicitly the seemingly straightforward

world-structure to which both are subject. This reading is immediately rejected as quietist

and enabling; insanity, for the artist, occurs both in the action of "sanctifying" certain

people, institutions, and ideas which contribute to the subjugation of the non-elite

individual and community, and in the refusal to look critically at the oppressive

constellations of control which hide in plain sight. As in Sontag's discussion of camp's

frivolity, the sober-minded "seriousness" of the respondent represents an "intellectual

narrowness" which is not equipped to deal with the complexities of power in an era of

global and abstract wealth; addressing these might require a camp resistance which is

"ironic and playful" (Muñoz 121), and is also the "kinetic motion that maneuvers,

poetically transfigures, and orchestrates while demanding alienation, perversion, and

reformation in both spectators and practitioners" of Sandoval's differential consciousness

(43).

One aspect of Muñoz's disidentification that I have not addressed with regard to

Run the Jewels is the grounding of the performance/hermeneutic methodology in queer

theory, or, perhaps more accurately, the lived experience of queer of color individuals

and artists. My own use of this discourse is an example of what Edward Said would call

"travelling theory," in that the original theoretical intervention comprising

disidentification, based on concrete social events and structures, has "travelled,"

becoming de- or re-contextualized in its application to diverse situations. This context in

particular may bear explaining as neither of the members of Run the Jewels identify as

queer; Killer Mike, in fact, is the group's sole person "of color." On the one hand, the use

of the theory of disidentification in this context is an "unmotivated" signification marked

by neutral re(f/v)erence—it's here because I like it and it seems to fit. However, on the

motivated, agonistic level the decision to deploy Muñoz's work here may be read as an

opposition to the academic logic of apartheid which marks the theoretical models of especially straight white men as being generally applicable while minoritarian discourse is considered in terms of its particularity and specificity, its implicit inability to "travel." Alexander Weheliye, discussing his recourse to the work of Sylvia Wynter and Hortense Spillers in his writing on biopolitics in lieu of the usual suspects, notes,

> [T]he challenges posed to the smooth operations of western Man since the 1960s by continental thought and minority discourse, though historically, conceptually, institutionally, and politically relational, tend to be segregated, because minority discourses seemingly cannot inhabit the space of proper theoretical reflection, which is why thinkers such as Foucault and Agamben need not reference the long traditions of thought in this domain that are directly relevant to biopolitics and bare life. (9 [2014])

This, of course, gets at the Manichean logic of European patriarchy which insists (though, as time passes, more and more implicitly) on essentialist qualities animating differently raced, gendered, or desiring subject positions, including associations between (heterosexual) masculinity and the rational thought of "proper theoretical reflection." In terms of the politics of academia, then, I would argue that Munoz's theory of disidentification remains as vital and useful outside of its QoC context as Linda Hutcheon's theory of pastiche does outside of the context of literature and fine art, or as does Fredric Jameson's conceptualization of the postmodern, the critical application of which seems limited only by its own mind-numbing ubiquity.

However, I would also argue that the application of Muñoz's work here surpasses the merely political; I might, in fact, go so far as to argue that the performance of Run the Jewels, by producing a fantastical version of hip-hop masculinity, consequently *queers the genre itself*. I make this claim with the following caveats: I do not mean to suggest

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that hip-hop has a uniform or pathologically divergent sexual politics, nor that the genre

is either musically or critically devoid of queer signification or engagement. Though in

the phobic majoritarian sphere of moral panics hip-hop has often been singled out as

uniquely transgressive in terms of its gender and sexual politics, my argument is that the

politics of hip-hop are *not* at odds with a dominant public discourse which is both often-

retrogressive and inarguably heterogenous. In fact, while it may be true, as Marc Lamont

Hill asserts, that "explicitly homophobic discourses are lyrically overrepresented within

hip-hop culture" (32), this may be merely because *lyrics* are overrepresented in hip-hop.

That is to say, any critique of hip-hop's homophobia that doesn't touch on the

homophobia of the larger US cultural sphere of which hip-hop is one sector confuses

symptom with pathogen, and engages with the dogwhistle racism of conservative

respectability politics.

　　Though my argument here has proceeded via a necessarily reductive binary

opposing "mainstream" or popular/Top 40/radio rap with both conscious rap and the

conscious-ironic rap of Run the Jewels, Hill is correct to note that "explicitly homophobic

messages are not…limited to mainstream rap music and artists," but are found in the

"progressive" music of "hip-hop's ostensibly 'conscious' sector." As in previous

chapters, the critical culprit here has tended to be the heteropatriarchal black nationalism

of the mid-20th century:

> At the height of the political rap era during the late 1980s and early 1990s, the
> progressive agendas of political rap artists such as Public Enemy, X-Clan, Paris,
> and Sista Souljah were strongly informed by radical Afrocentric, Black Islamic,
> and crude Black Nationalist ideologies that were openly hostile to queer identities.
> As a result of these positions, homosexuality was viewed as a consequence of
> spiritual malevolence, political conspiracy, or European hegemony. (32-33)

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A few points can be made about this sort of argument. On the one hand, it is true that there was a particular socio-historical commingling of subcultural expression, and there is/has been considerable overlap between hip-hop and movements that contained homophobic ideologies. However, I again stress the reductive and prejudicial nature of any explanation of hip-hop that attempts to in effect blame "black culture" for hip-hop's problems with gender and sexuality (let alone violence). In fact, it is precisely a hegemonic *white* heteropatriarchy that provides the model for a phobic American masculinity. As Patricia Hill Collins notes,

> the vast majority of the population accepts ideas about gender complementarity that privilege the masculinity of propertied, heterosexual White men as natural, normal, and beyond reproach. In this fashion, elite White men control the very definitions of masculinity, and they use these standards to evaluate their own masculine identities and those of all other men, including African American men. (186)

Lamonda Horton-Stallings, reading Collins in conjunction with the work of novelist Paul Beatty, points to the paradoxical "psychological impetus to claim a patriarchal legacy embedded within white supremacy" that may in part structure black masculine identification (99 [2009]). As I noted above, there is an intersection between the way that neoliberalism expresses itself culturally (i.e. self-managerialism and competitiveness) and the politics of respectability that place blame on subjugated communities for their own failures. When the discourse of white heterosexuality is ensconced as both arbiter (in its "evaluative" mode) and ego-ideal (as "patriarchal legacy") for black masculinity, the inherent white supremacy of the discourse itself situates black masculinity as always-already failed or incomplete. On the one hand, this can result in the spectacle of a

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dominant black masculinity that reflects the prevailing hetero-patriarchal mandates of white/Western culture to the exclusion of other gender and sexual possibilities: as Collins argues, "By using Black people's ability to achieve White gender norms as a sign of racial progress, upward social class mobility is increasingly hitched to the wagon of helping Black men gain 'strength' within African American families and communities" (183). On the other hand, in a neoliberal politics of respectability that takes the straight, white, middle-class man as its "natural" object, criticisms of an always-already failed black manhood or womanhood, as Rinaldo Walcott argues, "render[] both black men and black women queer…in the sense of an abnormal heterosexuality" (80). My point is not to theorize black masculine subjectivity, but to emphasize the too-often elided white supremacist, heterosexist politics of respectability that serve as both model for a masculinity that disavows queer sexuality and antagonist towards orientations of sexuality and gender that fall outside of its naturalized bounds.

Thus, when I write about the opposition of Run the Jewels to a homophobic/misogynist mainstream rap discourse, my characterization of that discourse is a function of its heightened visibility as an object of critique and its relative correlation to a greater hegemonic US discourse around gender and sexuality which is every bit as oppressive and interpellating. In fact, as the celebrated status of queer artists like Frank Ocean implies, hip-hop is shifting on these issues in a way that mirrors national progress, despite only the latter being publicly celebrated by the cultural voice of white liberalism. As Joel Penney notes, one way this is happening is (to invoke a theme of my first two chapters) through fashion, which affords the possibility of alternative identity

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constructions beyond those delimited by hegemonic cultural gatekeepers and troubles

reductive understandings of a homogenous rap homophobia: "The recent popularity of

queer-friendly, fashion-obsessed rap superstars such as Kanye West and Pharrell

Williams threatens to destabilize the hyper-masculine identity associated with

mainstream hip-hop culture, calling into question the heteronormative assumptions which

have long framed the black male rapper subject" (322). Further, as Jeffrey McCune, Jr,

explains in a discussion of the space of the hip-hop club in black gay culture, "hip-hop

often operates as the nexus between the black and the queer" in the way it is appropriated

by and affords pleasure to black queer subjects, allowing them to "recognize both parts of

the self, concomitantly" (302). In this way the discourse of hip-hop actually opens up the

possibilities for queer expression beyond the hegemonic shorthand of white gay culture.

Therefore, though there is a highly visible, latent, dominant masculinist/heterosexist

quality to much mainstream rap, this is neither a totalizing discourse nor a manifestation

of some pathologized blackness. Not all hip-hop is retrogressive; Run the Jewels

performs opposition to the hip-hop that is.

Caveats aside, when I argue that RTJ queers the genre of mainstream hip-hop, I

see this as occurring not via a sincerity politics of counteridentification (i.e. rejection),

nor even as the representational identity politics of, for example, Frank Ocean, who came

out (still a rarity in the culture of mainstream hip-hop) between his first and second

albums.[50] Run the Jewels represents a queer, disidentificatory stance in their embrace of

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[50] The performance of Frank Ocean would in its own right comprise an interesting study. There is, in the
first place, the recontextualization of the discourse of R&B heterosexual masculinity on his first album,
channel ORANGE (2012). Further, his second album, *Blonde* (2016) is marked in places by an overt
playfulness with regard to these same tropes, which were presented as naturalized or inevitable on *channel*

masculinist logics and their use of same in order to critique the homophobic foundations

of masculinity in hip-hop[51]; in this sense they might be said to be engaged in what Jean

Baudrillard called a "fatal strategy," one which "recognizes the supremacy of the object

and therefore takes the side of the object and surrenders to its strategies, ruses, and rules"

(Kellner). The discursive object at hand is the sexual logic of rap rhetoric, and Run the

Jewels certainly "do not elide the 'harmful' or contradictory components" (Muñoz 12) of

this logic. Other rappers, the implicit targets of their boasts, are criticized in ever more

inventive ways for failures to embody the virility of mainstream rap's masculine avatar, a

figure whose fantastic construction in fact precludes the sincere identification often

afforded it. This occurs through the discourse of skill and authenticity, as when Killer

Mike claims, "I'm stuck in a time capsule / when rappers were actually factual / meaning

shit you spit might cause killers to come and clap at you" ("Get It" *Run the Jewels*), or

"You know your favorite rapper ain't shit / and me, I might be / the closest representation

of God you might see" ("Jeopardy" *Run the Jewels 2*). However, the sexual logic at play

is in some ways more interesting, such as the infantilization at work in the lines, "You

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ORANGE. For example, the replication and inversion of the straight-erotics present in a boast that simultaneously references his homosexuality AND his (nevertheless) relative desirability in the heterosexual rap economy [Note: the term "cut" is a slang term for sexual intercourse, i.e. "I cut her/him" or "I got some cut (up)"]: "You must ain't get the memo/ I don't cut bitches no more / But your bitch my exception" ("Futura Free").

[51] As Tricia Rose notes, it is incorrect to totalize male rap/pers as misogynist and female rap/pers as feminist, a common assertion in media/critical practice which "serves to produce imaginary clarity in the realm of rap's sexual politics, rather than confront its contradictory nature" (147), which includes feminist sentiments expressed by male rappers as well as hetero-patriarchal and sexually objectifying discourse by female rappers. While I hope to avoid painting a reductive portrait of hip-hop's sexual politics, my discussion considers discourse which is both *prevalent* within the genre and *consistent* with dominant ideologies. This is the sense in which I will refer to hip-hop's misogyny or masculinity, not in a mistaken fantasy of strict gender divides.

itsy-bitsy / furry frightened and fricken' sickly / a little prickly / dick on display for

Winter swimming" (El-P "Blockbuster Night Part 1"), or even the unqualified

transgendering of the (likely homophobic and misogynist) opposition: "Rappers all get

the dick like they got tits on 'em" (El-P "Blockbuster Night Part 2" *Run the Jewels 2*).[52]

This represents a juvenile sexuality that revels in reversal, abjection, and absurdity, and

that recognizes the discursive foundation of rap's masculinist fantasy, weaponizing it

against those who would take it seriously. Take El-P's taunt on "Oh My Darling (Don't

Cry)"—opening with "Fuck the law, they can eat my dick," he invokes the quintessential

rap trope of anti-police bias before insisting, "You can all run naked backwards through a

field of dicks" (*Run the Jewels 2*). The humor of the line is in its surreal imagery, and

also in the restatement of the tired rhetoric of sincere critiques of law enforcement, which

already peaked in 1988's "Fuck tha Police" by N.W.A.. This points to yet another

function of camp humor noted by Muñoz: "Camp is a form of artificial respiration; it

breathes new life into old situations" (128).

The "old situation" of rap's masculinist sexual logic is not merely revived,

however; it is actively resisted. This is evident in the flipside of the duo's critique of

insufficient masculinity, namely the ridicule of excessive or improper heterosexuality.

The song "Twin Hype Back" from their first album, for example, is intercut with a

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[52] In the late 2000s it became popular to qualify a line like this with an explicit disavowal of the homoerotic sentiment, which is figured as being deployed as an attack on the masculinity of the target, rather than a reflection on the shape or substance of the speaker's sexuality. Jay-Z has been known to follow a potentially homophilic statement with "Pause," while others resort to the more queer-phobic "No homo." In actuality, the heterosexuality of male rappers is an always-already implicit assumption, so disavowals such as these work against their intent by calling attention to both the clumsiness of homophobic rhetoric and the often insubstantial distinction between aggressive homosociality and the playground sexuality of prepubescent masculinity that expresses itself in mocking and attacking the object of affection.

parody of the R&B trope of the hypersexualized monologue (think Barry White or Isaac

Hayes). While traditionally this has provided something like a manual of seduction by

and for the heterosexual male subject, in Run the Jewels' reworking the speaker exhibits

a sexuality that is both failed and dangerous, the latter implicitly proceeding from the

former. In between the duo's rapid-fire trading of verses, "Chest Rockwell" interjects to

engage with an imagined feminine subject:

> I must say you do look stunning
> I mean, you're the kind of girl I can really see myself artificially inseminating
> Oh I'm sorry, I'm being a little aggressive, right?
> ….
> [Outro]
> How you feeling now sweetheart? A little more relaxed?
> Maybe it's that half a molly I put in your Mountain Dew
> Yeah, works like a charm. Just chill out for a second, relax, relax, I got it under control
> I got you a glass of Beefeater, I got a brand new deck of Uno cards...
> Oh yeah baby, the night's just getting started
> Ok, how about I come over tonight and pick you up in my brand new Segway.
> We can go over to Long John Silver's, get a fish platter
> You can take me home and massage me with butter all on my neck
> I love you

Here, Chest Rockwell—perhaps a reference to actor John C. Reilly's character's chosen

porn alias in Paul Thomas Anderson's *Boogie Nights* (1997)—performs a version of

seduction which is leering and laughable, a heterosexual masculinity which is both

predatory and confused. The deep bass of his voice compares favorably to the icons of

disco sexuality that he emulates, but his confident words betray an erotic *méconnaissance*

which works against the come-on. His apology—"Oh I'm sorry, I'm being a little

aggressive, right?"—informs the listener's response to the monologue as it continues; the

implicit reaction from the hailed woman makes the continued interaction improper, and

puts the listener in the uncomfortable position of witness. Rockwell's admission of

drugging the woman's drink, along with his repeated entreaties to "relax," place the

speech firmly in the overtly frightening domain of the sexual assault narrative.

Even more relevant than the reference to R&B masculinity made by the

monologue form itself may be the reference to Rick Ross' controversial verse from

earlier that year: on Rocko's song "U.O.E.N.O.," Ross raps, "Put Molly all in her

champagne, she ain't even know it / I took her home and I enjoyed that, she ain't even

know it" (*Gift of Gab 2* 2013). The line, which prompted a public outcry and the loss of

Ross' sponsorship deal with Reebok (Soderberg), is indicative of the blurring of consent

in mainstream rap's objectification of women and the problematic excesses of the fantasy

lifestyle constructed in the "party rap" animated by the politics of conspicuous

consumption. However, the scenario is, importantly, not reproduced without critique. The

rape-culture masculinity which, in the Rick Ross verse, is celebrated, is here undercut by

details which characterize Rockwell as sexually deficient, childlike, and clueless. His

desire to "artificially inseminate" the woman disrupts his constructed persona's confident

sexuality, implying impotence or unfamiliarity with the act of intercourse, which, along

with his use of drugs, points to a failed heterosexuality; his provocation may, in fact, be a

form of camouflage. The enumeration of name-brand consumer objects in the hip-hop of

accumulative wealth is likewise parodied. The status objects which he has assembled in

order to bolster his sexual credentials are unimpressive—the affordably priced gin, the

children's game, the over-before-it-started transportation fad, and the fast food restaurant

all paint him as desperately unhip, someone without access to a legal or "healthy" sexual

economy. The final lines depict him as a greasy fool, childlike and unloved, his acting out symptomatic of lack rather than abundance of erotic prowess. He is a joke, an object of scorn and derision; and, in a perfect world, the possibility of an audience's positive identification with the straight masculinity he, and Rick Ross, represent has become laughable as well.

Though I have argued that the performance of Run the Jewels constitutes a critique of misogynist tropes in rap heterosexuality, this is not to say that the group shies away from the rhetoric of sexual skill tout court; however, they stop short of treating "women's sexuality…[as] the actual spoils of war" (Collins 151). For example, "Twin Hype Back," discussed above, features boasts of sexual talent that focus on the rappers' dexterity and desirability as a lover: El-P claims, "I slap and I suck clits / I fuck in my church shoes… / …They say that once a girl go Brooklyn no more soft dick will do." Here, as elsewhere, the sexual act occurs de facto consensually, with acknowledgment of partner preference. That is, while the focus remains squarely upon the rapper's experience as speaking subject, his is not the only subjectivity accounted for in the erotic economy. There is a frankness and celebration of an embodied pleasure that does not rely on the plunder of the other's body, one that might suggest a paradigm akin to what LaMonda Horton-Stallings calls "funky erotixxx," a "sacredly profane sexuality" that "ritualizes and makes sacred what is libidinous and blasphemous in Western humanism so as to unseat and criticize the inherent imperialistic aims within its social mores and sexual morality" (11 [2015]). Horton-Stallings notes that distinctions between performances of "pornography and eroticism" are not about "gender hierarchies and

oppression alone," but are rather constructed by "dominant epistemologies" which shape questions of taste and decorum.

This invocation of the paradoxical "sacredly profane" is central to the work of the duo's disidentificatory critique. On "No Come Down" (*Run the Jewels*) for example, Mike's account of taking psychedelic mushrooms with a stripper ("Girl named Mary lookin' like a black Madonna / Told me I can rent her but I can never own her") becomes a shared erotic experience that transcends the bounds of the scenario set forth in the hip-hop trope of "the strip club" as a place of male-oriented pleasure via feminine subservience, where men's abstract cultural or financial capital can be made flesh. The rapper first admonishes the listener, interpellated as the selfishly libidinous "bro," for focusing exclusively on the potential sexual consummation, insisting "that ain't the point, bro, please follow along, bro / God made a miracle…" Agreeing to a "pact" to ingest the drugs together, the shared experience leads to a spiritual connection in excess of the material conditions of their encounter:

> …we popped 3 caps and 3 stems
> She popped that molly, rocked my body, I fly high and my co-pilot
> Psilocybin, got me slidin', slipping into another dimension
> Me and this woman made love in Kemet
> Traveled to the moon came back when we were finished
> Fell to the earth, lost each other, died and we came back sister and brother
> In that lifetime we couldn't have each other
> So we killed ourselves and then killed our mother
> True romance, in one lap dance
> I was in my future, my present and past

The genre's familiar space of the strip club is decidedly defamiliarized by the presence of hallucinogens, but beyond even that the relations of power are utterly transfigured. Mary's offer of the mushrooms establishes her control over the situation even as the verse

highlights the ways that the drug brings them together in metaphysical space or spaces beyond the economic logics governing the interpersonal within the brick and mortar strip club. Further, the reference to "molly" (Ecstasy or MDMA) is pointed in its contrast to its appearance two tracks later on "Twin Hype Back": here, rather than being a tool of the sexually predatory Chest Rockwell, the drug is taken willingly by Mary as an aphrodisiac, a means of heightening her own pleasure; that is, for fun. The verse produces Killer Mike's sexual partner not as either subservient to his desires or as the money-hungry mercenary—or "gold digger"—figure, but as equally engaged in the erotics of the embodied spirituality that comprise their shared sensual experience; hence, the syntactical repetition of "we" constructions. The reference to ancient Egypt suggests a utopian fantasy that calls upon a cultural history not subject to Western moral logic; this suggests an association with Horton-Stallings' conceptualization of "funk," a "simultaneous creation of new knowledge and an acquisition of knowledge through the body to counter imperialist or colonial appropriation of bodies and cultures" (5 [2015]). Through the couple's shared hallucinogenic improvisation, as enacted through their sexual union, they are able to transcend historical, gendered, and economic systems of domination and reach some sort of imaginary neutral space where even sexual imperatives are momentarily evacuated (i.e. in their brief incarnation as siblings). The scenario being pastiched is so familiar that audience expectations need to be addressed, yet in its reworking still can be made to offer unexpected possibilities for oppositional consciousness, or even "true romance."

This, in short, is a microcosm of the disidentificatory pastiche of Run the Jewels, the critique paradoxically formed from the language of oppression. This reworking may signal a reverence towards the parodied text, though as I argue above it might more accurately be considered a *reference*, a neutral acknowledgment of past artists, albums, and tracks, and the influence that these have had on contemporary intra-generic discourse. Like the formal pastiche of Kehinde Wiley, Run the Jewels' combination of reference and revision acknowledges that art is not made in a vacuum, and that adapting and modifying stale images/rhetoric/tropes can be an overt demonstration of mastery, especially when the ideological valence of these texts is, in a virtuosic appropriation, shifted radically, in this case towards a progressivist, anti-hegemonic impulse. This speaks to the disidentificatory level of works like this, the ways in which the very familiarity of a dominant rhetorical mode can be precisely the means of its subversion, in the sense of Hutcheon's oppositional irony which allows for an "undermining-from-within" (52 [1994]). If classic late-80s-to-mid-90s political rap situated itself in explicit opposition to a white supremacist neoliberalism and its socio-economic effects, work like Run the Jewels' preserves this stance while simultaneously casting a critical eye upon the worst excesses of the discourse of classic/mainstream rap itself, much in the same way that Wiley's work is both anti-racist and critical of the limitations of earlier anti-racist aesthetic paradigms associated with black nationalism or the Black Arts Movement (e.g. solidarity, uplift, respectability).

I am not suggesting that this is an unqualified positive, as there can certainly be issue taken with the reinvocation of overtly masculinist rhetorics regardless of their

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disidentificatory tenor, just as Wiley can be critiqued for interpellating a new generation

into a Europhilic canon-worship. However, as I discuss in this chapter's introduction,

there is a marked dissimilarity in the politics of reception surrounding "conscious" rap

that often prevents art associated with progressive discourse from being consumed in the

same manner or to the same degree as art that is "fun"; in terms of hip-hop, this often

means that music confirming the US's dominant social mores—such as neoliberalism,

spectacular consumption, or misogyny (i.e. "party music")—often reaches a wider

audience (both as a function of radio play and in terms of its cultural capital, i.e. "what's

cool") than critical/subversive work. Run the Jewels doesn't necessarily dismantle that

divide so much as transcend it. By juxtaposing the aggressive masculinity of boast rap

with the lyricism and social awareness of conscious rap, and leavening it all with

camp/ironic humor, RTJ model a hip-hop performance that is both accessible in its tonal

familiarity and ideologically challenging in its progressivist dissonance. The duo might

be conceived of as a hypothesis, a proffered answer to the questions 1) can there be a

misogyny-free masculinist boast rap? and 2) can there be an ironized conscious rap,

absent the cloying sincerity?

As I discuss in this chapter's concluding section, there are no simple answers to

these questions even within RTJ's oeuvre itself. It is in this sense that they are a

hypothesis, an open-ended provocation rather than a fixed meaning. It is also in this sense

that the contrast between the call-to-arms of their appellation ("run the jewels") and the

call-to-stasis of its originary/referent ("watch the throne"), disruption versus order,

becomes most significant. This is anarchism in the sense that "The Way Things Are"

socially, culturally, or musically, is broken, perhaps beyond fixing, and the situation calls

not for band-aids but for revolutionary opposition to received wisdoms and hegemonic

institutions, whether gestured at broadly as in El-P's insistence that "any cow that is

sacred gets defaced" or quasi-specifically as in Killer Mike's subversive hailing of the

gang violence animating rap discourse in a not-quite call for "peace": "Where my

thuggers and my crippers and my blooders and my brothers? / When you niggas gon'

unite and kill the police, motherfuckers?" ("Close Your Eyes [And Count to Fuck]"). As

elsewhere, this is a serious unseriousness, less a call to violence than a demand that The

People recognize the actual conditions of their oppression—whether ideological or all-

too-concrete—and act, before it's too late.

The Politics of Sex and Death: "Love Again (Akinyele Back)" and "Early"

     In concluding this chapter's discussion of the oppositional pastiche of Run the

Jewels, I would like to look closely at two tracks in particular from *Run the Jewels 2*:

"Love Again (Akinyele Back)" and "Early." Both are formally unified songs that

function primarily through narrative, a trait not usually associated with the free-form

metaphor boasts of the rappers' take-all-comers one-upmenship (certain elements of

songs, such as the verse containing Mike's strip club story on "No Come Down,"

notwithstanding). "Love Again (Akinyele Back)" is the duo's seemingly comprehensive

statement on sex and masculinity in the rap genre, a pastiche both perfect as a document

of the thing itself and intent on undercutting audience identification with uncritical sexual

tropes. "Early," an overtly political song, represents on the one hand the group's foray

into the discourse of sincerity, and on the other the disavowal of that same discourse as always-already ironized by the context of rap performance. Ending with close-readings of these two texts will be a way of crystallizing the theoretical concerns laid out thus far and highlighting some of the issues which attend critical attempts to take irony, and humor, as means of dealing with topics of great seriousness.

A good place to begin discussing the performative function of "Love Again (Akinyele Back)" in the ideology of the hip-hop genre is with the title itself. The phrase "love again" is from the track's chorus, and thus reflects the common practice of naming a song after a word or phrase that is either present within the song or sums up the themes of the song. The parenthetical "Akinyele back" should be read as a citation, an explanatory aside; further, it is a reference that situates the song as a thematic, if not stylistic, pastiche of an earlier work. Akinyele is the stage name of a rapper from the 90s, whose enduring legacy as a one-hit wonder in certain pop cultural circles is a result of the underground (i.e. non-radio, for reasons soon-to-be-apparent) success of his 1996 song "Put it in Your Mouth" (*Put it in Your Mouth EP*), featuring Kia Jefferies. The single, an objectively obscene (both relative to prevailing standards of public decorum and in its unapologetically explicit sexuality) ode to oral sex, is a study in contrast and provocation. The production features a sunny, Jimmy Buffet-esque guitar strum over minimalist percussion (samples from 70s funk/R&B artists Brick and Al Green, respectively); this is paired with the backing vocals of Kia Jefferies, who, during Akinyele's verse and the chorus, sings, "Put it in my mo-o-uth / My motherfuckin' mo-outh." The beat and the vocalist's disarmingly sweet melody, taken together, form a sort of honeyed foundation

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for the track, tonally dissonant from both the lyrical content and the rapper's delivery, which could each be described as "coarse." Akinyele's rap is loose, with a quality of the unhinged that characterized the style of the Wu Tang Clan's Ol' Dirty Bastard, and in the tonally gruff vein of DMX, Xzibit, or Ja Rule, for example. His verse is a series of cringe-worthy puns ("I be like Herbie and Hand-you-a-cock") and repulsive figurative language that does no favors to the actual act being signified. In all, it's an ugly little bit that seems to showcase the misogyny of sexuality-rap by male MCs at its very worst.

Something happens, however, that, while not erasing the lasting and profound social consequences unleashed by Akinyele's verse, changes the tenor of the song in considerable and important ways—he shuts up and lets the backup vocalist have a verse of her own. Jefferies, evoking the sort of child-like fun of early Jackson 5, sings her way through a celebration of cunnilingus, which, while nowhere near as filthy as the preceding verse, disrupts the masculine orientation of the "flow" of pleasure within the track: "It's finger lickin' good, and I wish a nigga would / Go down kinda slow or even fast / I'm always sprung once I feel your tongue in the crack of my ass." She then reconsiders the refrain, transforming the feminine "mouth" into a masculine one, singing, "Put it in your mouth…you can eat me out." This recontextualization of the "dirty rap" power dynamic is underlined by the song's outro, a statement of equality that reads like Akinyele's good-faith attempt at a progressive sexual politics (which, in the context of mid-90s hip-hop, perhaps isn't quite as laughable as it may seem in hindsight): as the beat rides out, and Jeffries returns to her backing refrain, he repeats, "What do ya choose to lick / Pussy or dicks? / People throughout the world / Yeah it's your pick." Not quite an

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earth-shattering iconoclasm, but certainly not as repugnant as the opening verse. Both the form and the content of the song seem designed to inspire an overall sense of contradiction in terms of what is being shown to and asked of the audience: is this (aesthetically/morally) bad? is this fun? is this feminist? While I don't at all wish to answer these questions, for what it's worth I would argue that this hermeneutic impasse is actually central to the song's performance as a musical text: it's just "too much" to reduce to a definitive meaning or ideology. Its essence is excess.

Run the Jewels' "Love Again (Akinyele Back)" both pastiches and disidentifies with the earlier song. Killer Mike and El-P similarly use their verses to bask in uncompromisingly explicit sexual encounters, the hook—"Got that dick in the mouth all day"—echoes Akinyele's "put it in your mouth," and there is a final verse from Gangsta Boo, a female MC, that inverts the sexual perspective of the song. However, significant differences between the songs work to highlight the ways in which the latter text offers a critique of dominant forms of masculinist heterosexuality in the hip-hop genre. There is, in the first place, the contrast between the production on the two tracks. While Akinyele's track, produced by Chris Forte, features a sunny façade that works with Jefferies' backing vocals and against the rapper's verse, El-P's creation is all woozy bass coming in and out of focus, laid over a minimal drum beat punctuated every half-bar by a brass flair, a few stray bass plucks, or a "hey!", the latter stretched out digitally and stuttering wildly in the explosive refrain, creating an affective soundscape somehow both brash and slinky, erotically charged in a way that eschews self-seriousness in favor of an electronic

maximalism designed for, to paraphrase Eshun's formulation, a connection to the audience through a volume that overcomes distance.

Facilitated by the production's lazy wobble are the rappers' verses, delivered in a casual half-time flow which suggests a certain languorous savoring of their respective scenarios, each of which involve celebration of a species of "perverse," non-normative heterosexuality, whether explicitly BDSM or merely playful with regard to the default masculinist dynamics of bedroom power relations. Each, however, frames the interaction in terms of implicit worshipfulness, a move which constructs the song as working within a field of contestation between erotica and morality, those false epistemological poles addressed in Lamonda Horton-Stallings' "funky erotixxx"—the refrain, for example, repeats the phrase "dick in her mouth all day," only to end with "I think I'm in love again," suggesting a questioning of genre constraints which separate the machismo of sex-rap from the sensitive masculinity of R&B (both of which tend to have differently gendered audiences as well). Further, each verse situates the rapper as a conduit for the expression of feminine pleasure, rather than a vampire upon the same. To wit, the song's opening verse by Killer Mike, who draws out and stammers his diction to match the beat, as well as his own complex rhyme scheme:

> Reminiscin-in' on our time of innocence
> When we drank that Hennessy, ate on lamb and venison
> Face fucked you in your kitchenette, fucked you like we tuss-a-lin'
> Do you fuck your hus-bal-and? Like, do y'all be tuss-a-lin'?
> Do you wear the muzz-a-lin'? Do you ask him pretty please?
> Do you crawl on hands and knees, like you used to do for me
> Oh, you such a dirty girl, the world won't let you be yourself
> I won't accept nothing else, I be having none of that
> You be takin' all of this, pleasure come from punishment
> Your threshold astonishin', I think I'm in love again

> Found my perfect drug again, feel better than heroin
> You love my alpha arrogance, 2 Live Crew the narrative

Framed as a "our time of innocence," the verse celebrates what Patricia Hill Collins refers to as "'freaky' sex," or "sex outside the boundaries of normality—the kind of 'kinky' sexuality invoked by Rick James and other popular artists" which has historically been associated with a "Black hyper-heterosexual deviance" that constructs "White Western normality" through the racist logic of sexual otherness (120-121). However, here the relationship is inverted, and the only "deviance" comes in the form of normative heterosexual decorum which constructs/constricts feminine sexual identity. The repetition of the word "tussling" is a good example: in its first abstract sense it is a simile for rough sex ("fucked you *like* we tusslin'"), while in the context of the rapper's inquiry into his partner's sexual experience with her husband it represents the actual violence that can occur in domestic pairs ("Do you fuck your husband? Like, do you y'all be tusslin'?"). The fighting—physical, verbal, emotional—that has replaced sexual pleasure in the socially-sanctioned space of marriage forms an important contrast to the sex-*play* of the BDSM being recalled in the verse. In this case, "pleasure come from punishment" and not the other way around, the latter paradigm implicitly the hegemonic sexual logic of "the world" which "won't let you be yourself." The final lines underline the reciprocity of the sexual partnership, both in the repetition of the term "love" attributed to each subject in turn ("I'm in love"; "You love"), and in the reference to 2 Live Crew, whose seminal album *As Nasty as They Wanna Be* (1989)[53] both summarizes the thematic

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[53] The album is also notable for its elevation of Southern rap (a distinction applicable to the work of Killer Mike), the first work of that subgenre to reach the (double) platinum sales mark.

content of the verse and, in the logic of the title itself, rhetorically aligns the feminine

subject ("They") with desiring agency (again, progressive in terms of 1990s rap). The

reference to the earlier work is further a jab at the meta-discourse of public morality

which stands in judgment over both the lovers and the hip-hop genre itself, given the

album's status as poster child for constitutional free speech.[54] To "2 Live Crew" the

narrative, then, is not just to make it "nasty," but to construct it as out-of-bounds or

excessive in terms of the decorous, vanilla sexuality of what queer performance artist

Jack Smith memorably referred to as "pasty normals" in an attempt to index the "adjacent

and mutually informing ideological formations" of "white normativity and

heteronormativity" (Muñoz xii).

Post-refrain, El-P's verse reiterates the theme of the lovers' space as exceptional

with regard to normative sexual ideology, both in terms of the genre and the larger

American cultural sphere. His delivery is marked by a quicker, more staccato cadence,

possibly signaling the shift from the earlier verse's space of memory to the present tense:

> Here I am, my love, just like when we first hooked up
> Feeling like I'm animal, feeling like you're edible, bendable
> I been away, I don't have too much to say
> You say, "Say it anyway,"
> I say, "Take your shit off," I'm not playing, bae
> You little freak, what you are is so unique
> Smart and full of filth and joy, you been with some little boys
> Now you're with a grown-up man, one who actually understands
> Kid gloves are not on my hands, I will never condescend

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[54] *As Nasty as They Wanna Be* was ruled obscene by the US District Court of Florida in Skywalker Records, Inc. v. Navarro (1990), resulting in the arrests of the members of 2 Live Crew and restrictions placed upon the sales of the record; this ruling was later overturned by the US Court of Appeals in Luke Records v. Navarro (1992), in what was hailed as a victory for free speech, especially as it pertained to the burgeoning rap genre (Deflem).

> Now spread yourself
> She smiled a bit, gripped the outline of my shit
> Oh my god, I love this chick, I must put my tongue in this
> Into every space I go, give me everything you am
> She said, "No, you gimme first"
> That was like a day ago, 8 AM
> She still got my
> [Hook]
> Dick in her mouth all day [etc]

As in Mike's narrative, a distinction is made between the at-large sexuality available to the partner and the mutually satisfactory play of their relationship. The designation of his partner as "freak" is, as above, severed from the scientific-political work of manufacturing otherness noted by Collins, denoting instead the lover's status as "unique" exception with regard to a sexual economy that functions through similarity and repetition. The conjunction and equivalence of the terms "filth" and "joy" again points to Stallings' "funky erotixxx" in its acknowledgment of the "sacredly profane" register; here, the "pornographic" is evacuated of its political basis and deployed instead as a marker of the sexual Real available to the partners outside of ideology. As elsewhere in their oeuvre, El-P signals normative or failed heterosexuality through the infantilization of other men as "little boys," a sexually aggressive logic that doesn't extend to the partner, who will never be "condescend[ed]" to. The focus on feminine pleasure is reiterated in this verse as well, with the rapper exclaiming, "Oh my god, I love this chick/ I must put my tongue in this"; the intimations of cunnilingus place El-P on his knees before his lover in a position of worship, and his construction of his own sexuality as unselfish is highlighted by only allowing fellatio at her insistence, kicking off an encounter that has lasted since "a day ago, 8AM."

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In a further performance of disidentification with the rhetoric of hip-hop

heterosexuality, in neither verse are there references to the female body as a site of

fetishistic erotic investment; that is, neither partner is reducible to hair, lips, nails,

buttocks, etc. This is a notable deviation from the discourse of mainstream hip-hop; as

Collins notes,

> In the early 1990s, and in conjunction with the emergence of gangsta rap, a fairly dramatic shift occurred within Black popular culture and mass media concerning how some African American artists depicted African American women. In a sense, the *celebration* of Black women's bodies and how they handled them that had long appeared in earlier Black cultural production (for example, a song such as "Brick House" within a rhythm and blues tradition) became increasingly replaced by the *objectification* of Black women's bodies as part of a commodified black culture. Contemporary music videos of Black male artists in particular became increasingly populated with legions of young Black women who dance, strut, and serve as visually appealing props for the rapper in question. The women in these videos typically share two attributes—they are rarely acknowledged as individuals and they are scantily clad. One Black female body can easily replace another and all are reduced to their bodies. (128)[55]

While the El-P of *Run the Jewels* admittedly desires "the company of women with

opinions and fat asses" ("Get It"), by the second album the duo seem consciously

invested in constructing a rhetoric of heterosexual masculinity that studiously avoids

painting women or the female body as fungible commodities, celebrating instead the

"unique" individual, and the connection that comes not solely from biological

imperatives but is rather based on a shared estrangement from hegemonic identities,

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[55] While I consider Collins' specific point about the visual commodification of the female body in rap music videos to apply equally to the lyrical objectification of women in a rap verse, it is worth noting that the music video for "Love Again (Akinyele Back)" eschews both the use of women as dancing props and the visual adaptation of the sex narrative, which would likewise have meant a spectacular display of the sexualized female body. Instead, the video features high-resolution close-ups of insects interacting with brilliantly colored flowers, occasionally moving in ways that mirror the beat. While the figurative language of the scene remains traditionally gendered, the video seems designed to associatively naturalize the "perverse," pornographic, or non-normative heterosexualities on display in the lyrics.

sexual or otherwise.[56] Even at their coarsest and most pornographic, as in the refrain's

joyous emphasis on fellatio, the co-incidence of sex and the emotional/spiritual is never

discarded; the ending of the chorus ("I think I'm in love again") is not only an effect of

sex, but also its cause, pushing back against the sexual nihilism of mainstream hip-hop.

Like Mike's "true romance" at the strip club, the duo attempts to imagine a portion of the

tender in the pornographic, love blooming up through the concrete slabs of pasty normal-

dom.

What elevates "Love Again (Akinyele Back)" is not solely the extroverted-

introspection of the straight male rappers; completing the formal pastiche of "Put it in

Your Mouth," Run the Jewels reify the shift in the gendered power balance present in

their lyrics by ending the track with a verse by a woman MC. However, unlike

Akinyele's song, where Kia Jefferies' singsong melody didn't offer a sonic or formal

challenge to the rapper, Gangsta Boo's concluding verse is a case study in feminine

privilege established via a smash-and-grab attack on the rhetoric of patriarchal sexuality

in hip-hop, outdoing the men both in terms of explicitness and lyrical skill, ultimately

making their confident sexuality the butt of a joke. Music critic Ian Cohen notes,

> as [2013 Kanye West album] *Yeezus* proved, consensual, unorthodox sex is
> instantly heard as misogyny and the he-said, she-said hook of "She want that dick
> in her mouth all day" certainly courts trouble. At least until Gangsta Boo steals

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[56] This de-privileging of masculinist imperatives is the basis for one of *Run the Jewels 3*'s best moments, a crystallization of the rhetorical revisionism around gendered speech that I've gestured at here. As a dense series of self-aggrandizing internal rhymes reaches maximum inertia, El-P brags, "I got a unicorn horn for a—" ("Legend Has It"). The too-obvious "cock" never arrives because the entire song ceases, and into the dead silence his fiancée, Emily Panic, intones, simply, "Stop." Her voice is a quiet command, but she is also *utterly bored* by his compulsive penis-fixation. This is a moment of flat contextualization that both highlights the absurdity of his juvenile rhetoric and undercuts his masculine swagger with an implied factual counterpoint. It is a thrilling deflation of the rapper's outsized ego, his mythology of self. You can *hear* her eyes roll.

the track with a verse of even greater demands and vulgarity, in the same way she made filthy Three 6 Mafia songs like "Tongue Ring" and "Hit It From the Back" sound strangely progressive in their gender politics.

Indeed, "strangely progressive" might summarize not only the verse or the track, but the work of Run the Jewels writ large. To wit, as the aforementioned hook winds down for the second time, she interjects "Oh, that's what you want, huh? Well let me tell y'all a little story." El-P's maximalist beat disappears for the first six lines, reducing the sonic environment to metronome-like percussion on a blank canvas (a practice used in rap production to provide emphasis, often highlighting a particularly effective word or phrase), and Boo takes center stage, her delivery weaving confidently on and off time:

> I had a young player from the hood
> Lick my pussy real good
> Kept me stuck with lots of wood
> Kept my bank account on swole
> Sniffed my pussy like a rose, smokin' on dro
> Made a porn tape, that nigga is a pro, you ain't know?
> He had a lot of bad bitches in his past
> But I was the one who turned that boy into a motherfuckin' man
> His tongue is bomb
> And he love for me to ride his face
> Front to back, grippin' ass
> Pay my bills, where I live, fuck me good
> Broke ass niggas killing me
> I'm about my money, ho
> Never been a square bitch
> He ain't paying? Hit the fuckin' door
> Talking slick, that Memphis shit
> I be from that Haven clique
> Keep it ratchet so sweet
> All these boys kiss my feet
> I be on that queen shit
> You better bless my realness
> Stick your tongue up in my ass
> You better show me who you fuckin' with
> Run The Jewels
> Love again, you gon' lose, I'm gon' win

> Let's have an orgy
> I'mma share your ass with all my friends

At the end of her verse, a subtly transfigured chorus kicks in, and continues until the end

of the song, as she repeats, "He got that clit in his mouth all day"[57]; further, the refrain-

ending statement by the men—"I think I'm in love again"—is directly mocked, Boo

bragging, "I got this fool in love again." Here, the MC performs something akin to the

"gold digger," a fantastic construction of feminine identity that Tricia Rose calls the

"skeezer": "Male rappers justify their promiscuous and selfish behavior by focusing on

sexually promiscuous women who 'want their money' (sometimes called 'skeezers') and

rarely offering a depiction of a sincere woman" (173). Rose notes that part of the

performance of female rappers, always-already in dialogue with this archetype, is to

> distinguish themselves as seasoned women with sexual confidence and financial
> independence who are tired of dishonest men who themselves seek sex from
> women (much like the women who seek money from men); a move that draws
> attention away from the behavior of these objectified so-called skeezers and
> toward the men who depend on them for establishing their much-needed sexual
> prowess. (174)

Here, however, that work is obviated in the excess of feminine pleasure that objectifies

the overdetermined bases of hip-hop masculinity, whether psychological, physiological,

or financial. She echoes El-P's boast "You been with some little boys / Now you're with

a grown up man" by establishing her own sexuality as the arbiter of that oft-boasted

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[57] Tellingly, in live performances of this song, Run the Jewels cut the music after "She got that…", encouraging the crowd to chant "dick in the mouth all day." However, when the chorus changes, they don't leave it to the crowd to carry the refrain. This accomplishes a few things: by not reproducing the epithet aloud, they prevent its sedimentation as shorthand for the track itself, since only those individuals who are already familiar with the lyrics will know them; they excuse themselves (ineffectively, of course) from having created and propagated the surface-level misogynistic lyrics; and they demonstrate a (probably well-founded) lack of faith in the sexual politics of their crowds of (mostly) 15-35 year old men.

masculinity: "I was the one who turned that boy into a motherfuckin' man." The male body is the subject of fetishization and characterization based on use-value—she takes her own pleasure from his "tongue," "face," and "wood," as well as his ability to subsidize her lifestyle financially. This move in particular is a direct attack on what Tricia Rose (not herself an apologist for misogyny) points to as the motivation for anti-feminine sentiment in hip-hop's boys' club:

> Some of this hostility toward women is related to the dominant cultural formula that equates male economic stability and one's capacity to be a family breadwinner with masculinity, thus making black men's increasingly permanent position at the bottom of or completely outside the job market a sign of emasculation, dependence, or femininity. If financial and social clout cannot provide you with masculine virility, then the private social sphere is the next best alternative. At the same time, marriage in American culture is generally less and less an institution that serves as the primary vehicle for sexual interaction, financial security, and a sign of adult independence. Black women, especially under these larger economic and social conditions, are less likely to remain in unfulfilling and abusive relationships for economic reasons. (171)

Like the partner's hypothetically lackluster marriage in the first verse, hegemonic institutions fail to naturalize the intrinsic connection between masculinity and power, and the traditional means of interpersonal control, whether sexual skill or financial security, become free-floating signifiers in an economy of desire navigated by the "queen" (but not the "square bitch"). Given the terms of Rose's argument in 1995, Boo's discursive move is a backlash-to-a-backlash, a refusal to assuage rap's collective male ego by distinguishing herself from the gold-digger bogeywoman, doubling down instead on repressive identity-anxieties, and refusing to pander to the at-risk masculinity of any potential partner who is not "a pro."

Here, we could ask the same question Collins asks regarding Lil' Kim—"Is she the female version of misogynistic rappers?" (127) However, even if there is a difficulty in "telling the difference between representations of Black women who are sexually liberated and those who are sexual objects, their bodies on sale for male enjoyment" (126), when thinking about this moment in terms of genre pastiche, the answer can be "Yes, she is the female version of misogynistic rappers," but that this can still be productive in the context of the discourse of the track and the hip-hop macrocosm. In the space of the song, the irony of the verse itself is that Gangsta Boo swiftly undercuts all of the pointed "good guy" sexuality of Run the Jewels by displaying an actual role reversal, i.e. positioning masculinity within the hierarchal space the genre reserves for the feminine-as-prey, the space of sexual object or "fool." While the rap heterosexuality of Run the Jewels can at best try to meet women in the middle, Gangsta Boo's verse makes evident how self-serving this compromise is in terms of its lack of stakes; that is, a truly radical (not necessarily, in this case, a synonym for "progressive") position is not equality, but a species of inverted domination. Her reclamation of the derogatory term "ratchet"—"A ghetto girl who is loud and obnoxious and constantly causing drama and usually trashy," according to the least offensive definition on user-sourced slang encyclopedia Urban Dictionary—is a microcosm of the overall performative effect of the verse, which makes a joke of posturing masculinity, objectifying and toying with it, reducing and making it interchangeable, something that can be passed to "all [her] friends"; rap masculinity, dependent as it is on the construction, possession and exploitation of the female "ho" becomes one itself. Gangsta Boo, performing her identity

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as a capital-B "Bitch"—one of the "super-tough, super-strong women who are often celebrated" (Collins 124)—remakes the male MC and the discourse he propagates in her own image, albeit spelling him with the most lowercase of b's.

"Early," appearing on *Run the Jewels 2* two tracks before "Love Again (Akinyele Back)," sits in marked contrast to the song discussed above, formally, tonally, and content-wise. In fact, it departs from most of the Run the Jewels oeuvre, especially in its startling lack of overt humor; it represents the group at their most sincere, a term and register that I have denigrated throughout this chapter, and indeed in my larger study. My purposes, then, for examining this particular song are perhaps to provide a counterpoint to a thus-far unified reading of the group's work, to demonstrate the limits of irony as a tool of social critique (or indeed, as a tool made *available* for certain strands of discourse), and finally to attempt to reclaim some portion of the ironic in the sincere, find the "unserious in the serious" (to reverse Potter's defense of hip-hop discourse).

It may be useful, in beginning to discuss the track, to lay out a brief structural outline of the song's major features. Divided into two verses, with a chorus after each, the second of which becomes the outro, "Early" functions through imposing a strict separation between Killer Mike and El-P on a number of levels: the formal separation of their verses is a metaphor for their spatial dislocation at the level of the embedded narrative, and this physical estrangement from one another represents a social disconnect, figured primarily along the lines of race, that has material consequences for their movement through their respective life-worlds (which we later find are at least geographically unified by a shared urban space). The lyrical content eschews the

performative rhetoric of skill and boast central to their other works, instead focusing on a realist narrative strategy that highlights the mundane violence that connects their respective bodies to both concrete and abstract structures of power. El-P's production recalls a malfunctioning merry-go-round, a lilting tune cannibalized and reformed into a carnivalesque rhythm, switching at key moments to a pixelated siren, running up and down a scale one note at a time. The chorus, featuring the singer-songwriter Boots, interrupts as a yawning electronic void, his voice buried in layers of rising synths and the backing vocals of a digitized choir, cut short in its first iteration but allowed to run towards maximum entropy as the second chorus/outro. The bubbling over chaos of the chorus, and its second appearance as outro, recalls the interjection of dissonant strings in "A Day in the Life," with the only structural dissimilarity being the famous final note of The Beatles' track, which presents an analeptic end to disorder (of the strings, of the track, of the album itself); there is no similarly recuperative moment proffered by El-P's production in this instance. There are further parallels to the 1967 work in the lyrical/thematic content of the 2013 one, especially in their similar emphasis on first-person accounts of quotidian experiences interrupted by menacing (quasi-)presences (for The Beatles, the "rather sad" news and film which link politics to personal and global violence), or the way that El-P's choir reads like some electronic revenant of the vocals that accompany the "[falling] into a dream" of the earlier song's protagonist, their "ghost in the machine" (to misread the phrase as literal).

In short, "Early" similarly portrays "a day in the life" of each rapper, and there are even parallels in the abstract violence of El-P's verse; however, the stakes are raised by

Killer Mike's embodiment as a black man, thus coded as an object of state violence. His

verse is a repudiation of the cavalier machismo performed in hip-hop's critique of police

and the justice system (at work, for example, in Jay-Z's clever outwitting of a patrolman

in "99 Problems" [*The Black Album* 2003], or even El-P's encouragement for "the law"

to "run naked backwards through a field of dicks"). The verse makes clear the existential

threat of white supremacy in an America, where, as Ta-Nehesi Coates writes, "it is

traditional to destroy the black body—it is heritage" (103 [2015]). As the maddening beat

settles uncertainly upon the listener, Mike begins,

> It be feelin' like the life that I'm livin', man, out of control
> Like every day I'm in a fight for my soul
> Could it be that my medicine's the evidence
> For pigs to stop and frisk me when they rollin' round on patrol?
> And ask "Why you're here?"
> I just tell 'em cause it is what it is
> I live here and that's what it is
> He chimed "You got a dime?
> I said "Man, I'm just tryin' to smoke and chill
> Please don't lock me up in front of my kids
> And in front of my wife
> Man, I ain't got a gun or a knife
> You do this and you ruin my life
> And I apologize if it seems like I got out of line, sir
> Cause I respect the badge and the gun
> And I pray today ain't the day that you drag me away
> Right in front of my beautiful son"
> And he still put my hands in cuffs, put me in the truck
> When my woman screamed, said "Shut up"
> Witness with the camera phone on
> Saw the copper pull a gun and
> Put it on my gorgeous queen
> As I peered out the window
> I could see my other kinfolk
> And hear my little boy as he screamed
> As he ran toward the copper begged him not to hurt his momma
> Cause he had her face down on the ground
> And I'd be much too weak to ever speak what I seen

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But my life changed with that sound

The juxtaposition of this verse with, for example, Gangsta Boo's demonstrates a

semi-consistent divide in rap's gendered critique. As Rose explains,

> The police, the government, and dominant media apparatuses are the primary
> points of institutional critique in rap, and these institutions are primarily critiqued
> by male rappers. Female rappers rarely address police brutality or media coverage
> of rap music and are instead more likely to render social and political critiques
> against limitations on female independence, identity, community, and most
> critically, the sexist character of black heterosexual relations. (105)[58]

This de facto gendering of institutional critique (i.e. what Spence refers to as

"argumentative realist" discourse) has a few consequences with regard to Mike's

narrative. In the first case, the realist/representational mode of critical masculine rap

tends to invoke the black body as a site visited by state violence, simply because of the

inordinate amount of attention it receives as a spectacular image of threat in the

prevailing white supremacist social imaginary. As Patricia Hill Collins reminds us, not

only is the black male body coded as physically potent in a "positive" sense (i.e. as

"virile"), but

> As any Black man can testify who has seen a purse-clutching White woman cross
> the street upon catching sight of him, his physical presence can be enough to
> invoke fear, regardless of his actions and intentions. This reaction to Black men's
> bodies emboldens police to stop motorists in search of drugs and to command
> Black youth to assume the position for random street searches. Racial profiling is
> based on this very premise—the *potential* threat caused by African American
> men's bodies. Across the spectrum of admiration and fear, the bodies of Black
> men are what matters. (153)

The positive-negative dichotomy represents not separate discursive strands, but a singular

racist logic governing the possibilities of interpretation in the realm of American

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[58] As earlier, the gendering of this divide is a reductive shorthand, a general rather than absolute truth.

visuality. This Manichaean logic maps onto a discourse of illegality that has structured the rhetoric of hip-hop as well—as The Notorious B.I.G. memorably observed, the institutionalization of this binary means "either you're slingin' crack rock or you got a wicked jump shot" ("Things Done Changed" *Ready to Die*). The choice is barely one at all, as the physical threat of the black body always-already codes as "criminal"; thus, narratives of realist structural critique performed by black male MCs understandably focus on the way in which they are disproportionately subject to police violence, as do "unmotivated" narratives which merely report the material conditions of their existence without overt critical dimensions. As an active process of political contestation, these evidences of injustice and suffering can be a means of reaching the audience on an affective level: as Saidya Hartmann writes, "pain provides the common language of humanity; it extends humanity to the dispossessed and, in turn, remedies the indifference of the callous" (18). The language of violence has the capacity to act as a bridge, though not unproblematically.

The second consequence of the dominant masculine-gendering of rap's police narrative is linked, in some ways, to the first. Reading hip-hop's portrayals of police encounters, Rose notices that these often "use patriarchal heterosexual coupling as a setting within which to highlight the conditional status of black masculine privilege" in the face of legal authorities (114), a loss of power that, in terms of the narrative leads to "the increased vulnerability of black women in public spaces" (112). While not part of Rose's analysis, implicit in this construction is not merely the hetero-patriarchal idea of masculine possession and control over the movement of women in public, but the very

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"callousness" towards the spectacle of black men's suffering which renders it politically ineffective as an image of *human* suffering. As de facto criminal Other, possessing a body coded as excessive in terms of physicality and capacity for violence, acts of state violence visited upon black men's bodies are a priori justified both at the time of the event itself and in its circulation in a racist mediascape. Thus, the feminine avatar performs a dual function in these narratives: in terms of the patriarchal logic of ownership, she is a threatened possession of great value; in terms of an economy of spectacular violence inured to the image of black men's agony, hers is the only pain that might still matter.

Killer Mike's verse on "Early" represents the crystallization of these discursive threads. The lack of "control" he has over his own life is reflected in the way his physical body is the object of police manipulation, in this case as the result of his "medicine"—that is, marijuana, a drug legally available, even if only with the near-formality of a doctor's prescription, in over half of US states by the album's release in Fall 2014, but a continued pretext for the harassment of minoritarian subjects. He unsuccessfully attempts to demonstrate his "subordination [which] requires a credible performance of humility and deference" (Scott 11), insisting on his unarmed status as well as his submission to the metonyms of police authority[59]—" I respect the badge and the gun." He invokes his own role as husband and father, attempting to both sway the officer's sympathies and establish his own masculinity as valid within a shared patriarchal structure; however, in the

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[59] Killer Mike has spoken in various interviews about his own father's career as a police officer, a biographical note that doesn't temper his criticism of the institutional practice of policing itself, but has been rhetorically useful in his attempts to engender a dialogue.

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performative logic of the verse this speech act ends up being a summoning of those members of his family, who become subject to the same potential violence through their association with him. At the end of the verse, the lyrics become impressionistic flashes of action and disrupted/mediated sight and sensory information—he "peers through the window" of the police cruiser; a "witness with a camera phone on" sees the officer point a gun at his wife; he hears his son's scream; his wife is "face down on the ground." The action is left unresolved by his failure as narrator; though he has "seen" something, he is "much too weak to ever speak" about it, leaving the audience uncertain as to what constitutes the life-changing "sound" referenced in the final line—the screams of his son and/or wife? The orders barked by the officer? The listener is not ultimately given a definitive account of the event here.

Though the narrator attributes this climactic absence to his own "weak[ness]," I would argue that the artist's decision not to provide a concrete lyrical portrayal of what we later find out was the shooting of the narrator's wife represents not simply a broken masculinity overwhelmed by emotion, but a critique of the very politics of spectatorship, as well as the risks inherent in speaking for the other. The act of seeing or hearing, coupled with an event's recollection, are inherently tied up in the spectacle of the raced body in public space, leading to what Hartman calls "the crisis of witnessing." Though writing of the antebellum US culture of slavery, and despite the no longer "legal incapacity of slaves or free blacks to act as witnesses against whites," her diagnosis is startlingly current:

> Since the veracity of black testimony is in doubt, the crimes of slavery must not only be confirmed by unquestionable authorities and other white observers but

> also must be made visible, whether by revealing the scarred back of the slave—in
> short, making the body speak—or through authenticating devices, or, better yet,
> by enabling reader and audience member to experience vicariously the "tragical
> scenes of cruelty." (22)

Though there are no longer overt juridical limitations upon the testimony of the black

subject, the coding of the black body (as discussed above) renders the act of witnessing-

while-black a fraught endeavor, not least when the evidence proffered reflects

unfavorably upon institutions both ideologically and physically repressive, such as the

Law. If, in the absence of visual records, state violence often cannot be "proven" in the

legal sense, eyewitness accounts are effectively rendered null, especially in the context of

a majoritarian social discourse which always-already discounts the voice of the black

subject. In this sense, the narrator of "Early" doesn't recount the story's ending because

his account is already erased, socially and legally, before it is offered; in another sense,

the need for his narration is obviated by the presence of the "witness with the camera

phone on," whose digital record, though not de facto "true" in the narrative sense,[60] has

access to the social condition of truth in a way that the narrator does not.

In yet another sense, however, the absence of the full scope of the officer's assault

on the narrator's wife constitutes a refusal to proliferate the image of the black body in

pain, even if such a "tragical scene of cruelty" might promote empathy on the part of the

listener. As Hartman notes, the normalization of "displays of the slave's ravaged body"

often have a counterintuitive effect on public sentiment:

> Rather than inciting indignation, too often they immure us to pain by virtue of
> their familiarity—the oft-repeated or restored character of these accounts and our
> distance from them are signaled by the theatrical language usually resorted to in

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[60] Cf. Susan Sontag's *On Photography* or Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida*

describing their instances—and especially because they reinforce the spectacular character of black suffering. (3)

The black body is often marked as suffering, as an object of lack; this not only occurs in terms of a greater social discourse and spectacular media system dedicated to representing minoritarian subjects as less human than the "pasty normals" of white society, but also in the gritty "realism" of hip-hop (which has, of course, an at least overdetermined/dialectical, if not cyclical, relationship with the simulacral mediascape). The decision to avoid rendering the scenario gratuitously occurs in dialogue with the too-prevalence of similar images, and a politics of representation that transcends the body in pain. Further, as Hartman argues, the sorts of empathy black suffering evokes in (especially white) audiences often result in either the "other's obliteration" (19) through the failure of imagination which necessitates substituting the self for the sufferer, or a blurring of "the thin line between witness and spectator" (19) connected to "the relation between pleasure and violence" (26), modes which have always been intertwined in the history of racialized American entertainment. Thus, I would argue that the narrator's refusal to narrate stems from not simply the inefficacy of his emotional capacities or of the act of witnessing, but the politics of portraying violence upon the black body. Further, the reliance on sensory information communicated in the verse points to the artist's theorization of his own embodiment and the necessary limits this places upon his ability to represent the radical otherness of another human, be they man, woman, lover, or even his "gorgeous queen."

If Killer Mike's verse stands as the duo's statement on the politics of race and sincerity, El-P's second verse doubles down on the centrality of race to the lived

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experience of the individual, but accomplishes this through ironic contrast to the previous

narrative. The vast gulf of subjectivity reveals itself via the less-than-peripheral status of

the heartbreaking violence Mike has suffered, as well as the idle focus on abstract

systems of power relations that fail to actually inconvenience his white body. After the

refrain, rising inexorably towards the blank epiphany of a soul's implosion, abruptly cuts

out, El-P's narrator gives his own account of a "day in the life":

> It be feelin' like the life that I'm living man, I don't control
> Cause every day I'm in a fight for my soul
> All hands below, high seas in a rickety boat
> Smoke O's so the kid might cope
> You want cash or hope, no clash, matter fact get both
> Go without get turnt to ghosts
> You know that's the law, deal done by the shake of claws
> It ain't a game if the shit don't pause
> And I find you odd, so convinced in the truth of y'all
> That the true truth's truly gone
> And yes there's a They, any time a man say there's not
> Then you know that he lost the plot. What can I say?
> Truth's truth when denied or not, like its true crews ride the cock
> Fair enough, the way that the beat bump do sound tough
> I made it in the dark like Civil War surgery
> Woke up in the same air you huff, early
> By twelve o'clock the whole Earth felt dirty
> Street lamps stare when you walk, watch the birdie
> They'll watch you walk to the store, they're recording
> But didn't record cop when he shot, no warning
> Heard it go pop, might have been two blocks
> Heard a kid plus pops watched cop make girl bleed
> Go to home, go to sleep, up again early

In terms of the lyrics alone, the second verse contrasts markedly with the violent subject

matter of the first. The production, while largely the same, echoes this shift in at least one

moment: during the line "It ain't a game if the shit don't pause" the beat drops out, and

the line ends with the clichéd "down the drain" sound effect which accompanies the death

of video game icon Ms. Pac Man. The scenario begins the same, as the narrator "smoke[s] O's" to "cope" with the stress of his life; however, while the black narrator's pot use becomes a pretext for police harassment, leading to a nightmarish destruction of his family, El-P's white narrator appears to be lost in idle speculation about abstract systems of domination symbolized by the ubiquitous collective pronoun "They."[61] The Ms. Pac Man sound may suggest relaxing with electronic entertainment, either in the comfort of his apartment or at a local arcade; alternatively, it is an aural signifier expressing the "game-ness" of his experiential narrative, i.e. its low stakes. The "law" is criticized as a "deal done with the shake of claws," but these are metaphors for corruption that lack the embodied terror that confronts, perhaps at that very moment, the black protagonist. He brags about his skill as a producer and the difficulty of his work—the song's beat "do sound tough," an adjective that describes both its affective connection to his own constructed masculinity as well as the conditions of its manufacture, as he "made it in the dark like Civil War surgery." There's even a moment of self-deprecation that works as a throwaway double-entendre: the line "Truth's truth when denied or not, like it's true crews ride the cock" is both a recognition of the unmerited praise that comes from friends, groupies, and hangers-on ("cock-riding" being a less decorous equivalent of

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[61] A paranoid pronoun which became ubiquitous as a blank signifier of forces aligned against the individual around 2014-15 via the social media presence of DJ Khaled, whose Snapchat videos offered glimpses of his life and impromptu motivational snippets. For Khaled and those who ran with his meme-worthy constructions, "They" became symbolic of both obstacles to be overcome and hypothesized subjects of schadenfreude unhappy with a person's success or happiness. The humor emerged from Khaled's indiscriminate application of the "they" construction to every aspect of his life—as Jon Caramanica wryly observes, "Here are some other things that, according to DJ Khaled, they don't want you to do: eat breakfast, eat lunch, be in a Wraith with stars in the roof, have a No. 1 record, be on a Jet Ski doing 360s, have a fresh cut, smile" ("For DJ Khaled, Snapchat Is a Major Key to Success" *The New York Times*, 12/21/15, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/22/arts/music/for-dj-khaled-snapchat-is-a-major-key-to-success.html).

the more familiar "brown-nosing"), and also, when spoken/heard aloud, a homophonic

reference to the oft-denied homosexuality of (Tom) "Cruise." Interestingly, in the latter

reading the line becomes more explicitly an illustration of the nature of "truth" in public

discourse, expressing the way that the social circulation of gossip in the public sphere

creates truth-value even in the absence of verification. Leaving his home around noon,

the narrator muses on technological systems of control, as well as their tendency to fail

when enlisted in the service of opposition to entrenched institutions, such as how the

camera "didn't record" when the officer from the first verse "shot, no warning."

The crux of the verse's irony is, of course, the final lines, which reference the first

verse and fill in the narrative holes left for the audience by Killer Mike's protagonist.

That the reference is tossed in casually as an aside emphasizes the chasm separating the

lives of the two men. Though he is close enough to hear the "pop" of the gunshot,

perhaps even only "two blocks" away, the experience is as alien and abstract to him as

the monstrous, clawed "They" who exert invisible power over the urban space. Though

he can physically hear the pistol report, his knowledge of its context is second or third

hand, and extremely sketchy: "Heard a kid plus Pops watched cop make girl bleed." The

reduction of the experience of the first verse to an archetypal scenario drains it of its

particularity and lived immediacy, and its rendering demonstrates the protagonist's lack

of interest, as a condition both of the lack of video evidence and of its peripheral relation

to his own life. While the first verse theorized the politics of witnessing, the second

contemplates the reception commonly afforded testimony by the uninvolved and

disinterested mass of humanity, especially those whose racial privilege insulates them

from the messiness of facing oppression on the front lines.

While I've avoided quoting the artists themselves, preferring to let their

performance stand as its own testimony, the 23-year-old El-P's remarks to *Spin* in a 1998

piece on the topic of his participation in the discursive field of hip-hop seem especially

relevant to the this discussion of the politics of representation and reception, and give

context to the track's foregrounding of the absent-presence of the other:

> When people ask me about being white in hip-hop, I tell them, "Look, you can't
> pretend." The reason a lot of white people play themselves and just get it wrong is
> that they have the arrogance to think that they can identify with the experience of
> the black man or woman in America; not just empathize with it, but *feel* it. And
> you can't go there. Otherwise, you're sabotaging and belittling the experiences of
> the people you claim to love. (Aaron 224)

This, then, seems to be the ideological, emotional, and formal aporia presented by Run

the Jewels in the space of the track. The sincere and deadly serious account presented by

Mike's narrator is an attempt to make state brutality visible, rendered useless by the

spectacular nature of race and violence in contemporary discursive fields—this includes

the tropes of the medium itself, hip-hop, in which the scenario is cliché, and earnest,

"downer" tracks don't get radio or club play. The ironic narrative of El-P's protagonist

addresses ideological state apparatuses but cannot account for the embodied experience

of the minoritarian subject, who is relegated to a footnote—not out of hate or fear or

apathy, but as a condition of *love*. I am not suggesting that sincerity has no place in a

progressive politics, merely that it has a troubled place in a progressive *hip-hop* politics.

Here, the presence of irony serves a heightening function, a formal injunction to hear the

song with an eye to its contrast, the disjunction between said and meant, apparent and

hidden. That is to say, for example, that *race is never mentioned or even alluded to* at any point in the song, yet it is the absent-presence central to explaining the rappers' divergent quotidian experience. There are echoes of Chapter 3's discussion of Key and Peele's "Phone Call" sketch in the way that white supremacy is hailed indirectly, thus avoiding what tends to be a reflexive negation based on the fallacy of exceptionalism (e.g. "Not *all* white people!"). In this way, irony works to open up dialogue rather than shut it down, even as it smuggles the subversive grounds of an anti-hegemonic discourse in through misdirection and humor. While irony is not inherently oppositional, neither is it inherently hostile towards a nuanced and authentic commitment to challenging the material forces aligned against the individual on the basis of race, gender, sexuality, or class. Art that takes up irony as a medium, in-itself or as it is expressed in humor, satire, parody, or pastiche, may challenge received truths and systems of oppression, or it may simply open up a space of contrast, conflict, and disparity, a space of open-questions and skepticism towards meta-narratives.

Whether the disidentificatory work of Run the Jewels, for instance, is "merely" kitsch/camp or something "revolutionary," to whatever degree the term can be conceived, I cannot answer. Neither, I imagine, can Killer Mike and El-P. What they offer is, on some level, a mirror to the affect of progressive politics in the Trump Era: a stomach-clenching frustration with the sexual/racial status quo and the murderous-as-mundane, a weak belief that culture matters, that someday all their dark jests will amount to more than mere coping mechanisms, and a hope that their performance can somehow hail a complacent citizenry, can generate material consequences, that we'll see the "Emperors

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that hear the tunes admit that they are nudists" ("Job Well Done" *Run the Jewels*). Until then, given the partial and contextual nature of discourse and the importance of solidarity in the face of systems of oppression—both abstract and devastatingly tangible—invested in reifying the hegemonic fictions of race, gender, and sexuality, what seems important is that they're doing it together.

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    2011

Kanye West. *The College Dropout*. Roc-A-Fella, Feb. 10, 2004

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LL Cool J. *Mama Said Knock You Out*. Def Jam, Sept. 14, 1990

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---. *Run the Jewels 3*. Run the Jewels, Inc, Dec. 24, 2016

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Conclusion:

Jordan Peele's *Get Out*, and Post-Racial Smarm[62]

To Trump, whiteness is neither notional nor symbolic but is the very core of his power. In this, Trump is not singular. But whereas his forebears carried whiteness like an ancestral talisman, Trump cracked the glowing amulet open, releasing its eldritch energies.

- Ta-Nehisi Coates, "The First White President" (2017)

Welcome Wagon Lady: Have you heard? Just spreading like wildfire. A *black* family's moving into town. Think that's good? I think it's good. Well, I don't know if I think it's good so much as I think it's natural, considering, well, I mean, after all, we *are* the most liberal town around.
Joanna Eberhart: *Stepford*?

- *The Stepford Wives* (1975)

In a 2007 analysis of the campy millennial remakes of *The Stepford Wives* (Oz 2004) and *Bewitched* (Ephron 2004) for the *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, Sherryl Vint updates Susan Faludi's "backlash thesis" in order to point to a disturbing trend in the discourse of contemporary cultural production. Building on Faludi's diagnosis of a popular cultural reaction to second-wave feminism, one illustrated by narrative portrayals of career-minded women who come to regret missing out on the

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[62] An earlier version of this conclusion's discussion of *Get Out* appeared as a review-essay in the journal *Science Fiction Film and Television*, and is cited here per the publisher's copyright agreement.

"Anger Translator: Jordan Peele's *Get Out*," Michael Jarvis, *Science Fiction Film and Television* 11.1 (2018), 97-109, © Liverpool University Press. https://doi.org/10.3828/sfftv.2018.9

more meaningful pleasures of domesticity, Vint argues for a more insidious contemporary "new backlash":

> In [Faludi's] old backlash, feminism was vilified as a false ideology to which women sacrificed their personal happiness (in marriage and motherhood) for the sake of abstract ideals about work and independence. In the new backlash, women's equality is treated as a fact that no sensible person would deny, but feminism is made to seem ridiculous and passé in its insistence on still talking about gender discrimination when we all clearly live in a postfeminist utopia. (162)

Instead of attacking the discourse of feminism by overtly espousing anti-feminist ideologies, texts associated with this new backlash attempt to render the question moot on the surface while advancing the subtextual thesis that women's self-actualization occurs primarily via traditional (heterosexual) coupling and domesticity; that is, it espouses anti- or pre-feminist dogma via the cultural logic of post-feminism. The deceptiveness of this approach is further illustrated through both its jettisoning of the surface signifiers of misogyny/intimidation marking anti-feminism and its appeal to what is presented as an a priori universal good:

> New backlash motivates not through fear as in 1980s backlash culture, but through love. By making the right man the solution to the dilemmas of gender discrimination, new backlash texts make feminism comedic in the present and imply that even in the past feminism must have been mistaken or exaggerated problems because love is real, natural, and unchanging, preventing us from ever imagining a world in which most men treated women badly. (163)

In other words, things are fine now (not that they were ever that bad, really), so what are you worried about?

I revisit Vint's critique of popular post-feminism at length in beginning this concluding discussion of Jordan Peele's 2017 satirical horror film *Get Out* (USA) not just because of the director's clear affection for and pastiche of the original *The Stepford*

Wives (Forbes 1975)—unlike the camp-parody remake, a horror film with a clear second-wave feminist polemic—but because in updating and racializing the *Stepford*-trope Peele works within the terrain of an analogous cultural backlash—mainstream post-racialism—which similarly constitutes a covertly reactionary structure. What I mean to say is that *Get Out* critiques a post-racialism that functions in much the same manner as the post-feminism that the *Stepford* remake champions, a post-racialism that overtly disavows the antiblackness/white supremacy that is its proper subtext, one that appeals, like the post-feminist new backlash's emphasis on companionate love, to the consensus good of universal humanism in order to justify its disregard for an actual progressive racial politics. The problems which necessitate an anti-racist praxis are safely displaced onto a cultural fantasy of the past, i.e. The Racist Era, whose only bearing upon our present is as an unrecognizable "before" photo to which the contemporary image of our post-racial "after" can stand in stark, self-gratifying contrast.[63] (White) Americans don't see color these days, and equality is the law of the land; things are fine now (there were problems, sure, but that was then), so what are you worried about?

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[63] The geographical alternative to the post-racial chrono-logic is the projection of white supremacy onto the US South, i.e. those states and regions associated with both plantation slavery and Confederate secession in the US Civil War. There is a degree of overlap with the displacement of libidinal racism onto the past, as signaled by the self-justifying reference to the historic facts of slavery and the Confederacy. One might argue that to acknowledge the presence of white supremacy in the historical present is certainly a step in the right direction, and it is true that there is a particularly indelible legacy of open racial animus in many Southern US states. However this is similarly an exculpatory move that sets white supremacy at odds with some true or foundational America separate from the backwards South, as if the essence of America were not a form of protestant white patriarchy proceeding via genocide and slavery, the cultural and literal plunder of the non-European body and its resources. Just as it cannot be imprisoned in the past, this legacy is not bounded by geography. As even a glance at the Southern Poverty Law Center's "Hate Map" illustrates, white supremacist groups (i.e. Neo-Nazis, Skinheads, White Nationalists, Neo-Confederates, etc.) are active in a majority of the continental US states, and their presence seems correlated to the existence of population centers, rather than historical or regional associations (https://www.splcenter.org/hate-map).

I want to come back to this point, but some narrative context will be helpful. *Get Out* is the story of Chris Washington's (Daniel Kaluuya) weekend visit to the country estate of his girlfriend's family. Chris is young, handsome, and black, while his lover, Rose Armitage (Ashley Williams of HBO's *Girls*) and her family are prototypical "white liberal elites," enlightened folk of education and means.[64] "My dad would vote for Obama for a third term if he could," Rose reassures Chris before they arrive; later, her father, Dean Armitage (Bradley Whitford), insists the same thing to Chris almost verbatim. The familiar "black-boyfriend-white-family" dynamic immortalized in seminal works like Sidney Poitier's *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (Kramer 1967) thus provides the film's initial conflict, but this is a far cry from the overt antiblackness evinced by the iconic image of Katherine Hepburn's open-mouthed astonishment/horror at first meeting Poitier in the context of her daughter's interracial relationship. Rather, the family is effusive in their greetings ("We're huggers!" says Dean as he embraces Chris), and their missteps seem at worst clumsy, though well-intentioned (moments like Dean's jocular address of Chris as "My man!" or affably referring to their relationship as "this *thang*" are cringe-worthy rather than malevolent). At no point is Chris completely settled in, but he is not made to feel unwelcome, at least not in any way that he can put a finger on.

Initially, the film's tense, uncanny affect is generated by the Armitage's two black servants, Walter (Marcus Henderson) and Georgina (Betty Gabriel), whose unsettling auras disrupt the smooth sociality of the visit. Dean is quick to bring up race in order to

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[64] Peele, excited about the Armitage casting choices, refers to actors Bradley Whitford and Catherine Keener as, respectively, a "liberal elite god and goddess" at one point in the director's commentary.

disavow its relevance—"I know what you're thinking…white family, black servants. It's a total cliché." They had helped take care of his dying parents, and now they are like family, explains Dean. "But boy, I hate how it looks," he shrugs. Georgina and Walter stare openly at Chris in a way that disturbs him, each both overtly friendly yet somehow *off*—perhaps, he suggests to Rose in private, Walter dislikes him because he secretly fancies her. She finds the idea absolutely hilarious, an impossibility. Walter and Georgina smile too broadly, in the uncomfortable manner of children with a secret they want you to know they are keeping from you, as if barely suppressing a sinister giggle. The actors' intensely uncanny performances become even more praiseworthy upon repeat viewings, when we understand precisely how they fit into the Armitage household. This is a film of faces—what they reveal, what they conceal—and in key moments Peele's camera lingers excruciatingly upon faces that show much, but explain nothing.

The unease becomes more pronounced when Rose's mother, Missy Armitage (Catherine Keener), a psychiatrist, hypnotizes Chris in the middle of the night without his permission. This is ostensibly a means of curing his smoking habit, which she paints as in the best interest of Rose, whom they both love. Forcing him to relive a traumatic memory about the death of his mother, she sends him to "the Sunken Place," a state of paralysis Peele depicts as a surreal, yawning void that "Chris" falls into as his visual perspective hovers above him like a trapdoor, or a television tuned to real life. It is horrifying yet beautiful, a statement scene of technical mastery for the CGI-less film. The next day, he doesn't remember being hypnotized, though he picks up on Walter's hints to that effect. The parents throw a party for a few dozen of their friends, who come up the driveway in

a parade of jet-black luxury sedans and SUVs. They are all elderly, overwhelmingly

white and well-to-do; further, they seem to take an especial interest in Chris. In a series of

vignettes the guests make small talk with Chris, placing an indecorous emphasis on his

blackness—"I know Tiger [Woods]" an ex-pro golfer tells him, while another opines that

while, historically, "fair skin has been in favor…now the pendulum has swung back.

Black is in fashion." Chris soldiers through it all, putting up with what he imagines is

merely a clumsiness around race characteristic of older white folks (a deleted scene has

him responding to the "fashion" interlocutor with, "Sorry, but I don't know what the *fuck*

you're talking about," before walking away. Importantly, this is left out of the final cut,

signaling Chris' commitment to being a good guest). "Good to see another brother around

here," Chris says to Logan King (Lakeith Stanfield), a black guy about his age. King

seems utterly nonplussed by the comment, and he shares Walter and Georgina's uncanny

affect. "Chris just told me that he felt much more comfortable with my being here," he

tells his partner, Philomena (Geraldine Singer), a white lady very much his senior.

"That's nice," she replies. They both seem amused. The audience may or may not

recognize Stanfield as the man abducted from a quiet suburban street by someone driving

a white Porsche and wearing a medieval helmet in the film's brief *Halloween*-esque

opening scene; his manner is utterly changed.[65] When Chris and Rose go off on a private

walk, the guests sit down for a game of "bingo" officiated by Dean, who is shown

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[65] Peele suggests a more provocative reason for the possible misrecognition of the character from an earlier scene—that is, beyond Stanfield's masterful acting—namely that audiences are "not necessarily trained to differentiate black people" onscreen. "But, uh, that's just me trying to be woke up in here," he qualifies, with mock-humility.

gesturing in the manner of a silent auctioneer. As the camera slowly pulls back, we see

the item for sale—a photo of Chris. By now it is clear that the guests are bidding on not

the photo but Chris himself. This hasn't been a social event, but a sale; in speaking to

him, they have been evaluating the merchandise. This is a culmination of sorts, a slow,

silent break from pretense that feels completely natural as the part-explanation for every

small strangeness preceding it. Even in the violence that ensues as Chris attempts to "get

out," and the fantastic cruelty of the truth behind the buyer's intended use for him, there

are few moments more chilling in contemporary horror films.

Perhaps this is because the film's referents are ultimately not the post-9/11 crop of

torture porn (i.e. *Saw* [Wan 2004], *Hostel* [Roth 2005], *Wolf Creek* [MacLean 2005])

saturating the genre, but rather, as many critics have noted, the psychological drama-

inflected horror of Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980) or the film adaptations of Ira Levin's

novels, *Rosemary's Baby* (Polanski 1968) and *The Stepford Wives*. Peele himself, on the

DVD's director's commentary track, sums up his film as "*The Stepford Wives* meets *The

Help*" (Taylor 2011). The importance of making a specifically horror-genre film about

race, in his opinion, is that the subject "hadn't been touched…since *Night of the Living

Dead* 50 years ago" (Gross). A genre connoisseur, he plays with the tropes of horror's

past while signaling the possibilities for its future. His intention, as he has stated in

interviews, was to recreate the paranoid horror of the Levin narratives, in the sense that

the protagonist is eminently rational, and therefore self-doubting. If Chris could be

certain about the strangeness of these interactions, the racial animus comprising even

innocuous comments by the Armitages and the rest of the apparently well-meaning

upper-class white elites, he would Get Out; but, because the conspiracy is so vast and complex, because he is in hostile territory without knowing it, he thinks maybe he's overreacting, and he sticks around, lingering in the antiblack social text much as Joanna Eberhart (Katharine Ross) lingers far too long in the murderously patriarchal Stepford. To leave would be irrational. Eberhart's intuitions of danger are dismissed because of her femininity, her supposed lack of access to masculine rationality—her fears are "hysterical," in the most pathological-misogynist sense of the term (the 2004 remake expressly constructs her as mentally ill, in recovery from a devastating career setback, drugged, almost catatonic in early scenes). Chris doubts himself because as a contemporary American he inhabits a dominant post-racial social paradigm, the first commandment of which is: "It's Not About Race." As Peele told NPR's Terry Gross, "Part of being black in this country, and I presume being any minority, is constantly being told that...we're seeing racism where there just isn't racism." The incisive brilliance of the film is that it hinges precisely on the US post-racial moment, where overt acts of racism are frowned upon, but so is scrutinizing the social text of whiteness for foundational antagonisms undergirding the shiny façade of liberal humanism. Both are indecorous, but the latter is *paranoid*, a pejorative characterization that rejects non-hegemonic and racialized knowledges, and can help keep white supremacy potent as an invisible subtext. A white, patriarchal discourse casts doubt upon the knowledge of women and people of color; as *The Stepford Wives* and *Get Out* make clear, it also compels them to doubt themselves.

The horror movie, however, is the space of exception, where paranoia is always founded, though its object may be misrecognized; there *is* something dangerous under the bed, in the dark, in the thoughts and bodies of those around you. The problem is that Chris doesn't yet know he's in a horror movie. His friend Rod (comedian Lil Rel Howery) knows, and has been advising Chris against the trip from their first conversation in the film. "White people love making people sex slaves and shit," he tells Chris upon hearing the Logan King anecdote, correctly diagnosing the gist, and the genre, but not the specifics. Peele situates Rod as the voice of the black audience, a crucial horror market demographic that is traditionally disavowed by the genre, relegated to the movie theater, often making it to the screen only to be a film's first victim.[66] This relegation is one metaphor Peele puts forth for Chris' recurring physical paralysis via hypnotic confinement in the Sunken Place: it is a space analogous to the theater, where the "intelligence" and "voice" of the black audience are devalued as they are cast as passive spectators, unrepresented in the onscreen action. It is important, then, that the script makes Chris believable as an unusually effective and rational protagonist who makes the best choices given the information he has, and that Rod is allowed to make the thought/verbalized remonstrations of a genre-savvy audience legible in the diegetic space. Of course, awareness of genre tropes crosses racial lines; however there is no such parity in terms of *representations* of that knowledge onscreen. By representing and

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[66] Kumail Nanjiani, whose parents immigrated to the US from Pakistan when he was young, expresses a similar sentiment in a scene from his film *The Big Sick* (Michael Showalter, USA 2017), which he co-wrote. On horror movies: "I'm never gonna be one of the last guys alive; I'm gonna be the first guy to die. I die so that other characters get to find out that something weird is going on. I go off alone to find the cat. I never even find out that there were monsters. To me the plot of the movie was: We're at a research facility, and the cat's missing. The End."

validating a counter-hegemonic black paranoia that in many ways transcends a strictly horror-film application, *Get Out* disrupts the dominant epistemological grounds attributed to white-centric constructions of the normative theatrical film audience. It is in this way that the race of the film's ideal viewer is less important than their access to a type of oppositional, racialized knowledge; that is, in common parlance, their "wokeness." Wealthy white family, subtle microaggressions, hypnosis, uncanny black bodies—Rod and the woke horror audience can connect the dots. Unlike Chris, they know what type of movie this is, what type of America provides the setting for both the onscreen action and its real-world consumption, and so perform paranoid readings of the filmic text from the outset. They know he needs to get out before he even gets in.

The script, written by Peele over the course of five years, reflects this concern with subtext and paranoia, and the antagonisms that are left unspoken, yet simmering, in what he calls "the era of the post-racial lie" inaugurated by the election of US President Barack Obama. In this way, *Get Out* works as a continuation of rather than a break with his work on sketch comedy show *Key & Peele* (2012-2015), which was dominated by scenes dramatizing the effects of the relegation of race to subtext. As discussed in Chapter 3, especially relevant sketches include "Obama's Anger Translator" (2012), in which Peele's imperturbable Obama hires Luther (Keegan Michael Key) in order to make legible the rage and emotion that have been rendered off-limits to the president as a subject of intense racialized scrutiny, and "White Zombies" (2012), in which the duo's straightforward pastiche of a Romero-esque scenario is interrupted by their realization that the mob of zombified white suburbanites are so racist that they won't eat them. In

Get Out the characters of the Armitage family and their guests, even setting aside their monstrous telos, function as an indictment of a white liberal self-absolution that manifests itself overtly as a form of cultural capital. They "hate how it looks" when Chris sees their black servants, and they are sufficiently self-deprecating and abashed at their own relative privilege. They name-drop black figures (Obama, Tiger, Jesse Owens) in order to signal a racial affinity, yet it is one that functions via reduction and metonymy, i.e. the same process by which the election of Obama meant that "racism was over." The characters are animated by a racial knowledge that has no place in a post-racial society, yet continues to inform the basic structures of social relations. That this disavowal is ultimately not merely quietist or misguided, but actively hostile to Chris—not as a man but as a *black man*—is the essence of post-racialism's new backlash.

A few important touchstones for the film itself are (as previously noted) the 1975 *The Stepford Wives*, as well as Christian/white supremacist esotericism and mind/body-swapping narratives. Even in its details the film is in part a uniquely realized homage to (not to say pastiche of) the *Stepford* scenario. Joanna Eberhart and Chris Washington share more than just their marginalization by the forces that conspire against them—they are both photographers, a fact both films highlight through emphasis on the eye(s). When Joanna, for example, finally comes face-to-face with her fate—a perfect robotic simulacrum who will replace her as her husband's maid/nanny/sex toy—the terror of the moment is crystallized in the copy's one apparent deviation from the original: it has no eyes. Or, rather, its eyes are perfectly black and expressionless, inhuman. It is necessary for Joanna to be killed so that her eyes can be, as implied by the next scene, transplanted

to the robot, thus affording the requisite illusion of humanity. The eyes, here, stand as visible evidence of a "soul," some basic humanity, fragments of light brutalized and made fungible by the Stepford patriarchs. They are, in the terms of my discussion in Chapter 2, the paradoxical intrinsic ornaments, the *parerga* without which there would be no *ergon*.

In *Get Out*, the fate awaiting Chris similarly depends on his eyes, though the emphasis is different. When blind art dealer Jim Hudson (Stephen Root), who had praised Chris' art at the party (his assistant, he explains, describes visual images to him "in great detail"), wins the auction for Chris, preparations are made for what we understand is the same operation to which Walter, Georgina, and Logan King (formerly Andre Hayworth) have already been subject—a partial brain transplant, allowing the wealthy white man to completely inhabit and control Chris' body while what remains of Chris' consciousness is hypnotically imprisoned in the Sunken Place in perpetuity. They call the process "The Coagula."[67] After Hudson explains this to the captive Chris before the surgery, Chris asks why the group has chosen black people as their host bodies. As the film/Chris flashes

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[67] The Armitage patriarch provides a further explanation of the process in a retro-kitsch video played for Chris before the operation, a video that ends with the elderly white man (whose mind is, in the film's present, controlling Walter's body) declaring, "Behold! The Coagula!" while gesturing upwards with his arms, at something offscreen. The camera (as Chris' eyes) pans upwards, above the television screen, where a deer's head is attached to the wall. The head of the "buck"—as Peele makes clear, an intentional reference to the archaic, racist term for a strong black man—is a complex metaphor for the process itself. The replacement of the victim's brain is similarly a "beheading," both in terms of the surgical incision to remove the crown of the skull and in the separation of mind from body. Further, the choice of the black body for this process speaks to a specifically white (perhaps implicitly masculine) libidinal investment in domination and display—the prospective immortality offered by the procedure seems secondary to the pleasure of transforming blackness into a trophy (as the mounted head) or a mask (i.e. if the hollowed deer's head were placed over one's own head). Thinking about the hunter/hunted aspect—e.g. the hunter's use of camouflage, the invasion of the peaceable deer's habitus, the justificatory rhetoric of population control, and the unequal threat offered by each side—offers a wealth of possibility for engaging with this moment critically or pedagogically, as does the decision to have Chris kill Dean by impaling him upon the deer's antlers.

back to the myriad interactions with partygoers, Hudson opines, "Who knows? People want to change. Some people want to be stronger...faster...cooler. But please don't lump me in with that; you know I could give a shit what color you are. No, what I want is deeper. I want your *eye*, man. I want those things you see through." In an echo of Dean's earlier "Boy, I hate how it looks," Hudson makes it a point to disavow the inherent racism of his murderous appropriation of Chris' black body, situating his actions within not a socio-historical, but an aesthetic/instrumental context. The art dealer is not consigning Chris to a worse-than-death quasi-life because he's black, or as an expression of a whiteness whose soteriology is the plunder of black bodies, but because he's sighted, and an artist. Stop playing the race card, Chris! Even here, in the moments directly prior to his participation in an occult act of unthinkable evil committed upon an enslaved black body, Hudson compulsively evinces the central fear/refrain of post-racial whiteness: he doesn't know about those other folks, but *he*'s not a racist.

There is further a slippage here between eye/eyes, as the one is an only partly physiological capacity for discernment associated with "taste," and the others are bare structures of visual perception; that is, functioning eyes create the capacity for, but do not guarantee, an artist's eye.[68] This points to, on the one hand, a *meconnaissance* on the part

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[68] At the close of Ira Levin's novel *The Stepford Wives*, the narrative perspective switches to the character of Ruthanne, wife in the "black family" of this section's epigraph (Levin's novel develops these characters further than the film, which is content to merely use the idea of blackness as a joke at the expense of the "liberal" town gossip). It is from her naïve POV that we glimpse the afterlife of "Joanna," now (unbeknownst to Ruthanne) a robot with human eyes, a fate Ruthanne will certainly share. In terms of this discussion, it is worth noting that these eyes (of course) no longer serve any aesthetic purpose related to the artist's "eye"—it turns out that Joanna 2.0 has forsaken her budding career as a photographic artist in order to commit fully to the work of domesticity. Joanna's eyes, divorced from a human consciousness, become not tools of sight but objects to be perceived by others, a point the film illustrates through both the visceral discomfort caused by their absence in the face of the robot double and by the pleasure one of her husband's

of Hudson as an example of a white (cultural) appropriator: like the art he sells, Chris'

blackness, and Hudson's structural relationship to both Chris and blackness, is something

he thinks he understands but does not, because these are things that can only be gestured

at or approximated via the physiological/discursive contexts he inhabits (e.g. blindness,

racial chauvinism). On the other hand, there is a social/metaphysical dimension to the

eyes quite similar to the one we see in the original *Stepford*—they are in some way linked

to the soul, to being, or to appearing-to-be. It is significant that even in his hypnotic

paralysis Chris still has indirect access to his visual field (though depicted as if at some

distance), and that the strobe of his phone's camera flash on two separate occasions

disrupts the hypnotic subjugation of first Andre's and later Walter's consciousnesses,

affording them brief windows of bodily mastery. In a white supremacist public sphere,

being visually black marks an individual in otherness, with all the divergent socio-

juridical effects that entails; in *Get Out*, it marks Chris et al for appropriation, death,

slavery and consumption by a vampiric whiteness which instrumentalizes the other in its

quest for immortality. As sight becomes the primary means by which the world makes

sense of the individual, it becomes the primary means by which the individual makes

sense of the world; the visual becomes ontological.

This makes sense in terms of the film's other notable achievement, its

racialization of the "uncanny valley." As theorized by Masahiro Mori, the uncanny valley

is that point on the continuum of robotic anthropomorphization where human affinity for

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friends takes in repeatedly sketching her eyes at an earlier social encounter. Her eyes exist for the sake of
not her, but everyone else.

humanoid automatons turns sharply and inexplicably negative, the point where a simulacrum gets too close to the real thing, thus heightening its qualities of otherness and producing "an eerie sensation." In the 1975 *Stepford*, Joanna's intuition that something is wrong with the town's other women is based on sharp deviations in their established characters, and instances of the robots malfunctioning and repeating the same phrase over and over (as well as some plain old "hot-wife-ugly-husband" judginess). The women are strange, perhaps brainwashed, but their human eyes allow them to pass well enough. The moment of the uncanny is deferred until we see the robot designed to replace her, and its disturbing effect on the audience is a function of its alien eyes set within a perfect replica of Joanna's face. This moment, along with the greater plot, recalls E.T.A. Hoffman's paradigmatic treatment of eyes as the arbiters of uncanniness in "The Sandman" ("*Der Sandmann*" 1816) an Oedipal narrative of psychosexual trauma turning on the Mephistophelian artificer Coppellius' mastery of robotics and technologies of sight— including the fabrication, augmentation, transplantation, and destruction of various literal or metaphorical eyes—which drives the protagonist, Nathaneal, to madness/suicide. Nathaneal's compulsively fetishistic final words might as well be those of Hudson or Stepford roboticist Diz (Patrick O'Neal): "pretty eyes, pretty eyes!" ("*Sköne Oke*") (Hoffman 42)

In *Get Out*, by comparison, there are no robots, and no messing about with eyes per se; the black host characters' bodies are as before, with the exception of an alien brain replacing the original (as well as the attendant surgical scar high on the forehead, which explains why post-op characters are always seen in a hat or wig). In this *Get Out* is

similar to the *Stepford* remake, in which the women's minds were controlled by a series of neural implants (ones seemingly able to both be installed and malfunction catastrophically without damaging the host in any way; no wives were harmed in the making of *Stepford* 2004), and also to *Transfer* (Lukacevic 2010), in which an elderly European consciousness can essentially rent a time-share in an indentured African body via a proprietary corporate procedure. What dispensing with the robot trope means, practically, is that the uncanny effect is not produced by any tangible absences or additions, but rather by the new affect of lobotomized individuals, signaled by the chasm between the appearance of the black body and the elderly, white mannerisms of its comportment. The eeriest moments come when Chris attempts to relate to the post-op (or, I suppose, "coagulated") individuals on the basis of their shared blackness (as above with Logan/Andre, or when he tells Georgina "If there's too many white people I get nervous, you know?"). Their surprise or blank indifference could be a matter of a different socialization—the visual appearance of racial blackness, after all, does not signal some monolithic identity. However, it is in these moments of profound disconnect that the audience most senses something is horribly amiss, both as a result of a black body/white affect divide (Walter's conversation with Chris is particularly strange; Peele describes Henderson's performance as "like Walt Disney is in there"), or, especially, when the face of Georgina belies a struggle between the trapped black consciousness and the parasitic brain of Dean's mother. Peele's direction hints at the repressed soul of these bodies as a means of representing both the science-fictional horror and the historically inflected injustice of a black mind supplanted from its rightful place in the black body, a coup

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made legible for the audience in the persistent uncanniness of the resulting hybrid. The structure further suggests, allegorically, the uncanniness of black, or "soul," culture—e.g. soul food, soul music—when severed from black people for the purposes of commodification.

Peele's director's commentary (a feature included on the film's DVD release) gestures tantalizingly at a (he claims) fully-conceptualized mythos of the Armitages et al as members of an ancient cult ("The Red Alchemist Society") based on or descended from the Knights Templar, an 11th century fraternity associated with both the material brutality of the Crusades and the oft-romanticized Christian esotericism of secret rites, codes and relics made palatable for modern audiences via mass media fictions like Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* (2003). The irony of their proper honorific—The Poor Fellow-Soldiers of Christ and the Temple of Solomon (*Pauperes commilitones Christi Templique Salomonici*)—is that it belies their involvement in the systematic consolidation of vast fortunes through an early form of banking; hence their association with popular narratives of treasure-hunting. Importantly for the film's implicit use of this history, the Templars were wealthy, xenophobic Christian Europeans engaged in the slaughter of Muslim populations; further, their apocryphal association with the search for and possession of sacred Christian relics—e.g. the Holy Grail—points to a metaphysics of plunder coupled with the means-justifying fanaticism of the True Believer. *Get Out*'s Templar-derived Red Alchemist Society may or may not have found the immortality-granting Holy Grail, but in the Armitage's Coagula procedure they have found something they consider just as good, if a bit messier.

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While this background explains the medieval mask that Rose's brother Jeremy (played with a quietly unhinged menace by Caleb Landry Jones) wears to abduct Hayworth in the opening scene, it is completely unnecessary to an audience's understanding and appreciation of the film itself, which makes it, on the one hand a fascinating insight into Peele's writing process, and, on the other, a pointed thematic addition to the film's comprehensive critique of post-racial whiteness. The Templar-context gets at something more than just the trans-historical nature of white/European violence upon the racial/ethnic/religious other. It makes the American investment in whiteness the mark of a vast conspiracy, one that ties together class and racial privilege with, in recent decades, an ostentatious liberal humanism to form the grounds for a contemporary post-racial nightmare. Like the Christianity of the Templars, American white supremacy—in the Military/Prison Industrial Complexes, in its social engineering and hierarchization, in its neoliberal insatiability—is the extrusion of value from communities and from bodies made raw matter, the purification by the sword, the cleansing of the unclean, the remaking of the world in its own image, the ushering-in of the eschaton. The consensual illusion of immanent, talismanic Christianity or the oxymoronic idiocy of white genetic superiority don't depend on truth, only truth-value; they function because of the sincere belief of their attendant death-cults, not vice versa.

Jordan Peele's *Get Out* is a tense, paranoid work that succeeds by both fulfilling the audience's need for coherent thrills and rewarding critical inquiry.[69] Like the pastiche

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[69] Beyond its obvious success as a cultural touchstone during the early days of the Trump presidency, *Get Out* was quantifiably a major, nigh-unprecedented hit: it grossed $252 million worldwide on a $4.5 million budget, made Jordan Peele's debut as a writer/director of films the most financially successful of all time, and was briefly the US's highest-grossing film by a black director of all time (F. Gary Gray, whose *Straight*

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re(f/v)erence of Run the Jewels' treatment of classic hip-hop, it is a film that pays homage to elite works in the horror and SF genre, yet manages to say something original and urgent about the contemporary moment. This ultimate responsibility not to canon or aesthetic conventions but to the urgent necessities of the sociopolitical *now*—a trait shared by the artists and works I've discussed in the preceding chapters of this dissertation—is never more clear than in Peele's late-production decision to ditch the original ending, made available to audiences as a DVD extra. Originally, it is the police, not Rod, who show up at the end, arresting Chris, bloody and surrounded by bodies. Six months later he's still in jail; Rod is trying to organize a defense, but all the evidence of the Armitage's work has been destroyed in a fire, and the party guests, like the white supremacy and class privilege for which they are metonyms, are seemingly invisible to agents of the law. Chris has given up on being exonerated. "I stopped it," he tells Rod, in bittersweet consolation, before being led where thick cage-like bars prevent the camera from following, shuffling down a long hallway, into the prison's gaping maw, swallowed up by walls all painted a drab institutional white. Written during the early Obama years— "the era of the post-racial lie"—the ending was meant to be "the gut punch the world needed," i.e. a wake-up call for anyone lulled by post-racialism's covert backlash, who believed that Obama's electoral college victory signaled that America's libidinal investment in antiblackness had been resolved. This ending would have made explicit the other reading of the Sunken Place, as a metaphor for the prison-industrial complex, the

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Outta Compton [2015] was surpassed by *Get Out*, quickly reclaimed that spot via his helming of the franchise title *Fate of the Furious* [2017]).

way that black men are abducted, cast down into an abyss and forgotten, the way that

white supremacy turns people into bodies. By the time the film came out, though,

America was a month into Donald Trump's presidency, meaning much of the subtext had

become text again, and anti-racist structural critique had become more prominent in the

wake of public outrage over police violence and the rise of movements like Black Lives

Matter—as Peele puts it, by the movie's release, "people were woke." Thus, at the end,

when the bloody and beaten Chris has killed his captors and is on the verge of escape and

his face becomes lit by the blue lights of a police cruiser, the audience understands the

stakes of that moment far too well, whether in its genre allusion to the brutal antiblack

nihilism at the finish of Romero's masterpiece, or in its overt reference to all-too-real

spectacles of contemporary police violence. The audience doesn't need that moment to be

explained to them; instead they need "a release, a hero," something to pull them up out of

the horror of the Sunken Place and the horror of its institutional referents, the sick society

the film diagnoses. So in lieu of the two white cops throwing Chris to the ground we get

Rod, the plucky TSA agent, saving the day, cracking a joke, taking us home. Only in a

narrative text can white supremacy be reduced to assailable proportions, be made

immanent in killable bodies, be vanquished, with finality. Only in the horror film can

some horror end; so here, it does.

But,

But, despite the preceding discussion, I insist that *Get Out* is, at times, really quite

funny! Not just in the manner of self-righteous, woke knowingness, but specifically and

subversively funny! There *is* a reason (despite the confusion this inspired in many casual observers) why it was nominated for the 2018 Golden Globes in the category "Best Motion Picture – Musical or Comedy."[70] At times the film's humor comes in small "aha" moments that reward rewatching, like when we see Rose in her bedroom after the revelation about her role as seductress in the racial honeypot scheme. She is eating dry Froot Loops cereal while sipping a glass of milk—separating the "white" milk from the "colored" cereal—the joke being that her white chauvinism extends the segregationist impulse to even the most trivial aspects of her life. This covert humor is an expression of and reflects the film's formal expression of its central thematic; *Get Out*, after all, is a movie about anti-black racism which does not contain a single racial slur. In the post-racial United States, prejudice is a hint, a trace, not a spectacle. We become paranoid, experts in the semiotics of hate.

More obviously, the star of the film's overt comedic vein is Lil' Rel Howery, whose Rod is the face of almost every laugh-out-loud moment in the film. Peele's script peppers Howery throughout via the plot device of phone calls to Rod, who is dog-sitting for Chris. These act as pressure release valves for the main narrative, which is unrelenting in its steadily building tension. Rod is paranoid, yes, but he expresses this emotion in a language of hyperbole and humor that mocks both the structures against which it is directed and himself as speaker. For example, in his character's reaction to Chris' revelations about the "hypno-therapy" session and the uncanny Logan King, Howery invokes the specter of Jeffrey Dahmer in what Peele notes is a largely improvised bit, one

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[70] News that Peele responded to with a wry tweet reading, simply, "'Get Out' is a documentary." (11/15/17)

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that succeeds on a few levels. After invoking the aforementioned truism that "white

people love making people sex slaves and shit," the conversation continues:

> Chris: Yeah I'm pretty sure they are not a kinky sex family, dog.
> Rod: Look, Jeffrey Dahmer was eating the shit out of niggas' heads. Okay? But
> that was after he fucked the heads. Do you think they saw that shit
> coming? Hell no, okay? They were coming over there like, "I'mma suck a
> little dick, maybe jiggle some balls or shit." No! They didn't get a chance
> to jiggle *shit* because their heads was off their bodies. Yeah they still
> sucked the dick, but without their heads. It was weird detached heads shit.
> That was Jeffrey Dahmer.
> Chris: Thanks for that image.
> Rod: Hey man, I'm not making this shit up! I saw it on A&E. That is real life.

In moments like this, Rod performs a meta-textual comedy that reorients the film towards

both its status as entertainment media artifact and as indirect social commentary. On the

one hand this is a bit of absurdist, gross-out humor that mines a particularly sadistic

American historical figure for laughs. Its practical function within the diegesis, like the

other Rod scenes, is to prevent the audience from becoming bored by the long, slow

scenes of action-less innuendo.

It also, however, is a cousin of the Froot Loop joke, a moment where abstract or

submerged ideas are made too-tangible, to the point of ridiculousness. Like Rose's

culinary Jim Crow practice, Rod's invocation of Dahmer creates an overt parallel

between abstract, ideological, or historical violence and specific, individual, and

contemporary practices of discrimination—as Rod tells it, Missy Armitage "fucking

with" Chris' head becomes indistinguishable from Jeffrey Dahmer literally "fucking

heads." Dahmer's eating of his victims is both symptomatic and constitutive of a greater

American consumption of blackness. This is a microcosm of the film itself, which insists

upon reifying the covert machinations of liberal white supremacy into a horrifyingly

concrete experience of racist (dis)possession. The film's ending reinvokes this

congruence in its reveal that it is not hypnosis, but brain transplantation, that describes

the actions of the Armitages, metonyms for liberal whiteness, upon their victims,

metonyms for American blackness. Thus, in the logic of the film the meaning of the

phrase "fuck with someone's head" is simultaneously colloquial/abstract (manipulation

of minds, hypnosis, hegemony), colloquial/concrete (brain transplantation,

dismemberment), and literal/pornographic (oral necrophilia); further, each of these

meanings is explicitly conceived in terms of white supremacist violence, making it a

sophisticated bit of pointed humor. The outrageous manner in which the information is

delivered allows the audience—and Chris—to dismiss this connection as irrational or

hysterical, a joke without intent (a misreading aided by Rod's source, the cable channel

A&E, known primarily for its plethora of low-brow "reality TV" faux-documentaries

[e.g. the execrable "Duck Dynasty"] interspersed with aging True Crime-esque reruns

and conspiracy-baiting specials). Sometimes comedy is a juggernaut, sometimes it is a

smuggler.

The best part of this bit, however, is not just that this is an accurate portrayal of

both the serial killer and white supremacy's M.O., but is in Dahmer's specific relevance

to the film's themes not as a murderer but *as a post-racialist*. If you, like some

unknowable percentage of the film's viewers or the independently curious must have,

visit Jeffrey Dahmer's Wikipedia page, you will discover from the synopsis that he

murdered 17 men and boys between 1978 and 1991, and that these murders indeed

involved necrophilia, dismemberment, and cannibalism. There is extensive

documentation of his childhood, Army service, young adulthood, arrest, trial,

imprisonment, and so on. Towards the end of the article, in a section on known murder

victims, is the following:

> A total of 14 of Dahmer's victims were from various ethnic minority backgrounds, with nine victims being black. Dahmer was adamant that the race of his victims was incidental to him and that it was the body form of a potential victim that attracted his attention.[71]

Wikipedia, the collectively edited epistemological crucible of the 21st century, reflects the

prevailing white supremacist US discourse to the extent that the article's *sole reference* to

racism is in order to dismiss it as irrelevant, thus burying the racial lede deep enough to

obscure the antiblackness inherent in a praxis of violent sexual predation where *the*

majority of the victims were black. When Rod notes that "Jeffrey Dahmer was eating the

shit out of niggas' heads," he doesn't mean, as colloquially, "people's" heads, he means

"black people's" heads. Not that race had anything to do with it, of course.

 This, then, is final twist of the joke, the barb embedded in the laughter, the

parergonal excess that is actually essence. Dahmer's stubborn repudiation of any racial

thinking mirrors the blind Hudson's insistence that he "could give a shit what color"

Chris is, mirrors Dean Armitage's insistence that things merely *look*, rather than *are*,

racist. But, as Susan Sontag reminds us, it is precisely the look, style, outward

performance in the world, that defines a thing: "In almost every case, our manner of

appearing is our manner of being. The mask is the face." And 14 of 17 *appears to be* one

hell of a percentage.

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[71] "Jeffrey Dahmer." *Wikipedia*, retrieved 1/3/18

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Let me be clear: I cannot know, nor do I care, whether Jeffrey Dahmer "is (a) racist." It is beside the point. That is a question of essence, of metaphysics.[72] We should, rather, be focused on his and others' demonstrable performances of antiblackness. In post-Civil Rights Era United States discourse, open expressions of racism became taboo, which had the paradoxical effect of allowing by-any-other-name prejudice to thrive, to the point that "now the only way to be identified as a white supremacist is to say you are one" (Newkirk). Again, the emphasis is on self-identification of an essential "being." What we *are* is more important than what we *do*. Dahmer claims he is not racist, and there's no swastika tattooed on his forehead, so we gratefully overlook the obvious, overwhelming evidence provided by his actions in order to discern some other motive, something that safely disconnects him from the libidinal economy of white supremacy (in this case, homosexual fetishism). This is how to maintain racism without racists. Nobody is being asked to change, only to keep their mouths shut.

This is the importance, then, of attending to the cultural text, to our demonstrable performances of sociality, the stories we tell and the laws we pass and their tangible effects. Post-racial America asks us to ignore what we know about the world, its material surface, its institutions, to look beneath them and find a beating heart of virtue that redeems us historically, proleptically, and in perpetuity. But in Rod's humor, like in the contemporary US, it's all right there on the surface, whether we choose to understand it or not. We can take Dahmer, Hudson, Dean, our friends and families and acquaintances and leaders, Donald Trump, Hillary Clinton et al at their words, or we can simply pay

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[72] See Chapter 1's discussion of Edward Schiappa's legal philosophy of context.

attention to what interests are being served by their actions and decisions, who is privileged and who is expendable, whose lives matter, who's for dinner.

Irony, the Ouroboros

In 2013, Tom Scocca published a provocative long-form essay on the *Gawker* website, titled "On Smarm." It was in response to a general feeling in the more enlightened circles of public discourse that "we are living, to our disadvantage, in an age of snark—that the problem of our times is a thing called 'snark.'"[73] Snark, a word associated with hostility, snideness, and knowing contempt, often rudely humorous, was poisoning the national conversation, undermining basic human decency and respect. Why couldn't we be more positive? Snark was for "haters."

Rather, argues Scocca, snark is a reaction to a greater rhetorical, even existential, evil, "smarm," which he characterizes as "a kind of performance—an assumption of the forms of seriousness, of virtue, of constructiveness, without the substance…[and overly] concerned with appropriateness and with tone." Etymologically, smarm is a descendant of "'smalm,' to smooth something down with grease—and by extension to be unctuous or flattering, or smug. Smarm aspires to smother opposition or criticism, to cover everything over with an artificial, oily gloss." Smarm is a type of bad faith or "bullshit," as "it expresses one agenda, while actually pursuing a different one. It is a kind of moral and ethical misdirection. Its genuine purposes lie beneath the greased-over surface." It is a

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[73] See, for example, *Snark: It's Mean, It's Personal, and It's Ruining Our Conversation* (Simon and Schuster, 2009) by *The New Yorker*'s David Denby.

self-justifying logic of authority, a way of stifling debate by a focus on decorum and

respect for institutions. It is a logic of the market, of the status quo.

Scocca's piece includes a brief section on ironic laughter that is haunted by the

Schlegel quote that opens my first chapter.[74] While anger can upset smarm, he argues, it

is undone too by "humor and confidence." He explains,

> Smarm, with its fixation on respect and respectability, has trouble handling it
> when the snarkers start clowning around. *Are you serious?* the commenters
> write. *Is this serious?* On Twitter, the right-thinking commenters pass the links
> around: *Seriously?*
> *Seriously??*
> *Are you serious?*
> *Are you? Serious? Seriously?*
> Well, no.
> But yes, yes we are.

This "serious unseriousness" is a willingness to be a bit silly, to defy convention, to make

a joke, to risk misunderstanding, as a tactic of disruption, that what Schlegel refers to as

the "harmonious bores" might be confounded. Because *that* "harmony" is peace that has

been made with social institutions and structures of knowledge that are hostile to life.

That respectability is an expression of irrational authority. That decorum is about

knowing your place. Smarm should be opposed, but it should also be *mocked*.

The juxtaposition of these two terms in his piece is telling. "Snark," writes

Scocca, "is often conflated with cynicism, which is a troublesome misreading. Snark may

speak in cynical terms about a cynical world, but it is not cynicism itself. It is a theory of

cynicism. The practice of cynicism is smarm." And while snark may not be inherently

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[74] "It is a very good sign when the harmonious bores are at a loss about how they should react to this
continuous self-parody, when they fluctuate endlessly between belief and disbelief until they get dizzy and
take what is meant as a joke seriously and what is meant seriously as a joke." (*Philosophical Fragments* 13)

progressive (e.g. internet trolls), it can be deployed to progressive ends (e.g. Stephen

Colbert's parrhesiastic turn at the 2006 White House Correspondents' Dinner); on the

other hand, "smarm is never a force for good," as "a civilization that speaks in smarm…is

a civilization that says 'Don't Be Evil,' rather than making sure it does not do evil."

Scocca and his many interlocutors are, in fact, talking about two very different

aspects of the same rhetorical/performative mode: irony. He correctly notes that "irony"

and "the ironic sensibility" were used to discuss the same phenomenon that we now call

"snark" before the latter was popularized in the mid-aughts; the pejorative association of

both terms is with "cynicism," as he bemoans. His snark is that easily identifiable

postmodernist irony, hostile to meta-narratives, further wed to a humorous satirical

sensibility. Its dissembling is overtly theorized; it is self-aware. It is characterized by a

cosmic irreverence. Its extreme is nihilism, existential or economic.

Smarm, however, is also an expression of irony, both in its establishment of a

disjunction between what is said and what is meant (i.e. hypocrisy), and in its appeal to a

greater, a priori good (in the absence of the divine, this is public decorum, or respect, or

the market). This is a melding of the Deleuzian irony that "sets itself up in judgment of

life" (Colebrook 149) with the overt "sincerity" that Lionel Trilling derides for the way it

manipulates and self-aggrandizes while espousing the essential morality of being "true to

one's own self": "The moral end in view implies a public end in view, with all that this

suggests of the esteem and fair repute that follow upon the correct fulfilment of a public

role" (9). This is the irony of depths and heights, of hierarchies, of the fantasy of

disembodied subjectivity. This irony's extreme is fundamentalism, religious or economic.[75]

One way of thinking about this dissertation's discussion of the politics of race and irony in aesthetic production, then, is as an examination of the interplay between particular expressions of smarm and snark in contemporary US public discourse. *Get Out*, for example, is snark. It is an extreme skepticism of the liberal façade of bourgeois whiteness in America, which it mocks by making duplicitous, savage head-fuckers of the whole lot, literalizing the consumption of blackness which has been disavowed. Peele's tweet in response to the film's Golden Globe nomination—"'Get Out' is a documentary"—is snarkier still. *Seriously?* Is he serious? Well, no. But yes, yes he is.

Post-racialism, like its close cousin respectability politics, is smarm. It is an overt refusal of any racial narrative that shines a light onto white supremacy, in the interests of allowing the latter to chug along smoothly in the shadows. It says "there is no race" rather than have whiteness come under scrutiny. It banishes the discourse of race in the name of being polite, of "healing the divide"; it attempts to halt the sociohistorical dialectic via insisting that a taxonomic strategy of systemic violence can be magicked away in the nick of time, before being called to account, at the very moment that it might become an avenue for expressing grievance. It is smoke and mirrors, a game of optics: it suggests that rather than an alarmingly high percentage of black and brown people being denied fundamental civil rights, what we are seeing is the oppression of a reassuringly low percentage of a totalized, a-racial population of state subjects as a result of their

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[75] This specific understanding of irony is discussed at the end of Chapter 3.

deviation from universal socio-juridical and economic norms. It says "I'm not a racist" and means "don't judge me for my actions." It posits a virtuous, hidden essence that redeems a blithely sadistic collective performance. It is a gesture of power; it makes us distrust what we know.

Buckaroo Banzai, Kehinde Wiley, Keegan-Michael Key and Jordan Peele, Killer Mike and El-P, these are figures of snark, of rude contempt for decorum, of intransigence towards any status quo, whether of the military-industrial complex, of art elitism, of retrogressive identity politics, of hetero-patriachal misogyny and queerphobic discourse. This is El-P sneering, "You talk clean and bomb hospitals / So I speak with the foulest mouth possible" ("A Report to the Shareholders/Kill Your Masters" *RTJ 3* [2016]). If smarm is irony in its conservative sense, then snark, at its best, is one way of identifying irony's progressive bent. This ideal irony takes surfaces and overt performances seriously, privileges the body and its senses, resists the naturalization of oppression, knows that institutions are finite and mutable, respects no thrones. Irony's chaos, disorder, and negation are yoked and turned to productive ends, just as practices of pastiche, parody, and satire discussed in this dissertation resuscitate specific forms, genres, and styles and redeploy these with a critical edge. This is the Deleuzian humor that "allows for the joyous eruption of life."[76] It is a gesture of powerlessness. It is a way of reclaiming our experience of the world.

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[76] Colebrook 149, see Ch. 3

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