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Real Talk: Blackness and Whiteness in the Works of Jefferson Pinder, Dave Chappelle, and Aaron McGruder

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Real Talk: Blackness and Whiteness in the Works of Jefferson Pinder, Dave Chappelle, and Aaron McGruder

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of the College of William and Mary in Candidacy for the Degree of
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Doctor of Philosophy

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"Real Talk: Blackness and Whiteness in the Works of Jefferson Pinder, Dave Chappelle, and Aaron McGruder" will examine twenty-first century constructions of race by African Americans. I am interested in how visual artist Jefferson Pinder, comedian Dave Chappelle, and comic artist Aaron McGruder interrogate and incorporate race, particularly whiteness, into their respective works. Each artist challenges hegemonic constructions of race, utilizing technology and taking full advantage of our visualized culture to present their examinations of race. I selected the artists because of their intimate knowledge of their respective crafts, their use of popular culture, and their diverse perspectives on race in America. Additionally, the artists share a regional background in that they came of age while living in the Washington, DC metro area, which I believe heavily informs their racial views.

Inside their world of the visual arts, comic strips, and television, I argue that the artists are examining blackness while re-defining what it means and inserting, visually, whiteness into the discourse. These black constructions of race have always existed; however, I suggest that the post-soul generation is expanding concepts of race by taking the constructions from the shadows of African American culture and situating them in mainstream culture. In this attempt to challenge homogenous notions of race, the artists cull from several disciplines, which call for an interdisciplinary approach. Employing an interdisciplinary method, I will use theories of race and theories of representation. Additionally, theoretical approaches from art history, visual culture, studies of television, and film studies help frame and ground my research. This twenty-first century discourse from African American cultural workers makes my dissertation timely because it captures an important transition in American culture carried out through the combination of art, media, and racial discourse.
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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my mother, Angeline D. Hayes, who has always believed in my dreams.
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Real Talk: Blackness and Whiteness in the Works of Jefferson Pinder, Dave Chappelle, and Aaron McGruder

*Real Talk* is perhaps a strange title for a body of academic research on three Black men in their thirties and forties. UrbanDictionary.com has several definitions of the slang term *real talk*. Some of the definitions include the use of *real talk* to emphasize a fact, make a point, and mean what you say.¹ The most common definition is speaking the truth. This idea of speaking the truth, speaking candidly and openly, shapes this research. It also serves as a creative framework for the three cultural workers under consideration: Jefferson Pinder, Dave Chappelle, and Aaron McGruder.²

Complementary to this street perspective of *real talk* as truth is a scholarly approach which Melissa V. Harris-Perry sums up in her text *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America*, “Literature crafts a specific story to reveal a universal truth.”³ Harris-Perry makes this claim as support for using literature to understand the roles of Black women as citizens and in politics. The book is not typical of most writing in Harris-Perry’s field of political science, which often employs statistical models. She uses the arts to offer a cultural perspective on how Black women used a number of avenues, like literature, to craft a space in America while also challenging the perpetual cycles of stereotypes projected onto the bodies of Black females. In Harris-Perry’s view, “Literary parallels can reveal truths that might otherwise be obscured.”⁴

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⁴ Harris-Perry, 19.
Her point extends to all of the arts, which reveal universal truths within the beauty and enjoyment of the work, and thus, create an avenue for real talk to reach a broad public.

A term originating in hop-hop culture, real talk is also an apt title for a dissertation about three artists who grew up in the hip-hop/post-soul generation, and have contributed to the movement. A framing question that the dissertation considers is: What are these men—Pinder, Chappelle, and McGruder—speaking the truth about? The answer, in a word is racism. Each of them, through their respective cultural projects, speaks openly and honestly about race and racism in American life as they see it. Although they work in different media—performance and mixed-media art, stand-up/sketch comedy, and cartoons and comics—they elevate real talk from the seeming mundaneness of everyday life to an element of life that can affect all of us, whether we realize it or not.

Speaking truthfully and openly is important to the eradication of racism, a pervasive problem in the United States. Silence is no longer an option, particularly in the age of Barack Obama, the first Black President of the United States. Unlike previous generations of Blacks, who worked against racism in the relative safety of their communities and in the group solidarity of large-scale social movements seeking basic rights of citizenship, the post-soul generation confronts racism on a more individual basis in predominately white cultural spaces. A primary reason for this is that there are larger numbers of Blacks working in these spaces than a generation ago. Pinder, Chappelle, and McGruder exemplify this change. Post-soulers are perhaps in a better position to advance the discourse about racism because of their social and cultural location. Thus, many have
opted to do so in distinctly different ways than those before them who had far less access 
to white dominated spheres of communication in the media and the arts.

Post-Soul: "rebellious, sociologically important, and entrenched in the black psyche."^5

The post-soul generation of African American artists and cultural workers are re-
examining and expanding definitions of blackness while projecting Black constructions 
of whiteness into broad arenas of social, cultural, and political discourse. This is most 
evident in visual and popular culture. In the current state of visuality, I suggest that these 
artists are attempting to widen racial discourse by visually adding whiteness as a specific 
identity, rather than leaving it unchallenged as an assumed and largely unstated given of 
full-fledged "Americaness." The artists thus underscore the fact that whiteness is no 
longer normatively "American" but is instead a cluster of representations and attitudes 
within both changing demographics as well as shifting distributions of power in the 
United States. In order to better understand how they position themselves, we need to 
review the development of post-soul as a generational stance.

In the late 1980s to the early 1990s, cultural critics tried to describe the cultural 
movement occurring in the American Black cultural landscape. A new moment was 
emerging that was different from the Civil Rights period and the period prior, which was 
even more restrictive for Blacks. In this new moment, young people of African descent 
expressed themselves more freely, experienced diversity more widely than possible under 
segregation, and had access to opportunities that their parents and grandparents did not

^5 Nelson George, *Buppies, B-boys, Baps & Bohos: Notes on Post-soul Black Culture*, (Cambridge, MA: Da 
Capo Press, 2001), 5.
share. Three critics, Greg Tate, Trey Ellis, and Nelson George, have helped to define the cultural shift of this time, with Nelson George arguing that the era of blaxploitation films and the emergence of the hip-hop arena of cultural production ushered in greater freedom of expression for Black youth.

George first coined the term *post-soul* in a 1992 *Village Voice* article in which he reflected on the experiences he shared with his generational peers. Broadly, he argued that they were afforded opportunities due to the Civil Rights Movement that previous generations of African Americans were denied. He used *post-soul* to describe the cultural shift in African American culture beginning in the 1970s marked by blaxploitation films and hip-hop. Blaxploitation films, while they reinforced stereotypes of Black as urban criminals, also brought street smart, justice seeking Black male and female hero figures to mass audiences in greater concentration than ever before. Whereas earlier films tended to position Black characters in interludes of musical and dance entertainment or as isolated players in plots driven largely by white characters, blaxploitation put Black heroes before a mixed public, and showed them as triumphant in their own (stereotypically crime ridden) surroundings. The passing of soul music and the birth of rap and hip-hop culture prompted George to emphasize its widespread appeal among Black American youth as a whole.

Other scholars and critics have built upon George's term to describe cultural shifts in other areas of creativity such as the fine arts. In the late 1990s, museum professional Thelma Golden and artist Glenn Ligon coined the term *post-black* to describe a generation of Black visual artists who rejected “Black” as a primary identifier over “artist.” Golden employed *post-black* as the organizing principle for the 2001 exhibition
Freestyle. In the accompanying catalog essay, Golden articulated her intellectual rationale for *post-black* and the exhibition.

She defined *post-black* as a moment in Black art in which artists of African descent, "who are adamant about not being labeled Black artists, though their work is steeped in redefining complicated notions of blackness, create works of art that examine multiple identities and use a number of media to express their views." The artists were also moving away from using traditional media such as painting and sculpture, and instead employing performance, video, installation and found objects. Golden pointed out that the artists were also influenced by varied kinds of music, "high" and "low" culture, globalism, and technology, all of which added depth to their work. According to Golden, the most important characteristic of these artists is that "their work, in all of its various forms, speaks to an individual freedom that is a result of this transitional moment in the quest to define ongoing changes in the evolution of African American art and...[an] ongoing redefinition of blackness in contemporary culture."

While Golden's description of changing attitudes is useful to my work, the term *post-black* is problematic because it uses a racial signifier, "Black," to categorize art created by people of African descent at the same time that some artists decry this label. The term also incenses some Blacks as they see it as a denial of identity. As artist Kojo Griffin explains:

I do find the use of the term post-black to be somewhat problematic because the word 'black' has so many connotations within society as well as in the microcosm of the art world. As a person who is very proud of being 'black' or of African

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7 Golden, 15.
heritage, I would be reluctant to ever describe myself as 'post-black' in any sense.\(^8\)

Additionally, *post-black* carries forward an on-going debate within the African American community about what constitutes "Black art." As there is not a consensus on what Black art is, it is difficult to understand the place of *post-black* in the arts or other fields. Furthermore, it negates the artists in previous generations who possessed characteristics similar to those of the artists labeled *post-black* today. For this reason, I believe *post-soul* is a more accurate description of the cultural works of the early twenty-first century and the contemporary African American experience. It can encompass all cultural works within the movement, not merely those considered fine art. It also creates a contrast with the preceding generation that does not rule out blackness as important to *post-soul* artists.

George eloquently explains that those of the *post-soul* era are recipients of the advancements their parents and grandparents fought for during the 1950s and 1960s. Because of the Civil Rights generation, many of their children live a life their elders did not—a life of full integration—which allows access to higher education and higher-paying jobs. Integration has led to material wealth for a larger proportion of the Black population of America than ever before. Additionally, these children are free to follow their own social and cultural philosophies, which George categorizes as b-boy, bap, buppie, and boho perspectives.\(^9\) Equally important to social climbing and freedom of

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\(^9\) George defines each of these personas in general terms. B-boy is a term that originally identified break dancers and expanded to include hip-hop fans who were deeply involved in hip-hop culture. Baps means "Black American princess or prince" and is the worldly, stylish, financially well-off person. Bohos are
expression is the vast change in musical and performative expression among younger Blacks—hip-hop.

Black music, and for that matter Black American cultural expression, is born from struggle and oppression. The birth of hip-hop is no different as it grew from the frustration of Black and Puerto Rican youth and young adults of the Bronx, New York. The Bronx provided the pioneers of the music, and the lifestyle, fertile material. In rap, layered with party music is a social critique that, arguably, was much more explicit and direct than earlier Black music.\(^\text{10}\) To be sure, there were predecessors who paved the way for today’s artists, including Marvin Gaye, Nina Simone, and Billie Holiday. However, what distinguishes hip-hop artists from their predecessors is this explicitness. The critiques presented in hip-hop are not from the old and wise but the young and streetwise, consciously aware and consciously angry about their own and many of their peers’ social situation: poverty, crime-ridden neighborhoods, and police brutality. Hip-hop, to invoke activist rapper Chuck D, is Black America’s CNN.\(^\text{11}\) What Chuck D meant was that rap, and by extension hip-hop, provided a window into the lives of many disenfranchised Blacks in the United States. Though the dominant themes of top selling rappers have moved away from socially conscious roots to music about material wealth and sexual

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\(^{10}\) The difference between hip-hop and the other Black music genres is the directness with which the practitioners comment and criticize everything from sex to politics. The music while continuing linguistic traditions of indirection also leaves not much to the imagination.

\(^{11}\) This quote has been quoted in a number of iterations: “rap is the CNN for Black people,” “rap is the CNN of Black America.” One source quotes Chuck D as saying “Rap, for Black America, is like our CNN.” See “Chuck D” by David Thorpe in Bomb Magazine <http://bombsite.com/issues/68/articles/2251> accessed 26 May 2012.
conquests, the early art and some current non-commercial music serve as inspiration for
the artists who are my focus here.

In addition to their post-soul affiliation, I contend it is in the context of this
history—the explicitness of hip-hip culture—that Pinder, Chappelle, and McGruder’s
work should be understood. The importance of popular music and visual culture to each
artist’s work is often ignored by scholars. Exploring these links to other modes of
expression and communication serves as a loose framework for my research. I use the
term “loose” because the artists and their works defy rigid definition, just as concepts like
post-soul and post-black do.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of post-soul art is the interrogation of identity
and blackness within a global context, expanding what it means to be Black. This is
significant because, like some artists and comedians working during the 1960s such as
Sam Gilliam, William T. Williams, and Dick Gregory, Pinder, Chappelle, and McGruder
identify themselves as artists who happen to be Black. Yet, much of their work is about
blackness.12 In the 1960s, Gilliam, Williams, and Gregory worked towards diversifying
monolithic definitions of blackness and what was expected from Black artists and
entertainers. For instance, painters Gilliam and Williams work in a style of abstraction
which at the time—the late 1950s and into the 1960s—went against hegemonic notions
of representational subject matter as well as established notions within the Black art
community of what defines “Black art.” Abstraction countered the rigid definition of
Black art as figurative and representational. The artists also chose the style because they

12 Artists Sam Gilliam and William T. Williams are abstract artists whose works do not explicitly depict
blackness.
connected with its formal aspects—composition, color, and form—in addition to the freedom it offered to create works that did not explicitly represent their blackness. It also allowed them not to compromise or mask their political and cultural sense of themselves as Black by painting representational works consistent with the white-dominated canon of art history.

Until the 1950s, figurative and representational art served as the dominant style of Black art, primarily because earlier artists presented “recognizable” tropes of blackness. The most identifiable trope is the Black body. Prior to the 1950s, artists deliberately focused on representation and figuration, not merely to be current with artistic trends, but to establish African Americans as human beings and to render them in a humane way. Such artists worked in opposition to the popular stereotypes rampant in American visual and material culture, particularly in advertising. To be sure, the fine arts also showed Black people in stereotypical roles such as servants and happy slaves. However, visual and material culture reached a larger audience because of the mass production of images. With images of Black bodies continually presented within white America as grotesque, with exaggerated physical features in less than humane conditions, Black artists presented an alternate view, a three-dimensional view of African Americans. Some of this imagery included painting of the interiors of African American homes, portraits, and bustling views of urban life and rural life. In the first half of the twentieth century, art by Black artists portrayed African Americans in the same ways that whites were portrayed. This was the point of the images.

It should be noted that Gilliam and Williams were not the first Black artists to paint abstractly. From the early twentieth-century onward, artists like Jacob Lawrence
and Romare Bearden employed abstract elements of composition, color, and form but did not completely abandon representation. Perhaps one of the most notable Black Abstractionists who did was Norman Lewis.

Norman Lewis (1909-1979) was a participant in the New York School of Abstract Expressionism. Lewis moved from realistic works to abstraction in the late 1940s because he felt the strong vein of realism as well as the insistence on using African art as an influence in African American art limited his identity. Lewis was an integral member of the emerging group of Black artists who aimed to show African American identity is heterogenous. Lewis’s departure from representation coincides with the transition from uplift as a cultural movement to the civil rights era which focused not only equality but also defining one’s identity on one’s own terms.

Like Lewis, Gilliam and Williams did not want their art to be narrowly defined as African American art because of their African ancestry. This is the intellectual and philosophical lineage which the post-soul artists like Jefferson Pinder, Dave Chappelle, and Aaron McGruder carried forward into more diverse media and genres of art. However, they returned to representational art as well—though it was far from the Black art of the past.

Some artists and scholars may argue that Pinder, Chappelle, and McGruder are no different from artists of the Black Renaissance or Africobra\(^\text{13}\) in challenging racism;

\(^{13}\) Africobra is an artist group that formed during the late 1960s in response to the Black Arts Movement. Founded by Jeff Donaldson, the group wanted to create art that spoke to being Black. They looked to ancient Egyptian and African aesthetics as inspiration, incorporating the rhythms and colors of African textile and sculpture to their art. The improvisational nature of Jazz figures prominently in their compositions. Although their work was abstract the dominance of motifs associated with these sources signaled their Afrocentric stance.
however, what makes their work different is the addition of whiteness to the range of subjects they examine. Whereas the earlier movements opposed white domination by focusing on Black humanity and Black power, post-soul artists address the common denominator of racism and the ways that the privileges that derive from being white actually operate. By including whiteness in their personal investigations into who they are and what their blackness means, the artists expand the discourse about race while exposing the continuing prevalence of institutionalized racism in American society fifty years after Civil Rights legislation aimed to end it.

The Artists

Mixed media artist Jefferson Pinder was born in 1970 in the Washington, DC area and was raised in the suburb Silver Spring, Maryland. Both of his parents were professionals. His father worked for the DC government, writing speeches and his mother was a schoolteacher. Pinder earned a bachelor of arts in theatre in 1993 and a master of fine arts in painting and mixed media in 2003, both from the University of Maryland.

Drawing inspiration from Romare Bearden, Pinder began his art career creating collages that reflected the social and economic conditions that persist in urban communities and their effects on Black culture. In his more recent works, this focus continues in his installations, performances, and video art.

Pinder combines his theatre skills with knowledge of art, history, literature, and love of music and film to explore race. He pulls from “high” and “low” culture to have us
think outside of ourselves and to consider how we can change what we think we know in order to create a better community—a global community.

Dave Chappelle was born on August 24, 1973 to college professors William David Chappelle III and Yvonee Seon. Chappelle's father taught at Antioch College in Ohio and his mother was a professor at Howard University and the University of Maryland. After his parents divorced, Chappelle spent summers in Ohio with his father and the rest of the year in Silver Spring, Maryland.

As a child, Chappelle knew he wanted to be a comedian after watching Bill Cosby on The Cosby Show. Chappelle's inspirations include Mel Blanc (the voice of Bugs Bunny), Richard Pryor, Eddie Murphy, Martin Lawrence, and Chris Rock. Determined to become a comedian, Chappelle set out on the DC comedy circuit while he was still a teenager. 14

After graduating from DC's renowned Duke Ellington School of Arts in 1991 with a specialization in theatre arts, Chappelle decided to forgo college and headed to New York City to begin a professional career in comedy. While in New York, making the rounds on the comedy circuit, Chappelle began a film career starring in Mel Brooks's Robin Hood: Men in Tights (1993), Undercover Blues (1993), and Nutty Professor (1996). He was also in Half Baked (1998) and You've Got Mail (1998) among several others. Although Chappelle made films, he continued to hone his comedic skills on the stage, which led to the creation and success of his television sketch comedy show

Chappelle's Show.


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Chappelle's Show debuted on the television network Comedy Central in 2003. The show parodied all aspects of American culture, from the accuracy of history to how race shapes our perceptions. In Chappelle's Show as well as his stage acts, Chappelle's humor was a biting commentary on life. No one is immune from becoming the butt of Chappelle's jokes; he makes fun of everyone, challenging social labels and stereotypes. Once you get past the joke, you realize that Chappelle is doing more than just making you laugh. His comedy calls attention to the complexities of our humanity in a direct, in your face manner.

Comic artist Aaron McGruder was born on the South Side of Chicago, Illinois on May 29, 1974. McGruder was six years old when his father accepted a job with the National Transportation Safety Board and the family moved to Columbia, Maryland. From seventh to ninth grade, McGruder attended a Catholic school, which he described as "a very strict, very, very white Jesuit school." During this time, he discovered the British comedy group Monty Python, which influenced his work. In the tenth grade, McGruder transferred to a public high school where he hung out with Black kids for the first time. As a teenager, he listened to politically conscious rappers like Public Enemy, XClan, and KRS-One. The music helped to shape his political views, which are clearly exhibited in his comic strip and television series The Boondocks.

After high school, McGruder attended University of Maryland, where he majored in Afro-American Studies. At the end of 1996, McGruder began publishing The

16 McGrath.
Boondocks in the campus newspaper The Diamondback. In 1999, he signed a syndication deal with Universal Press Syndicate and the strip debuted in one hundred and sixty newspapers.\textsuperscript{17} By the end of 2006, The Boondocks ran in over three hundred newspapers.

While working on the strip, McGruder began developing an animated television show. Sony bought the rights but the deal fell through and the Cartoon Network purchased the rights for their Adult Swim programming.\textsuperscript{18} The television version, The Boondocks, debuted in 2005. McGruder stopped creating the daily strip in 2006 so he could focus on the television series.

Demonstrating a militant Black consciousness, McGruder critiques African American culture and political issues of the day. He does not hide his political leanings and everyone is fair game, from politicians to Black cultural icons. His satire pulls from influences which include comic strip artist Garry Trudeau, comedian Chris Rock, and rap music. McGruder uses two young boys to question the current state of blackness in America. Like Chappelle, McGruder uses comedy to take some of the sting off of his message. Although the commentary can be difficult to take, because the truth hurts, McGruder's work, like Pinder's and Chappelle's, shares a goal of wanting a better society for all, especially for Black Americans.

Why these Men?

\textsuperscript{17} McGrath.
\textsuperscript{18} McGrath. Adult Swim is adult-oriented cartoons produced for the Cartoon Network. Much of the television programs include nudity, profanity, violence, sex, among other adult situations. The Adult Swim block of programming is schedule from 9:00 pm to 5:30 am. The Boondocks is part of this programming because of the use of nigga in the show.
Like my choice of the title Real Talk, the grouping of these three men may seem odd. What do a comedian, mixed-media performance artist, and a comic/cartoon artist have in common? Perhaps not much on the surface except that they are Black males and, as I have already pointed out, aspire to improve and complicate the American racial climate. However, there is much more below the surface. All grew up in or around Washington, DC. In addition to being part of the hip-hop/post-soul generation, they grew up in middle-class families where education was a major factor in their personal and professional development.

These shared characteristics-- space, place, culture, class, and education-- are significant in connection to “Chocolate City” and its surrounding suburbs. Space and place are two key factors that help shape how we experience and navigate race. Where one grew up, geographically, and where one lives as an adult influence thoughts about race and identity. This place, consciously or unconsciously, contributes to racial formation.

It is difficult to live in an area dubbed “Chocolate City,” due to its Black population majority, and not have your identity, as a person of African descent affected. This is not always explicit when talking, thinking and interrogating race; however it is important for understanding cultural workers who create works that examine the complexities of race. It is certainly important in my analysis of Jefferson Pinder, Dave Chappelle, and Aaron McGruder.

Each man came of age during the height of DC’s transformation into “Murder City” as well as “Chocolate City.” They grew up in a DC where crack was the drug of choice in the 80s and DC government was predominantly Black. I contend that growing
up in DC during this era of African American dominance is culturally, socially, and politically critical to how each artist works through race and informs the cultural output of all three.

Another important reason I selected these men is my previous work on Black masculinity. Black men, even in the twenty-first century, continue to fight popular perceptions. The (mis)perceptions of Black men include stereotypes and caricatures such as gangstas, ballers, and rappers. Additionally, the criminal, player and pimp are strong images in American visual and popular culture as blaxploitation films make clear. American popular culture does not present a diverse view of Black men. Rarely do we see images of Black men who are educated and successful in the classroom and boardroom; instead we see them dunking basketballs and running for the endzone. Rarely do we see images of Black men caring for their families and children; instead, we see them ducking and dodging parental responsibility on the Maury Show.¹⁹ Rarely do we see Black men in conversation about the state of their communities; instead, we see them surrounded by scantily clad women in music videos.

Unfortunately, in American visual culture, images of Black men are too often one-dimensional. By examining three consciously aware Black men and their contributions to understanding race and racism, and to transforming our culture more broadly, I hope to illuminate the diversity of Black men. Like the artists discussed here, I also hope to emphasize that Black men have much more depth than the shallow stereotypes that we encounter, on a daily basis. It is important to give the Black male

¹⁹ The Maury Show is a daytime television talk show that went from focusing on relatable topics like health and relationships to an almost exclusive focus on DNA paternity testing. Black men are the vast majority of the paternity testing subjects.
perspective a space, an intellectual space. For this reason, my focus on Black men is decidedly purposeful.

Framing Questions

The overarching question shaping this study is how do Chappelle, McGruder, and Pinder examine race in their work? Although this question may appear straightforward, the answer is complicated because of the artists’ individual identities, the fields they work in, and their respective projects. A related question is: How do these artists go about elevating the race conversation in American to include the invisible, the unmarked and the supposedly universal, which is the essence of white privilege? Very often, when we talk about race people identified as the Other or non-white receive the burden of the discourse. As W.E.B. Du Bois pointed out long ago in *The Souls of Black Folk*, this burden consists of being viewed as the problem for white people as well as the reason for their status at the top of the racial hierarchy in the United States.²⁰ By placing the burden on non-whites, much of the discourse can avoid addressing how whites and whiteness contribute to the hierarchal system of race which is the actual problem. White people and their normativity are essential to the conversation and to exposing and challenging racism. In this way, post-soul artists of African descent examine blackness and whiteness to try to insert balance into the race conversation. Other “othered” groups are part of this conversation, but experientially, for Black artists, Black-white dualism remains central. I

use balance loosely because in works about race, marginality, and otherness, balance is rarely achieved.

How does investigating and incorporating whiteness into racial discourse broaden the discussion about race and inequality? With whiteness added to the racial equation, can race finally be viewed as fluid and not monolithic? In what forms can identities exist without the dominant-marginal structure that formerly organized racial categories? These questions also frame the examination of race in my dissertation. I suggest that the cultural workers of the post-soul generation are extending late twentieth-century academic discussions about race by challenging popular ideas of blackness and openly investigating whiteness.

Another commonality among the artists is that each works in white, male dominated media and culture industries—the visual arts, television, and graphic arts. I contend that by consciously choosing to work in those fields, when now, more than in the past, other options are available, the artists' make their blackness visible in contexts where they are in the unique position of interrogating whiteness as well as their blackness. Since their media choices are situated in white, male dominated forums, who is the audience for their works about race? If the audience is identifiable, how does this affect the message? Do the media dictate the audience? I would argue that these works of art, which come from Black minds, are directed toward a predominantly white audiences. Thus, we can view their work as strategies designed to affect white consciousness of race.

**Theoretical Framework/Methodology**
Pinder, Chappelle, and McGruder create works that entertain while educating their audiences on the complexity of racial identity, and ultimately humanity. Race is a complex system that many people simply do not understand. Race is not about biology. It is about social and cultural ideas that support oppressing those different from the dominant group. The artists, like any great educators, meet audiences on their level, hooking them in through their respective aesthetic choices of comedy, visual art, and comic art. Once the audience is engaged, the lesson begins, sometimes subtly and sometimes directly.

With the melding of African American traditions, American history, popular culture, and creativity, the artists create rich, multivalent works that leave a legacy of commentary for future generations. Pinder, Chappelle, and McGruder share this and much more. They share what bell hooks has termed a love of blackness.21 This love of blackness, which she defines as a political stance, allows for both constructive criticism of African Americans and constructive criticism of a system that is maintained to keep African Americans in inferior status. By examining both African Americans and the power structure in an effort to better our society, the love of blackness works to collapse rigid racial categories.

Race has shaped American culture since the arrival of the first Africans in the New World. Race is an ambiguous term and scholars differ about its meaning but agree that it is a socially constructed, complex, and a modern concept. Thomas Holt stresses the ambivalence of the term, claiming that race is not one thing but bound up with socio-

21 bell hooks, Black Looks: Race and Representation (Boston, South End Press, 1992), 29.
cultural constructions such as sex, gender, class, and economics. John Hope Franklin explicates the socio-cultural constructions connected with race and African Americans in his scholarship, demonstrating that race and racism are institutionalized in our society:

By the middle of the twentieth century, the color line was as well defined and as firmly entrenched as any institution in the land. After all, it was older than most institutions, including the federal government itself. More important, it informed the content and shaped the lives of those institutions and the people who lived under them.

Like Holt, Franklin argues that race contributes to educational and public policies and government mandates, all of which affect our lives.

Anthropologist Audrey Smedley sifts through the many meanings of race in an effort to understand what race is and how it contributes to and shapes racism. Smedley traces the origins of race from a global perspective from the seventeenth century to the present. Smedley defines race as a worldview, a "cosmological ordering system that divides the world's people into what are thought to be biologically discrete and exclusive groups." In this definition, race is a marker for difference in human physical traits and personal characteristics. Smedley contends that this difference—the physical, visible difference—is only one aspect of race. Here I use Smedley's definition coupled with Franklin's and W.E.B. Du Bois's arguments about the ways in which socio-cultural issues are bound to race as my racial framework.

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Race prejudice is deeply rooted in U.S civilization. Smedley draws from Stephen Jay Gould's scholarship. Gould investigated eugenicists' claims that non-whites were biologically inferior, and, hence, naturally located at the bottom of the social and cultural ladder. This biological determinism, Gould explains, is "the notion that people at the bottom are constructed of intrinsically inferior material." This notion justified racial prejudice against Blacks in America because white male scientists, the superior group, "scientifically" proved it. Gould identified the fallacies in the scientific experiments that supposedly produced this "proof" while exposing that science is not objective but racially biased.

I define racism as asserting innate biological, ethnic, and cultural characteristics of a specific group of people in order to categorize them as different. These differences are used to label people in terms of superiority versus inferiority, and thus provide justification for dominating those deemed different by those doing the labeling. My definition also draws on the works of George Fredrickson and Michael Omi. Fredrickson defines racism as:

not merely an attitude or set of beliefs; it also expresses itself in the practices, institutions, and structures that a sense of deep difference justifies or validates. Racism, therefore, is more than theorizing about human differences or thinking badly of a group over which one has no control. It either directly sustains or proposes to establish a racial order, a permanent group hierarchy that is believed to reflect the laws of nature or the decrees of God.  

Smedley and Fredrickson both see racism as flexible. Their emphasis on the global history of racism is important because the artists I discuss, although they focus on the

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United States, strive to expand interrogation of the notions of blackness and especially whiteness in a global fashion consistent with the global reach of media in the twenty-first century.

Michael Omi sums up one important way that the artists also view and interrogate racism: "unconscious racial privilege and representation in daily life and popular culture." Omi demonstrates that racism changes over time, just as racial representations shift through time.

Bound with socio-cultural politics, representation is a complex term, particularly when it comes to race, ethnicities, gender, and sexuality. With a history dating back at least to Plato, there are several schools of thought concerning the concept of representation. These consider what it is, what it means, and how it functions in society. The politics of representations are further complicated when representations are produced and received as empirically accurate, transparent, or authentic depictions of reality. Richard Dyer explores the connection between production and reception in his work on representation, claiming that the accuracy of an image depends on who is producing and receiving it and the "way of seeing the world that serves particular social interests." Hanna Pitkin and Walter Benjamin examine the connections between production and socio-political issues in their work as well. For Pitkin, the production of representation is connected to one of three basic types of representation, the first of which is standing for. Pitkin defines standing for as representation that relates to humans and objects that are

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either descriptive or symbolic. She explains that it "brings with it a corresponding notion of activity, the making of a descriptive representation or the creation of a symbol." The concept of standing for or standing in for something else is at the core of representations which deal with race, and the framework from which scholars Stuart Hall, Gayatri Spivak, bell hooks, and Kobena Mercer situate their work on race, representation, and otherness.

In regards to politics, Dyer invokes Benjamin's concerns about the politics of representation in his seminal essay about art, technology, and reproduction, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." Benjamin outlines technological advances in the visual arts such that representations in the form of images of works of art are linked with the politics of class distinctions. Benjamin argued that technological advancement in the arts broke or blurred class structures because reproductions of art works became widely available. At the same time, the aura of an original increased through contrast between its uniqueness and the mass reproductions. Thus, while reproductions helped to democratize access to art on one level, elite access to the original and its aura became even more privileged. In this sense, how a representation is produced and disseminated profoundly affects the audience and how they may interpret the representation.

Several scholars address representation as an underlying concept influencing long-lasting ideas about race, and for this dissertation, blackness and whiteness. A

29 Pitkin’s research expands upon Thomas Hobbes’ framework for political representation,
primary concern about racial representations is how they present homogenous, fixed views of heterogeneous groups of people and ideas. Stuart Hall explains this as "reducing the cultures of Black people to Nature, or naturalizing difference...if [differences] are natural...then they are beyond history, permanent, and fixed."  

Hall's position is intertwined with politics and power, aspects of representation Gayatri Spivak and bell hooks examine. The power of who is creating and speaking for the presented group is essential to understanding racial representations because mediation is involved in what is seen and who sees it.

These scholars, as am I, are most interested in investigating the political and cultural stakes of representation and race. If representations ultimately derive from widely shared ideas, what are the artists exploring, promoting or challenging in their representations and re-representations? As bell hooks states, the image is not about good or bad but about "transforming...creating alternatives, asking ourselves questions about what types of images subvert, pose critical alternatives, and transform our worldviews and move us away from dualistic thinking about good and bad."  

In addition to considering the work that images do, outside of the duality of good and bad, how the audience or viewer reads an image is important, and a significant theme in my work.

Another focus of the dissertation is the interrelatedness of art forms that are usually treated as discrete. Michael Baxandall's book Painting and Experience in

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*Fifteenth-Century Italy* (1972) was one of the first art historical investigations to highlight the importance of examining artists across media. His main argument is that the customer or patron played an important role in the process of painting. Baxandall examined letters and contracts between the painter and his patron to establish that patrons determined a shift in the kinds of paintings created during the period. For example, Baxandall states, “the diminishing role of gold in paintings is part of a general movement in western Europe at this time towards a kind of selective inhibition about display.” The shift in attitudes regarding materials and colors used in a work thus stemmed from a change in societal attitudes.  

What this means is that the patronizing public—those that supported the artists, including the Church, monarchs, and business men—helped to determine what kind of product the artist would produce. Further, therefore, patrons wanted art they could recognize as part of their experiential world. By consulting dance instruction manuals from the period, Baxandall showed that the painter Botticelli incorporated popular dances and dance steps into the poses of his figures and set them in motion to the popular music of the time so that figures in the painting performed the same dances that patrons themselves were learning from the manuals.

Baxandall explains that the patron also brought specific sensibilities to the images in what he calls “the period eye.” He identifies three characteristics of the “eye” that artists of the period were aware of with regard to their patrons’ way of looking. These characteristics are an understanding that the painter’s skill is an expectation; that the picture is sensitive to a myriad of interpretative skills that the viewer brings to it; and

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that there are a number of assumptions and kinds of information known to patrons projected onto the image.\(^{36}\) Indeed, Baxandall states that the painter's real training focused "not on paintings but on things more immediate to his well-being and social survival."\(^{37}\)

Although Baxandall is looking at the patron class of the fifteenth-century, and not the lay viewer or audience, his work is relevant to Chappelle, Pinder, and McGruder because the patronizing class, even in the case of Pinder whose presumed audience is mainly the art elite, includes the lay viewer. This is because of the particular media each artist works in: television, video, and comics. Today, everyone encounters these media in one way or another. Moreover, because of the media that they know well, the audience engages the work differently than if it was a fifteenth-century painting, yet at the same time views the work with its own "period eye." Similarly, the artists I discuss are also educated in things immediate to their well-being and survival because they must gain and maintain access to the mass media forms they use. Their choice in media speaks to their skill in conveying a message about the audience's world by leading the viewer's eye towards particular readings of their respective works.

Baxandall also notes the variation within the patronizing group—that these men are not all the same. The commonality of the group, which is also very much relevant to twenty-first century audiences, is that "some of the mental equipment a man orders his visual experience with is variable, and much of this variable equipment is culturally relative, in the sense of being determined by the society which has influenced his

\(^{36}\) Baxandall, 34-35.
\(^{37}\) Baxandall, 37.
experience." The varied experiences of everyone involved in visual culture makes the reading of specific visual works all the more interesting as we will see. Pinder, Chappelle, and McGruder also work for different "patrons" and for audiences for whom race and identity order "variable equipment" for visual experience.

Baxandall states of the artist that "his public's visual capacity must be his medium." This statement is a strong one in that it subverts the idea that an image is just that, an image, or even a work of "art" remote from the world in which it was created. Rather, the image is a part of social life, which the artist must stage or manage on canvas. For twenty-first century works and their artists, the creator is and has to be just as aware of his public and their ability to react to, interpret, and understand the works of art put in front of them, and this awareness in turn helps to shape the work. For the artists in my research, while the audience and what they may know are factors, what the audience may not know is also a factor because American racial hierarchy has also shaped sectors of the audience whose visual experiences are quite different. Pinder, Chappelle, and McGruder each recognize this directly yet gently push the viewer's capacity in order for them to receive the message more fully.

Terminology

Several terms used throughout my study are loaded and have multiple meanings, depending on the context in which they are used. Performance, performance art, popular

38 Baxandall, 40.  
39 Baxandall, 40.
*culture* and *mass art* are terms that need clarification from the outset in order to not confuse the reader. Because of the nature of my research—African American visual culture—African American theory frames my work. In addition, I incorporate theories from the larger fields of performance and cultural studies.

Roger D. Abrahams's definition of performance provides valuable grounding for how I look at the works under consideration. In *Talking Black*, which examines Black English, Abrahams defines Black performance as an important aspect of Black linguistic practices and expressive behavior. He sees performance as the ability to affect onlookers and draw audience participation.  

40 Abrahams, 9.

The Black performer "does not try to astound the audience...he attempts in some way to establish a dialog with them."  

41 Abrahams, 9.

This characteristic is an important aspect to Pinder, Chappelle, and McGruder as their works and performances are about dialogues: dialogues about working past racism.

As Abrahams works through a definition of performance, he distinguishes between Euro-American (white) performance and Black performance. Of white performance he says "performance to an Euro-American audience is regarded as a thing, to be judged in terms of integrity, verisimilitude and control over media." In contrast, Abrahams defines Black performance as "not a thing but an aspect of an interactional process, and that process is likely to be regarded as co-terminous with life itself."  

42 Abrahams, 9.

Abrahams aptly describes the differences between performances in Black and white communities. White performances, especially in the art world, are things rather than experiences, although there are always exceptions. When considering the works of

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41 Abrahams, 9.
42 Abrahams, 9.
Pinder, Chappelle, and McGruder, they are, whether explicitly or implicitly, working within the tradition of Black performance, particularly because their work deals with experiences of being Black in America as well as the experiences of their audiences. The key to these artists and Black performers is “to bring about an experience in which not only [the artist’s] creative energies but the vitality of others many find expression.”

According to Richard Schechner, performance “exists only as actions, interactions, and relationships.” He distinguishes between “as” performance and “is” performance. “As” performance is an event, action or behavior, whereas an “is” performance refers to a definite, bounded event marked by context. These boundaries, he admits, are often blurred.

Performance art involves “is” performances of a particular type. The art form is a combination of actions that inform an experience with a conceptual idea. Performance art has a history dating from the late 1960s, with 1970 as the benchmark for its institutionalization as a recognized form in the art world. Like many cultural forms, the meaning of performance art has shifted during its forty-plus years.

In the early days of the form, Robyn Brentano described performance art as “the ephemeral, time-based, and process-oriented work of conceptual (‘body’) and feminist artists that was emerging at the time.” Feminist artists responding to the civil and social

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43 Abrahams, 9.
45 Schechner, 42.
47 Robyn Brentano, Outside the Frame, quoted in Richard Schechner’s Performance Studies: An Introduction, 137.
movements of the late 1960s, particularly the feminist movement, created performance art that critiqued social constructions of femininity.\textsuperscript{48} What defined the form was the ideology that "the personal is the political" and that "identity is constructed, not given, contested, not settled, historically and politically evolving, not fixed in 'nature.'"\textsuperscript{49} Feminist artists were challenging paternalistic ideals of womanhood by building upon the reconstructions of identity spurred by the Civil Rights Movement.

An innovation of performance art was the shift away from typical venues such as theaters and performance halls to roof tops, beaches, sidewalks, galleries, and other atypical spaces.\textsuperscript{50} Though Schechner argues that performance art was not developed for a general audience, considering the public locations of the spaces used, the work reached a general audience, whether artists intended to or not.\textsuperscript{51} Additionally, performance art's use of the "individual artists...own selves—bodies, psyches, notebooks, experiences—as material"\textsuperscript{52} added to its avant-garde status.

Britta B. Wheeler, in an essay about the institutionalization of performance art, provides a more nuanced account. She defines it as an "interdisciplinary form of cultural production that serves as an indicator of cultural and social mores in late-twentieth-century U.S. culture."\textsuperscript{53} The interdisciplinary nature of performance art includes the use of theater, dance, music, photography, and video as well as the incorporation of a number of theoretical and literature sources. As a subset of conceptual art, an art form based more

\textsuperscript{48} Schechner, 137.
\textsuperscript{49} Schechner, 137.
\textsuperscript{50} Schechner, 139.
\textsuperscript{51} Although Schechner states this, he does not explain why. Wheeler explains that performance art's early audiences were artists and gradually included a more general audience as the form moved to become a more democratic art. This democratization began with the institutionalization of the form.
\textsuperscript{52} Schechner, 139.
\textsuperscript{53} Wheeler, 491.
on ideas than aesthetic products, performance art fuses form and ideas with the goal of moving art into a more democratic environment.

Utilizing Pierre Bourdieu’s work on art and culture, Wheeler explains that avant-garde artists denied “the importance of insitutions of art, claiming instead an alliance with an idealized working class against the status quo of bourgeois society.” Within the avant-garde, again drawing upon Bourdieu, Wheeler identifies two groups of performance artists: bohemian and consecrated. The difference between the bohemian and consecrated artists is that the bohemian artist is young, poor, and unknown while consecrated artists are well-known and successful. Among this group, the bohemian performance artists “resist market-based determinants...to remain ‘autonomous.’ They reasserted the value of art outside the normative economic logic and continue to define art as something other than commodity.”

Like performance, popular culture and mass culture are terms are used in different ways. During the late 1940s into the 1950s, scholars looked to theorize the rise of culture that moved outside of the fine arts and the elite, to the working class and “uneducated.” Trying to understand the rapid growth of popular forms, Theodor Adorno wrote about mass culture in an essay about how to look at television. Adorno argued that mass culture touches all people, all classes and that “mass culture, if not sophisticated, must at least be up to date—that is to say, ‘realistic,’ or posing as realistic—in order to meet the

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54 Wheeler, 492.
55 Wheeler, 492.
expectations of a supposedly disillusioned, alert, and hard-boiled audience."\textsuperscript{57} Here, what Adorno is saying is that the works within mass culture should be relatable to the audience, regardless of their attentiveness to the medium. Within his argument, the following quote is especially important to understanding mass culture: “mass media also consists of various levels or meanings superimposed on one another, all of which contribute to the effect” of integration into mass culture.\textsuperscript{58} Adorno stresses that meanings associated with mass media help not only its integration into culture but also its acceptance by the audience. Essentially, Adorno is saying there is more to the media than what lies on the surface. “The hidden message may be more important than the overt, since this hidden message will escape the controls of consciousness, will not be ‘looked through,’ will not be warded off by sales resistance, but is likely to sink into the spectator’s mind.”\textsuperscript{59}

Adorno’s theoretical framework is helpful but it also demonstrates the problem of terminology because he uses mass culture and mass media interchangeably. Because artists like Pinder, Chappelle, and Magruder home in racial difference, their work challenges the notion of mass culture as undifferentiated whole. However, for my purposes his explication of mass media serves as a foundation for understanding and defining popular culture which can expose fissures as well as commonalities in its audience.

Lawrence Levine’s work on popular culture connects it with folk culture and thus is very helpful not only in framing popular culture in general but also Black popular culture in particular. He explains in “The Folklore of Industrial Society: Popular Culture

\textsuperscript{57} Adorno, 139.
\textsuperscript{58} Adorno, 141.
\textsuperscript{59} Adorno, 141.
and Its Audiences” that critics of popular culture state it was “created—often artificially by people with pecuniary or ideological motives—for the community, or rather for the masses who no longer had an organic community capable of producing culture.”

However, this line of thinking does not take into account that the people creating popular culture come from communities themselves and incorporate aspects of their specific culture into the media. Additionally, according to Levine, the critics believe that popular culture is not a reflection of the consumer but that it reflects the producer’s consciousness. Although this is case, on the surface, much of what makes up popular culture is what the audience thinks or feels mediated back to them through familiar modes of representation. Granted, popular culture does not reflect everyone’s point of view, but there is something for everyone to connect to, which is why popular culture is worth studying. Levine argues that “popular culture functions in ways similar to folk culture and acts as a form of folklore for people living in urban industrial societies, and thus can be used to reconstruct people’s attitudes, values, and reactions.”

While this way of constructing popular culture may not be dominant in the academy, Levine’s view fits comfortably with American Studies way of thinking of popular culture is a “text” that we can use to understand American culture.

Levine defines popular culture as “culture that is popular; culture that is widely accessible and widely accepted; widely disseminated, and widely viewed or heard or read.” He states that it is also mass culture because of its distribution through

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61 Levine, 1372.
62 Levine, 1373.
centralized outlets, such as national magazines, Hollywood production studios, publishing houses, syndicated newspapers, and media outlets. However, Levine makes clear that not all mass-produced media was or is popular.

In Levine’s estimation, the audience determines what is popular, and thus determines popular culture. He says “in every popular genre, audiences distinguished between what they found meaningful, appealing, and functional and what they did not.” Levine offers an alternative to the argument that audiences are passive consumers of culture. His formulation supports his identification of popular culture with folk culture as popular culture is born of a community with specific audiences consuming it. As Levine states “artistic expression is neither detached from the world around it nor just a ‘reflection’ of the world…it is an inseparable part of the larger world, one of the fundamental forms of communication and expression people engage in and depend on.”

In this respect, Levine concurs with Baxandall that art is not separate from, but rather part of society, with “community” situated for Levine more or less where “patron” and “period eye” fit into cultural production for Baxandall. Levine’s statement drives not only expressive culture but also my research. Many scholars overlook the value of artistic expression, in whatever form it takes. Nothing is created in a vacuum, whether it is history, literature or popular culture: all are important to remember when analyzing popular culture created by Black Americans.

Understanding Black popular culture is essential to understanding the context in which Pinder, Chappelle, and McGruder create their works. Though their works have

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63 Levine, 1373.
64 Levine, 1373.
65 Levine, 1375.
crossed over into mass culture, they are also part of a Black cultural tradition that should not be overlooked. The distinguishing factor between mainstream popular culture and Black popular culture is that Black pop culture was and still continues to come out of a place of racial struggle—struggle for equality, struggle for freedom of expression, and struggle to be Black in America.

As Blacks create popular culture which becomes more widely disseminated, particularly in white American cultural spaces, a critical framework is needed to put the work into a larger contextual history. Cultural critic Michele Wallace worked to create this critical space with her symposium “Black Popular Culture,” which resulted in a publication of the papers presented at the event. Black Popular Culture: A Project by Michele Wallace, edited by Gina Dent, offers a number of ways to examine popular culture created by Blacks.

Stuart Hall presented a paper “What is this ‘Black’ in Black Popular Culture?” in which he discussed how culture shapes our lives and defines popular culture as the experiences of the producers and consumers:

[P]opular culture always has its base in the experiences, the pleasures, the memories, the traditions of the people. It has connections with local hopes and local aspirations, local tragedies and local scenarios that are the everyday practices and the everyday experiences of ordinary folks.66

In Hall’s assessment, popular culture is a window onto everyday people and their lives. This counters the argument that popular culture has no roots within the larger population and acts as a vehicle for the producers’ agendas. Popular culture is a “site of alternative

traditions.” Because of this, Hall argues that “the dominant tradition has always been deeply suspicious of it.” bell hooks agrees that the margins—non dominant spaces—are spaces of creativity and power.

Hall continues:

the role of the ‘popular’ in popular culture is to fix the authenticity of popular forms, rooting them in the experiences of popular communities from which they draw their strength, allowing us to see them as expressive of a particular subordinate social life that resists its being constantly made over as low and outside.

Hall’s claim that the use of popular media authenticates certain forms also connects with folk culture which is also often considered a marginal or inferior form of art that, because of its community base, lacks the innovation the art market ascribes to the individual artists it markets as “cutting edge.” Authentication of a particular art form itself has more to do with the dominant group’s acceptance than the form itself. In this sense, “folk” and “popular” are much alike when the cultural context of the work is connected to specific communities outside of the mainstream.

Hall also connects popular culture to the economic system of commodification: “control over narratives and representations passes into the hands of the established cultural bureaucracies.” Like all art works, popular culture it is not divorced from capital. Hall’s statement is especially significant when considering works by people of African descent as there is a continuous history of exploitation of art created within the community and appropriated by “cultural bureaucracies” for wider distribution and profit.

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67 Hall, 25.
69 Hall, 26.
70 Hall, 26.
Perhaps most important is Hall’s view of Black popular culture as a “site of strategic contestation,” a claim that speaks to the complexity of the cultural and social positions Blacks occupy as well the complexity of culture as a whole. Hall does not believe, and rightly so, that the precarious position of Blacks can be reduced to simple binaries.

In its expressivity, its musicality, its orality, in its rich, deep, and varied attention to speech, in its inflections toward the vernacular and the local, in its rich production of counternarratives, and above all, in its metaphorical use of the musical vocabulary, black popular culture has enabled the surfacing, inside the mixed and contradictory modes even of some mainstream popular culture, of elements of a discourse that is different.

Not only has Black popular culture contributed to popular culture through its forms but also through its politics. It has provided a space for “different” traditions or forms of culture to gain acceptance by mainstream audiences.

The three artists I focus on also produce works that are multi-layered and may appear easy to interpret because they use popular media. However, this is not the case. Using the systematic approach to analyzing cultural works that Hall and Levine provide, the interrogation I undertake of Pinder, Chappelle, and McGruder illuminates the depth of their contributions to their respective crafts as well as the significance of popular culture in their work.

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71 Hall, 26.  
72 Hall, 27.
Historical Overview of Representations of Black(ness) and White(ness)

During the eighteenth-century, portrayals of Blacks in America focused on physical differences in comparison to whites based on the sciences of the period which supported the dehumanization of Africans for the transatlantic slave trade and other groups for imperialist conquest. These representations revealed a growing sentiment among white Americans that Blacks and Native Americans were inferior, socially, culturally and economically, placing them at the bottom of the society. In the nineteenth-century, representations of Blacks, whites, and Native Americans shifted from exclusively portraying biological differences to presenting the new the identity English-speaking North Americans began to fashion for themselves.

According to research conducted by art historians Hugh Honour and Guy McElroy, this trend is most evident in the visual media—visual arts, graphic prints, and performance—of the eighteenth-century through the early to mid-twentieth century. Their comprehensive work on the image of the Black in America and the West illuminates the power of the image. In art, McElroy states, "the often turbulent history of this country is accurately reflected in the ways that visual artists have chosen to represent Black people in their art." McElroy further claims, when discussing the work of painter John Lewis Krimmel that the visual arts played a role in shaping how race was represented in the popular culture of the nineteenth century:

Aside from the overt mannerisms of Krimmel's characterizations, the forceful repetition of black people as absurdly comic entertainers—musically adept but otherwise unskilled—reinforced in the fine arts a harshly restrictive stereotype

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74 McElroy, xi.
that would in turn be further promulgated by Currier and Ives and other producers of popular images.\textsuperscript{75}

Although McElroy and Honour center their research in the visual arts, their work opens the way for considering the development of representations of race not just in the arts but also in visual culture at large.

The stereotyped images whites created functioned as representations of all Black people not particular individuals. Jane Gaines points out that such representations are "formed against an ideal characterization in which the ideal is in turn a stereotype." She further states "objectionable types are not measured against real people at all; rather, they are compared with a characterization that could serve as a 'positive' image for the minority group."\textsuperscript{76} In this sense, stereotypes are idealizations or images in the imaginations of those forming them. This is key to the works performing race in American visual and popular culture.

Thus, in the imagination of whites, Africans and African Americans were dark-skinned and wide-eyed with full red lips and kinky hair. Depictions of exaggerated physical features coupled with images of Blacks as happy, dancing, infantile, or lazy produced a lasting history of negative imagery—a history Blacks fought and continue to challenge.\textsuperscript{77}

In contrast to representations of Blacks, whites presented themselves as the epitome of beauty and as model citizens. In idealized portrayals, whites stereotypes

\textsuperscript{75} McElroy, xiii.
themselves as possessing physical characteristics that Blacks should aspire to have and should want to mimic as closely as possible. Often, the representations of whites served as visual instructions to people of color, upholding the paternalistic relationship whites had with people of color. Functioning in a hegemonic framework, these positive images were homogenous and no more representative of all whites than negative stereotypes were of Blacks.

The origins of many of these representative images of race reside in eighteenth-century scientific charts and illustrations categorizing species. Within the same century, they made the transition into derogatory images and continued to have a long life in nineteenth and early twentieth century literature, popular culture, and art. The eugenicists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries presented their views on race in charts that hierarchized animals and people. In the fine arts, paintings were the dominant medium that perpetuated the binary of Black and white. Nineteenth-century graphic caricatures emphasized physical difference with their appeal to the masses. In the popular culture of the time, difference was also performed in minstrelsy, vaudeville acts and film. Each of these media is essential to providing a historical context for my research on twenty-first century definitions of blackness and whiteness.

Fundamentally, Black American folk and popular culture are major means by which Black communities over time have explored, critiqued, and offered solutions to their race-based oppression, and continuing marginalization as a “minority” group which contrasts with dominant whiteness. In order to understand how Pinder, Chappelle, and McGruder draw on and confront this history today, we must look both to the history of
race stereotyping and the theorization of race by Black thinkers in other fields such as literature.

Some of this scholarship focuses on how African Americans subvert constructions of blackness and exploitation through stereotypes in minstrelsy and popular characterizations like Uncle Toms/Neds, mammy, jezebel et al. However, while many scholars claim to situate Black cultural workers in a larger, “American” context, they very often neglect the African American tradition which these artists and their works engage. Thus, such scholars essentially ignore the fact that there is a cultural context already established for these works.

Three texts are especially useful for understanding Pinder, Chappelle, and McGruder: Herman Gray’s Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for Blackness, Richard Dyer’s White, and the edited collection by Gena Caponi-Tabery Signifyin(g), Sanctifyin’ & Slam Dunking: A Reader in African American Expressive Culture. Each provides theoretical grounding in race, and particularly how to incorporate blackness and whiteness into the study of cultural works. Gray’s discussion of television and the negotiation of blackness through media is particularly relevant to the chapter that follows on the comedy of Dave Chappelle. Dyer’s White frames my argument about the role of whiteness in the work of all three artists. Caponi-Tabery’s collection offers Afrocentric contextual grounding, especially when it comes to examining humor, satire, and mimicry.

Black authors and their literature also explore whiteness in ways useful to my project. Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man, for example, delves into the depths and complexities of blackness in white dominated America and served as an inspiration for Jefferson Pinder’s video work.
Toni Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* also shows how cultural works reveal the power of whiteness in society: “in matters of race, silence and evasion have historically ruled literary discourse.”78 Like the artists I research, this dissertation is about exposing the hegemonic structures that “enforce [Black] invisibility through silence [and] allow the Black body a shadowless participation in the dominant cultural body.”79 Just as Morrison illuminates whiteness as a dominant yet invisible form of ideology, the work of Pinder, Chappelle, and McGruder is not just about flippin’ the script and making their white characters function as white artists have made blackness function: in the shadows and/or as decorative. Their work goes further than that in order to examine how whiteness functions in and of itself an in relation to non-whites.

**Organization and Summary**

Too often critics, scholars, and lay people alike tend to dismiss or underestimate art, television, and comic strips that appear straightforward to them, treating both the particular image and the artist as insignificant when their work is accessible on the surface."Real Talk" attempts to show how works with seemingly straightforward content build in layered meanings and ideas.

In chapter one, I examine mixed-media artist Jefferson Pinder and his performance video *Invisible Man*. The video, from 2005, is a work that interprets Ralph

79 Morrison, 10.
Ellison’s novel of the same name. I chose the video because it is a thoughtful interrogation of blackness, whiteness, and identity and because its pleasing aesthetics draw the viewer into the performance. My analysis of Pinder’s video incorporates perspectives from literature, fashion, and the Civil Rights movement. I also aim to show why Pinder is an important artist. Although Pinder has been working in the visual arts for over ten years, he has yet to receive substantial critical attention; nor has *Invisible Man* received an-in-depth analysis. Thus, the chapter also contributes to fostering critical discourse around Pinder’s work.

Chapter two is dedicated to comedian Dave Chappelle and *Chappelle’s Show*, a sketch comedy show that ran for two seasons. The most successful sketches in the show focused on race and racism. Chappelle performed several of sketches with this subject matter. I focus on two which give an especially hard push back against rigid definitions of blackness. Unlike Pinder, Chappelle’s comedy has attracted scholarship. For example, Bambi Haggins focuses on the breadth of Chappelle’s career, which includes films, stand-up comedy, and *Chappelle’s Show*. She situates him within a post-soul commentary and distinguishes his professional life from his personal life or agenda, arguing that he has created a comic persona that allows him to be publicly critcal. Additionally, Chappelle is also the subject of an edited collection of essays entitled *The Comedy of Dave Chappelle*. Here, the analysis is similar to Haggins’, considering Chappelle’s career in its entirety. While these are two significant texts, neither go into depth about Chappelle’s exploration of whiteness nor his connection to long standing African American traditions of performance and language use. Instead they position him within hip-hop culture. Haggins goes so far as to call him a hip-hop artist but hip-hop
itself is both current and part of a longer history of Black performance which Haggins and the other authors do not discuss. In contrast, I see Chappelle as using a repertoire with precisely the kinds of folk and popular roots that Abrahams and Levine describe. Certainly Chappelle is part of the hip-hop generation, and draws on hip-hop culture as I show. However, he draws on other older resources as well. Additionally limiting is scholars’ continued tendency to frame examinations of Chappelle too narrowly through the lens of earlier comedian Richard Pryor. This obscures Chappelle’s own unique contributions to comedy. My work considers Chappelle as an artist in his own right while acknowledging Pryor’s influence on his work. I situate him within a larger African American cultural context. This Afrocentric lens is missing from the scholarship on Chappelle as it is also from previous analysis of the work of Aaron McGruder.

Aaron McGruder’s *The Boondocks* is my focus in chapter three, with special attention to the strip’s first year of national syndication, 1999. In order to understand the newly syndicated strip, I also look back to its beginnings in University of Maryland’s campus paper *The Diamondback*. Although McGruder has received some scholarly attention, his campus strips are largely ignored, which I believe does a disservice to the history of the strip. The campus strips serve as an important foundation for the ideas and themes approached in national syndication.

Other scholars who have also examined the comic strip, include Mark Anthony Neal in *Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post-Soul Aesthetic* and Michele Elam in *The Souls of Mixed Folks*. Both consider McGruder’s interrogation of race and culture. Each provides character analysis but only of selected characters who fit the points they wish to make. For example, Elam is most concerned with Jazmine Dubois the
biracial character, whereas Neal centers his analysis on the brothers Huey and Riley Freeman. While the brothers and Jazmine are important, other characters are also significant to McGruder’s vision and the success of *The Boondocks*. I also place McGruder in an African American comic lineage. Thus far, this lineage has not figured in any publications on *The Boondocks*. Whether McGruder admits it or not, he works within a larger tradition of African American cartoon and comic history. This history counters the assumption that he is “the one”: the first and only Black comic strip creator. Thus, it also gives credit to the predecessors who paved the way for McGruder, connects him to the past, and solidifies his contributions in the present, within a genre. In addition to character analyses and African American cartoon and comic context, I also look at how McGruder others whiteness—a theme that links his work to that of Chappelle and Pinder. Elam touches upon how McGruder deals with race but because her focus is on biraciality, whiteness is not fully examined. Like Pinder and Chappelle, McGruder shifts the burden of race from the Black Other to whites, who become the Other in their work.

Chapter four concludes the dissertation by summarizing the research undertaken and reiterating the significance of each artist’s contributions to understanding race, racism, and our society as a whole. In this chapter, I connect Mel Bochner’s site-specific wall painting *Theory of Boundaries* (1969-1970) to the works of Pinder, Chappelle, and McGruder, arguing that the art critiques boundaries that appear rigid but are actually fluid.

As I close out the introduction, I want to note that these men—Jefferson Pinder, Dave Chappelle, and Aaron McGruder—are representative of a generation that is often chastised for taking for granted the advancements of the Civil Rights generation. I
deliberately chose to focus my dissertation on artists that I see as representative of the post-soul, hip-hop generation as a way to enlighten those who misunderstand the critical and thought-provoking work of this generation. The misunderstanding between the generations may arise because the post-soul generation approaches social, political, and cultural issues in a different manner than the Civil Rights generation. Much of this is due to the advancements—access to education, jobs, technology, and global movement—made for them by their parents and grandparents. The post-soulers are astute at paying homage to the past while documenting the present and leaving a legacy for the future. Taking a cue from their predecessors, the post-soulers continue to make great strides in areas that were previously closed off to Blacks. I hope my dissertation illustrates that my generation has picked up the baton and is working towards the same goals of the generation before us while fighting new challenges in the quest for equality.
Chapter 1: "Lift the Veil and Set the Prisoned Free..."\(^{80}\): Jefferson Pinder

bell hooks claims in "Choosing the Margin," that the margins, commonly spaces of struggle, are also spaces of creativity and power.\(^{81}\) The struggle comes from the systemic racism in America that oppresses people of African descent. Placement at the margins offers a full view of the dominant center based on assessing one’s own peripheral status, while those at the center can take their own place for granted.

Living as we did—on the edge—we developed a particular way of seeing reality. We looked both from the outside in and from the inside out. We focused our attention on the center as well as on the margin. We understood both. This mode of seeing reminded us of the existence of a whole universe, a main body made up of both margin and center.\(^{82}\)

This double or multiple vision is often the starting point for artistic inquiry by artists of African descent. From this vantage point, oftentimes the most stirring artistic works are interrogations of America’s most prevalent sin—rachism. Artist Jefferson Pinder questions the center and the periphery in his mixed-media and performance works.

Pinder’s life experiences influence his art, particularly the urban landscape and the many issues of class, politics, and race intertwined with it. As I mentioned above, he grew up in a suburb of Washington, DC. Until he moved to Chicago in the fall of 2011, Pinder was the only artist in this project to have spent most of his career at "home."\(^{83}\)

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\(^{80}\) The chapter title is from W. E. B. Du Bois’s chapter in *The Souls of Black Folks*.

\(^{81}\) bell hooks, ""Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness,"* Yearning: race, gender, and cultural politics,* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), 152-153.

\(^{82}\) hooks, 149.

\(^{83}\) Pinder left University of Maryland, where he was a tenured professor, to take a position at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago as an Associate Professor in Fall 2012.
As a mixed-media artist, Pinder works in collage, video, and installation with conceptual ideas at the foundation of his work. His current focus on performance allows his ideas to expand beyond the traditional confines of painting. Although Pinder works primarily in performance and continues the tradition of the artist's hand, doing so poses obstacles. The artist has funded all but two of his own projects. Because the artist pays for performances which surely cost more than a painting or collage to produce we must wonder what role economics plays in the finished product? Does money affect the message?

The answer cuts both ways. Since the artist funds his own projects, he maintains more control over the work than if he worked within the confines of a foundation or non-profit agency supporting—financially and conceptually—the performance. While it is challenging to pay for equipment, editing, and people to perform, it allows Pinder to say what he wants without answering to a museum, gallery, or patron. This autonomy, according to Britta B. Wheeler “rests on the assumption that performance artists rarely depend on their work as a source of economic sustenance.” Pinder is like several other performance artists who depend on other sources of income in order to create and have a semblance of autonomy. By maintaining this autonomy, his work is taken out of the control of the white cube and placed squarely in his own space, particularly as the works can be shared on the world wide web.

84 Email exchange with the artist, October 23, 2011.
86 Pinder works as a college professor.
87 Pinder maintains a website featuring some of the full-length videos in addition to video excerpts. See http://www.jeffersonpinder.com.
Pinder explores the ambiguous nature of race, culture, and identity. The fluidity of these themes makes them difficult to define as they depend on variables such as time and space. The media he uses: performance, music, and technology, allow him the flexibility needed to investigate the malleability of race and identity.

**Framing of Investigation**

*Invisible Man*, one of Pinder’s earliest performance pieces, takes inspiration from Ralph Ellison’s novel of the same name. The video interprets, on the surface, Ellison’s interrogation of a Black man’s journey through individual and community identity. Beneath the surface, the video serves as a personal investigation of Pinder’s own identity as a Black man as well as his connection with Ellison’s narrative, and perhaps more broadly, with all Black men in America.

I present a contextual analysis which, by examining two other Black artists—Glenn Ligon and William Pope.L—provides a better understanding of where Pinder fits within the matrix of culture. The artists are both Pinder’s forerunners and his contemporaries in that they are still at work today, but gained recognition before Pinder. This analysis situates Pinder in a critical transdisciplinary dialogue and connects him to a larger cultural framework present in African American culture. Ligon works in a number of media—painting, prints, installation, and performance—and explores Black culture and the socio-political issues that are associated with blackness in America. Pope.L examines similar issues primarily through performance and installation art. I will return to these artists and their connections to Pinder later in the chapter.
Several more questions also frame my analysis of the *Invisible Man* performance: why did Pinder select Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* to perform? Why did he decide to interpret one of the most arresting passages in the text? Or, is Pinder’s decision based on the whole, rather than the part: is the video about trying to encapsulate all of Ellison’s writings into one succinct, visually enticing image? These questions can help us understand why other artists are attracted to his work, especially Pinder’s predecessor and peer, Glenn Ligon.

To begin, I will describe Pinder’s methodology, especially those elements of his practice. Next, I provide an overview of performance and video art which connects Pinder to other contemporary conceptual artists. Finally, I turn to Pinder’s major video *Invisible Man*, discussing its content, critical implications, and—as cases in point—the incorporation of music into the performance and the invitation to the white audience to engage with it.

**Pinder’s Methodology**

Artist/curator Nicholas Frank’s identifies movement, struggle, and between-ness as important to Pinder’s work. However, these are abstract terms that tells us little about how Pinder actually composes his works to explore these and other themes. I contend that if we pay close attention to five specific methods within Pinder’s repertoire of practice we can get at the heart of the artist’s performances. These methods are *the use of self*,

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the wearing of a suit as a costume, action/non-action, and his use of music. Each of these methods also has a history in African American cultural traditions which illuminate the multiplicity of ways of being Black in the United States.

Pinder performs the majority of his art himself, often collaborating with other artists. Using the self is prevalent in contemporary art practice, especially in performance art. Pinder states, “I can make sure it’s genuine and that it’s my message. I have control of the work and I’m involved with performing it.”89 The issue of artists controlling performance, outcomes, and intent also connects Pinder with Dave Chappelle’s attitude towards Chappelle’s Show. Control here is not hubris, but awareness of how meaning can be misconstrued when another person interprets someone else’s ideas. Moreover, it demonstrates the concern Black cultural workers have about lack of control and ownership of their works, especially in mainstream cultural venues. Post-soul artists, perhaps, understand this better than previous generations, as many of the artists devise ways to have creative and intellectual control of their art. Thus, the one-man show is not about the artist’s ego but about ownership and directing his or her message.

Pinder’s work, and Chappelle’s work for that matter, can be viewed as a self-portrait. Scholars and critics often mention this tendency. However, the work is much more than a self-portrait. Pinder’s use of himself provides a number of meanings in his work. While the viewer encounters Pinder, the man, the viewer also encounters an anonymous body.

89 Michael T. Martin and David C. Wall, “‘Where Are You From?’: Performing Race in the Art of Jefferson Pinder,” Black Camera, 2.1 (2010), 82.
This is evident when Pinder dons a suit. When he emerges on screen, in all or just elements of the suit, Pinder becomes everyman. The artist explained that he wears a suit because he is “trying to connect with the past generation of activists” he watched as he grew up. These activists were the Black men and women of the Civil Rights period. Pinder continues to say that the formality of the marchers and “what a presentation of a person should look like” attracts him to the images and inspires his style of dress. He views the suits Black men wore as “recognition with work” and that the men “meant business.” Additionally, he associates the suit with his grandfather, who wore a jacket and tie to dinner every night. This formal self-presentation is no longer prevalent in contemporary times. Pinder’s look back to this period connects him with the past while he examines the present.

Pinder’s emphasis on action/non-action is fundamental to the medium of performance art. Within the medium, the viewers have no choice but to focus on whether the artist moves or not. For example, in performance art non-action can be someone standing in a room, nature, or gallery space for a specific amount of time. Even though there is no movement, the physical body is still performing; thus, non-action is a form of action. Pinder’s actions include crawling—which Pope.L performs as well—and pushing a car or running through a field.

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91 Podcast.
92 Podcast.
93 Pinder spoke about this at the “Performing Race” symposium at the University of Maryland, Fall 2010. He also mentions it in the Martin and Wall interview.
Pinder's performance of action/non-action is another link with the 1960s generation of protest. Pinder mentions the protesters as inspiration for the way he dresses but the two levels of activism—action and non-action (non-violence)—displayed on television and in photographs, I believe also shape his performance methodology. For example, photographs of young Black adults sitting at the lunch counters performing non-action action in the face of racism could easily be a source of inspiration for Pinder, especially for his *Invisible Man* piece. Other images show Blacks running away from being attacked by the canine unit of the police department, when they were peacefully demonstrating in the streets. Whatever the visual images, Pinder's performance work gleans not only inspiration but also continues the legacy of confronting the hierarchy of race.

Music is important in all of Pinder's art videos. As he explains, music is "a kind of texture" and "flavoring or coloring of my video pieces." The bias toward the visual that comes from performance art's situation as a sector of the visual art world has led some critics like Michael T. Martin to treat music as mere background. However, Pinder himself treats music as integral to his work. It is woven seamlessly into art performances that, without it, would be entirely different works.

Pinder watched music videos on MTV (Music Television), and this has heavily influenced his videos. Often, he refers to his video works as music videos. Pinder's interest in music videos connects "high art" with popular art, blurring boundaries in a

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94 Martin and Wall, 91.
95 Martin and Wall, 91.
vein similar to that of hip-hop artists. Coupling music and the visual allows multiple points of access. Often cited as a unifying medium, collapsing differences between people, Black music, offers insight for non-Blacks because it is part of their experience of popular/mass culture also.

However, although Black music may work as a unifier or point of access in dominant culture, it ultimately works in the opposite way in Pinder’s video art. Pinder weaves hip-hop, rap, and jazz in his videos. Because Pinder works in the predominantly white field of the visual arts, music allows an access point for a group of people often ignored and marginalized in the art world—Black folks. The visual art component of the work is familiar for most of his audience, as the majority of art consumers are white. Incorporating music that people of African descent recognize, invites them to participate not as objects or subjects, but as spectators as well informed as whites and perhaps moreso, where the music is concerned. In this way, the music Pinder chooses encourages the center and the margins to meet in the middle.

The artist’s choice of music has nuanced meaning that adds to the understanding of the videos as a whole. As many people argue, music is a bridge between differences, namely racial and ethnic groups. All one has to do is look at today’s global presence of hip-hop. It can be argued that the genre’s audience is dominantly white and caters to this audience, but those who support that supposition forget about underground and socially conscious hip-hop music that tends to have a diverse audience.

Pinder’s Place in Performance Art & Post-Soul
Positioning Pinder within an African American tradition of performance art acknowledges Black art predecessors like Pope.L and Adrian Piper and the long history of Black performance within the community at large. Signifyin', playin' the dozens, and loud-talking are just a few of the cultural performances many Black men do on a daily basis. Pope.L comments on this when he speaks about his use of the communicative forms: “I've discovered that performance is as Black as the skin on my ass. Black folks have just as much right to it as anyone, hey maybe more...”97 Never one to mince words, Pope.L’s statement is about performance art in the mainstream art world and implicitly alludes to the folk nature of performance within the Black community.

Furthermore, situating Pinder in this tradition of Black art performance acknowledges Pinder and all Black artists as artists in their own right. Too often, they play the role of the token artist, within the art world, in relation to white artists. While this includes them in the larger discourse of creativity, it also essentializes and marginalizes the artists and their talent because they stand in the constant shadow of the hegemonic center.

Several questions emerge about Pinder’s use of new media instead of the plastic arts. Perhaps the most important question is: What does performance art offer that the plastic arts do not? What does it mean for an artist to use a “marginal” medium?

Performance art affords marginalized artists the chance to work on the fringe while having one foot in the center, as the medium is not as widely accepted as traditional art media like painting. Performance art gained institutional acceptance during the late

1980s into the 1990s with support from the National Endowment for the Arts. With the institutionalization of performance art, the artists who considered themselves to follow in the footsteps of the earlier bohemian avant-garde valued art as something other than a commodity and desired to connect their art with a larger community. As Wheeler argues “the task of the avant-garde is to invite individuals to consider their own role in the production of culture and to suggest how the world could be remade.”

In performance art, flexibility is granted to the artists, primarily because they have control over the performance as they are at the center of the work—physically and psychologically. Becoming the object and subject allows for a synthesis of the art experience for the performer and the spectator. I would argue Pinder’s use of the medium is his way of trying to enter his audience’s psychological and emotional space so they can critically engage with the socio-cultural issues he presents. This extension is reciprocal as the audience in turn enters into his emotional and psychological space—an important characteristic of the art form. The plastic arts do not accomplish this type of engagement in the same way as performance. It is easier to walk past a painting or sculpture than a live or filmed performance. Our natural curiosity about what happens next encourages engagement with the work but perhaps most importantly, for a public that has grown up with television and film as dominant entertainment media, these media draw viewers in with a promise of familiarity. Painting, on the other hand, retains a reputation as an elite medium which takes special training to appreciate: it lacks such a strong pull of comfort.

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99 Wheeler, 493.
Performance art also allows many of the artists shun to the use of the white cube—the museum and gallery—as the dominant space for the performance. A number of artists select easily accessible environments for their performances, like the city streets, sidewalks, and natural spaces. Given the history of the exclusion of non-white and non-male artists from exhibiting in galleries and museums, performance art not only gives the artist control of where and when their performance takes place but also, to a certain extent, gives them a creative way to shun the art sales establishment. However, their funding often comes from a public sector of that establishment, whose mission is to underwrite experimentation and new media. Certainly, once the artist receives recognition by the establishment, the artist walks a fine line with the medium and the message. In spite of this, much of the work addresses multiple levels of racism and sexism found not only in our culture but also in the mainstream art world, which more often than not upholds these systemic structures of oppression.

The performance artists of the 1960s ushered in a direct attack on oppression and this is an issue many of the post-soul artists continue to deal with in their work. Pinder is a part of the post-soul generation because of his focus on bridging the gaps between different people and his use of technology to accomplish this. The influences of hip-hop, global music, and thinking about the cultures that give birth to them affects everyone, not just African Americans. Pinder’s post-soul position complements his performance and video art practices. Thinking outside of oneself, even if the work created is about the self, is important to Pinder and a characteristic he shares with Adrian Piper, William Pope.L, and Glenn Ligon.
Performance Art and Conceptual Contemporaries: Pinder's Predecessors

Piper (b.1948) interrogates race and gender, challenging the oppression that comes with racism and sexism. She was an early practitioner of performance and conceptual art beginning in the early 1970s. Like Pinder, her works are both personal and community based. Although she performed within the confines of the museum and the gallery in addition to public spaces, many of the attendees in these spaces did not realize they were part of a performance. For example, for *My Calling (Card) #1* (1986), she distributed her calling or business card to whites who made discriminatory or racist comments and jokes in her presence. What made this performance powerful is that many of the people making the comments did not know that Piper herself was a woman of color who self-identifies as Black. Piper's skin is so light that she can pass for white. Because the white attendees assumed she was like them racially, they felt free to be themselves. Being around people of similar backgrounds provides a safe space in which one will rarely be called out for making derogatory statements. Her inspiration for this performance was her subjection to racist conversations in a number of environments, especially when people assume racial identification because the color of your skin "matches" theirs. Some of the spaces in which Piper endured blatant racism included museums, galleries, and academic institutions of "higher learning." She has written about her experience as a graduate student, when a professor argued with her about her racial identity. He would not accept that she was Black because of her light skin. That a white person would tell a Black woman that she is not Black is not only unheard of but also
arrogant and a motivation for Piper's fighting racism. In another performance, she took to the streets of New York City to expose, although subtly, racism against Black men.

Mythic Being (1972-1976) was created in order to understand how people interacted and reacted to a Black man, particularly in a city that was experiencing an upsurge of violent crimes attributed to Black and Latino men. Piper dressed in drag, wearing an Afro wig, sunglasses, bell-bottoms, and a mustache. She performed in a number of New York City venues in addition to the city streets. In the filmed performance, she walks down a sidewalk repeating lines from her childhood journal. Many of the passersby looked at Piper in amazement and others walked right past her as if she did not exist. Perhaps the most shocking element of the performance was a staged public mugging in which Piper was the victim. As the scripted mugging took place, Piper noted that no one took action perhaps because the mugging happened to a Black man.

Complacency like this is also an important theme for William Pope.L (b. 1955), another conceptual and performance artist. Self-dubbed "the friendliest black artist in America," Pope.L creates performances that expose the intricacies of identity in the United States. He reveals how race, class, and gender inextricably connect with each other. Since he is a Black artist, the overdetermined assumption is that his commentary is strictly about blackness. Overdetermination is an issue many non-male and non-white artists encounter during their careers. This is not to say that Pope.L's work is not about race but to say that his work is about much more. Pope.L is significant in framing Pinder's work within a tradition of performance art, distinctly an African American

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tradition, and Pope.L receives an in-depth assessment. This artistic connection is important not only to Pinder’s work but also to the history and critical scholarship on African American art and artists. However, Nicholas Frank, an artist and curator fails to recognize this history in his essay about Pinder’s work.

Frank, the curator of Pinder’s 2009 exhibition *Jefferson Pinder: Anthology*, situates the artist within the context of feminist artists Lynda Benglis, Howardena Pindell, Adrian Piper, and Ana Mendieta. These pioneering artists worked within a feminist construct, challenging the male gaze and hegemonic notions of the female body and identity within art history. Much of their work begins with the personal and evolves into a community endeavor. With this in mind, Frank points out that “the ways personal identity filters outwards through the skin and into the eyes and ears of an audience”\(^{101}\) places Pinder’s work in context with these artists. He continues, “like them, Pinder jukes any simple notion of who possesses another person’s identity.” Though Frank does recognize that female performance artists illuminated the marginalized status of women, he overlooks the Black male performance and conceptual artists like Pope.L. who have contributed to Pinder’s artistic lineage.

Born in Newark, New Jersey, Pope.L seeks “a visceral, bodily, material ‘explanation’ for human desire writ large in human action.”\(^{102}\) To realize his goal, the artist customarily wears a business suit or other costumes, and performs actions like crawling in public spaces. These components are conscious and deliberate. The suit

represents social class, acting as a marker of middle- and upper-class membership. It symbolizes what one should aspire to as well as an emblem of respectability. As Pope.L states, it is “an icon of privilege.”

Multiple levels of privilege are associated with the suit. First, not being able to afford one. Among poor and working-class community members, this can be a distinguishing characteristic of status. With middle and upper-class people, the issue is not so much the ability to purchase a suit as the quality, brand name, and fabric. Darby English argues that Pope.L’s suits and “other accoutrements of upright citizenship, prosperity, and cultural superheroism [are] all signs of unconflicted identity performance that neatly align race, class, and sex.” However, the suit and markers of respectability actually problematize this identity because Pope.L is African American—so no “unconflicted identity” for him is possible.

This conflict is particularly apparent when he performs an action such as crawling. Crawling for Pope.L is about calling attention to class issues and the hierarchy that exists in oppressing minority groups. As he has stated in several interviews, crawling symbolizes the verticality and horizontality between the “haves” and the “have-nots.”

Pope.L states that:

the act of crawling, which is based on horizontality, refers to those who ‘have-not.’ In Western society, we are given examples of the vertical: the rocket, the skyscraper, Reagan’s and Bush’s Star-Wars system…it’s all about up. I want to contest and challenge that….verticality isn’t what it’s pumped up to be.

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103 Wilson and Pope.L., 51.
In other words, the verticality of the “haves” signifies upward mobility. The horizontality of the “have-nots” refers to people at the bottom of the social and economic ladder who are not able to change their position.

The act of crawling while wearing a suit complicates what we know and believe regarding class and money. The work contests this ideology but also becomes a personal interrogation for the artist as he reflects on his own status in relation to his extended family’s status. How does one move from horizontality to verticality and reconcile that with the fact that his or her loved ones are not able to attain the same social and financial status? This question is one that lingers for Pope.L as he performs, and one that he hopes reaches his audience as well.

The overarching connection with the suit and its formality is the issue of acculturation, for Black men and women as well as Pinder. He says of the suit that it is also a “connection for me to explore assimilation.” Acculturation through dress and demeanor is a way to gain acceptance by the dominant group—whites. This formal presentation—dressing up, dressing well, and acting right—countered white representations and perceptions of African Americans as backward and poor. However, assimilating yields to whites’ bias that Blacks need to be trained by whites and create art only when it is acceptable in terms of whiteness. Those against acculturation or accommodation believe Blacks negate their blackness and turn their backs on the

\[107\] Martin and Wall, 78. Though Pinder speaks of assimilation, I believe he means acculturation. Assimilation is about divorcing oneself from a specific culture while acculturation is about people using particular methods to gain social access or advances for themselves as well as their community. These two terms—assimilation and acculturation—are often used synonymously yet they have very different outcomes and meanings for the particular person or group utilizing those social and cultural modes.
community when they should instead look within the community for inspiration. Looking within, in their eyes, shows pride in one’s heritage.

Although Pinder and Pope.L both use the suit in their art, it signifies different ideas for each of them. As previously discussed, Pope.L’s use of the suit connects to notions of privilege, while Pinder’s reason recalls work and presents his art as a job and a cause, similar to the activists of the Civil Rights period. Though observers of the marches commented that the dress of activists appeared middle-class, many of the participants belonged to the working-class.

I Am A Man: Glenn Ligon

Pinder incorporates a number of cultural influences in his work in ways similar to many visual artists. Pinder’s practice connects to that of Glenn Ligon on a number of levels. Specific to this research, Pinder and Ligon are linked by their use of the novel Invisible Man as a starting point for new art works. In order to show their connections, I present an overview of Ligon which also continues the homage to predecessors that paved the way for the post-soul artists.

Glenn Ligon (b.1960) uses to create art that broadly reflects on Black socio-political and cultural issues. Many of his works speak to his individual experiences as a male within a Black cultural context. Working at the height of the 1980s era of multiculturalism, Ligon’s art includes a variety of media: text-based paintings, printmaking, neon signage, video and installation. Ligon rose to fame in the art world with his text-based paintings, which recall seminal figures and moments in African American culture. His paintings from the 1990s incorporate iconic lines from canonical
Black American literature by authors Zora Neale Hurston, James Baldwin, and Ralph Ellison. These works established Ligon within the mainstream art world. In addition, the artist used the lyrics of rapper and actor Ice Cube in a painting. This move recognized rap's use of language to create lyrical masterpieces, expanding while questioning the canon of Black literature and merging high art with popular culture.

Ligon created an ode to one of the most iconic images of the Civil Rights Movement, I Am A Man, a 1968 photograph by Ernest Withers. The black and white photograph shows a large crowd of Black men all holding placards that read “I AM A MAN.” This image documents the Memphis, Tennessee sanitation workers march for work equality. The protest march, like other civil rights marches, served as a visual and physical sign of solidarity. It would also be Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s last march as his assassination on April 4, 1968, occurred just days later.

Ernest Withers (1922-2007) was a native of Memphis, where he lived and worked until his death. Nicknamed the “Original Civil Rights Photographer,” he served in World War II and later became one of a handful of Black police officers in Memphis in 1948. In his spare time, he photographed Memphis's Black life. After three years, he left the police force and pursued photography as a career.

Withers worked for the African American newspaper The Chicago Defender at the Memphis bureau. In this role, he received access to important leaders and venues of

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the period, documenting the trial of the murderers of Emmett Till, the 1957 integration confrontation in front of Little Rock High School, and the Memphis Sanitation Workers Strike. Deborah Willis says of Withers, “Though Withers photographed everyday life of Black America...his most empowering work was of African Americans’ struggle for equal rights.” These images of Black Americans actively fighting for equality, integration, and realization of their humanness are Withers’ most significant documents because they not only serve as evidence of history but also work across media boundaries, connecting journalism with art.

*I Am A Man* may be, outside of the Emmett Till photographs, Withers’s most recognizable image of Black men. Standing shoulder-to-shoulder, filling the entire width of the street, Black men span the entire picture composition. Fashioning a wall, they face forward holding up their signs. A lone man, without a sign, walks in front perpendicular to the gathering. He looks directly at the viewer. He is the only person who stands between the workers and the viewer, and serves as a cautious protector for his brothers.

The placards, held up high, creating a sea of personal and collective declarations, are white signs with black letters. The statement, in all capital letters, stresses their serious disposition as well as the gravity of the situation. The first line of the phrase is especially noteworthy. Printed in a thicker font, “I AM” emphasizes their demand for equality as men. Moreover, if that did not make their point, the “AM” is bold and

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underlined, while the other words are not. This accentuates the men’s stance and fervently answers the question posed in the eighteenth-century, “Am I not a man and a brother?”

Almost two hundred years earlier, the Society for the Abolition of Slavery produced a seal that represented their views. This seal is arguably the first image of an enslaved African in abolitionist visual culture. The slave is a partially nude male rendered in side-profile, kneeling with his hands clasped in prayer. Attached to his wrists are shackles that link to the shackles on his ankles. The question, in uppercase letters, “Am I Not a Man and Brother?” coils around the man.

This image became popular during the antebellum period as reproductions in the form of medallions and graphic prints circulated throughout the United States. Through its circulation, the image varied and one iteration included a female slave in a similar pose. Although the seal was anti-slavery in intent, it also set a visual standard of Black subservience and inferiority. The supplicant Black person founded an American visual and material culture legacy that lasted for hundreds of years without many alternatives to counter it. As August Wilson has written:

What we lack is the ability to give the ideas and images we have of ourselves a widespread presence, to give them legitimacy and credence in the same manner in which the debasing and denigrating images that provide other Americans with a

112 “Am I Not a Man and a Brother?”, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part2/2h67.html> accessed 19 May 2011. According to the PBS website, the artist for the original design is unknown. However, the best known version is Josiah Wedgewood’s design for a cameo, known as the Wedgewood cameo. The description I provide is of the Wedgewood cameo, attributed to William Hackwood or Henry Webber. Many of the print versions vary the location of the phrase, placing it either at the top or bottom of the composition.
113 Sharon Patton, African-American Art, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 95. In Patton’s explanation of Edmonia Lewis’s sculpture Forever Free (1867), Patton points out the female figure kneeling down was modeled after the Josiah Wedgewood male slave cameo.
Wilson illuminates the lack of access to media for distribution of counter images of Blacks. The Withers photograph is all the more extraordinary because it presents an alternative view of Black men, challenging the visual and ideological history of Black people presented to mainstream America. Also remarkable about the image is its widespread reproduction, reaching a large mass of people, like "Am I Not a Man and a Brother?" did in the eighteenth-century.

The men in I Am A Man stand straight up, with a clear purpose and confidence, unlike the Black man in the eighteenth-century seal. In a counter representation to the enslaved man asking for equality and acceptance with chained, folded hands out in front of him, the Black men raise their arms straight up in the air in a militant statement, which echoes the placards. Lastly, the men dressed in suits, polo shirts, dress pants, cardigans, and hats demonstrate their pride in being styled like men and not naked, except for a cloth covering the genital area, like the man in "Am I Not a Man and a Brother?" Taking the images together, we see how constructions of race and ideology live on and shift over time. Ernest Withers’s photograph offered an alternative to hegemonic representations of Black men and captured a particular moment in history when African Americans stood together to fight for their manhood. Withers may not have realized in that moment what kind of impact the image would make on future generations. Ligon’s 1988 painting Untitled (I Am a Man) demonstrates its significance.

**Untitled (I Am a Man)** is an oil and enamel painting on canvas that appropriates the iconic placards shown in Withers’s photograph. Ligon stated in an interview that he remembered seeing the sign in Congressman Charles Rangel’s office. The memory prompted him to paint his re-interpretation of the sign.

The painting, with black letters on a white background, resembles the front of a cardboard sign. Ligon alters the composition by breaking up the statement and placing the words on three lines: I AM / A / MAN. Although this differs from the signs in Memphis, which had two lines, Ligon kept “AM” underlined, possibly to emphasize that even twenty years later, Black men were still demanding to be recognized as men. In this way, the artist highlights the continuous struggle for Black manhood.

All the letters are of equal height and width. The equality of the letters may signal that although the 1960s struggles made advancements, the struggle for respect, recognition, and equal rights continues in contemporary times. As Scott Rothkopf says the painting is “historically specific yet universal” because the struggle extends to all marginalized groups.

Ligon’s 1991 diptych *Invisible Man (Two Views)* honors a significant text in African American culture. The painting is an example of Ligon’s black on white paintings. The diptych shows the opening sentences of the book in black lettering on white canvas, “I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar All Poe; nor I am one of your Hollywood movies ectoplasms…” Painting Ellison’s words adds another level of visceral visuality as they become a work of art. Comprised of multiple layers of paint creating a raised surface, the text reads left to right, like the page of a book. The surface of the painting allows the words, the text, and the ideas in
Ellison’s masterwork to invade the spectator’s physical and psychological space, invoking the commonly used phrase “the words jumping off the page.”

The words are legible at the top of the painting and become illegible in the middle of the work because the thickly painted letters highlight two heads, in each work. In the left painting, a faint form of a head emerges, positioned in a frontal pose. A profile of a head, presumably a man, materializes in the right painting. The outlines of the heads recall common visuals of Blacks like Louis Agassiz’s slave daguerreotypes, wanted posters, studio portraits, and mug shots.115 With a historical connection to presentations of Black bodies, the shadowy figures embody Ellison’s protagonist—black, visible yet invisible, inextricably tied to his blackness, whiteness, and all the gray matters in between.

Prologue Series: The Invisible Man (Black Version) #4 (1991) is another example of Ligon’s work with the Ellison novel. The graphite and oil stick work on paper inscribes the same opening lines of the prologue. In this piece, instead of a marriage of black and white, Prologue contains black on black stenciling. Similar to the painting, Prologue is difficult to read as a text and work of art because of its monochromatic presentation.

Glenn Ligon’s art texts provide a foundation upon which Pinder builds a conceptual, contextual, and artistic structure for his Invisible Man video, taking the baton

from Ligon. While Ligon portrays the opening lines of the prologue, Pinder conceptualizes the middle of the passage where the narrator is essentially in a black hole.

The protagonist, living in a forgotten basement in a whites-only apartment building, waxes poetic about the significance of light that illuminates corporeal being. He says "light confirms my reality, gives birth to my form...without light I am not only invisible, but formless as well, and to be unaware of one's form is to live a death." He continues to describe his dwelling and how he wired his living space, "In my hole in the basement there are exactly 1,369 lights. I've wired the entire ceiling, every inch of it. And not with fluorescent bulbs, but with the older, more-expensive-to-operate kind, the filament type." The nameless narrator explains the unsettling feeling of invisibility, not only as a Black man but also as human being. Pinder captures this moment—the moment of light giving form to Invisible Man’s being.

**Pinder's Invisible Man**

"Without light I am not only invisible, but formless as well."—Ralph Ellison

As the Ralph Ellison quote states, once we know who we are, we are free—free to be ourselves; and free from internalizing other people’s projections of who they want us to be. Figuring out how to navigate space, as an artist, as a man, and as a person of

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117 Ellison, 7.
118 Ellison, 7.
African descent, is an important element in Pinder’s art. Like many artists of African descent, he discounts the label “Black artist” as it essentializes him and his work.\(^{119}\)

Inspired by Ralph Ellison’s critically acclaimed novel *Invisible Man* (1952), Pinder created a five-minute art video of the same name. Though the art video is the focus of this research, a brief overview of the film the artist created at the same time is necessary as it demonstrates his versatility. Additionally, the discussion makes clearer how the different media of film and video inform the messages in the works in different ways.

The film version is five minutes long, about the same length of the video and is an understated performance. Pinder used Super-8 film stock. The stock contains scratches and visibility of the grain on the surface. Employing Super-8 mm combines Pinder’s personal and professional connections to the medium. While Super-8 was the primary film stock for making home movies during the 1970s, it is still a medium used by contemporary independent filmmakers and artists. Pinder cites his family home movies as a source of inspiration for his trajectory into art films and videos.\(^{120}\) In addition to the nostalgia these films elicit, Super-8’s attraction for contemporary filmmakers and artists includes the affordability of the stock as well as its aesthetics. Jonas Mekas foreshadowed the appeal of 8mm film in 1963, when he said “The day is close when the 8mm. home-

\(^{119}\) Pinder has stated this at several conferences and symposia at which he was a panelist. Some of the conferences include the James A. Porter Colloquium, hosted by Howard University, and at the David C. Driskell Center at the University of Maryland, College Park.

\(^{120}\) Conversation with the artist, June 9, 2011. Also in Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery’s Face to Face interview.
movie footage will be collected and appreciated as beautiful folk art, like songs and the
lyric poetry that was created by the people.” 121

For many artists and filmmakers, the aesthetic appeal of Super-8 is its graininess.

Filmmaker Peter Tscherkassy describes the allure of Super-8:

Super-8 was a microscope which allowed us to see beneath the skin of reality and
make the internal lives of images visible in a way that was not possible with any
other format... The best thing about it was the graininess... In the harsh, crystal­
clear light of a xenon projection, you could perceive a wholly different kind of
resolution, in particular when the forms began to lose themselves in the grain and
new and unexpected shapes emerged from seemingly amorphous clusters of
bodies, only to be lost again in the colorful primordial soup. 122

Tscherkassy’s statement about the physical and visual qualities of the film beautifully
describes the image and experience of Pinder’s film version of Invisible Man. The film is
not as naturally crisp as the digital video format. The graininess and saturation of the
color draws the viewer in much like the visuality Ellision produces in his text. Given that
the time period in which the text was written coincided with the height of 8mm home
movies—the 1950s—it is appropriate that Pinder uses this particular format, recalling the
time and space of the culture in Ellison’s narrative. 123

Ellison, through his nameless Black male character, approaches identity, race,
politics, and socio-cultural issues in a multi-sensory fashion. Visceral visuality is a
significant trope in Ellison’s masterpiece. I define it as the use of words to create highly

121 Jonas Mekas, “8mm. Cinema as Folk Art,” Movie Journal: The Rise of the New American Cinema,
122 Quoted in Alexander Howrwath, “Tabula Rasa and Back: The Avant-Garde Films of Peter
123 “Super 8 mm Film History,”
<http://motion.kodak.com/US/en/motion/Products/Production/Spotlight_on_Super_8/Super_8mm_History/
index.htm> accessed 8 July 2011. In the film history, the high visibility of home movies cameras in the
1950s is mentioned in the history of the film stock.
visceral visual scenes that implore the reader to actively engage with the scene. It requires the reader to vividly imagine the scene, in color. For instance, in the Liberty Paint Company sequence, the reader sees the nameless protagonist learn about its best-selling paint, Optic White. Ellison paints a picture for the reader when the narrator mixes ten drops of black or "dope" into this paint: "Slowly, I measured the glistening black drops, seeing them settle upon the surface and become blacker still, spreading suddenly out to the edges."124 After Invisible Man adds the dope to several buckets of paint, Kimbro, his supervisor, checks on him. Kimbro says "'Let's see,' he said, selecting a sample and running his thumb across the board. 'That's it, as white as George Washington's Sunday-go-to-meetin' wig and as sound as the all-mighty dollar! That's paint.' "125 Visualizing the anonymous Black man dropping black droplets into the paint to make "White! It's the purest white that can be found. Nobody makes a paint any whiter" heightens the comprehension of the text and Ellison's thematic scheme. It also allows the reader to have a sensory relationship with Invisible Man, the character, and Invisible Man, the novel.

Pinder seems to understand the ways in which Ellison lures the reader into Invisible Man's identity formation using the lenses of race, politics, and class. The most affecting way Ellison succeeds at this is with his marriage of the textual and the visual. Ellison's ability to weave visuality and language together demonstrates his gift for expressing our world beyond black and white. His writing informs us of the bounded intersectionality of these lived experiences. This is what Pinder's art performance

124 Ellison, 200.
125 Ellison, 201.
interrogates, pushing the psychic boundaries, as Ellison did, to engage and entice the viewer in his video *Invisible Man* (2005).

As Pinder’s video begins, the viewer encounters a pitch-black screen with music playing in concert with the blackness. A blank slate, the screen is somewhat unnerving as the audience is not sure if the darkness is part of the work. At the same time, there is a sense of anticipation because the music continues to play. An upbeat tempo, the music balances both feelings of anticipation and the uneasiness of watching a pitch-black screen as it draws the viewer into the visual space of blackness.

Blackness acts on several levels aesthetically and psychologically during the opening scene. In one way, it is an aesthetic choice and perhaps a necessity as the work connects to theatrical and cinematic devices. For example, at the start of a theatrical performance, the house lights dim into darkness with the stage curtains—acting as a blank slate or screen—covering the stage set and action that is about to commence. In these few seconds, the audience prepares for the performance.

I suggest the black screen also acts in a similar way to Kara Walker’s (b. 1969) fictional and fantastical black silhouette cut-out narratives of the antebellum south. Walker creates counternarratives that challenge dominant historical and social ideologies. In these narratives, she walks a fine line “between fiction and reality” as she is also interrogating how her life parallels the ideologies.\(^{126}\) Walker’s use of the silhouette form, outlined images of figures and objects, allows the viewer to be active in the process of making meaning. As Walker says, a silhouette is “a blank space that you project your

The viewer encounters a form that is an outline, a shadow of a figure that they bring into it their psyche. There is something alluring about the blankness in front of you. Walker states: “Working with such loaded material as race, gender, [and] sex, it’s easy for it to become ugly...I really wanted to find a way to make work that could lure viewers out of themselves and into the fantasy.”\(^{128}\) Blackness functions in the same way in Pinder’s work, as the audience can project their thoughts onto the screen while waiting for the appearance of a form.

About twenty seconds into the video, an object subtly emerges on the right side of the screen (figure 5). Taking thematic cues from Ellison, the shape is unintelligible but whiteness makes its presence known. In the foreground, a milky, white light bulb fully materializes as the objects around it slowly come into the light. The space is still dark but bright enough to see a mass grouping of light bulbs dangling from the ceiling. Background lighting flickers in the space as mini spotlights, in the center of the screen, form a diagonal line above the form, indicating that there is another form emerging from the darkness.

On the right side of the space, a light bulb turns on. Starting as an orange color, the light gradually gets brighter and brighter as the viewer tries to decipher the partially illuminated form. In the progression from darkness to brightness, we see only the right side of the figure. As the right side materializes, the viewer sees that the figure is a man standing in a room. Bathed in lightness and darkness, his gray blazer, white shirt, and black tie come into view along with more light bulbs. The dichotomy of dark and light,

with the man in both, becomes a metaphor for blackness/whiteness, seeing/not seeing, and visibility/invisibility.

In "Working Notes for Invisible Man," Ellison sketches out the theme of invisibility and explains how it "springs from a great formlessness of Negro life wherein all values are in flux, and where those institutions and patterns of life which mold the white American's personality are missing or not so immediate in their effect."129 The formlessness Ellison writes about is a result of being Black in America, always being aware of one's blackness, and feeling one's fluctuating identity in relation to white America.

However, the invisibility becomes complicated. As Kobena Mercer says, the problem of invisibility is the hypervisibility of Blacks. In the introductory chapter to Mercer's Welcome to the Jungle, he maps out the terrain of Diasporic cultural politics, with emphasis on Britain. Mercer identifies the tense socio-political situation between people of African descent and white Britons. He states of the social position of Blacks that if we were invisible, marginal and silenced by subjection to a racism by which we failed to enjoy equal protection under the law as common citizens this was because we were all too visible, all too vocal and all too central...as a reminder and remainder of [Britain's] historical past130

Blacks are a problem simply because they exist in the dominant's space. This visibility is a reminder that an imperialist history, which has often received much-deserved criticism, renders Blacks invisible because the hegemonic group wants to ignore the past. Thus, the

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past shapes the present. As Mercer declares “we are here because you were there.”

Pinder captures this conundrum throughout the video as whiteness and blackness envelope him.

Here, Pinder’s suit connects with more than images of Civil Rights activists and family memories. As another element in the piece, the suit extends the artist’s visual interpretation of the novel to Ellison himself. Ellison, part of a generation that donned the suit in solidarity for racial uplift, talked about the suit or Sunday clothes, and the different world it signified for him as a youth. He eloquently described this world in Invisible Man. Clothing in Ellison’s personal and fictional worlds intertwines and provides his audience a view into how dressing both distinguishes Blacks from each other and allows for desired acceptance by the majority.

During an interview with Richard Stern, Ellison explained how he understood the racial divide, growing up in Oklahoma. He saw it as two worlds: one of economic and human freedom and one of limitations. Interestingly, he describes them in terms of clothing:

there was a world in which you wore your everyday clothes on Sunday, and there was a world in which you wore you Sunday clothes everyday—I wanted the world in which you wore your Sunday clothes everyday...it represented something better, a more exciting and civilized and human way of living.  

The group who wore everyday clothes on Sunday includes the majority of Black Americans who could not afford to purchase Sunday clothes: suits, ties, formal dresses, and dress shoes, to wear on any other day but Sunday, most likely to church. Here,

\[\text{\textsuperscript{131}}\text{Mercer, 7.}\]
Ellison talks about the poor and working-class. To be sure, there was a Black middle-class who could afford these clothes and wear them on a daily basis, but they were an elite few.

Those able to wear their Sunday best or dress-up everyday, in Ellison’s context, were white people. For Ellison, these whites were the families his mother worked for and his white childhood friend, Hoolie. Even though he was young, Ellison perceived that dressing in the finest clothes represented a different life.

Ellison’s memories call to mind Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*. The novel explores race and beauty through the eyes of young Black girls from working-class and poor backgrounds. The title alludes to the notion of beauty associated with having blue eyes. The specific scene that connects with Ellison’s comment on clothing is the arrival of the new girl in town, Maureen Peal, and the reactions of the main characters Frieda and Polly to her.

Morrison uses the character of Maureen, who is the light-skinned daughter of middle-class parents, to expand the conversation on beauty and race to include skin color issues within the African American community. When Maureen arrives at school, sisters Frieda and Polly are envious of her. Her clothing and her assumed beauty because of her light complexion elicit envy and hatred. Polly narrates, describing their nemesis as:

A high-yellow dream child with long brown hair braided into two lynch ropes that hung down her back. She was rich by our standard...swaddled in comfort and care. The quality of her clothes threatened to derange Frieda and me. Patent-leather shoes with buckles, a cheaper version of which we got only at Easter...fluffy sweaters the color of lemon drops tucked into skirts with pleats so

133 Hoolie is a white, childhood friend Ellison occasionally talks about in his essays in *Shadow and Act*. 78
orderly they astounded us. Brightly colored knee socks with white borders, a brown velvet coat trimmed in white rabbit fur, and a matching muff. 134

The sisters look for Maureen's physical imperfections. She seems perfect in their eyes, from her hair, skin, and eyes down to her clothing. Polly frequently refers to Maureen's clothing whenever she talks about her: "I knew it would be a dangerous friendship, for when my eye traced the white border patterns of those Kelly-green knee socks, and felt the pull and slack of my brown stockings, I wanted to kick her." 135 In Morrison's novel, to use Ellison's analogy, the sisters represent the every day clothes on Sunday and Maureen symbolizes the Sunday clothing everyday.

In both authors' cases, children are not too young to understand racial dynamics and class disparities. Clothing becomes a marker for difference and assimilation. Ellison uses the trope of assimilation and clothing in the transformation of Invisible Man.

After Invisible Man's expulsion from college, he heads to New York City to find a job, so he can earn enough money to return to school. In the city, he begins to question his appearance, particularly his clothing, when he attempts to meet some of the white trustees of his college. He wondered to himself "My appearance worried me. Mr. Bates might not like my suit, or the cut of my hair..." 136 When things do not work out in his favor—for example, when he fails in meeting all of the white powerful men as he hopes to—he thinks about his clothing, "My clothes felt ill-fitting..." 137 Clothing, for Invisible Man, signifies his uncertainty as well as his old identity. One scene posits a positive view of himself in relation to Dr. Bledsoe, the president of his college:

135 Morrison, 63.
136 Ellison, 163.
137 Ellison, 165.
I continued to see him gazing into his watch, but now he was joined by another figure; a younger figure, myself; became shrewd, suave and dressed not in somber garments (like his old-fashioned ones) but in a dapper suit of rich material, cut fashionably, like those of the men you saw in magazine ads, the junior executive types in Esquire.¹³⁸

This is one of the first occasions in which Invisible Man sees himself anew. The passage invokes a turn of the century photograph, *Old and New at Utica Miss* (c.1900) (figure 6). Very often, scholars discuss this image in terms of the cultural progression within the Black community as the dawn of the New Negro commenced at the turn of the century.¹³⁹ The photograph shows two men on a dirt road in Utica, Mississippi and illustrates the significance of clothing to one’s identity as well as a signifier of progress and class.

Taken by an unknown photographer, the image centers both men in the middle of the composition. The older man, partially bald with white hair and moustache, stands in front of the young man. The older man wears a dark colored jacket, a white shirt, light colored pants, and work boots. His clothes appear a tad oversized. He looks away from the photographer. Again, to invoke Ellison’s descriptor of clothing, the older gentleman’s clothes are every day clothes on Sunday.

The younger man stands behind the older man. Dressed in a dark suit, buttoned, with a white shirt and tie, unlike the older gentleman, he wears a hat and looks at the photographer. The sartorial ensemble appears tailored for his physique, which differs greatly from the man in front of him. This gentleman clearly represents Sunday clothing everyday. However, it is quite possible both men are heading to church or an important

¹³⁸ Ellison, 160.
¹³⁹ See Deb Willis, Shawn Michelle Smith.
meeting, since they are both dressed up, although in different styles. Nonetheless, this image point to a difference in styles not only generationally but also temporally.

An intriguing aspect of this image is the position of the younger man. While he represents progress and the future, his placement between the older gentleman and the horse buggy behind him also connects him to his past. No matter how far a generation advances, one must always remember where you came from and the people who came before you. Remembering and honoring one’s ancestry helps to shape one’s identity. This is something that Ellison deals with when Invisible Man remembers his grandfather. Pinder does the same when he dons the suit in his performances.

Invisible Man acquires his new clothing and suaveness when he becomes involved with the Brotherhood, an integrated equal rights organization. After watching him speak at the eviction of an old couple, the Brotherhood recruits him to join their cause. Despite his hesitation Invisible Man joins, and receives a new name in addition to money to “pay your debts and buy you clothing.”¹⁴⁰ Later, the reader learns that the protagonist shops for new clothes: “I selected a more expensive suit than I intended, and while it was being altered I picked up a hat, shirt, shoes, underwear and socks.”¹⁴¹ All of the new items accompany his new name and new identity. This newness requires shedding the old. Just as important, the newness symbolizes his assimilation into the group and exhibition of respectability and power to his primary audience of African Americans. This respectability, formality and assimilation, conjures up Civil Rights activists’ style of dress but has a history dating back to uplift.

¹⁴⁰ Ellison, 303.
¹⁴¹ Ellison, 324.
Racial uplift was an ideology of social advancement during the period of Jim Crow. Jim Crow was a “system [that] enforced by law and custom the absolute racial separation of Blacks and whites in the workplace, schools, and virtually all phases of public life in the South.”\(^\text{142}\) The institution of Jim Crow received federal sanction through Plessy v. Ferguson, a Supreme Court case in 1896, which proposed the “separate but equal” basis for legalized segregation. Because Jim Crow and other racist actions positioned Blacks as too backward to be full citizens, African American leaders worked diligently to present counter images to those that whites continued to perpetuate in the public mind.

The Black leaders of the day—businessmen, educators, lawyers, and doctors—decided there were several ways to prove the community’s worthiness of full citizenship, which should be read as “American”—white American. As St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton state

\begin{quote}
the successful Negroes of the era, many of them former slaves, interpreted their own careers as proof that some day black men would be accepted as individuals and Americans. They visualized their progress of their race in terms of education, personal economic success, judicious political action, and co-operation with powerful and influential white people.\(^\text{143}\)
\end{quote}

In Drake and Cayton’s assessment as well as that of Kevin K. Gaines, the Black community sought to uplift the race not only in white America’s eyes but also within the community through economic success. This success in countering the national narratives of Blacks occurred in class divisions among the group. Gaines explains: “black leaders


generally countered anti-black stereotypes by emphasizing class differences among blacks.\textsuperscript{144} This group of elite Blacks felt that uplifting race meant “highlighting their function as elites to reform the character and manage the behavior of the black masses.”\textsuperscript{145}

The leaders or race men and women of the period “begain placing increasing emphasis upon ‘racial self-reliance’—the development of political power and a strong business and professional class.”\textsuperscript{146} The fracturing of the community into distinct socio-economic classes allowed them to create self-reliant and self-sufficient communities. This distinction relates to a significant tenet of racial uplift—respectability.

During this period, respectability was about demonstrating Blacks’ ability to act properly, dress appropriately, and live a highly moral life, in accordance with—or even more thoroughly than—white American ideals. This social and moral code of conduct was the dictum in public and private spaces. Blacks could not act up or act out, especially in front of whites. Respectability, upheld by those of the professional class and those desiring to be part of this elite group, acted as a distinguishing quality between the middle- and upper-class and the folk. Within this hierarchy of Blacks, behavior would determine one’s social status. As Heidi Ardizzone states “status...was based less on money than on education, accomplishments, culture and behavior.”\textsuperscript{147}

Taking a lead from uplift, respectability served as a foundational building block for the Civil Rights Movement. As one avenue to acceptance by whites, respectability

\textsuperscript{144} Gaines, “Racial Uplift Ideology in the Era of ‘the Negro Problem’.”
\textsuperscript{145} Gaines.
\textsuperscript{146} Drake and Cayton, 57.
\textsuperscript{147} Heidi Ardizzone, “‘Such fine families’: Photography and Race in the Work of Caroline Bond Day,” \textit{Visual Studies}, 21.2 (October 2006), 111.
entailed being good citizens, acting right, and dressing appropriately. If Blacks could demonstrate in their appearance and behavior their equality to whites and that they bought into their ideology, perhaps whites would finally treat them in a humane way. Respectability through appearance is no better captured than in the photographs of the period.

In “‘Dress modestly, neatly...as if you were going to church’: Respectability, Class and Gender in the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Early Civil Rights Movement,” Marisa Campbell, Jenny Hutchinson and Brian Ward examine how notions of respectability, gender, and class shaped the fight for equality. The authors look at black and white images, juxtaposing the respectable activists against the angry white segregation sympathizers. The authors approached the contrast by considering the dress of each group. They map out this terrain in the opening paragraphs, discussing the images found in Time magazine: “there are few more striking images...as in the Time article...juxtaposed perfectly coiffured, immaculately dressed, quietly dignified, and stoically nonviolent Black demonstrators with violent, foul-mouthed, unkempt and hysterical white mobs.”

Throughout the essay, the authors quote newspaper accounts from the Black and white press, to establish the respectable dress of Blacks in contrast to whites. Additionally, the juxtaposition demonstrates how respectability connects to middle-class ideals. For example, in the discussion about Martin Luther King, Jr., the authors discuss

148 Marisa Chappell, Jenny Hutchinson and Brian Ward, “‘Dress modestly, neatly...as if You were going to church’: Respectability, Class and Gender in the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Early Civil Rights Movement” in Gender and the Civil Rights Movement. Peter J. Ling and Sharon Monteith, eds. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 69.
descriptions of King, adding that he “represented the strength and commitment required
to fight oppression tirelessly, but through his dress, speech, demeanor, education, and
above all his family, he also represented the post-war middle-class respectability
necessary to gain support.”149 The way activists dressed distinguished them from not only
white segregationists but also the “old” way of how Blacks lived and dressed. The earlier
analysis of the Old and New at Utica Miss photograph supports the authors’ critique.
African Americans were concerned with how they clothed their bodies prior to this
period as evidenced in turn of the century photographs, but what appeared “proper”
changed over time, moving closer to middle-class ideals.

W. E. B. Du Bois curated the “Exhibit of American Negroes,” which featured
African Americans and the social progress they had attained since Reconstruction. The
exhibit debuted at the 1900 Paris Exposition. His intention was to provide a visual
argument for the equality and humanity of Black Americans. Du Bois’s exhibit featured
material culture and photographs of a burgeoning middle-class. It received critical
accolades. As Deborah Willis argues “photography played a critical role in reconstructing
and shaping American visual culture at the turn of the twentieth-century.”150

As a form of subversive resistance, Willis argues the photographs offer an
alternate view of Blacks in America and a global visual context because the exposition
occurred in Paris. In the vein of bell hooks’s definition of subversive resistance, the mere
act of documenting and displaying a counter image is important.

149 Chappell, Hutchinson, Ward, 90.
Willis explores this resistance by examining the role of clothing in these photographs. At the dawn of the twentieth-century, the New Negro becomes defined in relation to the Old Negro. The New Negro is urban, professional, educated and clothed in the finest wears. Perhaps out of all of these characteristics, how and what one wore distinguished new from old ways as “clothing was a key signifier for the New Negro.”\textsuperscript{151} The photographs “recast the New Negro as a collector of fine clothing, preserver of ancestral mementos.”\textsuperscript{152} The men and women either dressed in their finest outfits or borrowed the photographers’ clothing props. Nonetheless, the clothing and “style of dress worn by the subjects reveals the status of the sitters, either real or hoped for.”\textsuperscript{153}

In one example, Willis analyzes the image of Reverend Henry Hugh Proctor, a doctor and the pastor of First Congressional Church in Atlanta, Georgia. The Thomas Askew photograph depicts Reverand Proctor in a three-quarter view. Reverand Proctor is dressed in a full-suit: jacket, vest, tie, and white shirt, looking out past the viewer. Sitting straight up, Rev. Proctor evokes an authoritative stance which demonstrates his position within the Atlanta community. Willis states: “The photograph of Dr. Proctor wearing [a] suit and tie identified this leader as a prominent figure in his community.”\textsuperscript{154} The suit denotes professional status as well as community standing. The civil rights activists took a cue from their ancestors, visually and sartorially claiming leadership and humanity by their style of dress.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{151} Willis, 59.
\item \textsuperscript{152} Willis, 60.
\item \textsuperscript{153} Willis, 66.
\item \textsuperscript{154} Willis, 64.
\end{itemize}
Lloyd Boston, a fashion expert, writes “for Black American men...who have emerged from a history of slavery and segregation, and who continue to be stereotyped and stigmatized, clothing has always served a symbolic purpose.” Boston, in his historical account of Black American male fashion, deconstructs the significance of the suit, culturally and politically.

He opens the book with a general discussion of the suit, claiming it as possibly the most important fashion staple in a man’s closet. Boston states: “the suit has served as a sort of leveling device for Black men...there’s no denying the air of respectability gained by a man wearing a suit. Sartorially, it was the ultimate assimilator.” “The traditional suit has always been,” Boston continues, “an external manifestation of an inner determination to be seen as equal.”

Most interesting in Boston’s fashion history are his connections of social movements to the changes in Black men’s fashion. For instance, for each decade, when he discusses the different cut in suits, Boston highlights the purpose in the change. Of suits, he states “sixties suits had a softer shoulder, one that was able to turned away in the face of ‘separate but equal.’ They had a leaner leg, one that could endure countless miles marched in hope...” This interpretation, while poetic, fits the specific time in which Black men lived and faced struggle.

The reading of Pinder’s suit extends beyond the cultural context of the artist’s memories of his grandfather and father and images of the Civil Rights Movement. If we consider the media of film and video, the suit takes on another meaning. Patrizia Calefato

156 Boston, 20.
157 Boston, 24.
examined how fashion plays a different role in cinema than in daily life. The context changes as she states “getting dressed, even casually, fixing our hair, putting on make-up is a language...even more so in cinema, where every sign on the body of a character has a precise meaning.”158 She argues that with clothing in cinema, regardless of the time period the film portrays, there is a ‘veridiction contract’ between the clothed body in the performance and the spectator:

A character's clothes, accessories or hairstyle in a costume drama may appear verisimilar to the viewer if the latter's encyclopedia contains prior knowledge of the apparel in vogue during the historical period in which the film is set and, moreover, if the image manages to make that costume credible at a textual and intertextual level, if they manage to stimulate the viewer's imagination.159

Calefato articulates the communicative transaction that occurs between the performer and the viewer, stressing that each party is responsible for creating engagement. While the viewer's knowledge of the period presented is critical, Pinder's clothing crosses racial and temporal boundaries, which again allows for a broader group engagement with his body and the art video.

Pinder's decision to wear a suit connects to the character in Ellison's text, but also connects with the everyday person. Even those not familiar with the novel and images of Black male civil rights activists will be familiar with the suit. Whether contemporaneously or historically, the suit resides in the spectator's encyclopedia of fashion and culture. Thus, the viewer not only relates to the suit but can also begin to imagine switching places with Pinder. In this sense, the suit accomplishes what Calefato argues, stirring the viewer's imagination. However, with the awakening of the

159 Calefato, 92.
imagination, the suit then becomes a screen, a sort of clean slate, similar to the blackness and whiteness the viewer encounters throughout the video.

The suit invites the audience to project their thoughts and feelings onto Pinder’s body. For Pinder, the suit serves as a type of armor as he tries to be who he is, without internalizing others’ projections. In this sense, the suit acts as a mediator between himself and Pinder the performer. It also mediates the meanings and projections that it invites when viewers recognize it in the video.

The personal and collective meanings of Pinder’s costume accomplish what Calefato contends that the clothed body does: “the language of the clothed body shapes the body into a kind of map.” The meaning of the suit and the body that wears it make Pinder and the video Invisible Man even more intriguing. Just as the suit becomes a part of a whole in the performance, so too do the technical aspects of the video, such as filmic framing.

In Invisible Man, when we finally see the figure a minute and half into the video, the man stoically looks out at the viewer as light bulbs illuminate the scene (figure 7). After this revelation, there is an unsettling feeling. A sense of confinement becomes evident because of the framing of the man. The filmic device of tight framing heightens this feeling. Bernard Dick explains that “the subject appears to be confined within the horizontal and vertical borders of the frame, so there is not even a hint of offscreen space.” Dick continues, “tight framing gives a feeling of oppression.” In addition to tight framing in the camera work, the space in which the performance occurs—a

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160 Calefato, 5.
161 Bernard F. Dick, Anatomy of Film, (Bedford, MA: St. Martin’s, 2009), 88.
162 Dick, 88.
basement—adds to the feeling of confinement. By coupling the filmic device and the film set, the viewer cannot avoid noticing that Pinder is boxed in, a metaphor for himself as an artist and for the Black man. Furthermore, this device allows the audience to project their own moments of confinement onto the male protagonist.

Just as we get comfortable with the Black body on the screen, whiteness begins to dominate the figure (figure 8). The bulb in the foreground gets brighter and outshines the brightness of the other bulbs in the scene. As all the lights turn on, they create a yellowish aura that washes over the man and the basement. At this point in the performance, the music, which had been playing at a steady tempo, hits a crescendo just as the whiteness/lightness reaches its climax.

Meanwhile, the body continues to stand still, looking out at the viewer and displaying no emotion as whiteness engulfs the man and the music hits its climax. This static disposition can be read in multiple ways: standing firm in defiance of attacks; being invisible in a world that does not notice you; watching a world as it moves around you; and blending seamlessly into the environment. The non-action action in the video recalls the non-violent protests of the late 1950s and 1960s. As he stands firm, in the basement-box, it conjures up images of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) lunch counter sit-ins and protesters forming formidable walls against angry whites and the police.

Also interesting is the contrast between Pinder’s static body and his choice of music for the piece. The instrumental that Pinder weaves effortlessly into the video is “Din Da Da,” from The Roots album The Tipping Point (2004). ?uestlove, the drummer in the hip-hop band, remixed “Trommeltanz” which is also known as “Din Daa Daa.”
“Din Da Da Da,” created by George Kranz, is a 1980s club hit as well as a standard B-boy or break dancer’s joint. Ken Tucker describes Kranz’s hit as “German dance-rock in which a bright-eyed blond fellow does his best to turn himself into a human drum, scatting percussively over the splashing keyboards and doo-wop refrain of the back-up singers.”

Pinder’s video and selection of The Roots reflects this little recognized sub-genre and the goal of creating thought-provoking music while drawing in a diverse audience. Most importantly, his inclusion of The Roots’s “Din Da Da” version connects to the historicity of the album as well as how the creation of art does not happen in a vacuum.

“Din Da Da” is on The Tipping Point, The Roots’s sixth album. The album borrows its title from Malcolm Gladwell’s book, The Tipping Point: How Little Things Make a Big Difference (2002). Gladwell’s thesis is that “ideas, products and behaviors can spread like viruses and that consequences of such social epidemics can ripple outward until a critical mass—the tipping point—is reached. Even a single person’s behavior can affect society at large.” Ultimately, as individuals we can make a difference, and the thematic structure of the album speaks to this idea. The Roots set the tone for this before one even hears the album, with an image of Malcom Little, before he becomes Malcolm X, as the cover image. The image is a mugshot of Little, from a 1946 arrest for burglary. Questlove identifies this moment as Malcolm X’s tipping point because if not for the arrest, he would not have become an icon for Black

consciousness. With this image, the album title, and the music—particularly the band’s re-working of Kranz’s hit twenty-years later, The Roots marry the past with the present, in the same way that Pinder does in *Invisible Man*.

The song is one made for hip-hop dancing. A reviewer of The Roots album states: “Q-Tip does a version of an old B-boy favorite ‘Din Daa Daa,’ turning it into a five-minute drum jam.” With the seductive scatting of Kranz and the drumming of Q-Tip, which encourages head bopping and pop-locking, Pinder’s non-moving body counters the rhythmic pressure to move to the song. Thus, Pinder goes against the grain, just like the Civil Rights activists.

Most important is Pinder’s firmness as a metaphor for strength through struggle. Black American culture is borne from struggle and oppression. Pinder demonstrates his awareness of this when he states: “I try to embody strength, a Black strength or a Black power in my pieces.”

Once the audience settles on the body, framed by the red brick walls and light bulbs, whiteness takes over everything (figure 9). In spite of the blindingly white space, Pinder’s form does not fall victim to formlessness as we continue to see the bottom edge of his black tie. The tie indicates to the viewer that regardless of the whiteness, which led to invisibility of the man, the male figure is physically present. Whiteness cannot extinguish his physicality.

Unlike the beginning of the video in which total blackness blankets the screen with no visual clues, the saturated whiteness leaves a small amount of space across the

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165 Tucker.
167 As quoted in Martin and Wall, 83.
bottom of the screen. In this opening, the tie peeks out at the audience, serving as a reminder that there is a man embedded in whiteness. The whiteness is not complete whiteness as there are hues of yellow and orange at the bottom of the screen. This space possibly acts as another access point, allowing the viewer to continue to project into the image on screen. Without the view of the body, whiteness is the primary object for the projections. Or, perhaps the opening allows the audience to regroup and gather their thoughts.

The lights dim, revealing the figure once again, providing a balance of darkness and lightness, and we see the still man standing in the room. As the light fades to black, the music returns to a steady tempo and leads the viewer into gradual blackness. Blackness signals the end of the sequence just as it marked the beginning.

Pinder's video performance makes a remarkable statement. When the lights overload the camera sensors, the video becomes whitewashed, so that Pinder's form is invisible. With the journey from black to white, we see that in the blackness, the body is unidentifiable just as it is in total whiteness. Only when the light is balanced, do we see Pinder's form. I would argue that this is the artist's way of questioning blackness and whiteness, asking what they are and how they contribute to the whole picture, figuratively and literally.

Although the invisibility in Ellison's novel is about the Black man in America, Pinder's invisibility trope takes this a step further by incorporating whiteness. Invisibility is as much about Blacks visible invisibility as it is about whites' invisibility—the failure to see their whiteness and how it shapes their lives and, most importantly, the lives of groups labeled as Others. Richard Dyer explains how "the colourless multi-colouredness
of whiteness secures white power by making it hard, especially for white people and their media, to ‘see’ whiteness.\textsuperscript{168} Pinder speaks to this inability of seeing by making whiteness visible to his predominately white audience with the blindingly white lights that engulf his body. This audience, perhaps unknowingly, receives the artist’s take on his blackness in relation to whiteness. It is as if he is imploring the white spectators to recognize their place in the race discussion and their power in the systemic structures of racism, in order for him to truly shed the label “Black” artist. As a mirror, the white screen makes the white spectators complicit in upholding racism especially as they project their thoughts and beliefs onto the screen and most importantly onto the Black body.

Another reading of the whiteness in the video is its role as the veil W.E.B. Du Bois writes about in The Souls of Black Folks. The veil is a psychological wall that separates Otherness from “normativity” and gives the marginalized a view of their duality within a dominant group. Du Bois recounts his first encounter with the veil as a child. He explains that “it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others; or like, mayhap in heart and longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil.”\textsuperscript{169} Du Bois’s response reflects upon a childhood experience of rejection by a white girl in his school. Du Bois expands upon the veil saying “the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world.”\textsuperscript{170}

\textsuperscript{169} Du Bois, 44.
\textsuperscript{170} Du Bois, 45.
The veil serves as a barrier—psychological and physical—from full acceptance of a person in society. The barrier refers to Otherness that stays with the person as long as he or she is in the margins. An interesting note about Du Bois’s writing about the veil is that as Souls progresses, he capitalizes the “v” in veil, which symbolizes the growing significance of the veil in American life. Du Bois also speaks of it in terms of casting shadows and light, which is quite appropriate to the discussion of Pinder’s art video, and for that matter Ellison’s novel.

When Du Bois discusses the birth and death of his son, he woefully accepts the difficulty his child will face because he has African blood flowing through his veins and blonde hair and blue-brown eyes mark him as a descendant of interracial heritage. It is at this moment, Du Bois states “And thus in the Land of the Color-line I saw, as it fell across my baby, the shadow of the Veil. Within the Veil was he born, said I…”171 This is not Du Bois’s first reference to the veil as a shadow but it becomes quite poetic as he thinks about it being an obstacle for his infant. In terms of Pinder’s video, the white lights metaphorically act as the veil. While this is a more nuanced usage of the veil, Du Bois becomes more explicit about it towards the end of the essay.

As the reader continues reading the mixed feeling Du Bois has about becoming a new father, the reader learns of the death of his infant son. Du Bois laments his death and the possibility of his son’s ability to handle the burden of blackness. In a hopeful proclamation, he says “Surely there shall yet dawn some mighty morning to lift the Veil

171 Du Bois, 227.
and set the prisoned free."\textsuperscript{172} This one sentence fully encapsulates the hope and despair of the fight against racism.

Shawn Michelle Smith examines the meaning of the veil in Photography on the Color Line. She argues that the "Veil is that which dims perception" and "functions as a cultural screen on which the collective weight of white misconceptions is fortified and made manifest."\textsuperscript{173} In terms of Pinder's video and the whiteness that overtakes his form, Smith's reading of the veil connects with the function of the white light and supports reading the whiteness and blackness in the video as a screen.

If the veil is, as Smith states, "a site at which African Americans are asked to see themselves 'through the eyes of others,'"\textsuperscript{174} in Du Bois's lens, then the veil, for Pinder, is a site at which his predominantly white audience is forced to see themselves. With the explicitness of the whiteness on the screen, the spectator begins to understand how and why people of color become invisible, as "it is a moment of transformative awareness, of enlightenment."\textsuperscript{175} It is due to the dominance of whiteness—the social category as well as the cultural reality of living in a raced society. Because the brightness of the lights is explicit, it forces the audience to engage with their perceptions as well as Pinder's. In this way, there is an unspoken dialogue happening simultaneously.

Pinder's visual representations of the psychological interdependence of whites and Blacks, while showing each respective group independently, is quite remarkable. Though one, when viewing the video, may think this is obvious, it is not so

\textsuperscript{172} Du Bois, 231.
\textsuperscript{174} Smith, 40.
\textsuperscript{175} Smith, 41.
straightforward because of the structure of race and racism in the United States. Many are taught to believe that marginalized people are dependent on the normative group. However, one might argue that whites depend on Blacks more than Blacks depend on whites. Dyer states that while whites have power, they are “materially dependent upon black people...it is this actual dependency of white on black in a context of continued white power and privilege that throws the legitimacy of white domination into question.”¹⁷⁶ Dyer’s statement complicates the familiar hegemonic ideology, turning it on its head and acknowledging that whites’ financial gain is often a result of the exploitation of Blacks.

Though Dyer speaks of the material, and essentially the economic system built upon the backs of Blacks in the West, an allusion to the social and cultural development of a group of people is present in the quote. Stuart Hall explicitly remarks on the codependence of forming one’s identity, using the Caribbean as his example, and its representation in cinema. Hall says “we cannot speak for very long, with any exactness, about ‘one experience, one identity,’ without acknowledging its other side—the difference and discontinuities which constitute precisely the Caribbean ‘uniqueness’.”¹⁷⁷ Hall’s statement, while focused on the diversity of the Caribbean, points to an absence of understanding about how differences, and “different” people, shape our identities—identities that make us unique. Pinder’s performance also suggest this kind of interdependence, saying that without the one you cannot have the other: blackness and whiteness require each other. This leads to the conclusion that there is no pureness in

¹⁷⁶ Dyer, 737.
race, and for that matter American culture, illuminating the fluidity of race and identity, hence calling into question and asking: What is race?

Black bodies frequently receive projections from the dominant majority. The Black body is a site for the majority’s problems and ills, and unfortunately, this attack on the Black body is not declining. For the artist, he constantly deals with his audience’s various projections, which often place him neatly into a box. This is something all Black and marginalized artists deal with in their respective fields. Invisible Man, the character and the video, provides Pinder with a way to explore the burdens and weight of being Black as he states “my pieces are an escape and definitely an alter ego because inside of me I don’t know how to walk around with that weight and maybe that chip, except through my pieces. It’s my way to explore and express identity.”

The Veil Lifted

With the directness of keepin’ it real or real talk, Pinder and his peers are also interested in bridging the gap between racial and ethnic groups. Creating art is one way to accomplish this as well as enticing spectators into the work through music. Though there are debates about whether music is an equalizer, this generation expresses themselves through hip-hop and Pinder uses it seamlessly in his work, especially in Invisible Man.

The center and the margin converge in Jefferson Pinder’s work, most strikingly in Invisible Man. Groups of people, meaning the audience, so different yet so similar, meet in Pinder’s, Chappelle’s and McGruder’s work. This is what makes the post-soul

178 Martin and Wall, 78.
generation so markedly different from previous generations of African Americans. Pinder’s art video charts this navigation but also concedes that the onus of race is not soley on non-whites; whites are integral to the discussion about race and racism.

*Invisible Man* accomplishes a balance in the conversation about race; something that has yet to be achieved in the race discourse of everyday life. Pinder, because of his generational status, is quite mindful of balancing the discourse about race as well as culture and identity. In this work, there are several access points for a diverse audience, no matter their social, cultural, ethnic, or political affiliations: the music, the novel *Invisible Man*, and the clothing.

While he provides points of access for his audience, Pinder does not let them off the hook, in regards to their complicity in upholding racial ideologies and hierarchies, particularly his predominantly white viewers. Through Pinder’s cultural references, the audience connects with both blackness and whiteness. For his white audience members, the blindingly white light that washes over Pinder’s body and dominates the screen is an unavoidable mirror to the dominance of whiteness in our culture. Although an argument can be made that the whiteness is not mirror because it reflects something whites cannot see, the extremeness of the light forces the audience to engage, especially because the light engulfs Pinder. It is difficult not to see the symbolic meaning of this action, particularly because it is an action—hegemony—that is easily overlooked by whites.

This whiteness may be the most striking commentary on race and identity in the video. This does not make whiteness central or more important than blackness, but speaks to Pinder’s courage in asserting its place within race discourse. Many viewers tend to focus on Pinder’s body—a Black body—within the performance, which commonly
happens with a Black artist. By focusing on the Black body, they are missing the point of the video: whiteness is a problem because of its assumed invisibility and dominance. Pinder is fearless in making this statement so boldly considering his profession as an artist and academic, which are both dominated by whites. This is what makes Pinder stand out and makes him part of the post-soul generation, a willingness to say what is necessary without apology. In essence, a willingness to call a spade a spade.

An important aspect of the audience reading the video is the understanding that the “picture depends on acknowledging a representational convention.”179 The audience has to understand that the video performance is not a direct representation of being literally boxed-in but a reference to a social condition of feeling marginalized. In this way, the picture, or in this case the video, is “sensitive to the kinds of interpretive skill—patterns, categories, influences, analogies—the mind brings to it.”180 This connects back to the complexity of images and representation stated in the introduction.

Homage to the past in the present is a strong characteristic of the post-soul generation, a generation for which The Roots and Pinder serve as representatives. Much of the criticism of this generation is that they take the accomplishments of the civil rights generation for granted, and while there is some truth to this, it only represents a portion of post-soulers. It is easy to focus on extremes. This is why examining cultural workers who are diligently interrogating our culture—culling from the past and mixing it with the present in order to leave a legacy for the future—is important. These cultural workers, for all of their keen and thoughtful insights into our world, often exist at the margins, and

179 Baxandall, 33.
180 Baxandall, 34.

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even more so for artists of color. It is time to consider those at the margins, whether they are there because of their difference or profession, so that we as a society can heal old wounds in the hopes of preventing new ones.

Pinder’s main goal is to collapse antiquated notions of identity and perceptions we have of ourselves and of other people that box us in. This is the brilliance in using Ralph Ellison’s novel as his source of inspiration. Just as The Roots remixed a classic, so too does Pinder. Ellison’s examination of identity and perception still resonates in the twenty-first century. And, though this is a testament to the genius of Ellison, it is problematic that in the twenty-first century, we continue to fight against others’ perceptions of ourselves. Pinder’s video beautifully captures this problem. Although the inspiration is Ellison’s prologue, the five-minute performance speaks to the entire novel and where our society was and continues to stand.

In coupling music and the visual, Pinder creates works that everyone can find a point of access. His work is not about art created by a Black artist but about demonstrating the necessity of interrogating everyone’s complicity in race, racism and identity politics. By illuminating our roles in maintaining the status quo, we can begin to question the Othering of our differences. Pinder accomplishes what very few do with his art; he creates art that transcends rigid notions of race. *Invisible Man* exemplifies Pinder’s mission.

Jefferson Pinder’s video *Invisible Man*, with all of its stunning aesthetic qualities is a work of art that sparks dialogue. Pinder is not an artist going for the slickness of contemporary visuality, in order to be accepted within the mainstream. He is leaving a
legacy of his artistic astuteness in addition to representing a generation that cares about the issues that continue to plague our society: race, class, gender, politics, and equality. Pinder creates subversive images, as defined by bell hooks: “It is ... about transforming the image, creating alternatives, asking ourselves questions about what types of images subvert, pose critical alternatives, and transform our worldviews.” Pinder’s art and nuanced commentary connects to the work of Dave Chappelle and *Chappelle’s Show*. 
Chapter 2: “I'm Tryin' to Do My Thang!”: Dave Chappelle

One way Blacks define and expand notions of blackness is through performance. Comedy is employed by Blacks not only to examine blackness but also as a way for the African American community to deal with racism. Within the structure of comedy, several characteristics rooted in African diasporic culture are significant to the medium: language, mimicry, and style.

While utilizing these characteristics to interrogate one’s identity—with blackness at the forefront—comedy also has been and continues to be a forum to analyze whiteness and white people. In the guise of jokes, the comedians demonstrate the continual shift in the notions of whiteness while expanding ideas of blackness. This interrogation of whiteness, culturally and socially, refuses to allow whites to treat race as an exclusively Black “problem” but instead incorporates whites squarely into the discourse.

The focus in this chapter is comedian Dave Chappelle and his comic vehicle Chappelle’s Show. Airing from 2003-2005, he used the show to examine race and racism, as well as class, gender, and sexuality in America. What is of specific interest to me is how Chappelle interrogated blackness and whiteness using a post-soul sensibility. I argue that his television show broadened definitions of blackness and makes whiteness and its works visible to a mainstream audience. While everyone is free game for Chappelle, I believe he explicitly Others whites in some of the show’s sketches, turning the tables on them in order to show the ridiculousness of racism and making the point that

181 Although, the show aired for two seasons, Comedy Central aired the “Lost Episodes.” These episodes were sketched taped for the contracted third season, which never happened because Chappelle abruptly quit the show in 2005.

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race is much more problematic than white people assume, especially in our so-called "post-racial" era.

Chappelle’s Show raised such questions as: How does performing race affect the message? How does Chappelle examine Blacks/blackness and whites/whiteness? How should the television medium teach people about race and racism? How does Chappelle’s comedy undermine the dominant-marginal structure of race? Who is Chappelle’s audience? Do Chappelle’s characters re-inscribe stereotypes, especially if the audience is not in on the joke? These questions help to frame my analysis of Chappelle’s Show.

The specific sketches from Chappelle’s Show I analyze are “Reparations 2003” and “Wayne Brady’s Show.” Each sketch highlights how Chappelle explicitly and implicitly examines blackness and whiteness drawing upon insider knowledge. This insider knowledge, knowledge gained as a Black man in the United States, involves an insight that most African Americans learn as they grow up in the US—that blackness is the contrastive Other that makes whiteness possible. Coupled with this is the awareness that power and privilege come with the social and political position of being white. In addition to interrogating race, the sketches probe the many issues bound up with race.

“Reparations 2003,” from the premiere season, examines race, class, and consumerism in a more direct manner than some of Chappelle’s other sketches. This skit illuminates the stereotypes connected with blackness and also serves as an interrogation of whiteness. Chappelle not only illustrates how blackness and whiteness play out in our lives but also the fluidity and ambiguousness of race. Continuing the analysis of race, the “Wayne Brady’s Show” sketch offers multiple levels of race interrogation and adds an examination of power in the entertainment industry. The sketch also demonstrates the
general misconception that Blacks are homogeneous, especially in the entertainment arena. All of these aspects show that although a comedian, Chappelle is an intellectual creating art that theorizes the dynamics of race, racism, and power in twenty-first century America.

I begin this chapter with an examination of how race exhibits itself in the power of words through the naming. Next, I explore how language and assumptions about race and culture work in skits within the frame—the show. A close look at the use of mimicry, as a way to investigate cultural differences, supports the language analysis and the various ways Black counter racism. Lastly, I examine how Chappelle uses the character Chuck Taylor to investigate whiteness.

**Chappelle’s Show: What’s in a Name?**

“Once again, Richard hands over the keys to the Caddy. He wants me to do all the casting for his comedy series (which, in a stroke of originality, NBC is calling The Richard Pryor Show).”\(^{182}\)—Paul Mooney

Naming is important in how we identify the people, places, and things that make up our culture. This practice is no different when an artist, filmmaker, or author names or titles a project. The title of cultural works provides the audience, viewer or reader an idea about what they will encounter. Sometimes works of art have no title or the title does not reflect the work’s content. Often, the title is misleading, leaving the viewer to determine what they are viewing and how the title relates to the work. Whether a cultural object has

\(^{182}\) Paul Mooney, *Black is the New White: A Memoir*, (New York: Simon Spotlight Entertainment, 2009), 174. This quote from Mooney refers to Pryor’s comedy show, after the success of *The Richard Pryor Special?*. 

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a name or is nameless (titled or untitled), the identification is a significant characteristic of the work.

In the fields of art history and aesthetics, several scholars have researched the importance of titles. There are varying viewpoints on titles; however most scholars agree that titles, whether of a painting, musical composition, or novel, serve a purpose. As John Fisher states “a title is not only a name, it is a name for a purpose.” Fisher further claims “names can be given to anything but titling calls for some special acknowledgment of value or relationship.” This statement, while significant to Fisher’s analysis of “high art,” is also relevant to Chappelle’s television show, Chappelle’s Show. I contend Chappelle’s Show is more than a name. It is a title whose possessive marking represents Chappelle’s intellectual ownership, movement from the periphery, and connection with African American cultural traditions.

Before analyzing Chappelle’s work, it is helpful to explore the titling of another comedy show whose title “calls for some special acknowledgment of value”—Richard Pryor’s The Richard Pryor Special?. I use this television special as an example because the act of titling it was deliberate. On this basis, I argue that the naming of Chappelle’s sketch comedy is in line with the conscious decisions of Richard Pryor and Paul Mooney. Comedian and writer Paul Mooney addresses the issue of naming in Black is the New White, a memoir in which he describes his experience working with his best friend, the great comic, Richard Pryor. Mooney collaborated with Pryor throughout Pryor’s

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184 Fisher, 298.
career, perhaps most notably on three television shows—two with Pryor as the primary act and one with an ensemble.\textsuperscript{185} The Richard Pryor Special? was one of these projects.

As Mooney discusses NBC executives offering a comedy special to Pryor, he explains the decision to include a question mark at the end of the title: \textquote{We pitch it with a question mark in the title to set it apart from other shows, but also because we talk about mixing it up, putting a few dramatic skits in with the comedic riffs.}\textsuperscript{186} This decision is significant because the strategic use of the question mark represents the comedian\textquotesingle s awareness of politics in television, the special, and race relations in the United States, particularly after the Civil Rights Movement. Pryor and Mooney actively engaged in challenging the norm throughout their comedic careers and this subtle act, I posit, is no different.

The Richard Pryor Special?, which debuted in 1977, was imagined by the network to showcase Pryor doing what he did best—comedy. After all, NBC established a working relationship with Pryor based on him being a funny man, so this is one reason the question mark is included in the title. The punctuation calls attention to the multidimensionality of Pryor\textquotesingle s talent compared to the network\textquotesingle s expectations of Pryor. Is the special really Pryor\textquotesingle s or the network\textquotesingle s special?

While outsiders might not notice, when Pryor and Chappelle use the conscious act of naming along with punctuation and other subtle elements to distinguish themselves from other shows and comedians, they follow an African American linguistic tradition—signifyin\textquotesingle. Signifyin'/signifying is \textquote{often used to make a point, to issue a corrective, or to}

\textsuperscript{185} Mooney also wrote some of Pryor\textquotesingle s jokes for his stand-up routines.
\textsuperscript{186} Mooney, 171.
critique through indirection and humor." The linguist Geneva Smitherman further states that signifyin’ is subtle in that the receiver is not always aware of the act. In the comedians’ titles of their respective shows, viewers and scholars alike may overlook the question mark and the possessive. This fits Claudia Mitchell-Kernan’s definition of signifyin’: “the recognition and attribution of some implicit content or function.”

While the question mark and possessive simply appear to be part of the title, Pryor and Chappelle, use these markers as a strategy that keeps them true to themselves and the Black community. In essence, signifyin’ is a way for Black folks to keep it real, while in mixed company.

Pryor and Chappelle are considered griots; similar to the rapper, they “must be lyrically/linguistically fluent. . . expected to testify, to speak the truth, to come with it in no uncertain terms.” The Black comedian is also like the rapper because both employ Black oral traditions of “tonal semantics, narrativizing, signification/signifyin’, the dozens/playin’ the dozens, and Africanized syntax” in their work. Pryor and Mooney practice the art of signifyin’ with the question mark in the title which problematizes the actual ownership of the show. But, the question mark has even wider implications.

Given’s Mooney’s statement about the question mark and the signifyin’ it signals, the special’s title also points to the double-consciousness of Blacks and those categorized as Others. The example illustrates how Black people are mindful “of measuring one’s self through the eyes of others...one ever feels his twoness—an American, a Negro; two souls,

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188 Quoted in Marcyliena Morgan, “Theories and Politics of African American Language,” 333.
189 Ibid, 4.
190 Ibid, 4.
two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body..." 191

Aware of their blackness and the double talk one has to do in order to break into a hegemonic industry, Pryor and Mooney must signal their unease with the power structure to black viewers without antagonizing the white decision-makers.

While television arguably provided Pryor with a wider audience than his comedy tours and films, television as he experienced it was too restrictive. In his autobiography Pryor Convictions and Other Life Sentences, he recalled hosting Saturday Night Live in 1975. “During rehearsals, writer Michael O’ Donoghue came to my hotel room to discuss ideas, but my suggestions scared the hell out of him, and all he could say was, ‘You can’t do that on television.’ ‘See that’s what I’m talking about!’ I protested, airing my frustration over the constraints of TV.” 192 Early in his career, Pryor felt he had more freedom in film but realized that “maybe I was just fooling myself by thinking there was more freedom in movies, since I was never going to find an outlet as unrestricted as the stage. Just me, the mike, and the audience.” 193

With the constraints placed upon Pryor, it is curious that he agreed to do a comedy special and a variety series two years after his experience with Saturday Night Live. As the host of Saturday Night Live, Pryor, unbeknownst to him, was put on a five-second delay to allow censorship if he cursed during the live broadcast. 194 It is not clear when Pryor found out about the delay, but it speaks to the question mark that he dealt

193 Pryor, 147.
194 Pryor, 145. Pryor states in his memoir that if he know that there was delay, he would not have hosted the show.
with the executives trying to get him to tone down, essentially not allowing him to “do him.”¹⁹⁵ The question mark also alludes to Pryor walking a fine line between his art and his livelihood: Would he go over the line and lose the show altogether?

Mooney discussed throughout his memoir Pryor’s concern that he was not keeping it real. Pryor stressed this personal stake as he commented:

> when I committed to do a ten-week-comedy-variety series, I thought I could do something significant. I only saw the possibilities of TV as a way of communicating. But the reality of what the network censors allowed on primetime undercut all my enthusiasm. Because I didn’t want to sell out completely, I walked into one of the earliest meetings...and quit the show.¹⁹⁶

Thus, the question mark is not only about Hollywood and an artist having space to be creative but also a reminder for Pryor to keep it real and be the comedian (and the man) people witnessed on the stage and in film. As Lily Tomlin stated, “When you hire Richard Pryor, you get Richard.”¹⁹⁷

Richard Pryor’s comedy special shows how analyzing a work’s title gives insight into the artist and the work of art. This is also true of Dave Chappelle and Chappelle’s Show. I contend that titling the show Chappelle’s Show, using a possessive /s/, rather than The Chappelle Show, with a definitive article /the/, is important for the show and Chappelle. To date, I have not encountered any evidence that Chappelle consciously titled his show the way that he did but, considering that he created the show, Chappelle’s involvement in naming the show is most likely the case, particularly because of his

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¹⁹⁵ This is a vernacular phrase which comes from “do you” meaning the just be who you are.
¹⁹⁶ Pryor, 153.
¹⁹⁷ Pryor, 153.
experience with television sitcoms.\textsuperscript{198} Therefore, I believe that he was aware of the
importance of titling.

Chappelle’s title for the sketch comedy show deserves special attention because
“what a work of art is titled...has a significant effect on the aesthetic face it presents and
on the qualities we correctly perceive it in.”\textsuperscript{199} The fact that Chappelle titled the show
\textit{Chappelle's Show} sets the tone for the content as well as establishing the comic’s
intellectual ownership of the show. Unlike \textit{The Richard Pryor Special?}, there is no
question that \textit{Chappelle's Show} is not just his ruminations about life and culture but is
Dave Chappelle. E.H. Gombrich’s work on the titles of artworks supports this position.
He argues that titles have dual purposes: to act as a reference to the work for the artist and
to “tell his public what mattered to him.”\textsuperscript{200} He adds that titles instruct the viewer to
change or adopt a mental attitude. Chappelle’s audience knows they have to, or get to,
check out of their lives for thirty minutes and get their mind ready for what he will give
them. The show’s title instructs the audience that they are getting part of Chappelle
himself. Although the comedy show was a collaborative effort, from the writers to the
actors, he informs the studio audience and the home viewer that the show is his and to
expect Chappelle’s brand of humor. In this sense, the title “helps determine its
character.”\textsuperscript{201}

\textsuperscript{198} While Chappelle had a writing partner, Neal Brennan, the show is titled with Chappelle’s last name as
he is the star and perhaps the guiding force for the show. Chappelle also had a short-lived television show
on the ABC network called “Buddies.”
\textsuperscript{200} E.H. Gombrich, “Image and Word in Twentieth-Century Art,” \textit{Word & Image}, vol. 1, no. 3 (July-
September 1985), 216.
\textsuperscript{201} Levinson, 29.
This is evident in two separate occasions during the show: the premiere episode and a sketch in the second season. In the opening episode of season one, Chappelle walks onto the stage and welcomes the studio audience as well as the home viewer. If the title was not enough to set the tone for the show and establish ownership, Chappelle uses this opportunity to make it explicit as he states “Welcome to this thing that we call Chappelle’s Show. This is the very first episode. I finally get my own show. And, I mean I’m serious when I say this is my show. This is my show.” Chappelle continues to say that he has control and can do whatever he wants. His statement, while said in a cool, laid-back manner, speaks volumes about the titling of the show and the significance of ownership, creative control, and the brand of comedy the audience will experience throughout the season. This declaration makes the sketch in the second season all the more noteworthy.

“You’re Replaceable”: Expendability of Entertainers

The “Wayne Brady’s Show” sketch (Season Two; Episode Twelve) begins with Dave Chappelle speaking with Comedy Central executives at their faux headquarters. He tells the executives, who are played by actual executives at the network, that he is burned-out, and he resigns, effective immediately. The executives respond by

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202 Comedy Central present’s Chappelle’s Show, Season I, Episode I, DVD, Paramount Pictures and Comedy Central home video, 2003.
203 Audio commentary, Comedy Central presents Chappelle’s Show, Season 2, Episode 12, DVD, Paramount Pictures and Comedy Central home video, 2004.
reminding him that he signed a two-season contract and has already completed the
sketches for season two. The female executive and Chappelle have a candid exchange:

**Female executive:** “At this point in the season, you’re replaceable.”

**Chappelle:** “Replaceable? You’re gonna replace me? Dave Chappelle of *Chappelle’s
Show? I’d like to see that.”

The exchange demonstrates the dance that artists—actors and comedians—must perform
when dealing with networks and organizations that have a financial stake in their art.
Additionally, the discussion illustrates the irony in Chappelle owning his show or the
rights to the show. The network believes, as happens all too frequently in our culture, that
they can replace him with another “popular” Black comic, demonstrating the common
belief that Black people are interchangeable, without individual qualities of value.

The insistence of the executives that Chappelle is replaceable reveals the social,
cultural, and political hierarchy in American society, where whites are frequently in
positions of power and non-whites are marginalized. The power relations between whites
and Blacks are often talked about and theorized but here the power of the visual image
speaks volumes, when you really look at the encounter. For example, Chappelle sits
opposite the two white executives. The executives sit straight up, projecting authority,
whereas Chappelle slouches in his seat, assuming both the role of the subjugated Other
but also a confrontation of this rigidity with relaxed Black “cool.” The stiffness of the
white execs and the relaxed posture of Chappelle help to establish whiteness and
blackness. Julie Dash’s film *Illusions* (1982), for instance, examines this difference
through the use of the body.
*Illusions*, a short film, is set in 1942 and follows the heroine, Mignon Duprey, a light-skinned woman passing for white, in her position as a Hollywood film executive. Mignon, the only Black and woman executive at National Studios, wants to make films about African Americans, particularly focusing on the soldiers returning from World War II. Dash utilizes Mignon’s fraught social, professional, and cultural location to examine whiteness as well as blackness. E. Ann Kaplan analyzes the film for its interrogation of whiteness and points out the way Dash constructs whiteness by reversing the gaze. In her analysis, Kaplan identifies how Dash uses the bodies of women—the white women and Mignon—to accomplish this. She points out that the white women’s “bodies are imaged as stiff, tight, and awkward, as against Mignon’s relaxed, svelte, and slender body.”

Blacks’ fluid body movements against whites’ stiffness is often a noticeable difference. It is so significant that Chappelle includes it in the “Ask a Black Dude with Paul Mooney” sketch.

"Ask a Black Dude with Paul Mooney" (Season One; Episode Five) features Mooney as the quintessential authority on blackness. In this installment, a Middle-Eastern man asks about Black men’s walk or strut. Mooney responds that “Black people walk like that because we have style, we’ve got flavor, we’ve got rhythm.” Black men’s walk is commonly mimicked and commented on by Blacks and whites alike. Recently, President Barack Obama’s walk received national attention during his 2008 Presidential campaign. Interesting to note here is that a Middle-Eastern man asked the

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205 *Chappelle’s Show*, Season One.
question, which speaks to the presumable difference between not only Blacks and whites but also Blacks and other ethnicities. The man complicates the racial binary of Black and white, expanding it to include all people of color and their differences from each other.

*Illusions* and "Ask a Black Dude" both exemplify how one's body, body movement, and body language are used to highlight racial differences. These examples provide a framework for further examination of the bodies on *Chappelle’s Show*. The body language in this sketch provides insight into the racial tension present among the players in Chappelle’s meeting with the television executives.

Thomas Kochman’s research on the differing ways Blacks and whites communicate in various settings is helpful in interpreting the scene. Utilizing his work, I suggest that inequality is at the center of this and many other Chappelle sketches, even when it is not explicit. Kochman claims “In official meetings, inequality is built into the negotiations. It results from the power of one group to prevail regardless of the merits of their argument.”206 Because of the racial dynamics of hierarchy, negotiations do not begin balanced. We see this in the meeting between the white executives and Chappelle.

Furthermore, the building in which the meeting takes place can be seen as representing the institutionalization of racism. A view of the Comedy Central headquarters leads the audience into the meeting taking place between the Chappelle and the executives. The lead-in shot of the structure is important as “the very architecture of the official building makes it more important to Black negotiators to sustain emotion that brought them there. Moreover, the marble inside represents the power of the

establishment and thus serves to reinforce the grievance and heighten the emotion.”

The structure supports yet contains the negotiator. In other words, the building serves dual purposes: to figuratively support the negotiator, Chappelle, and to symbolize a physical representation of the company—Comedy Central. The building and architecture act as reminders of the literal and figurative power structures in play in our culture, and in this sketch. In essence, the building is a modern day big house, echoing the plantation residence of slaveholders in the antebellum period.

After the exterior shot of the headquarters, the viewer witnesses the exchange between Chappelle and his employers. The interior scene shows Chappelle sitting across from two white executives, with a large mahogany conference table between them as a physical divider. Behind Chappelle—very important to note—are three posters for television shows that are the highest rated programs on Comedy Central: Crank Yankers, South Park, and Chappelle’s Show (figure 10). When the camera focuses on Chappelle, the audience sees the posters. Then, gradually, the camera zooms in on Chappelle, with the Crank Yankers and Chappelle’s Show posters out of view. However, the South Park poster is still visible directly behind Chappelle. I point out the posters because they frame the significance of Chappelle to comedy shows regarded as politically progressive, and perhaps most importantly to Comedy Central.

Chappelle was a guest star on Crank Yankers, a comedy show about prank phone calls enacted by puppets. A who’s who of comics starred on the show including Wanda

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207 Kochman, 41.
Sykes, Sarah Silverman, Tracy Morgan, and Jimmy Kimmel. Although, Chappelle was not the premiere star, his involvement with the show began his relationship with Comedy Central, and he contributed to its success. Placement of this poster to the left of him, the *Chappelle’s Show* poster to the right, and Chappelle in between forms a triangular frame, with Chappelle at the apex.

The triangulation does not stop with the posters but continues with the positioning of Chappelle and his colleagues. Because Chappelle sits across from the two executives who sit next to each other, he is again at the apex of a triangle. In addition, the trio’s position in relation to each other is “vis-à-vis,” which means their bodies face each other. The executives, while “vis-à-vis” with Chappelle, are “side-by-side,” a position that displays “withness” or togetherness according to Albert Scheflen. The withness of the executives against the lone Chappelle demonstrates the overpowering of the comedian, in numbers and status. Not only as whites are the executives socially above the Black comedian but they also represent the company that signs Chappelle’s paychecks. These triangulations set up the gaze and the politics behind the gaze.

The gaze between the parties is of interest as it further demonstrates the tension occurring in the scene. In addition to the verbal exchange and the participants’ of the body language, the audience witnesses the looks each person gives the other. How one gazes communicates their feelings. As Scheflen states “Blacks and whites often avoid the

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208 Crank Yankers, <http://www.comedycentral.com/shows/crank_yankers/about.index.jhtml>, 17 December 2010. Jimmy Kimmel was one of the creators of the show. Chappelle guest starred twice: season one, episode one as the character Shavin and on the fourth season, episode five as Francis, in 2002 and 2007 respectively. The show moved to MTV in its fourth season.


210 Scheflen, 28.
civil exchange of glances, or look away very abruptly; these encounters are perceived as hostile. In some cases, members of one of the ethnic groups establish a gaze and hold it until it amounts to a challenge. Chappelle and his colleagues engage in this visual stand-off: him against them. The most intense gaze comes from the female executive who looks at Chappelle with piercing eyes and with her arms, on the table, crossed. She delivers the dagger to Chappelle, “You’re replaceable.” By the way the executives look at each other, with smirks, they visually present what they think about Black entertainers, or really the entire Black workforce.

Thus, Chappelle reveals the many facets of working in television as a Black man in America, and exposes the undercover racism in the cultural arena. This scene, as it plays out, exposes one aspect of the thought process behind the networks’ decisions in hiring television performers. Although premise of the scene is for entertainment, there is a semblance of truth to the interaction between the characters. Spike Lee illuminates this notion in the critically acclaimed film Bamboozled (2000).

Bamboozled is a satirical work of art that examines Black representation in popular performance media. Often hailed as Spike Lee’s best work, the film deals with the multiple factors involved with Black representation, mis-representation, and performance—from power to class to gender. Within this social and cultural critique is Lee’s take on the replacability of one Black performer for another.

The film traces the production of a twenty-first century minstrel show called “Mantan New Millennium Minstrel Show.” The show features two Black men—Mantan and Sleep ‘n Eat—played by dancer Savion Glover and actor-comedian Tommy

211 Scheflen, 36.
Davidson, respectively, who want to make lots of money. Actor-comedian Damon Wayans plays Pierre Delacroix, the aspiring producer, whose brainchild is the minstrel show.

Although Mantan and Sleep 'n Eat are reluctant to re-inscribe and perform stereotypes, they entertain the masses—making the money they long desired—and the minstrel show is a success. As the toll of playing in blackface weighs on both men, they individually decide to quit the show. Sleep 'n Eat quits before Mantan, and it is Mantan’s resignation scene that is of interest.

When Mantan quits “Mantan New Millennium Minstrel Show,” the white executive producer Dunwitty, played by Michael Rappaport, yells at the security guards to throw his star out of the building. Dunwitty—set up by Lee as the blackest white man by virtue of his imitation of stereotyped Black speech styles—tells Manray, “You’re done. You see, niggas like you are a dime a dozen. You think you’re special? I’m just slide Honeycut right into your spot. You fake ass, tap dance kid.” As Dunwitty is telling Manray off, Honeycut, played by Thomas Jefferson Byrd, dances in the background, behind Manray, to his left. Dressed as a blacked up Abraham Lincoln, Honeycut is the show’s hype-man. He warms up the studio audience with jokes and dancing.

A crystallizing moment, the scene expresses how many Hollywood executives think of Black performers. Nevermind the fact that Honeycut cannot dance like Manray or looks like him. It does not matter because he is a Black man who will wear the burnt cork. A few scenes prior, we are privy to a foreshadowing of Honeycut “sliding” into the

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212 Spike Lee, Bamboozled, 2000, 40 Acres and a Mule Filmworks, Inc. and New Line Cinema.
spot when Sleep ‘n Eat’s dressing room door no longer bears his name but bears
Honeycut’s name. These two vignettes exemplify the ways in which Hollywood views
Black entertainers and mirrors the scene in which Comedy Central executives decide to
“replace” Chappelle with entertainer Wayne Brady, a well-known face in comedy and
television.

Replaced: Wayne Brady’s Show

As the show continues, Wayne Brady greets the audience. In many ways the
antithesis of Chappelle, Brady is an all-around entertainer: singer, actor, comedian and
television host. He is probably best known for his role on Whose Line Is It Anyway, an
improv comedy show. His comedy is family friendly and not controversial. In the
audio commentary included on the DVD for this particular episode, Chappelle and his
writing partner Neal Brennan explain that the sketch came about because Paul Mooney,
as the character Negrodamus, made a joke about Brady. Mooney joked that “Wayne
Brady makes Bryant Gumbel look like Malcolm X.” The joke connects Brady’s appeal
to whites with that of Bryant Gumbel. Because of Brady’s presumed “vanilla” career,
Mooney views him as the ultimate white Negro. This was a position many Blacks felt
Bryant Gumbel fulfilled with his proper speech and lack of flavor, to use Mooney’s

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213 This scene occurs after Sleep and Eat/Womack tells Mantan/Manray that he is no longer willing to
perform “the pickaninny bullshit.” After this, the camera cuts to Mantan walking backstage and he sees
someone painting Honeycut’s name over Sleep and Eat. He exclaims “Ya’ll don’t waste no time.”
214 Whose Line Is It Anyway was a improv comedy show on the television network ABC. The show ran for
eight seasons, from 1998-2006. Wayne Brady was part of the cast, from the beginning of the show. See
215 Paul Mooney, Chappelle’s Show, Season 2, Episode 3.
term. Brady was upset about the joke and Chappelle apologized and asked him to be on the show.

The scene cuts to a new opening for “Wayne Brady’s Show,” complete with the blues duo playing Chappelle’s intro music on screen but with Brady singing “Brady’s Show” instead of “Chappelle’s Show.” He tells the audience, “Welcome to the Wayne Brady Show. Dave’s been downsized.” Something peculiar happens after Brady announces the absence of Chappelle. A white woman walks up to the stage and hands Brady a bouquet of flowers, perhaps as a welcoming gesture. This act speaks volumes. I see this as a clever reference to Mooney’s joke about how white people are comfortable with Brady and his non-confrontational humor.

Interestingly, Brady had his own television show The Wayne Brady Show on ABC. The show began in 2001, as a variety show and due to low ratings, ABC reformatted the show into a daytime talk show in 2003. The second iteration lasted for two seasons and ended in May 2004. With Brady’s experience, he would be a perfect replacement because he hosted and performed on his own variety show that included comedic skits. He had a built-in audience, although not large, as his ratings show. Nevertheless, the executives could see the benefit in replacing Chappelle, or any troublesome Black entertainer for that matter.

216 Of course, what many failed to understand about Gumbel was that he worked in a predominantly white industry—journalism and television, where he had to perform in a certain way. He and his sportscaster brother, Greg Gumbel were among the first Blacks to be hired for permanent positions as hosts/announcers on network programming as opposed to musical show hosts like Nat King Cole.
As far as the executives are concerned, Brady can replace Chappelle because the two are similar—meaning the men are Black comics. However, Chappelle stresses the difference between the two towards the end of the episode.

The episode cuts to Chappelle watching Brady open his, or now Wayne Brady’s show, from home. His restless actions convey to viewers that he is beginning to feel the effects of not working and most importantly of losing his show. For example, Chappelle calls Big Boi, a member of the rap duo Outkast. Big Boi makes excuses as to why he cannot hang out with Chappelle: because Chappelle quit the show; he is no longer important enough for Big Boi to hang out with. When he hangs up Chappelle decides to go for a walk to clear his head. He runs into his son and entertainer Nick Cannon on the street.

The inclusion of Nick Cannon emphasizes the homogenous view of Black comics, with Chappelle establishing the difference between him, Brady, and Cannon, as well as the heterogeneity of the Black community. Cannon, similar to Brady, is an entertainer, who to use Mooney’s joke again, also “makes Bryant Gumbel look like Malcolm X,” in that his entertainment style is non-confrontational and he tends to stay away from race and sex. In other words, Cannon and Brady are like Cosby, “the perfect Negro.”

Seeing his son, Chappelle asks “What’s up?” It seems like he cannot get a break as his son tells him that Cannon is his new dad, again as a consequence of Chappelle quitting his show. The interaction prompts Chappelle to declare “I’m a get my show back.” His declaration supports the ownership argument and the intentional act of titling the show with a possessive noun.

Mooney, 14.
When Chappelle shows up on set, he sneaks up on the two executives seen earlier in the sketch, and his writing partner Neal Brennan. He makes the executives pass out with a chemical on a handkerchief, and punches out Brennan. Unbeknownst to Brady, Chappelle walks onstage and the audience claps, with the applause progressively getting louder. Brady turns and sees Chappelle and the two do a soul-brother man handshake. The following dialogue between the two men illuminates what I contend is the significance in the title, ownership, and representation of heterogeneous blackness:

**Brady:** “What’s up Dave?”

**Chappelle:** “I want my show back. Gimme my show back now. Just give it back. C’mon man.”

**Brady:** “Ok. You know what?”

**Chappelle:** “Look Wayne. What?”

**Brady:** “Why don’t we host it together?”

**Chappelle:** “Naw son. Naw man. It can’t be together man. Cause you do different thangs than I do. The way you do it ain’t like the way I do it. You got your thang. I got my thang! I’m tryin’ to do my thang!”

This verbal exchange, while occurring between Chappelle and Brady, puts the Comedy Central executives on notice: no one can do Chappelle or *Chappelle’s Show* like Dave Chappelle. He is not replaceable and cannot be replaced by another Black entertainer. The scene defines who Chappelle is and the show’s content. The naming of the comedy show after Chappelle demonstrates that “titles and artworks do not hang in the void but exist in a shared communicative space established between artist and viewer. This communicative space is the psychological arena in which artists and viewers come
together in their imaginations.” The initial intro, Brady’s faux intro, and the return to Chappelle’s intro, after Chappelle takes his show back, further show the communicative space between the artists and the audience. Brady exhibits his understanding of the bonding space when Chappelle thanks the audience, in closing the show, and barely audible over the applause, Brady says, “take your show back.”

Additionally, this sketch shows Chappelle’s use of a traditional African American language genre—loud-talking. When the speaker is loud-talking they have a grievance with another and address that person in a manner that allows others to hear the discussion. An audience is required and their presence and overhearing helps the speaker pressure the addressee in achieving their desired result. According to Mitchell-Kernan, loud-talk “may be delivered at low, normal, or high volume” and it “breaches norms of discretion.” Often loud-talk occurs when there is a sensitive topic at issue and the conversation should be in private, hence the breach of discretion that puts the recipient of the loud talk on the spot in front of the audience.

When Brady takes over his show, Chappelle is the loud-talker, assuming the role of the antagonist, confronting Brady about taking back his show. The conversation should be private, however there is an audience—the one in-studio and the one at home—which is a key element in loud-talk. Chappelle’s voice begins at a normal volume but progressively gets louder, while Brady’s voice stays the same throughout—calm. It could

\[\text{220} \quad \text{Mitchell-Kernan, 324.}\]
be argued that Brady’s calm responses act as his own loud-talking, as his tone and volume continue at the same normal level. In the end, Chappelle’s loud-talking achieves his goal of getting his show back with the audience’s active support through listening to the dialogue and clapping when Chappelle takes the stage.

Chappelle’s employment of signifyin’ and loud-talking reveal his awareness of how these forms of talk distinguish him from other Black comics in mainstream entertainment. In essence, he is demonstrating his blackness through African American linguistic traditions as well as countering the monolithic image of Black comedy among Hollywood’s white power structure. The Chappelle-Brady interaction points to the complexity of blackness in terms of language. Chappelle’s use of signifyin’, loud-talking, and the Black vernacular showcases one of the many ways Blacks express their blackness and individuality. Brady’s use of “proper” English or what is commonly referred to “talking white” in the Black community is another expression of blackness because it shows mastery of a form which Blacks have used to upset and upstage whites on their own familiar ground. This is a strategy that W.E.B. Du Bois famously described as “outthinking and outflanking” the “rulers of the world” in his address at Howard University in 1930. Thus, rather than treating Brady as a “sell-out” to white styles and himself as a “winner” of an either/or situation of “black” versus “white-black,” Chappelle constructs a both/and context in which heterogeneous resources are part of the Black community’s strength. The visual and auditory juxtaposition of Brady and Chappelle presents the diversity of blackness and comedic differences among Black comedians.

Continuing to establish the difference among Black comics, and in this instance Chappelle and Brady, the audience is treated to Brady’s “difference” as exhibited in the last sketch. Taking its cues from the film *Training Day* (2001), the sketch illustrates Brady’s “bad” boy side. A brief summary of the film follows, providing context for the sketch.

*Training Day* follows Ethan Hawke’s character Jake Hoyt on his first day of narcotics training with veteran cop Alonzo Harris played Denzel Washington. In the course of this twenty-four hour period, the audience witnesses Alonzo’s corrupt ways, from the way he handles criminals to accepting monetary bribes to making Hoyt smoke marijuana laced with PCP. After a day of battle between moral codes, the film’s message is that good triumphs over evil, with Alonzo dying, and what goes around coming back around, as his death is handed to him by the same criminals he was in bed with.

What is significant about the film, in relation to the Brady sketch is Washington’s Oscar-winning portrayal of Alonzo, the bad guy. Washington, prior to this role, was highly regarded for playing strong, heroic yet flawed Black male characters. His departure from the “good” guy to the “bad” guy demonstrated his artistic depth and acted as a model for Brady in the sketch.

Mimicking various aspects of *Training Day*, the sketch positions Chappelle as the naïve passenger along for the ride, similar to Jake, and Brady as bad boy Alonzo. Brady is supposed to drop Chappelle off at home but instead the two men go on a ride in the middle of the night. Here, the audience is privy to Brady’s street side: he shoots a man outside a club, collects money from his prostitutes, and gives Chappelle marijuana laced

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222 Denzel Washington won the Oscar for Best Actor in a Leading Role in 2002.
with PCP. The ultimate “gangsta” moves by Brady come at the end of the sketch when he kills a cop with his bare hands and shoots Chappelle in the leg, after he kicks him out of his SUV. As a response to Mooney’s humorous proclamation about Brady, the sketch and joke represents deeper issues regarding blackness, and in particular male blackness.

Mooney’s joke essentially is that Brady is the kind of Black man who does not make whites nervous. The joke is a twenty-first century take on “Tomming” or accommodation that occurred during slavery and post-emancipation. “Tomming”—being an Uncle Tom—meant that Blacks smiled and accommodated whites in order to have peace or to get ahead, financially and professionally. Rooted in southern etiquette, “Tomming” was necessary for Black men’s survival until the 1940s, when jazz ushered in “cool.” It is clear from Mooney’s joke that he views Brady as an Uncle Tom and “Tomming” as his path to a career.

Mooney frequently claims in interviews and commentaries about race relations in America that “when black people’s hair is relaxed, white people are relaxed. When it’s nappy, they’re not happy.” The comment means that whites are not comfortable with explicit blackness, the kind of militant blackness Mooney represents. In this sense, Brady, as Mooney views him, relaxes whites, like comedian Bill Cosby: “Bill Cosby represents

224 Dinerstein discusses how jazz musicians would use “Tomming” as they performed for white audiences and how Lester Young was against this “mask” in his essay on Lester Young and the Young’s ushering in the cool in jazz.
225 Mooney, 18.
straight success, straight comedy, straight laughs...For white people, Bill is the perfect Negro. He’s the Sidney Poitier of comedy, very clean-cut and articulate.”

Although this is a statement about Brady and the difference between him and Chappelle, it raises the question, where does Chappelle fit within the Black comedy hierarchy? If he is not a Cosby or Wayne Brady type, then what type of Black comedy does he represent? Is he aligned with Richard Pryor’s brand of humor? Is Chappelle in a category of his own? I argue that while easy and useful to compare him to Pryor, it is limiting. Chappelle is in a category of his own because he is a mix of Pryor, with his story-telling, Cosby, with his ease of telling jokes to a diverse audience, and Mooney, with his ability to keep it real.

These characteristics separate him from Wayne Brady and make the Brady sketch all the more interesting, as it not only juxtaposes the two comics but also diverse forms of blackness in the Black community. Furthermore, Chappelle’s purposeful titling of his show separates him from other performers and subtly calls attention to signifyin’. Language continues to play an important role in the show and serve as an avenue to study the complexities of race.

**A Recurring Character: Language in Black and White**

Language is an uncredited recurring character on Chappelle’s Show, significant to Chappelle’s goal of pushing on both comedic and racial boundaries. Chappelle’s play with language destabilizes and reveals racial assumptions and ideologies. He

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226 Ibid, 14.
accomplishes this with satire, mimicry of “Black” and “white” speech, and the use of African American vernacular or urban slang. In several sketches, while language is used to represent blackness and whiteness, it also shows how language can be a point of contention in race discourse. Conversely, language as a character can act as a bridge over racial discord, particularly when vernacular enters mainstream lexicon. The use of satire connects all of this together and demonstrates how Chappelle resists outmoded and outdated racial assumptions, providing an alternative view of what blackness means and exposing whiteness as an integral part of race discourse in the twenty-first century.

In numerous sketches, white and Black dialect and African American urban slang are employed and contrasted with each other. Play with what is “Black” or “white” speech is an aspect of the show which operates under the radar for many in the audience. Chappelle interrogates whiteness as normative by employing mimicry coupled with satire. Chappelle, like many other Black comedians, has made an art of mimicry. As Zora Neale Hurston wrote in her essay “Characteristics of Negro Expression,” “the negro, the world over, is famous as a mimic…Mimicry is an art in itself.”

Hurston continues, “the contention that the Negro imitates from feeling of inferiority is incorrect. He mimics for the love of it.” Hurston’s essay, written during the Negro Renaissance in the 1930s, still holds true in today’s culture.

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228 Hurston, 301.
William D. Piersen also examined how satire and mimicry functioned as a tool of resistance for enslaved Africans and African Americans as well as a coping mechanism to deal with white oppression within the slave system. According to Piersen, slaves resisted oppression through satirical music. While there were dangerous and infrequent compared to everyday forms of resistance, overt rebellions and revolutions occurred. Satirical practices gave people of African descent an outlet to critique and undermine their oppressors, often without the oppressors realizing that they were the butt of the joke.  

Piersen determined that Blacks frequently made white Europeans the subject of their satiric songs, ridiculing and imitating the whites they came in contact with: “whites have always been a favorite target of satire, and Europeans in Africa commonly were lampooned as objects of native humor and mimicry.” The cultural tradition of satire and mimicry offers both Chappelle and Aaron McGruder a historical framework for challenging race, stereotypes, and division. An important element of African satire in the New World was its use to “release . . . anger and frustration,” and this is no different from how Chappelle employs satire and mimicry in his sketch-comedy show.

Just as Chappelle used Chappelle’s Show to work through his frustrations and observations about American culture, the slaves were able to comment on their enslaved condition and their white masters and oppressors. They did this openly and directly because some masters were oblivious to what the slaves were singing and that the songs were...
were about them.\textsuperscript{232} Piersen claims "whites being held over the satiric grill could not help
smacking their lips over the satire even while being roasted with the message,"\textsuperscript{233} and
"whites usually seemed flattered by what they interpreted as 'awkward' attempts by black
society to duplicate their manners."\textsuperscript{234} This is important to \textit{Chappelle's Show} because
many of the white audience members do not realize that the joke is on them. Discussing
race under the guise of jokes in a satirical manner provides a "safer and more effective
[tool] when veiled as coming from a clown."\textsuperscript{235}

Chappelle's most effective use of mimicry lies in his character "Chuck Taylor," a
news anchor for the fictitious News Center Three, introduced in the first season of the
series in the "Reparations 2003" sketch (Season one; Episode four). To play Chuck
Taylor, Chappelle wears whiteface make-up on his face and hands, and a dirty blonde
wig. I argue that Chuck Taylor and in particular the "Reparations 2003" sketch highlights
how language is a point of contention in racial understanding. Additionally, Chuck
Taylor and this sketch display Chappelle's skill at Othering whiteness.

The character opens up multiple levels of communication. The name "Chuck
Taylor" is synonymous with counter-culture and significant in the athletic world. I
contend that Chappelle, very much aware of popular culture, youth, alternative, and hip-
hop culture, and sports, consciously chose the iconic name to speak to his diverse
audience and draw them in. First, I will analyze the cultural significance of Chuck Taylor
and how Chappelle uses this significance to Other whiteness while demonstrating the

\textsuperscript{232} Piersen, "A Resistance Too Civilized to Notice," 365.
\textsuperscript{233} Piersen, 349.
\textsuperscript{234} Piersen, 358.
\textsuperscript{235} Piersen, 359.
merging of Black and white culture. Next, I will examine the Chuck Taylor character and its role in establishing language as a character on the show.

Chuck Taylor: The Man, The Brand

Charles H. Taylor was born in 1901 in southern Indiana. As a teenager he went to live with an uncle in Columbus, Indiana, because the town where he spent his youth did not have a high school. The move proved instrumental to Taylor playing on the high school basketball team from 1915 to 1919. Basketball was very popular in Indiana and Taylor shared the same enthusiasm for the sport as other young people.\textsuperscript{236}

Instead of attending college; Taylor decided to play professional basketball. Shortly before his high school graduation, he joined the Columbus Commercials in March 1919.\textsuperscript{237} The team, sponsored by a businessmen’s group, disbanded at the end of the 1919-1920 season. After his short time with the Commercials, he played for the Akron Firestone Non-Skids, named for Firestone’s tire. As a Non-Skids, Taylor learned the art of self-promotion that served him well for the rest of his life.\textsuperscript{238}

By promoting himself, Taylor transitioned from a career as a mediocre basketball player to that of a well-respected businessman and promoter of basketball as a national sport. After playing for a couple of local teams, Taylor became a salesman for Converse Rubber Shoe Company, the company best known for the athletic shoe, Converse All

\textsuperscript{237} Aamidor, 30. According to Aamidor, although the team was a professional team, by today’s standard the Columbus Commercials would be considered a semi-pro team.
\textsuperscript{238} Aamidor, 43.
Stars. Beginning in 1922, Taylor worked as part of a nationwide sales force that made direct contact with independent retailers.\textsuperscript{239} He would call high school and college coaches, pitching the shoe as well as giving them basketball pointers.\textsuperscript{240}

In addition to making sales calls, in 1922 Taylor also conducted basketball clinics at North Carolina State University.\textsuperscript{241} The clinics served as demonstrations of the shoes and personal contacts developed more sales from various schools. Because of the popularity of the clinics they became a mainstay in the company’s marketing plan and were institutionalized in 1932.\textsuperscript{242}

1932 proved to be a pivotal year for the Converse Rubber Shoe Company and Taylor’s career. Marquis Converse, the owner, lost the company in 1928 and the Hodgman Rubber Company bought it in 1929. The company changed hands again in 1933, with its purchase by the Stone family. With the company under new ownership, Converse revamped its image around Taylor. Before this decision, Taylor had informally become the face of the company with his road campaigns; thus it made perfect sense to formalize their number one pitchman’s endorsement.

In 1932, the company added Taylor’s name and the signature “Chuck Taylor” to the ankle patch on the shoes. The circular patch on the high-top style reads “Converse ‘Chuck Taylor’ All Stars,” with Taylor’s signature and a large blue star in the center of the patch. This was a key move because Taylor became synonymous with the shoes and was the first athlete to receive an endorsement deal. Abraham Aamidor reports that

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{239} Aamidor, 45.  \\
\textsuperscript{240} Aamidor, 48.  \\
\textsuperscript{241} Aamidor, x.  \\
\textsuperscript{242} Aamidor, 60.  
\end{flushleft}
"Many people consider the Chuck Taylor name to represent the most successful athletic endorsement of all time. Long before Michael Jordan had his line of shoes, there were 'Chucks',” as they typically were known in many areas, or “Chuck Taylors,” as they were often called in inner-city neighborhoods.” 243 That Chucks are nationally and internationally known in a variety of communities is significant to Chappelle’s character. With Chappelle’s use of the name, he continues Taylor’s reach into popular culture. Further, Chuck Taylor remains a white icon in a sport that is now dominated by Black athletes.

In twenty-first century popular culture, everyone from youth and urban culture to fashionistas rock Chucks. Chucks were and continue to be linked with counter-culture. This is important because of Chappelle’s position in counter-culture, as demonstrated with his cult film hit Half-Baked (1998). 244 When one considers Chappelle’s various cultural positions, it is not surprising that he named his white news anchor “Chuck Taylor.”

Chucks, as Aamidor stated in the previous quote, found a home in the inner city with youth. This is visually evident in hip-hop culture, and most distinctly with West Coast rap. Rappers Ice Cube, Snoop Dogg, Xzibit, and The Game, to name a few, wore (and some continue to wear) Chuck Taylors. The shoes were part of the West Coast fashion styling of wearing Dickies—industrial work clothes—flannel shirts or jackets, and baseball caps or bandanas. Furthermore, Chucks remain a fashion staple not only as a visual expression but also in lyrical expressions—in rap songs.

243 Aamidor, 70.
244 Half-Baked is cited as a hit with the “stoner” crowd because the premise of the film is about smoking marijuana.
Several rappers, including the ones listed, reference the shoe. For example, in Ice Cube’s song “Friday,” he raps, “He’s bout hard as Darth Vada/In his sweat shirt, khakis and Chuck Taylors/Just see him in the drive way/Getting beat like a smoka fool because it’s Friday.”245 Another example is Snoop Dogg’s “Lodi Dodi,” “Now I’m fresh, dressed, like a million bucks/Threw on my White Sox, with my all blue Chucks/Stepped out the house, stopped short, oh no/I went back in, I forgot my indo.”246 Black performers appropriated Chucks, just as Black athletes appropriated the game for which they were designed.

Not only does the shoe live in fashion, as visual and personal expression, but also in hip-hop lyrics and a culture that is known to go against the grain. It is fitting that many wear Chucks, as the man behind the shoe went against the grain; and it is fitting that Chappelle connects with Chuck Taylor, as he too works against the grain. Chappelle’s whitefaced Chuck Taylor exemplifies his movement outside of the norm and the shift of “the norm” to a subsidiary role in a Black dominated space. The news anchor Chuck Taylor is a white player in a Black dominated ‘game’ too: Chappelle’s Show.

Chuck Taylor and the Reparations Sketch: A Reflection of and Challenge to Whiteness

Introduced in season one and sporadically shown throughout the series’ sketches, Chuck Taylor, for many viewers, reflects what we see daily on several news channels: a white, male news anchor delivering the news of the day. Perhaps the most memorable sequence featuring the character is the “Reparations 2003” sketch. The character plays dual roles on the show: he serves as a reflection of whiteness and as an oppositional view of whiteness in this particular sketch as Chuck Taylor, and by extension real white journalists, move from being unmarked to marked.

“Reparations 2003” makes visible a kind of whiteness, I argue, which was constructed in the 1980s, when Ronald Reagan was President of the United States. Herman Gray and George Lipsitz have argued that this period ushered in new constructions of blackness and whiteness in response to the 1960s civil rights movement. As a youth, Chappelle witnessed this re-construction of white identity in Washington, D.C. during Reagan’s presidential tenure. Because of Chappelle’s first hand knowledge and experience of Reaganism, I suggest that he counters criminalized and demonized representations of blackness from the 1980s with the analysis of whiteness in this sketch.

In Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for “Blackness,” Herman Gray examines the televisual world of the 1990s by focusing on key Black television shows that complicated notions of blackness. His assessment of the articulations and re-

\[247\] The character shows up throughout the show, in sketches and as new “break-ins” in between sketches. 
\[248\] Chappelle stated in several interviews watching how the District changed during the Reagan years. 
\[249\] I reference Reaganism because of Chappelle’s direct references to this pivotal moment in US history. It is clear from several of his interviews that the political discourse around African Americans has not only left a lasting impact on Chappelle but has also informed his work.
articulations of race are heavily situated within the period where Reagan "functioned as the cultural and historical sign, for many whites, of the 'real' America." The "real" America at this time was white, Christian, heterosexual, male, and middle-class, as it had been defined throughout the nation's history. However, this era was also different because those Othered were gaining a presence in American culture and politics as never before. The construction of this "America" or whiteness was, and still is, in opposition to Blacks and blackness. As Gray states: "the new right appealed to popular notions of whiteness in opposition to blackness, which was conflated with and came to stand for 'other'." The new right that he speaks of is the newly articulated conservative Republicans that Reagan associated with during the 1980s. This period is significant because while the contrast between whiteness was always present in the United States, the 1980s serves as a critical point of re-articulation of whiteness in response to the gains of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. Just as blackness shifts over time, so too does whiteness.

Gray connects the new construction of whiteness with a specific moment during Reagan's term, in which Reagan (and the new right) rhetorically proscribed Blacks. According to Gray, Reagan used rhetoric that "resurrect[ed] the nativist language of reverse discrimination, traditional values, and anti-immigration" shifting whiteness of the 1950s and 1960s from "victimizer" to "victim." In other words, during the 1950s

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250 Gray uses the term "articulations" instead of "representations" when discussing the visual and ideological constructions of race, sex, and gender.
251 Herman Gray, 16.
252 Gray, 17.
253 Gray, 17.
254 Gray, 17.
and 1960s, many whites were actively victimizing Blacks through social policy and violent means, thus acquiring the victimizer label. However, because of the socio-political gains of Blacks in the 1960s, whites, in the 1980s viewed themselves as suffering because of the policies put in place to ensure equality, most notably affirmative action, and eagerly embraced a vision of themselves as victims.

Reinforcing the rhetoric of Reagan and the new right, media images of whiteness and Otherness appeared daily in the news, in print and on television. This is particularly important as I suggest Chappelle’s awareness is rooted in these visual and televisual images of blackness and Otherness. Here media images serve as a foundation for “Reparations 2003” and the Chuck Taylor character.

As they had throughout the history of visual culture in the United States, Black bodies frequently appeared in print and television media throughout the 1980s. In all periods, the images are visual interpretations of the racial and racist discourse circulating in political and social circles of the time. Gray examines the Black body in the 1980s as a site of criminality and demonization. Attached to the politics of the images was a class element, which Gray terms as the “urban underclass” made up of working-class and poor Blacks. This so-called class represented all that was wrong with America. Evening newscasts broadcasted this message as “news reports of ‘rampaging’ hordes of urban Black youth robbing and raping helpless and law abiding white (female) victims came to

255 People of African descent were depicted in various visual media throughout history, from scientific Great Chain of Being charts to minstrel sheet music to derogatory caricatures, to name a few.
256 Gray, 22. While race and class were bound in racial discourse prior to the 1980s as well as negative representations, Gray’s focus is on this specific moment as it is a transitional moment in visual articulations of race.
“Reparations 2003” is Chappelle’s answer to Reagan’s construction of blackness and whiteness. The premise for the sketch is that African Americans finally receive reparations—monetary compensation for the immoral enslavement of their African ancestors—in 2003. While the sketch pokes fun at how Blacks would spend their compensation, it also illuminates issues concerning economics and class in addition to how Blacks contribute to certain capitalist industries. Chappelle illustrates how, arguably, the plight of disenfranchised group was, and still is, the lack of economic and social resources that would help them live a moral life in the minds of white conservatives.

As previously stated, Chuck Taylor, the man, was instrumental to popularizing modern day basketball in American popular culture. I believe Chappelle made a conscious decision to create a character named “Chuck Taylor,” for two reasons. First, Chappelle selected a white man with a history within Black and white culture, making him recognizable to both groups, as well as Asians and Latinos. Second, as Chappelle portrays Chuck Taylor, the character represents how Black and white history and culture intertwine while also demonstrating the tenuousness of the relationship Blacks and whites have with each other.

Chuck Taylor is a form of extreme whiteness in comparison to “real” white news reporters, who can be viewed through the lens of ordinary whiteness. Extreme whiteness, as defined by Richard Dyer is “exceptional, excessive, marked…it exists alongside non-

261 According to Aamidor, Taylor was instrumental in having African American men basketball players Earl Lloyd and John McClendon to the Converse company in addition to including black players and coaches in the Converse Basketball Yearbooks. The yearbooks documented players and coaches in basketball, from across the nation. See Aamidor, 5.
extreme, unspectacular, plain whiteness.” 262 Plain whiteness is ordinary whiteness and described as “taut, tight, rigid, upright, straight (not curved), on the beat (not syncopated), controlled and controlling.” 263 With his stiff body movements and dry sense of humor along with his flavorless speech, Chuck would seem to fit the definition of ordinary whiteness. However, his physical markings—the pasty white make-up and blond wig—mark him as extreme. While Dyer argues that this type of whiteness is a “distraction” to ordinary whiteness, I would argue that within the confines of performance, particularly performances by marginalized peoples, extreme whiteness is a way to draw the audience’s attention to the racial Othering occurring within the performance, especially for white viewers who realize that their taken-for-granted normativity has been overturned. In this sense, extreme whiteness acts as a “mask [that] refracts the viewer’s gaze,” 264 to destabilize “the fixity of race and elicit its malleability while still exposing the very real consequences of racism.” 265 Chappelle accomplishes this as whiteface Chuck Taylor, wearing not only the mask but also taking on white speech. The success of Chuck Taylor comes with the split screen shots of Taylor/Chappelle and real or “ordinary” whites/whiteness.

The audience meets Chuck Taylor as a figment of Chappelle’s imagination in a dreamlike sequence that highlights the cityscape of New York City. The sketch was born out a faux television show in which Phil Donahue, a veteran talk show host, talks about affirmative action from the perspective of white men. Chappelle is a guest and encounters

262 Richard Dyer, White (London: Routledge, 1997), 222
263 Dyer, 222.
265 Gilbert, 693.
an angry white man, who is upset about affirmative action. This is fake appearance on a
talk show leads Chappelle to imagine what would happen if Blacks finally received
reparations. While this white man may have prompted Chappelle’s imagination, the
reparations sketch is not from the perspective of a white man, as Glenda Carpio states in
her text Laughing Fit to Kill.\(^{266}\) Clearly, this is a “performance of fantasy”\(^{267}\) as she
argues. Chappelle explicitly states in the intro, “I want my reparations for slavery. That’s
right. I’m tryin’ to get paid for my forefathers…I wonder what would happen if someone
actually did that. Hmmm.”\(^{268}\) After Chappelle’s lines, the dreamscape shows that this is a
fantasy and that it is his fantasy. The fantasy is connected to whites, to be sure, because
of slavery but the sketch is not from a white perspective.

As the lead news anchor for News Center 3, Chuck announces the award of
reparations to African Americans. During the announcement there is a split screen image
of him and three African American men which sets the tone for the underlying message
embedded in the sketch.

The first of several split screens, this includes a graphic to the left of Chuck: a
blue and red background with the “Reparations 2003” across the top. Below the text one
framed image of three Black men shows them standing outdoors in front of a fence,
holding their cash—presumably cash from their reparations compensation. The men have
relaxed postures and are dressed casually in t-shirts and baseball caps turned backwards.
Chuck’s presentation of self contrasts with the men because he is white, dressed in a suit
and tie, and sitting straight up against a plain blue background. Although we know that

\(^{266}\) Glenda Carpio, Laughing Fit to Kill, 110.
\(^{267}\) Carpio, 111.
\(^{268}\) Chappelle’s Show, Season 1, Episode 4.
Chuck is Chappelle, a Black man in whiteface, the contrast between the two images establishes the visual, social, and racial differences between the men. Chappelle employs this device to illuminate the extreme whiteness that Chuck displays on top of the ordinary whiteness Blacks encounter on a daily basis. He sets up the sketch to be more about whiteness than about Blacks receiving monetary compensation for the heinous act of slavery against people of African descent. This becomes more apparent when Chuck interacts with his white colleagues.

After Chuck informs the audience that “the checks got out,” the anchor cuts to Wendy Mullin, a pretty blonde (real) white woman, reporting from Queens, New York (figure 11). This set of split screens shows the two fictional news reporters as an encounter between extreme and ordinary whiteness. In a format similar to the opening, a box frames Wendy’s image to the left of Chuck. The frame works to present her image as a portrait. She wears monochromatic yellow-beige colors—suit blazer and blouse—which complement her skin tone and blonde hair. Chuck, on the right side of the screen, follows a similar monochromatic style in a brownish-gray blazer that complements his dirty blonde hair, eyebrows, eyelashes and mustache, in addition to his “white” skin. Just as the opening contrasts Black men with a white man, the contrast between Wendy and Chuck makes it clear that Chuck is not really a white person, but someone wearing make-up. Wendy is white, and represents ideal whiteness and ideal “American” beauty. This ideal American beauty is fair-skinned, blonde, and blue eyed. Furthermore, the name Wendy is presumably a “white” name. Interestingly, although Chappelle is obviously in make-up, the visual set-up between him and a white woman, establishes the hierarchy
between them. Reading the scene from left to right, the white woman will always be
hierarchally above Chappelle and Blacks, in general.

In Queens, Wendy appears to be in a predominately Black neighborhood. She
reports that Black people are waiting in line to cash their checks at the Olimpic Liquor
store. To expand upon the gender and racial dynamics of the Chuck-Wendy split
screen, the audience sees that Wendy stands beside the line, which consists of mostly
Black men. This may be Chappelle’s way of commenting on the gendered racial
dynamics between Black men and white women, particularly because there is a strained
history between Black men and white women.

The people cashing their checks at a liquor store also speaks to socio-economic
issues within the Black community. Many may claim that Chappelle is re-inscribing
stereotypes of liquor stores in the hood and Blacks not having bank accounts. Bambi
Haggins writes that this particular sketch “presents a litany of stereotypical constructions
of blackness.” However, the number of liquor stores in predominately Black and low-
income neighborhoods is overwhelmingly large. In addition to selling alcohol, many of
the stores provide a service that is not readily available in the community—check-cashing
services. The reality is there are not many banks in the hood. Some critics find fault with
this representation, but the check-cashing outlet is a reality for many Blacks and
marginalized groups who do not have bank accounts. Katherine Lee, in her essay on
Chappelle, says “rather than merely perpetuating stereotypes, it serves as a mediation on

269 The name of the store is misspelled with an “i” instead of a “y.”
270 Bambi Haggins, Laughing Mad: The Black Comic Persona in Post-Soul America, (New Brunswick, NJ:
Rutgers University Press, 2007), 211.

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the dynamics of these distortions and constructions.” Chappelle is not re-inscribing a stereotype as much as he is calling attention to the lack of services and access in Black and poor communities.

What the critics overlook is the inversion of Otherness within the scene. Wendy is an outsider or “Other” because the Black folks in line at the liquor store are the majority. She also clearly looks different from the people in the community in skin color and dress. In addition to the visual and physical Othering, speech patterns also serve as a way of Othering.

After reporting from the liquor store, Wendy runs to a white box truck, to interview the Black man driving it. The man, whom she mistakenly assumes is a truck driver, just bought the box truck “straight cash” and filled it with a truckload of Kool cigarettes. The driver’s speech contrasts starkly with Wendy’s. He speaks in urban tongue, saying “straight cash,” “ain’t,” “baby,” and emphasizes tonality to create a syncopated rhythm. Wendy, on the other hand, refers to the man as “sir,” uses a form of proper English associated with schooling, and speaks “on beat” to use Dyer’s words.

To further establish difference the driver exclaims before driving off, “I’m rich, biatch!” Presumably, he now has more money than Wendy because of reparations changing the power relationship associated with money. Although it is never stated how much each African American receives, at the beginning of the sketch Chuck says the

272 “Kool” is on the side of the truck in addition to the car refresher, which also has “Kool” on it. Kool cigarettes have long been a favorite brand of cigarettes in the black community. Donnell Rawlings, the truck driver, also has a cigarette sticking out of his hat.
273 Dyer, 60.
274 This phrase became an instant catch-phrase, making its way into the urban lexicon. “I’m rich, biatch!” is another iteration of the phrase.
payout is over a trillion dollars. Thus, the audience can assume the checks are for a significant amount.

When Wendy completes her brief interview with the Black man, she cuts back to Chuck (figure 12). This transition leads to another split screen where the viewer again sees whiteness at work with the voice and sight of Chuck Taylor questioning Wendy’s report:

**Chuck:** “Wait, Wendy. Let me get this straight. Why aren’t there any banks in the ghetto?”

**Wendy:** “Well, Chuck, that’s because banks hate Black people. But, I think that’s about to change. Back to you.”

**Chuck:** “I bet you’re right Wendy. Hot damn, Almighty I betcha right.”

Chuck’s responses are dry and monotone. His movements are stiff as well, supporting Dyer’s description of white style. Monotonous expression is very much considered white speech in the Black community. Moreover, with Chappelle speaking, albeit in character, the physical and auditory mimicry act as a mirror so that the white viewers can see and hear Blacks’ interpretation of them. Many Black comedians have taken on whiteface and “white” speech in their comedy routines, sketches and films, because it is funny to the ear as it Others whites. One of the best-known parodies was Eddie Murphy’s “White Like Me” sketch for Saturday Night Live in 1984.

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275 *Chappelle’s Show*, DVD, Season 1, Episode 4.
276 Some of the Black comedians donning whiteface and speaking in white dialect include Martin Lawrence and brother Shawn and Marlon Wayans. Lawrence had a recurring character “Bob” on his comedy show.
Murphy, an alumus of the comedy show, hosted the ninth episode of the show's tenth season. He states that his goal in "White Like Me."\textsuperscript{277} is to "go underground and actually experience America...as a white man."\textsuperscript{278} The sketch was a take on journalist John Howard Griffin's investigative experience of being a Black man in the South during the 1960s. Griffin's book, Black Like Me, was adapted into a film of the same name and James Whitmore played John Howard Griffin. Both men darkened their skin to become "Black" in order to gain the "full" experience of being a Black man in America. Murphy flips the script by becoming "white."

To begin the sketch, Murphy tells the audience that some people believe there are two Americas: one Black and one white. While this is certainly a long-standing belief, even in the twenty-first century, Murphy's declaration of experiencing America as a white man calls attentions to the historical ideas that America was and continues to be a white man's land, with no room for non-whites. Essentially, to be American is to be white (heterosexual, and male).

In order to go underground, Murphy hires the best make-up artists in the business, who are Black, to assist him with his transformation. This is accomplished with white make-up, a brown wig and moustache. However, the make-up is only part of the racial masquerade. While sitting in the make-up chair, in voiceover, Murphy says he studied for


\textsuperscript{277} "White Like Me" is a take on the book \textit{Black Like Me} by John Howard Griffin, a journalist who conducted a social experiment on race. Griffin, a southern white man, decided to pass as a black man to experience first hand what it felt like to be black. The book documents his account and became a best-seller in the 1960s.

the role by watching the 1980s television show Dynasty and reading Hallmark cards. While watching Dynasty, Murphy explained that he looked at body language, supporting the idea that Blacks and whites carry themselves differently. He says to the male make-up artist, “See? See how they walk? Their butts are real tight when they walk. I have to remember to keep my butt tight when I walk.” He uses Hallmark cards as his training for white speech or dialect. The cards’ messages are written in English which is considered in the Black community, “proper,” “white” or “talking white.” With the physical and vocal transformation in full effect, Murphy or Mr. White, as he is called in the sketch, sets out to “experience America.”

Murphy leaves the NBC building in full make-up, wearing a suit, tie, and glasses. He also carries a briefcase. This is a vast departure from how he began the sketch—wearing all black: leather jacket, button down shirt, and jeans. Walking down the sidewalk, we see Murphy’s interpretation of a white man’s walk—very stiff with no rhythm and with butt real tight. He goes into a store to purchase a newspaper and experiences the first of three privileges of being white. When Murphy tries to pay for his newspaper, the white, male store clerk will not accept his money. Instead, the clerk gives

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279 Dynasty, which ran from 1981-1989, was a popular evening soap opera that chronicled the lives of the rich, who were white, for the exception of the African American character Dominique Deveraux played by Diahann Carroll. Carroll joined the cast in 1984 (season 4) and was later revealed to be the half-sister of Blake Carrington (John Forsythe), making her biracial. She was on the show from season 4 to season 7. In season 5, ABC hired African American actor Billy Dee Williams as Brady Lloyd, playing Carroll’s ex-husband. Both of these moves, respectively, marked a first for the show as Carroll was the first African American to join the program and with Williams, America received a glimpse into a black romantic relationship that was not a comedy. See issues of Jet magazine: March 12, 1984; May 7, 1984; September 10, 1984; January 28, 1985. See also <http://www.tv.com/dynasty/show/138/cast.html?tag+page_nav;subtabs;cast> accessed 1 April 2011.

Murphy the paper for free, which makes Murphy a little uneasy but as he observes in voiceover, “when white people are alone, they gives things to each other...for free.”

After receiving his newspaper, Murphy gets on a New York City bus and continues to experience America as a white man. When the only (obvious) Black man gets off the bus, the bus becomes a party bus for the all-white passengers, complete with music, hors d’oeuvres, and drinks. However, the most impactful part of the sketch is Murphy’s visit to the bank.

Mr. White (Murphy) sits in front of a Black loan officer, Murphy’s first and only interaction with a Black person in the sketch. The loan officer tells Murphy that without collateral, credit and identification, he has to deny his loan application. However, a white loan officer walks in and interrupts the meeting when he overhears the Black loan officer telling Murphy about the denial. He tells the loan officer he will take care of Mr. White, and when the Black loan officer leaves, the white bank officer tears up the application, saying “take what you want” as he hands Mr. White cash.

In this segment, Murphy exposes three issues: the ease with whites receive bank loans, the usurping of Blacks in authoritative positions, and the view of Blacks in these positions as playing “white.” The first issue illuminates how whites receive, for the most part, more financial assistance because of their whiteness, and Blacks are systematically denied loans and lines of credit with banks. Of course, there are exceptions to this, as lower- and working-class whites may not have as much access as white, middle- and upper-class whites. But more often than not, they have it easier than people of African


\(^{282}\) Ibid.
descent. In addition to the ease of receiving loan approval, there is a continuing thread of whites taking care of their own, which balances Murphy's newspaper transaction earlier in the sketch.

The usurping of Blacks' authority is common within the racist power structures in the United States. Harry, the Black loan officer, is doing his job according to the bank's loan criteria. However, because he is denying a white man, his decision is viewed as the wrong one, and a white person, who presumably is professionally above him, steps in to right Harry's wrong.

Murphy calls Harry a "silly negro," as if to further the idea that he does not understand how to do his job. He does not understand his job because he is Black and unaware of the unspoken code of white privilege.

This is the final scene of the sketch because the bank visit illuminates how one's race is either viewed as a privilege or a hindrance to access to resources which translate into power. Being white also affords one the freedom of being unmarked, normal. As George Yancy explains "'racialized' whiteness [is] normative, moral. Good and pure is dependent upon the projection of the Black body as 'inferior,' 'stained,' and 'impure'." 283

Murphy's satirical exploration of racial hierarchy provides a context for Chappelle's subsequent examination of whiteness. Economics serves as a link between the sketches. Both equate whiteness with money. In Murphy's sketch the "white" man has no problem walking into a financial institution with no identification and receiving a loan. In Chappelle's sketch, the Blacks finally receive financial access but it comes only

at the hands of white politicians in Congress. Chappelle emphasizes in his introduction that these whites insisted that Blacks had to come up with a plan for the money, if they want to receive reparations. Since American society is a consumer-based economy, without a plan, there could be a potential disaster. Chappelle presents the “potential disaster” when, as Chuck Taylor, he cuts to Michael Peterson, the white financial correspondent.

Peterson gives Chuck an update on the financial markets after Wendy’s report. At the beginning of Michael’s report, there is another split screen with the same image as at the start of the news program: three Black men flashing their cash. The format parallels the earlier scene with Chuck and the men: the men at the left of the screen and Michael to the right. Again, Black men in t-shirts, backwards baseball caps, and relaxed posture contrast with the white anchor suited up and displaying stiff posture.

In the financial report, Michael tells Chuck and the audience that the markets are up dramatically with the award of reparations. Some of the stocks that “skyrocketed” include Sprint, the communications company; and precious metals and gems: gold and diamonds. Completing his story, Michael says “These people just seem to be breaking their necks to give this money right back to us.” This statement reinforces Chuck’s racial identification as white. Although Chappelle’s character is a white man, it can be argued that Chuck Taylor is a light-skinned or fair-skinned Black man, mainly because the white make-up on Chappelle’s skin looks more tan than white. His color lends itself to the ambiguousness of race particularly when defined solely by skin tone. However,

284 Chappelle’s Show DVD, Season 1, Episode 4.
285 Chappelle’s Show, Season 1, Episode 4.
when Michael says "us," he identifies Chuck as a white man, a man like him. Chuck's response to Michael's report solidifies his whiteness: "Flabbergasting"—a term not commonly used by Blacks. He ends the newscast informing the audience that the crime rate dropped to zero, implying that Blacks no longer have to commit crimes because they have money. Indirectly the statement speaks back to the Reagan rhetoric of the 1980s that Blacks commit all crimes. Next, Chappelle undercuts this assumption with the following joke, "How could that be? Did the Mexicans get money today, too?" Couched in racist ideology, the joke straddles the line between satire and re-inscribing stereotypes. When he tells the joke, Chuck laughs at himself, then realizes in astonishment that the camera is still on. Looking at the camera, he shakes his head and says, "I shouldn't have said that." As the camera zooms out, he tells a staff member "Listen, I think we'll be alright. The Mexicans don't watch the news." Chuck is caught being himself, when he thinks the cameras are off. This is Chappelle's way of illustrating how people are themselves when they think no member of a marginalized group can hear.

The joke also connects to the argument of replacability and racism. Now that the Blacks have money and are not a "problem," the Mexicans or Latinos will take their place in the minds of white folks. As long as there are bodies not defined as white, racism will exist because of the difference projected on these bodies.

Chappelle uses the "Reparations 2003" sketch to define whiteness explicitly while exploring the ambiguity of race. By examining whiteness through the lens of television news, Chappelle uses a cultural product we encounter on a daily basis. The exploration of race and racism through the news is ingenious because we take the messages for granted yet the issue of race is projected into our space every day. The sketch shows how race is
present in everything we see and experience, and that we are conditioned ignore it because it is so normal. This is what whiteness is about—normativity.

Watching the sketch, one sees how the white body—physically and ideologically—is different from the Black urban bodies it encounters. I would argue that Chappelle views money as the fundamental reason for racial Othering. Race science emerged in the eighteenth-century Europe as a legitimation for slavery and colonialism. Discourse ever since has aligned whites with haves and people of color with the have-nots. Thus, the Reparations sketch takes viewers to what Chappelle sees as the essence of racism and bigotry. Race is not so much about people of color as it is about whites.

Like the viewer of Pinder’s work, the Chappelle’s audience participates in the making of and challenging of representations he creates in his television shows. Chappelle depends on the fact that “one brings a mass of information and assumptions drawn from general experience.” In the same way that the audience brings this information, so too does Chappelle. This prompts the question: how much can one contest Chappelle’s representations when much of what he portrays come from experience? This is not to give Chappelle a pass on his art but to point out that the creator, to some degree, brings information to representations, whether it is deemed wrong or right.

Baxandall speaks to the viewer’s responsibility of reading a work of art: “a man’s capacity to distinguish a certain kind of form or relationship of forms will have

286 Baxandall, 35.
consequences for the attention with which he addresses the picture."\textsuperscript{287} Clearly, the work of reading a representation is not solely on the viewer as noted earlier, the artist or creator bears some of the onus of setting up the viewer. If we take Baxandall’s point, Chappelle’s audience, to some degree, has the skill to determine the kind of representations he presents in his work. As Baxandall noted about the fifteenth-century painter, which is relevant to not only Chappelle but also Pinder and McGruder: “The painter worked with nuances: he knew that his public was equipped to recognize with little prompting from him that one figure in his painting was Christ, another John the Baptist.”\textsuperscript{288}

Dave Chappelle created a series that reflected his views on the state of American life and culture. \textit{Chappelle’s Show}, though short-lived, made a larger impact on conversations about race than Chappelle himself may realize. Because he came at the show from not only a humorous and creative point of view but also an intellectual one, the many degrees of humor are intertwined with social critique. Chappelle’s fusion recalls Adorno’s assessment of mass media—that there are hidden messages that sink into the viewer’s mind. In this case one of the most important messages is about collapsing racial boundaries in order to fight racism and economic injustice.

Indirectly taking a cue from his ancestors—African and African American slaves—Chappelle’s satire allows him to work through the harsh reality of racism in America. In turn, the satirical work pokes the viewer’s funny bone and embeds a little knowledge from outside their comfort zone into their psyche. Of course, not everyone

\textsuperscript{287} Baxandall, 34.
\textsuperscript{288} Baxandall, 75.
will reach the depth from which Chappelle is working but that is not the point. The point is to produce work that interrogates the systemic intertwining of culture, race, and racism.

In examining the way in which Chappelle used *Chappelle’s Show* as a platform for interrogating and challenging race and racism, I analyzed the naming of the show and the sketches “Wayne Brady Show” and “Reparations 2003.” The analysis of naming supported my argument that Chappelle employed the African American tradition of signifyin’ as way to counter racism. His signifyin’ marks ownership of his cultural and intellectual property within an industry notorious for exploiting Blacks. In my examination of the respective sketches, I argue that Chappelle illuminates how whiteness works within popular media. The sketches also reveal the heterogeneity of blackness, a notion ignored by white society. Definitions of blackness and whiteness are also examined in the following chapter that looks at Aaron McGruder and *The Boondocks*. McGruder’s interrogation often parallels those of Dave Chappelle and Jefferson Pinder, although the strip appeared nationally four years before the work of Chappelle and Pinder. Like Pinder and Chappelle, McGruder combines the visual and artistic with popular media-- in his case, the newspaper.
Chapter 3: "We Need MoreVoices to Be Critical": Aaron McGruder

In 1950, C.L.R. James wrote a short essay entitled "C.L.R. James on Comic Strips," exploring the ways in which comic strips and other popular media provide a better view of American culture than "great artistic expressions."\(^{289}\) For a "complete and dynamic view of the society,"\(^{290}\) he claims that we must consider mass and popular culture. James's approach contrasts with the dominant discourse around high and low culture, in which high culture is treated as representative of society at large. He strongly believed that by studying popular media one would find the "clearest ideological expression and deepest feelings of the American people and a great window into the future of America and the modern world."\(^{291}\)

Aaron McGruder's *The Boondocks* exemplifies C.L.R. James's declaration: "the modern popular film, the modern newspaper (The Daily News, not the Times), the comic strip, the evolution of jazz, a popular periodical like Life, these mirror from year to year the deep social responses and evolution of the American people."\(^{292}\) Popular media offer a wider lens on what is relevant to the masses, as James puts it, because the creators work outside the margins of the high and low culture debate. Just as the creators look from the outside in, the works function, as James argues, as a mirror. This mirror reflects but also engages the looker.

\(^{290}\)James, 142.
\(^{291}\)James, 142.
\(^{292}\)James, 142.
Not only do comic strips reflect history as it happens, they reflect back to us who we are. As Scott McCloud states "cartooning is a way of seeing." McCloud continues, "when you enter the world of the cartoon—you see yourself." As the mirror metaphor suggests, cartoons and comic strips allow readers to engage on a level that they might not have in the "real" world. Cartoons and comics are by nature abstractions of the real world. McCloud explains that "by de-emphasizing the appearance of the physical world in favor of the idea of form, the cartoon places itself in the world of concepts." According to McCloud, focusing attention only on specific, necessary details allows the artist to "amplify...meaning in a way that realistic art can't." With realistic or representational art, the artist must include a great deal of detail if the image is to pass as accurate. In comic art, the reductive palette of imagery forces the reader to engage with not only the image but most importantly with the meaning of that particular strip or sequence.

James ends his essay: "to believe that the great masses of the people are merely passive recipients of what the purveyors of popular art give them is in reality to see people as dumb slaves." John W. Treat adds that popular culture, "is actively constitutive of an experience rather than passively reflective of it." Forms of popular culture, including comics, require the artist to work to have the reader/viewer engage

293 Scott McCloud, Understanding Comics, 31.
294 McCloud, 36.
295 McCloud argues that readers are more willing to engage with the cartoon world rather than the real world because cartoons are presented as escapist acting similar to the world of film.
296 McCloud, 41.
297 McCloud, 30.
298 James, 143.
with the medium. That is the nature of the medium and this is what McGruder does with *The Boondocks*.

While *The Boondocks* has received critical acclaim, both in print and television, particularly for its bitterly honest commentary on race, the strip is deserves even more attention as it weaves class, gender, politics, popular culture and generational Black consciousness into its narrative-commentary. Within McGruder's interrogation of race and the socio-cultural issues bound with it, whiteness is Othered. This characteristic of flipping the script on race discourse is one of the most important aspects of *The Boondocks*. Like his peers Chappelle and Pinder, McGruder skillfully inserts whiteness into mainstream consciousness. His addition of whiteness to blackness for analysis is one of several areas of consideration in this chapter because other scholarly examinations have focused primarily only on the ways in which McGruder positions blackness within *The Boondocks*.

I begin with an overview of the origins of *The Boondocks* in the University of Maryland's campus paper The Diamondback. Although the strip was short-lived, examining the early strips gives insight into McGruder's message because the Diamondback strip provided the nationally syndicated strip a foundation to build upon.

Next, I establish a contextual history of nationally recognized African American cartoonists and comic artists. Several scholars as well as the artist himself identify McGruder and *The Boondocks* with white, mainstream comic strips. While this is appropriate, given McGruder's ascendancy into comic history, it is also important to understand that he works within a long tradition of African American comic history.
An analysis of the strip’s characters follows the contextual history. Through character analysis, I show the depth of the characters through their racial and cultural identifications. Additionally, my analysis shows how McGruder privileges the heterogeneity of blackness and how he interrogates whiteness through the interactions of his characters.

Lastly, I analyze strip sequences that explicitly Other whites, building upon my examination of a white character name Cindy. Although McGruder situates whites as the Other, on many occasions the Othering is implicit not explicit. However, the sequences I have selected clearly demonstrate McGruder’s understanding of whiteness and its place in the broader conversation about race.

The Boondocks: The Background

The Boondocks debuted on December 3, 1996 in University of Maryland’s campus newspaper The Diamondback. In the initial panel, McGruder introduces the main characters (figure 13). The caption in the first cell reads, “It is a bright crisp fall morning...” The illustration shows that two young Black boys, one with an afro wearing a jacket, and the other with a close fade haircut and hoodie sweatshirt, are outdoors. Shown in a side profile view, the boys do not look at the viewer. The second cell introduces the boys: “Huey and Riley, along with their parents have just become the first Black residents of this upscale neighborhood.”300 The brothers look out at the viewer with similar scowls on their faces. In this panel, McGruder sets the narrative for the reader: the

300 The Diamondback, University of Maryland Archives, reel July-December 1996.
focus will be on the brothers, their transition to a suburban neighborhood, and their experiences of being young and Black in this environment.

The narration continues in the third cell: “The boys eagerly look forward to a new life—a new beginning nestled in the warm embrace of suburbia...” Given the boys’ body language in this and the previous cell, the boys are not happy about the move. Considering their “first” status, suburbia will not warmly embrace them. One only needs to recall the Civil Rights period to understand the acrimony that surrounded housing integration.

If the first three cells did not present the brothers’ displeasure, the final cell makes it very clear. Riley says: “You know if we JACK that Lexus across the street we could be back in Chicago by Wednesday...” Huey tells him: “FORGET IT Riley, we’re stuck here...” This final cell tells the reader more about the new kids: they are from Chicago, familiar with urban slang, and understand class as Riley easily identifies a luxury car.

Within his first strip, McGruder sets up two clear sets of binaries that shift over the life of the strip: inner city versus suburbia and blackness versus whiteness. Percolating underneath these pairings are the mammoth issues of class and identity. McGruder subtly comes out swinging, using the boys to interrogate pressing issues at the dawn of the twenty-first century. In four cells, McGruder informs the reader that The Boondocks will more than just another funny. The funny will be combined with education and critique.

In the university run of the strip, the Freeman brothers arrive in white suburbia with their parents, although they never appear in the strip. When The Boondocks moves to national syndication, the boys move with their grandfather. This difference may signal
McGruder's understanding that he now has larger platform to interrogate pressing issues in the Black community. The absence of the parents and the presence of the grandparent may suggest the striking number of grandparents parenting their grandchildren on a full-time basis.\textsuperscript{301}

The university strip serve as documentation of Huey's and Riley's experiences in a predominantly white elementary school. The explicitness of blackness and whiteness plays out in the classroom, from the white teachers to the scared and curious white classmates. For example, on Huey's first day of school, his teacher introduces him to the class and asks him to share something about himself. With an intense gaze, Huey says "Look y'all. I realize that I'm the first Black kid most of y'all have ever seen in real life."

The reader, when he/she reads the first strip, learns that blackness and whiteness will play out in an educational environment, as it does daily for Black children in America. Although this race discourse occurs in a fictional elementary school, the scenario could be a veiled critique of the situation of Blacks in college. While many white college students probably have interacted with Black people, chances are they may have had that encounter with "the one": the only Black in their classes or neighborhoods. As a presumably autobiographical strip, it is quite possible that attending the University of Maryland extended McGruder's self-reflection, begun as child and continuing into young adulthood on a predominately white college campus.

\textsuperscript{301}This has always been the case with Black families, especially when one considers the innumerable amount of families separated during slavery. However, the number of Black grandparents caring for their grandchildren, in the late twentieth- and twenty-first centuries, is alarming. Much of this due to drug addiction and abnormally high incarceration rates among Blacks.
In another December strip, Riley’s white classmate sits next to him and nervously eyes him (Figure 14). Riley sits, with his arms folded on the shared table, resting his head on his arms. He looks straight ahead, not paying attention to the boy. The classmate sits straight up and his hands grasp the desk. With furrowed brows, he looks at Riley, without turning his head. Riley, in the next cell, feels the boy staring at him and gives him a side eye look as the boy begins to sweat. In the next cell, Riley asks him if he has a problem, to which the boy exclaims “Oh God No. Please do not hurt me. I don’t have any money on—God Help!!.” Riley’s eight-year old peer exhibits his fear of him. The boy expresses his association of criminality with Riley, even though they are both children.

Phil’s reaction to Riley has multiple readings, such as the demonization of Black males in the media as well as the gangsta mentality visually rendered in music videos of the 1990s. This cell reveals how children learn very early to perceive people as different from them, and difference as inherently negative. It also demonstrates the demonization of Black boys before they reach adulthood. The boys’ teacher confirms in the last cell, when he screams, “Phil? Are you okay? Riley what did you do to Phil?” Black boys as early as eight years old already have the deck stacked against them.

McGruder also set up issues of blackness and whiteness when hair becomes an exotic curiosity. In an early strip, a white female student asks to touch Huey’s afro. The girl, a blonde, sits behind him with her head in her hand, as she leans towards him. Huey tells her she can touch it, remarking “tomorrow’s headlines will read ‘Local girl pummeled into oblivion by enraged negro...bewildered parents wonder why she couldn’t have just kept her hands to herself...’”
Kobena Mercer explains some of the political and cultural implications of Black hair: “[it is] constantly processed by cultural practices which thus invest it with meaning and value.” Of all the Black hairstyles, the afro is probably most overtly associated with politics. The political significance of this hairstyle will be discussed later in the chapter.

A subject usually reserved for Black women, McGruder flips the script and shows how the subject of hair resonates more broadly. He makes the issue explicit with the words hair, different, and puffy in bolded font. By singling out these three words, McGruder identifies for his non-Black audience how Black hair texture serves as a marker for difference. The girl does not understand why she cannot touch it. The reason is that she recognizes the hair as different and thus, a curiosity. This difference prompts her to want to touch it, which Huey understands and he denies her the privilege. After silently processing Huey’s response, she says that he is mean. Not fazed, Huey responds with “Your Mother.” This ends the discussion but also extends the race discourse to language and speech patterns. McGruder and Chappelle are linked in bringing African American linguistic patterns to mainstream America.

When Blacks play the dozens, tell yo’ mama jokes, or want to insult someone, they say “Yo Mama,” not “Your Mother.” The proper speech Huey uses speaks to his education, the classroom, and the ongoing debate about Blacks using Standard English. The proper speech of “your mother” also shows that even though Huey rocks a large afro and Black hoodie, he knows and uses proper grammar. Additionally, Huey’s use of “Your Mother” speaks to the Ebonics debate going on at the time.

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On December 18, 1996, The Oakland California school board passed a resolution declaring Ebonics as the language of the twenty-eight thousand Black children in the school system. The resolution caused a lot of controversy. On one side, people believed it finally recognized that Black children enter the classroom with their own cultural knowledge and language. Leanne Hinton, a professor at UC Berkeley in Linguistics, who attended the school board meetings, said the board “concluded that Black English is not just some random form of ‘broken-down English.’ It is rather a speech variety with its own long history, its own logical rules of grammar, discourse practices that are traceable to West African languages.”303 Another proponent, Marcyliena Morgan, stated “We must recognize that when children go to school, they not only bring their homework and textbooks, but their language, culture, and identity, as well.”304

Of course, not all Black children spoke or speak Ebonics, which was the other side of the debate. To identify Ebonics as an authentic language of Black students is to continue marginalizing an entire group and marking them as homogeneous. However, the outcry against identifying, for many, a distinct speech and language pattern, is to cater to the dominant groups’ ideology of what is appropriate speech. As Robert Williams, a social psychologist who coined the term “Ebonics” eloquently states

A recurrent combination of racial segregation and inferior educational opportunities prevented many African Americans from adopting speech patterns associated with Americans of European ancestry. As a result, generations of white citizens maligned or mocked speakers of African American Vernacular English, casting doubt on their intelligence.305

304 Ibid.
For many, especially Blacks who believe speaking standard English is necessary for success, speaking Ebonics or African American Vernacular English is a measure of intelligence, which is a problematic construct. McGruder deals with the upheaval in the February 1997 strips.

McGruder introduced a new character, Caesar, an Afro-Latino kid, to the neighborhood in the February 5 strip (figure 15). Caesar, with his dreadlocks wrapped in a bandana, arrives on his big wheel, riding down the sidewalk and realizes that he is not in Brooklyn, New York anymore. He notices the absence of liquor stores, subway trains and basketball courts. Caesar asks “Where do these people cash their checks?” This question echoes Chappelle’s commentary on liquor stores as check-cashing places for Blacks in their neighborhoods. Caesar continues his exploration in the next day’s strip when he sees Huey.

As Huey is walking with his backpack and books, he hears someone say “Hey You with the ‘fro!!!” He stops, turns around, and Caesar introduces himself. Caesar expresses his disbelief in the lack of Black people in the neighborhood and asks “What happened, did JAKE come through and everyone break out?” McGruder, understanding his diverse audience as well as engaging with the Ebonics debate, defines “jake.” In a text box in the lower right corner, he tells the reader that “Jake—Ebonics for ‘police’.” This is McGruder’s first comment on Ebonics. Towards the middle of the month, he dedicates several more strips to the subject.

In one of these strips, Huey and Caesar have a conversation using African American English. The last frame caption declares that “Ebonics is Fundamental.” In the February 26 strip, the white teachers decide they want to receive federal dollars to offer a
course on Ebonics. The February 28 strip shows the white teacher reading a book entitled “Ebonics for the Melanin Challenged.” After reading the book, which deciphers African American slang, he says “Ok. I think I got it now. So CREAM is another word for MONEY. And CHEESE is another word for MONEY.” In the next two cells, he continues “And Cream Cheese? That’s what my mom put on her bagel.”

In addition to learning Ebonics because of federal funding, the teacher is forced to learn the language of Riley, who uses Black talk in class and when talking to school authorities. This is the point of the Oakland School Board’s resolution. White teachers should make an effort to understand their Black students, in essence meeting them on their level, culturally, in order to help raise them up to the level they need to be academically. McGruder understands this. The strip demonstrates his desire to not only be humorous but also socially relevant.

*The Boondocks*’s socially relevant themes may have driven the popularity, which altered its home on the comic page. The strip’s placement changed during its three month run in the *Diamondback*. When it debuted, the strip was third in the comic section on the “Features” page. By February, it moved up to the second spot, and by the middle of February it was the leading comic strip.

If there was a hierarchy of strips, then *The Boondocks* moved up on the page as it rose in popularity. Another reason for the movement was that other strips were no longer published. For example, Bit O’ Blarney by Gene Ferrick was in the second position when *The Boondocks* debuted in December but Bit O’ Blarney was no longer published in February 1997. *The Boondocks* moved into its spot and *Vinegar Country* by Peter Miller was placed in *The Boondocks*’s former spot. In the top spot was Average Joe by Lars
Eidsness, which had maintained that spot since at least The Boondocks premiere.

However, on February 18, 1997, The Boondocks took Average Joe’s spot and remained the top comic until a major debacle occurred in March which ended The Boondocks’ run in The Diamondback.

March 3, 1997 was the last day the strip appeared in the campus paper. Because of technical difficulties, The Diamondback did not print the comic but instead, without McGruder’s permission, printed a large “OOPS!” in its place, under The Boondocks title along with McGruder’s name. This led many readers--at this point an audience of 19,000--to believe that McGruder did not submit his strip on time for the deadline. It was not until several people asked McGruder about absence of the strip that he discovered that the strip he had submitted was not printed in the March 4 edition.

McGruder addressed the missing strip, and its indefinite hiatus in his bi-weekly column (which was also shortlived) “Watch Yo’ Nuggets.” In the article “Has The Boondocks really ended up in the boondocks?,” McGruder details the events that led him to pull the strip from the paper—technical issues with printing the strip—and—the “OOPS!” replacement strip. He explains:

Technical difficulties are not a crime. Had they just not run the strip at all, or printed something along the lines of “Sorry, due to technical difficulties The Boondocks will not be seen today,” there would have been no problems. Instead, somebody (the culprit has yet to claim responsibility) decided to get cute and put “OOPS!” in my space without my knowledge or permission. It was heinous unprofessionalism.\footnote{Aaron McGruder, “Has The Boondocks really ended up in the boondocks?” Diamondback, March 18, 1997.}

McGruder continues, “I told them I was pulling the strip for at least two weeks because of that little stunt, and I felt an apology was in order. I was told that an apology
would run the next day. To my knowledge, it still hasn’t run yet. So I pulled the strip indefinitely."

Though the strip’s run in the campus newspaper provides a general introduction to what the strip is about, its debut in national syndication differed greatly from the campus paper version. From the outset, McGruder established a somewhat different tone. Arguably, the tone for a national audience was much more pointed than before because he knew he would reach a larger and more diverse audience.

For its April 19, 1999 national debut, The Boondocks lets the boys introduce themselves to their new audience. McGruder opens up the four cell strip with the brothers in conversation. Huey, although unnamed at this point, tells Riley “Riley, we’re not in Chicago anymore.” Now readers learn right away that the boys are from Chicago. In the campus strip, the reader did not learn this until the last cell. Informing the national reader about the boys’ connection to Chicago, a major city, sets the tone for the readers. It alerts them to Huey and Riley’s urban sensibilities, and more significantly, how space and place inform one’s ideas about race and one’s identity.

This first cell also differs from the one in the Diamondback in dialogue and composition. Both show the boys in a side profile. However, in the Diamondback, trees surround the boys whereas in the national edition, there are no environmental clues in the cell. The boys fill the cell, McGruder puts the focus solely on the main characters. Additionally, in the national strip, the boys are much taller than in the Diamondback. While Huey keeps his large afro, Riley wears a skull-cap or do-rag instead of a low fade.

307 Ibid.
haircut. With the focus on the boys, McGruder establishes their centrality as centering characters as well as their personality types.

Huey, with his afro and black t-shirt represents an Afrocentric, political Black Power consciousness. Black Power participants wore black as a uniform, whether a black leather jacket, a black turtleneck or both. Riley’s black do-rag and oversized hoodie sweatshirt communicate a late 1990s hip-hop and urban orientation. Riley’s self-presentation and use of slang, in addition to his desire to be the baddest kid in the neighborhood, speak to the mindset of commercial hip-hop. The brothers represent two very distinct generational Black consciousnesses. This sets the cultural context for many of the issues that The Boondocks addresses in the run of the strip.

The neighborhood—trees, houses, manicured lawns—dominate the second cell. The reader receives a bird’s eye view of the boys’ new environment, and the boys are miniscule compared to their surroundings. In this cell, Huey continues to educate Riley and the reader about the difference between suburbia and the urban streets when he says “these people are well-off...comfortable. These are not the hard streets of the South Side.” Just as children notice class differences through clothes, as Ellison pointed out in Invisible Man and Shadow and Act, children notice class differences in their immediate surroundings.

Huey asks Riley if he understands what he is telling him. Riley, speaking for the first time, says he thinks so. In the last cell, Riley’s understanding is questionable because he says, “I’m the hardest, baddest thing for miles, and I can run amok here without fear.” Huey’s response to his brother is “No. Let me try this again.” Though on the surface it may appear that Riley does not get it, his declaration shows that he is fully aware.
If Riley were to “run amok” in the city, especially in the South Side of Chicago, the fear is getting caught by the police or a rival who thinks he is even bigger and badder. Running amok and being delinquent are almost expected because of the inner city environment. Since he is most likely the baddest because he lives in suburbia, Riley is *runnin’ thangs*. The assumption is that he will not have to worry about the police since the neighborhood is safe, without the ills of the inner city. However, through Huey’s response, McGruder hints at the fallacy of Riley’s thinking. They are in a well-off community, thus they will have to be on their best behavior, especially as the new kids. If there was a fear of getting caught up with the justice system in Chicago, the fear should be greater in an upscale neighborhood where the police show up at the drop of a hat.

The last cell demonstrates the difference in philosophies the readers will encounter over the life of the strip. Just as McGruder uses the clothing and hairstyles to differentiate the brothers, he also use language. Huey speaks proper, standard, while Riley spits slang, the language of the streets. The audience learns that Huey is the principled one and Riley is a bit of a troublemaker. The way McGruder positions the characters visually adds more insight into the boys and the diversity they bring to Black culture.

Huey and Riley stand side by side in all of the comic frames except for the last one. When Riley is proclaiming his freedom to be a delinquent, he faces Huey. The face-to-face stance sums up the many brotherly and philosophical sparrings they will have against each other. On a larger contextual level, the face-to-face symbolizes the generational differences within the Black community. This is especially significant as Huey is taller than Riley, not necessarily towering over him, but symbolically more
powerful than Riley. As a representative of Afrocentric and Black Power sensibilities, Huey has more wisdom and understanding of the world around him. Riley, part of the hip-hop generation, younger and worldly, represents the supposed lack of awareness of the younger generation.

The introductions orient the reader to what he or she is getting into reading the strip. As one of the few comic strips focused on African Americans in national press, analysis of the background of *The Boondocks* is important as it illuminates how McGruder sets the tone for the critically acclaimed comic. Because *The Boondocks* is the most successful comic strip in African American comic history in terms of circulation, it is also important to identify African American comic artists who establish a longer lineage of comic success.

**African American Cartoon and Comic History**

Numerous predecessors paved the road for McGruder’s success: E. Simms Campbell, Oliver Harrington, and Brumsic Brandon, Jr., among countless others. *The Boondocks* is often compared to Garry Trudeau’s Doonesbury. This is accurate given that McGruder has mentioned Trudeau’s influence and the satirical nature of Doonesbury. However, McGruder’s place in an African American tradition of satirical cartoons and comic strips has for the most part been ignored. In a recent essay, Mark Anthony Neal does broadly link McGruder to Oliver Harrington. He points out that “well before McGruder elevated *The Boondocks* to the level of social criticism in the tradition of Garry Trudeau’s Doonesbury and Berke Breathed’s Bloom County, cartoonist and
essayist Oliver W. Harrington set a standard for Black readers throughout the 20th century.\textsuperscript{308} Neal appears to suggest that McGruder’s work is connected with Harrington’s. Yet, he undercuts this connection by aligning McGruder’s work with that of Trudeau and Breathed, rather than pursuing a connection with Harrington as well.

Neal’s essay is a biographical sketch of Harrington, but its title, “Before ‘The Boondocks,’ there was Ollie Harrington,” leads the reader to expect that a connection between McGruder and Harrington will be developed. Neal’s work on Harrington does help to situate \textit{The Boondocks} in a larger African American comic tradition. However, it is essential to identify a longer comic lineage beyond Harrington which also critiqued race in America. Ignoring this history does a disservice to both McGruder and the pioneers who came before him. Ironically, treating McGruder as a “super star” and “the one” actually marginalizes him as “the one” exception, when in fact the system of marginalization based on difference has already erased his predecessors.

Elmer Simms Campbell, (also known as E. Simms Campbell), an African American who worked during the 1930s through the 1960s, was one of the most successful comic artists in the United States. Race appeared to be a non-issue for Campbell. Considering this period of heightened racial turmoil in the country, Campbell’s success is an example of a rare crossover in a medium dominated by white artists.

Born in St. Louis, Missouri on January 6, 1906, E. Simms Campbell grew up in a middle-class family and knew from an early age that he wanted to be an artist. His

parents, Elmer Cary Campbell and Elizabeth Campbell (nee Simms), supported his artistic pursuit. His mother was a painter, specializing in watercolor, and his father served as an assistant principal for a high school.

Campbell attended the University of Chicago for a year, then transferred to the Art Institute of Chicago, where he completed his studies. After graduation, Campbell went back to St. Louis and worked as a waiter in a dining car. During his work shift, he continued to hone his skills by drawing his co-workers and passengers on the train.

A person integral to Campbell’s success was fellow comic artist and cartoonist Edward Graham. The two men met during Campbell’s stay in Chicago. Graham, a white cartoonist, mentored Campbell and introduced him to magazine editors. This was instrumental to Campbell’s entry into the comic industry and helped to shape his attitude about the color line. When asked about the color line, he replied, “I really haven’t had much time to think about it.”

In 1933, Arnold Gingrich, publisher of the national magazine Esquire, hired Campbell to be one of their premier cartoonists. The publisher liked his work so much that he ordered the staff to “never let an issue of Esquire go without an E. Simms Campbell cartoon.” Campbell’s importance at the magazine is evident from Esquire’s covers, some of which featured his cartoons. He also heads the list of cartoonists included in the weekly magazine. Like The Boondocks’s placement in The Diamondback, Campbell’s placement at the top of the list shows not only this significance to the publication but also the cartoon/strip’s popularity and respect within the specific media organization.

310 Tapley, 32.
Campbell created humorous cartoons that commented on daily life, particularly the daily life of the working male professional. During a thirty-plus year career with Esquire, Campbell’s cartoons had a home in several other magazines such as Playboy, The New Yorker, Cosmopolitan, and Redbook. Considering that the height of his career coincided with intense racial and social upheaval in the United States, Campbell did not come up against the color line like some of his peers.

Nevertheless, acceptance of his work did not mean that he did not suffer personally. In 1957, he and his wife, Vivian, with their daughter Elizabeth, moved to Switzerland. Vivian and Campbell lived there until her death in 1970, and Campbell moved back to the United States in 1971. While there are some accounts that he moved because of race relations in the United States, according to their only daughter, the Campbell family moved to Switzerland in order to give her a better future and education.311

The move did not affect his cartoon career. Before emigrating to Switzerland, Campbell received a syndication deal for his cartoon Cuties. In 1954, Cuties appeared in 110 newspapers, which was a significant accomplishment of any comic artist or cartoonist, especially an African American.312 The cartoon revolved around beautiful, curvy, white women in everyday situations. Campbell created the original “Cutie” to sell products as well as sex appeal (figure 17).313 She is a red-headed woman with a modestly curvaceous body. The popularity of “Cutie” in Esquire led Campbell to create a series of

311 Tapley, 32.
312 In a byline for a 1951 article, the number of newspapers is 143. See E. Simms Campbell, “Are Black Women Beautiful?” in Negro Digest, vol. 98, June 1951.

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“Cuties” based on sexy white women: Cuties in Arms (1942), More Cuties in Arms (1943), and Cuties (1945). Much of the white reading audience did not know a Black man was behind these sexy women. His publishers worked to protect his identity for the obvious reason but some people “heard” he was Black and it apparently did not bother them as they kept reading the cartoons.314

Campbell rarely drew African Americans in his cartoons. When asked about his “Cuties,” Campbell said, “if she came to life, she would be colored.” He explained “Colored girls have better breasts and more sun and warmth...she’s got colored girls’ hips.”315 He received this question quite a bit, in one form or another, and wrote about it in Negro Digest in an essay “Are Black Women Beautiful?” In the essay, Campbell discusses the beauty of Black women, particularly in contrast to white beauty.

Because we live in this society in which standards of physical beauty are most often circumscribed by a static concept of whiteness of skin and blondeness of hair, there is an aching need for someone to shout...that black women are beautiful...I mean black women—whose skin are deep, rich velvet shades of ebony.316

Cleverly, Campbell speaks to the beauty of dark-skinned women not only in opposition to whiteness but in light of the open discourse within the African American community about light-skinned versus dark-skinned beauty. The essay also discusses the negative treatment of African American women in America. He then explains his drawings of white women:

314 R.C. Harvey, “E. Sims Campbell: Comics Pioneer,” in Other Heroes: African American Comic Book Creators, Characters, and Archetypes, by John Jennings and Damian Duffy, exh. cat. 2010, 31. Harvey’s essay is quite informative yet he misspells Simms throughout the essay. There is one instance, towards the end, that Campbell’s name is spelled correctly. Perhaps the misspelling is an editing issue however as a practioner in the field and writing an essay about a pioneer, spelling the artist’s name right is significant and speaks to the lack of scholarship on Black comic artists.

315 Quoted in Carter’s “Meet E. Simms Campbell,” 5.

Since I work for many advertising agencies, and I am paid by them, I must out of necessity draw women who are white. I have often drawn the beauty and perfection of black models, simply painting white skins on a gorgeous black body, because white advertisers would not use a Negro woman to advertise their wares.317

Thus, Campbell saw Black women as very much a part of his work but they had to be painted white for economic reasons. Although he did not draw politically humorous cartoons or critique race in his art, Campbell’s methodology is political as he openly admits that the curvy women America fell in love with were not white bodies but those of Black woman. Campbell’s methodology is his way of signifyin’—calling attention to the denigration of Black women by a white male public which also lusted after their bodies.

Through his forty-year career, E. Simms Campbell created a legacy for future aspiring cartoonists and comic artists as well as his peers already in or trying to enter the profession. A pioneer, Campbell demonstrated that race does not have to get in the way of success but that it is important to also recognize that racism exists. Although he did not feature African Americans in his work, he inspired another comic artist of African descent, Oliver “Ollie” W. Harrington, who did.

Born on February 14, 1912, in Valhalla, New York, Oliver W. Harrington was a politically active cartoonist during the Black Renaissance. As a mixed-race person, with a Black father and Jewish mother, he focused his cartoons on the experiences Blacks had with American racism. He grew up in the South Bronx, New York, in an immigrant and racially mixed neighborhood. Unlike Campbell who knew he always wanted to be an artist, Harrington did not come to that conclusion until he had an embarrassing racial incident with a white school teacher.

317 Campbell, 18.
As he recounts in his essay “Why I Left America,” Harrington turned to cartoons after the teacher embarrassed him and other Black student in front of their classmates. Harrington writes, “I had one teacher, Miss McCoy, who used to call me and the other Black pupil in school….to the front of the room and present us to class. She’d say, ‘These two, being Black, belong in a waste basket.’” He continues,

there was no defending of oneself against that. So, I began to build up a kind of rage…in the end, it turned out rather beneficial to me because I began doing cartoons of Miss McCoy in my notebooks…it was an opening to a source of pleasure which has remained and sustained me; the art of what we might call, loosely, cartoons.

This began Harrington’s use of the cartoon medium to confront the racism and injustices he and other African Americans experienced daily.

After high school, Harrington moved to Harlem and began studying at the National Academy of Design. During this time, he published political cartoons in The National News and the New York State Contender. In 1935, he created Dark Laughter, a single panel cartoon, for the African American newspaper Amsterdam News, where he was hired as a temporary cartoonist. Born out of this “temporary” job was his most famous character, Bootise.

Bootsie, a “jolly, rather well fed but soulful” African American man became the focus of Dark Laughter. The city editor for the Amsterdam News, Ted Poston named the character. Bootise provided laughter amid the social changes occurring in the United States as well as offering some education (figure 18). He seemed always to find

318 Oliver Harrington, “Why I Left America” in Why I Left America and Other Essays, (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1993), 98.
319 Harrington, 98.
320 Harrington, 29.
321 Harrington, 29.
himself in a bind. Harrington used the life outside his window—the Harlem streets—as material for Dark Laughter and later Bootsie.

In 1940, Harrington graduated with a bachelor of fine art degree from Yale University. During this time, he continued Dark Laughter and also created a number of cartoons for various publications. He also worked as an illustrator. Most notably, in 1942 he illustrated his good friend, Richard Wright’s serialization of Native Son in Adam Clayton Powell’s weekly magazine People’s Voice.

Harrington worked as a war correspondent for the Pittsburgh Courier during World War II. In reaction to the war, he created a comic strip Jive Gray, which dealt with the war from a Black man’s perspective. Unlike his peer, E. Simms Campbell, Harrington centered his art on the Black experience nationally and internationally. However, like Campbell, Harrington moved overseas to East Berlin as he grew increasingly disenchanted with race relations in the United States.

Harrington became an expatriate in 1961. While working in East Berlin, the Berlin Wall went up dividing the country. According to comic scholar M. Thomas Inge, he received a contract from Aufabu Publishers to illustrate translations of American and English classics. Harrington also contributed political cartoons about American issues of racism, poverty, and foreign policy to two publications: Eulenspiegel, a humor magazine, and Das Magazine, a general interest magazine. While an expatriate, Harrington still published cartoons in American serials.

323 Inge, xxiv.
Oliver W. Harrington drew cartoons that focused on African American identity formation during two significant historical periods: the Black Renaissance and World War II. By centering the African American experience, he demonstrated that through humor one could learn about the depths of the issues plaguing the Black community, the most pressing of which was racism.

Harrington, in turn, laid a foundation for Brumsic Brandon, Jr., another important comic artist who also dealt with African American life and racism. Brandon was born in Washington, DC on October 4, 1927. He began submitting comic strips in the 1940s. Brandon attended New York University and drew editorial cartoons and a strip called Luther. Some of his cartoons appeared in African American periodicals like Freedomways.

In Freedomways, Brandon wrote an essay about the development of Luther in which he discussed the politics surrounding the strip’s setting, naming, characters, and context. One of the rare articles that describe the struggle between the creator’s vision and the organizations publishing the art, it also demonstrates how the politics around Black representation continued to be an issue in cultural and media realms.

Created in 1968, after the assassination Martin Luther King, Jr., the strip’s name pays homage to the slain civil rights activist. Luther, the main character, is a little boy who lives in the inner city. The strip follows the barriers that come with being an African American child in an inner city neighborhood, where the inhabitants are of working-class and poor backgrounds. Brandon takes the reader on a journey into the Black community and offers insight into how children interpret the world around them.
In his article, Brandon details the genesis of Luther. When he was invited to create the strip, he saw an opportunity to “right the wrongs of comic past.” The wrongs Brandon mentions are “the bulbous lipped, bug-eyed, ghost-fearing, foot-shuffling bumblers of comic pages gone.”324

Brandon decided that he wanted to create a strip around children but does not mention why he did so. Perhaps this was to make the content easier for readers to take. Naming the strip and the characters were a primary concern. Brandon initially wanted to call the strip The Inner City Kids but the editors rejected this because “by virtue of past experience, [they] felt the comic strip would have a more successful impact on the readers if the strip were named after the main character.”325 Like Chappelle’s Show, naming, no matter the object, project or person, is important because it sets the tone for the reader and viewer.

In this case, the title may have been too direct for the editors and could have turned off publishers and readers. Thinking about the time period, when two major social movements—the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement—put a visual face on the social issues plaguing the Black poor and working-class living in the inner city, the original name was probably too much to bear, for both Black and white readers. Another view is that naming the strip after a character creates empathy in the audience.

Brandon stated “Surely the name of the character (and the strip) would be no less important to his image than his appearance!”326 Therefore, he insisted that the name of the main character, a “handsome little boy with a small Afro, soulful eyes and high

325 Brandon, 235.
326 Brandon, 235.
waisted pants,” not perpetuate stereotypes of Black males like “Willie, Hambone or Bubber.” Brandon wanted a name that would elicit positive feelings and present an alternate image of Blacks.

An homage to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who died months before the publication of the strip, Luther before his debut was a “little Black boy already burdened with the responsibility of helping to change the Black image on America’s comics pages.” Luther takes a page out of Dr. King’s book and questions not only race but the human condition with his inquisitive and worrisome but hopeful personality (figure 19).

Ultimately, Brandon sought to overturn monolithic notions of the Black community. To accomplish his goal, Brandon created, through his characters, a pantheon of Black philosophical viewpoints. He used this approach in selecting the names of Luther’s friends: five children, four Black and one white. Brandon was careful to provide a balance of philosophies and gender. There are three girls: Oreo, a Black girl who is “white-oriented”; Mary Frances, a street smart, sassy Black girl; and Lily, a white girl presenting various white views. Brandon also included three Black boys, including Luther: Hardcore is tough and streetwise; and Pee-Wee is the youngest and most impressionable of the children.

Although the strip presents a range of views through its Black characters Brandon presents white views as monolithic because there is a single character Lily, representing all whites. Additionally, the names are tongue in cheek, particularly Oreo and Lily.

327 Brandon, 235.
328 Brandon, 235.
329 Brandon introduces a young white boy in late 1968, early 1969 into the strip. He is not named but he provides another white view.
Oreo references the chocolate and vanilla cookie while Lily, the white girl, references the saying "lily white," or the white flower named lily.

Interestingly, the editors wanted Brandon to create a strip about Black kids in the inner city but with no racial content. This kind of thinking divorces the social issues from each other--compartmentalizing each into its own box when each social problem is dependent on the other. For example, the majority of people in the inner city are people of color. They are not there because they chose to be but because of a lack of access to resources—education, better housing, and higher paying jobs, which more often than not is connected to their racial and ethnic classification. Divorcing race from class in a strip about the inner city or any environment tells only part of the story. Inevitably, taking race out of the strip, especially one named after a civil rights activist, continues the cycle of invisibility of people of color, and perpetuates racism by ignoring race as an issue.

While McGruder identifies with Trudeau, he may have more in common with Brumsic Brandon, Jr. I contend that The Boondocks, as part of a larger cartoon and comic strip history, shares a contextual lineage with Brandon, Jr.’s strip Luther. The lineage directly and indirectly, informs The Booondocks.

What Makes Up The Boondocks: Character Analyses of the Strip

The scant scholarship on The Boondocks includes only cursory examinations of the major characters that make up the strip. Most of the character analysis focuses on Huey, the moral compass of the strip, which is appropriate as his voice is the loudest and
most direct. However, even examinations of Huey lack the depth his character deserves. Two scholars have provided analyses of the characters: Mark Anthony Neal and Michele Elam.

Mark Anthony Neal, in *Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post-Soul Aesthetic*, gives an analysis of Huey and Riley, which goes below the surface of the characters’ cultural positions. However, he ignores Granddad, Jazmine, and Cindy, all of whom play prominent roles in the strip. By focusing on Riley and Huey, Neal effectively isolates the brothers, especially Huey who Neal views as “the more richly developed character.” I would argue that the other characters are also richly developed albeit in different ways than Huey, as I will demonstrate. While Neal focuses on the brothers, Michele Elam examines Jazmine, the bi-racial character in her work on mixed-race identity.

In *The Souls of Mixed Folk: Race, Politics, and Aesthetics in the New Millenium*, Michele Elam uses *The Boondocks* as a source for interrogating race, focusing on attitudes about mixed-race. She provides one of the few in-depth examinations of Jazmine Dubois, the daughter of interracial couple Thomas and Sarah Dubois. Elam argues for looking at how popular culture shapes our perceptions and identities, particularly when it comes to race. Her main concern is how mixed-race identities are articulated and managed, from the individual to the community. Elam shows appreciation for the depth McGruder and *The Boondocks* achieve and demonstrates what Neal does not—that Jazmine is a well-developed character.

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Although Neal and Elam elevate scholarship on *The Boondocks* to critical analyses of the strip and look beyond mere humor, they focus on parts rather than the whole. To be sure, each includes some examination of the other characters, which is necessary as the characters interact with each other. However, by providing a critical analysis of all the characters, I will illustrate how each character is important to the other as well as to McGruder’s message. Moreover, I will demonstrate that the characters provide much more thought-provoking insight into race and racism than commonly believed.

The primary characters in the strip are Huey, Riley, Granddad, Jazmine, and Cindy. McGruder uses Woodcrest, the suburban neighborhood where the action takes place. The neighborhood is taken for granted because it is the background of the strip. Woodcrest is a silent character, which provides the necessary foundation upon which McGruder examines blackness and whiteness. The “human” characters serve as representatives of different racial viewpoints. Each provides a way to consider how race functions in our society. The Freeman family demonstrates the heterogeneity of blackness while Jazmine complicates notions of blackness and whiteness through her bi-racial or mixed-race position. Cindy, the lone white girl in the strip, presents whiteness through the eyes of McGruder and receives treatment as the Other. Through analysis of each of these characters, I will show that *The Boondocks* serves as an active agent rather than a passive reflection of how race and racism construct our perceptions of ourselves and each other.\(^{331}\)

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Woodcrest: A Veiled Critique of Columbia, Maryland?

Space informs our identities, our communities and how we view the world at large. It shapes race and racial identities because racial divisions have served as rationales for spacial divisions throughout American history. McGruder uses the neighborhood of Woodcrest to create another level of discourse on race and class in *The Boondocks* beyond that of the human characters. Because McGruder approaches race and class in such a direct way, it is surprising that scholars have overlooked the interconnectedness of these elements in his work. Examining Woodcrest adds dimension to McGruder’s contribution to cultural understanding of race and class, which is what makes *The Boondocks* more than just a funny and controversial comic strip.

A predominantly white neighborhood, Woodcrest is the primary backdrop for the Freeman family’s antics. The Freemans are the first Black family to move into Woodcrest. Before analyzing specific strips that illuminate the complexity of relocating to a white neighborhood after living in a predominantly Black area of Chicago, it is important to understand the muse for Woodcrest—Columbia, Maryland.

The thoroughly planned suburban community of Columbia was the brainchild of James Rouse, a businessman who believed in order and planning. Rouse stated “Columbia began with a simple conviction—that cities need not grow in the unplanned,

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Treat’s framing of popular culture and the significance of it as works that are active in constructing an experience. Treat says popular culture is “actively constitutive of experience rather than passively reflective of it.” In this sense, popular culture is an important object of study for human experiences.
disorderly, irresponsible manner in which they did.”  

He viewed planning as the way to create a community that “contributed the most by its physical form, its institutions, and its operation to the growth of the people.”

When Rouse identified the results, as he saw it, of Columbia, his number one outcome was “it has shown that you can plan what ought to be reaching beyond what is considered practical or even feasible—and achieve it. It is rational to plan what is best. The big, bold, rational plan and image has the power to enable its fulfillment.” Rouse not only homes in on the significance of planning but on the desired objective that planning can have. For the “next America,” Columbia, Maryland would be a community that provided opportunities for a better life and the personal and social growth of its residents by marrying the rural or countryside with urban amenities such as cultural centers, shopping, restaurants, and businesses. Additionally, Columbia would be racially tolerant and supposedly ahead of government mandated integration as “Columbia is also unique for its purposeful goal to be an integrated community at a time before the Fair Housing Act of 1968.” The supposed racial openness is of special interest as it directly relates to McGruder’s critique of Columbia and many planned utopias. However, before discussing race relations in the community, a brief discussion of a predecessor of

333 Rouse, ix.  
334 Rouse, x.  
335 When Columbia welcomed its first residents, the Columbia Exhibit Center in the community organized an exhibition “The Next America” referring to Columbia as a pioneer in planning a community as well as full racial openness. See www.columbiaarchives.org.  
Rouse establishes a historical and social context for the philosophy that helped to form Columbia.

According to Joseph L. Arnold, Rouse’s vision for Columbia is closely related to the work of the visionary Sir Ebenezer Howard. Howard, a Briton, identified the vastly changing lifestyle of people in London at the turn of the twentieth-century in his book *Garden Cities of Tomorrow* (1898): the exodus from the countryside to live and work in the city. He was not alone in recognizing the migration to the city as he documented a number of viewpoints about the problem from newspaper editors to respected citizens. “It is at least of immense importance that, on a subject thus universally regarded as of supreme importance, we have such a consensus of opinion at the outset.”337 Though Howard focused on London, he recognized that the exodus from the rural areas was a worldwide problem and mentioned the Americas.

The key question Howard investigated was “how to restore the people to the land.”338 He argued that the social activities and high wage jobs found in the city caused the movement. Howard’s solution for drawing people back to the countryside was a hybrid of town and country, as it offers “all the advantages of the most energetic and active town life. With all the beauty and delight of the country, [which] may be secured in perfect combination.”339 This marriage of town and country is the garden city, with clear emphasis on the garden or the country. Howard further states that “town and

338 Howard, 13.
339 Howard, 15.
country must be married, and out of this joyous union will spring a new hope, a new life, a new civilization.”

In *Garden Cities of Tomorrow*, Howard mapped out the benefits of his vision. Stated broadly so that other communities could tailor the proposal to suit their needs, these advantages included better opportunities for socializing, beautiful homes and gardens, and more freedom for their residents. The most important result of the newly developed areas would be happy people. These outcomes are in line with Rouse’s objectives for Columbia.

Howard’s description of the physical layout of the community included a city center, which would be circular in design around a well-watered garden. Surrounding the garden would be public buildings such as a town hall, lecture hall, museum, theater, and hospital. The outer ring should consist of industrial and commercial buildings.

Howard’s proposal for a healthy life balance not only considered the social well-being of residents but also the economics of developing such a place. According to Arnold: “This proposal for the construction of ‘garden cities’ was based on a thorough knowledge of land costs and the economics of land developments in the greater London region.” This is where Rouse and Howard have much in common. Rouse wanted to create a socially healthy environment just as much as he wanted to make a profit. Profit is

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340 Howard, 18.
listed as one of the goals of the Columbia development plan as stated on the community’s archive website.\textsuperscript{342}

"Columbia’s greatest success lies in the racial integration of its housing. Colombians are extremely proud of this success."—Lynne C. Burkart

Columbia welcomed its first residents in June 1967, at the end of the Civil Rights Movement, the beginning of the Black Power Movement, and before the 1968 Fair Housing Act, also known as the Civil Rights Act. Though the community opened during a tumultuous time, Columbia was ahead of many communities. Integrated housing was an important action that should be applauded, especially because it was not forced through government policy.

While Columbia’s accomplishment of integration deserves recognition, dealing with race and racism in the community took a backseat to the Utopian ideals of its plan. Being “racially” open does not eradicate racism; often racism merely takes on a different form and is not explicit in ways which would mar the vision of openness. Several scholars have examined the proposed racial utopia in Columbia, identifying the many ways that racism manifested throughout the city’s existence. This underground racism is what McGruder makes visible in the setting and character of Woodcrest.

A resident of Columbia, Lynne C. Burkhart investigated racial politics in what was then a fairly new community in the late 1960s to the early 1970s. Burkhart set out to understand how race and racism were or were not discussed, from the perspectives of

both Black and white residents. In her research, she documented how racism primarily
lived underground at the hands of both groups. Burkhart summarizes a 1973 incident that
made Columbia’s race problem public, if only for a short time.

The Peer Organization, an all-white group, wrote a letter that publicly addressed
Columbia’s racial problems. They asked for meetings with the community’s nine village
boards to discuss racial incidents against white kids. Of the nine, only one board willingly
discussed race and racism in its community. This board, Harper’s Choice, commended
the Peer Organization for taking the initiative to have the conversation. Burkart noted that
one board member stated, “there is indeed racism in homes, good single-family homes,
both black and white.”343 Perhaps the most telling comment is “when people move to an
open community they think of themselves as liberal while racist tendencies linger
on…racism has gone underground in Columbia.”344

Despite Columbia’s presumed racial openness, it could be a place that was not as
welcoming as it presented itself. For example, while many Columbians touted the
accomplishment of integrated housing, many Blacks, as Burkhart discovered, felt
Columbia only recognized them when it was advantageous to present a liberal image,
such as Black History month and other Black celebrations. Burkhart cites that in casual
conversations Blacks expressed a “widespread resentment that Columbia, the Columbia
Association, and whites in general are unwilling to accept the idea that there is a black
community.”345

343 Lynne C. Burkhart, Old Values in a New Town: The Politics of Race and Class in Columbia, Maryland,
344 Burkhart, 68.
345 Burkhart, 71.
As Burkhart experienced, Columbia attempted to be a color-blind community. Whether to its credit or detriment, "the community has become more self-critical about efforts to extinguish racial divisions."\(^{346}\)

Nicholas Dagen Bloom also examined the city’s development and its integrationist environment. Bloom states that the discussion about race increased over the course of Columbia’s existence, which he argues demonstrates the maturation of racial views in a community that tried to be color-blind.\(^{347}\) In his study, Bloom shows how color-blindness was quite deliberate in two ways: in the marketing materials and in an unspoken mandate not to have Blacks segregated in their own neighborhoods. In marketing images, "the company mixed images of Blacks and whites in guidebooks, the exhibit building, and similar venues."\(^{348}\) From the beginning, Columbia created visual literature that asserted racial inclusiveness.

Rouse himself wanted the neighborhoods to be diverse and not to have Blacks forced into one area by real estate agents or builders. If there were too many Blacks in one area, a Howard and Research Development (HRD) partner would buy out the Black homebuyer to create a racial balance. Bloom explains that "HRD had to monitor and occasionally socially engineer the community in order to achieve the integration desired."\(^{349}\) This is problematic, particularly if Blacks wanted to live next to or near other Blacks, especially because there was far less emphasis placed on ensuring that whites did not live next to whites. The underlying assumption therefore was that whites comprised


\(^{347}\) Bloom, 191.

\(^{348}\) Bloom, 193.

\(^{349}\) Bloom, 194.
the normative population while Blacks were, as usual, the marked one. Further, these moves were also a forced form of integration, which countered Columbia’s reputation as progressive. This way of dealing with racism may have hurt Columbia more than it helped because racism lived underground.

Drawing upon an article by Jeanne O’Neill, Bloom found that while adults and children seemed to deal with racial tolerance well, teenagers did not. In the article, O’Neill notes clear racial divisions at a basketball game, which resembled many high school lunch rooms where the races are voluntarily segregated. At the game, all the white kids sat on one side of the court while all the Black kids sat on the other. At a sporting event, where the common belief is that athletics transcend race, Columbia’s teenagers bucked that belief. Clearly, teenagers understood that race was present.

Some may argue that walls go up during the teenage years, especially as young people experience emotional and physical changes. To be sure, this contributes quite a bit to a young person’s development. However, it is not the only reason. Columbia did not deal realistically with race. The color-blind mentality sets up children of all races and ethnicities for an identity crisis once they reach adolescence and college. This happens because the world outside of Columbia is not color-blind. It is a world where race matters and racism exists, overtly and covertly. Although Bloom highlights a few quotes about the “intense identification with the Afro-American experience” that many Black teenagers experience in Columbia, he too has an unrealistic view when he states “one could fault Columbia for being unrealistic, but it is the outside world that has failed these
While Bloom means well, the reality is that regardless of where they grow up, people should understand how race works in a country that continues to mandate racial Otherness, which upholds systemic racism. In order to look past race, one has to fully understand racism and its place within our lives. Not talking about it gives racism permission to keep on keepin’ on. Ignorance is not acceptable.

Although Columbia is culturally diverse and maintains an openness to all, being tolerant does not help to expose the racism that exists in the community. Racism is not overt in Columbia because it is not socially acceptable. Thus, it lives behind closed doors and underground. McGruder defiantly disputes this color-blind, naïve way of thinking with his direct critique on race in not only Columbia but also cities and communities similar to Columbia.

In *The Boondocks*, by pointing out the whiteness of Woodcrest, the elementary school named after J. Edgar Hoover, and the children’s lack of knowledge about race or Othered bodies, McGruder furthers the discourse on race in these “Utopian” communities. McGruder has never stated that Woodcrest references Columbia. However, Woodcrest is like Columbia in that it is a planned community and the white community has racist views of Blacks that come to light behind closed doors. McGruder examines this in strips featuring the teachers at J. Edgar Hoover Elementary School. Another similarity is the recognition of racism in the community by Huey, who represents a Black point of view. The way in which Woodcrest is not like Columbia is the young

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350 Bloom, 195.
351 McGruder does not inform the reader about Woodcrest being a planned community in the comic strip. In the animated series, this becomes much more explicit with the inclusion of a Rouse-like character named Ed Wuncler. Ed Wuncler is the developer of Woodcrest.
children's understanding about Othered bodies: Black and bi-racial bodies. Because of this, I believe Woodcrest is a veiled critique of the community McGruder grew up in—Columbia, Maryland.

McGruder digs below the surface to expose how problematic these communities and ways of thinking are in today’s society. In other words, McGruder explores the other side of the discussion regarding race in Columbia, offering a more balanced view of race relations. Focusing on the race issues does not dismiss the pioneering accomplishment of Rouse and Columbia. It highlights the people and the issues that are silenced because of the surface success of Columbia’s integration. McGruder’s attack on racism in Columbia provides the racial balance Rouse tried to achieve in his planned community. This is the most salient characteristic of The Boondocks.

Huey Freeman: “I represent your darkest fear!”

In an early strip, readers receive an introduction to The Boondocks’ main philosophical view and character—Huey Freeman, a ten-year old Afrocentric. Named after the co-founder of the Black Panther Party, Huey P. Newton, Huey is the militant, consciously aware character. Huey’s Afrocentricity—focusing on the issues of people of African descent and having a Pan-African world and political view—drives much of the strip’s cultural and political stance. What comes with Huey’s philosophy is knowledge about the history of Black people, particularly in the United States. With this knowledge also comes an understanding of oppression. Huey demonstrates this knowledge and
Afrocentric worldview when he expresses to his grandfather, Robert Freeman, that he liked living in Chicago and does not want to live in the suburbs (figure 20).

Grandad and Huey are outside when Huey tells him how he feels about the move. In the second cell, after Grandad dismisses Huey’s feelings, Huey exclaims, “Ok. Fine, Look, it’s Bull Connor with a firehose!!! Duck!!!” The elder Freemens responds by saying the white person with the hose is their neighbor washing his car. Grandad ends the conversation with “Should have NEVER let the boy watch ‘‘Eyes on the Prize’.” Huey says that next time it may be Bull Connor and why should they live in fear? The interaction between grandfather and grandson demonstrates the philosophical viewpoint of each and the relationship they have with each other.

Several hints point to who Huey is and to the subject of the strip. References to Bull Connor, firehoses and Eyes on the Prize all relate to Jim Crow and the Civil Rights Movement, particularly when Connor turned hoses on demonstrators. Viewing white people as the enemy and the move to suburbia through the lens of the Civil Rights Movement attest to Huey’s Afrocentricity. While not directly speaking of the oppressive 1950s and 1960s, McGruder provides glimpses of it.

Theophilus Eugene “Bull” Connor is a significant figure for McGruder to mention in light of the Freemans being the first Black family in Woodcrest. Connor was the Commissioner of Public Safety in Birmingham, Alabama during the height of the Civil Rights Movement. He was also a staunch segregationist. Connor’s most notable connection to the fight for equality and integration is that he approved use of police dogs and firehoses to control demonstrators in Birmingham in May 1963. Bull Connor
continues to stand for racism and is a fitting yet shocking choice for Huey to mention in relation to his new neighbors.

Firehoses were the weapon of choice police enforcement against protestors and supporters. Police opened up fifty pounds of water to control and punish Blacks who were knocked to the ground and injured by the pressure. Several photographs from the period document this violent display of the unbalanced structure of power. In these images, there is a sense of urgency as if the men behind the hoses are putting out a fire—a political, social, and cultural fire. Invoking this imagery puts readers on notice: McGruder will not shy away from race and racism. The following strip further exemplifies this, when Huey announces his arrival to Woodcrest (figure 21).

Standing on a hillside, Huey shouts in the first cell “Oppressors, run and hide! Fear the arrival of the righteous! I, Huey Freeman, represent your darkest fear!” McGruder drew Huey in silhouette, with his left arm up and fist balled. The blackness of Huey’s form and surroundings recall Kara Walker’s silhouettes, which are loaded with racial meaning. Unlike Walker’s, and for that matter Pinder’s play on blackness in *Invisible Man*, McGruder’s use of the silhouette is not a projection. I would argue he utilizes the form to call attention to racialized imagery in science and popular culture in addition to directing the readers’ attention to the text. Huey proclaims his purpose while articulating whites’ fears of Blacks, especially Black men.

By using the term “oppressors,” McGruder sets up an adversarial relationship with his predominantly white audience while at the same time sounding humorously grandiose for a child. There is no easy way to stand against a system of oppression and McGruder understands this with his choice of terminology. He is direct about his attack
on racism and shares his political agenda upfront. Additionally, the word “righteous” establishes Huey as the moral compass for the strip and for American readers. Though McGruder focuses much attention on whites, African Americans are not exempt from his criticism. In this sense, everyone is fair game. Much like Chappelle’s Show, no one receives a pass.

McGruder solidifies his position with “darkest fear.” Here he plays on whites’ fears of Blacks, signifyin’ on the word dark. The term connects Blacks’ skin color with their ethnic origin of “darkest” Africa.

In the second cell, Huey faces the reader, with his right fist covering his heart, and left arm and fist down at his side. An elderly white woman stands in profile, at the right of the cell. As she looks down onto Huey, he says to the reader, “I am a Black freedom fighter! My knowledge of self shines boldly in the face of the beast!” Huey’s political stand is explicit when he says “black freedom fighter.” McGruder’s use of “Black” instead of “African American” is not a haphazard choice. McGruder’s use of Black as a self-identification is political. It signifies the political nature around the naming of groups in hegemonic culture. It also illuminates the continuous debate within the Black community about its community identification.

For example, Brumsic Brandon’s Luther (1969) devoted a cartoon and a strip to this very issue. Lily’s brother, a nameless white boy, is confused and frustrated about how to identify his Black friends. In the cartoon, which precedes the strip in the book, the names Colored, Black, Afro, and Negro surround the little boy who has his arms up in the air in confusion and in defeat (figure 22). On the following page, the strip explains his confusion (figure 23). When he calls his friends one of the names, each one tells him a
different self-identifier. In the last cell, he asks Luther what he wants to be called and Luther responds with “Luther!” With this, Brandon expresses that group naming is contentious and that Black people want to be called by their birth names—recognized as individuals—above all.

McGruder’s use of “black” connects to the political movements of Black Power and the Black Panther Party, looking back to the late 1960s and 1970s. Also, not using African American, which is currently the politically correct term, speaks to the political incorrectness the readers will witness over the life of the *The Boondocks*. It also adopts for public presentation the term that Blacks have continued to use in everyday speech within the Black community, whereas, although “African-American” represents an attempt to further a deracinated nomenclature parallel to “Italian-American” the parallism fails because race, not, ethnicity remains the salient issue in difference.

As Huey sets the tone for his character and expresses who he is to Woodcrest, the elderly white woman interrupts him as she bends over to pat his hair. She says “Aren’t you just the cutest thing…” In the last cell, she continues, “Just a big ole cutie pie, that’s what you are…”

Several things are happening with the white woman. She is used as a disarming tool, cutting into Huey’s highly militant statement. Having her say that Huey is cute gives the reader a break and helps to not turn off the reader. At the same time, the woman infantilizes Huey, putting down his manly claims by using words suitable for a baby. This also calls to mind the historical actions of white women approaching Black mothers and their children to condescendingly comment on how “cute” the children are.
In the film *The Color Purple* (1985), there is a scene with Sofia and a white woman, Miss Millie, in town. Sofia, played by Oprah Winfrey, is in town with her children and Miss Millie, played by Dana Ivey, stops her. She tells Sofia that the kids are clean and well-behaved, as she bends down to touch them. Miss Millie then asks Sofia if she wants to be her maid. Sophia forcefully says “Hell no.” Miss Millie, like the white woman that thinks Huey is cute, represents the history of condescension.

She also serves as a constant reminder of a hegemonic group telling the marginalized who they are, as if the dominant groups understands the marginalized better than they know themselves. Huey begins the strip by saying who he is, to only have a white woman dismiss everything he said by saying he is cute. Her statement also goes to the naming issue.

After the white woman speaks to Huey, he looks out at the reader with a scowl and arms at his side with his hands balled up into fists. His look and stance signify militancy and frustration.

McGruder uses this strip to Other whiteness, framing whites’ status as marginal. The old woman stands in profile, off to the right side of the cells. The woman, though important to McGruder’s message, does not receive as much space as Huey. Huey is the focus not the woman. The placement of the woman recalls the marginal placement of Blacks in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European and American prints and paintings. Blacks were commonly shown as servants or slaves and relegated to the margins and background of the canvas and paper. They were not painted as subjects but

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352 The film is an adaptation of Alice Walker’s novel *The Color Purple*. After Sophia refuses Miss Millie’s offer, she is arrested for assault and forced to work for the same woman who is responsible for her incarceration.
as objects in ways similar to the other possessions of the main figures in the image, or an archway or tree off in the distance.

Though the medium of comic art does not offer a lot of space for compositional development, I would argue that space constraints make the compositional placements all the more important. The artist has to be deliberate about the object or figure and where it is positioned. Space limitations help to organize the focus of the work as well as demonstrate the meaning of each figure and the overall message. Thus, its visual economy gives comic art much of its impact.

McGruder combines Huey’s self-awareness and intelligence with humor. When Huey meets Thomas DuBois, the Black father of the biracial character, Jazmine, he shares his sense of humor with the reader. While this is not the first strip to showcase Huey’s cynical and pointed humor, it speaks to the issue of naming and Huey’s intelligence (figure 24).

Kneeling down to Huey’s eye-level, Tom introduces himself and tells Huey that he is a lawyer. Tom asks Huey if he knows what a lawyer is. Huey responds with a remark about selling Amway products. Tom’s jaw drops in shock, perhaps because Huey’s remark is a dig at lawyers. In the last cell, Huey says “You’ll have to excuse my low tolerance for condescension.” Tom, with his mouth agape, looks at the reader sideways. Clearly, Tom is not only shocked but offended by Huey’s statement. Though his reply is snide, Huey gets some laughs because he delivers it in a sarcastic way.

In the next strip, their first encounter continues with Tom asking Huey’s name. He tells Tom his name, and Tom exclaims, “Huey! That’s a great name! Did you know there was once a pretty famous person named Huey?” Huey tells Tom that he is named
after Huey P. Newtown, a co-founder of the Black Panther Party. However, Tom is not referring to the iconic Black Panther leader but Huey Lewis, a white musician from the 1980s, “Um, actually, I was thinking of Huey Lewis from Huey Lewis and the News, pop star of the mid-eighties.” Huey responds with “Before my time.”

With Tom’s reference to Huey Lewis and the News, McGruder sets him up to play the assimilated Black person whose blackness, in some circles, would be questioned. The irony of Tom assuming Huey’s name is an homage to a white pop star is characteristic of a device McGruder employs throughout the strip: Tom demonstrates his white-oriented identity because he does not make the more obvious connection of Huey’s name to the Black icon of the 1970s. The fact that his name is Thomas or Tom is also significant. This strip, similar to Brandon’s character sketch of Oreo, the white-oriented Black girl, clearly situates Tom as the Uncle Tom of the diversity of blackness presented in *The Boondocks*. McGruder squarely pits Huey’s militant Black consciousness against Tom’s assimilatist philosophy in the last cell.

The face-off has more meaning in this cell than in the previous one because Tom shows his awareness of their philosophical difference with a scowl of his own. Furthermore, the confrontation foreshadows the many debates Huey and Tom engage in over the life of the strip.

When Huey says that Huey Lewis and the News are before his time, the remark is funny because as a ten-year old, while he does not know the group, he knows African American history—including that of his namesake whose rise to fame predated Lewis’s by 15 years. It is also a sly dig at white popular culture that demonstrates Huey’s lack of interest in a white pop band.
McGruder shows that Huey is not one-dimensional. The Black Power and conscious hip-hop \(^{353}\) character represents the multifaceted ideologies that exist within blackness. Each ideology is part of Huey’s self-presentation—his hair, clothing, and permanent scowl—and spitting knowledge.

Huey is quite proud of his African heritage and McGruder lightens Huey’s militancy with a joke about loving the heat. Huey sits outside his house. Grandad tells him to come inside because it is almost a hundred degrees. Huey asks “Why, because of the **heat**? Never. I **love** the heat. We have forgotten that as Africans we are a people of the heat. We are **sun-drinkers**. The heat doesn’t bother a proud African. He basks in the glory of the sunshine!” After sweating profusely, Huey asks for a drink and Grandad tells him “In the fridge, Shaka Zulu.”

This strip speaks to the argument used during slavery that Africans were used to heat because of the sub-Saharan climate. Because of this, enslaved Africans and their African American descendents could supposedly work long hours in the southern sun, without breaks and proper hydration. Clearly, the difference between Huey and an enslaved African is freedom. While perhaps some Africans actually enjoyed the heat and were “sun-drinkers,” they did not have a choice about working in the heat. There was not much leisure time for the overworked slave whereas Huey makes the choice to sit and not only enjoy the sun but to refresh himself with a readily available cold drink.

When Huey speaks of being a proud African and how Africans are "sun-drinkers," McGruder may be suggesting an environmental connection to Africa and age-old

\(^{353}\) The term conscious hip-hop refers to hip-hop that deals with social issues and overlaps with political hip-hop. Though Huey and Riley both like hip-hop, they each represent different types of hip-hop.
arguments Blacks have about getting too dark in the sun. Both of these allusions connect
to biological anthropology and the issue around skin color as a distinguishing factor of
race. This is what makes the comic strip ripe for scholarly analysis. McGruder cleverly
fuses the many issues around race within the funny. Similarly, to Chappelle, there is more
to the funny than just laughs.

Huey's proclamation of being a proud African also speaks to the connection, or
lack thereof, of Black Americans to the continent. Many African Americans do not feel
an emotional connection to the land of their ancestors whereas others do. McGruder's use
of "proud African" clearly situates Huey within the group who feel a connection and this
emotional and cultural connection is what centers the Afrocentric view. It is the
connection to the ancestors, the Continent, and all it embodies for Huey that makes his
perspective fascinating to examine. His invoking an African sensibility and Afrocentric
view is a way of paying homage to the ancestors on not only the Continent but also the
ones forced into New World enslavement.

The invocation also speaks to geography and skin color. In the exhibition Race:
Are We So Different?, the section "Human Variation" examines the argument that
biology and skin color are what defines race. Just as in numerous scholarly texts, the
exhibition states that skin color and biology are not race, "all skin colors, whether light or
dark, are not due to race but to adaptation for life under the sun."³⁵⁴ Nina Jablonski, a
scholar quoted throughout the exhibit further states that skin color and its many variations
are a result of geography and ultraviolet radiation (UVR). She contends that "darker skins

³⁵⁴ Alan Goodman, quoted in “Race: Are We So Different?,” exhibition website,
occur in more tropical regions and lighter skins in temperate" zone, making a distinction between the New World and the Old World where skin color gradient is less intense.\textsuperscript{355}

H. Walter, as cited in Jablonski's article, explained that "pigmentation gradient observed was linked to the intensity of UVR."\textsuperscript{356} With Walter’s research and Jablonski’s argument, skin color is tied to geography and its environment. In addition to space, migratory events, diet, and cultural adaptations influence skin color, not race. Jablonski puts an exclamation point on the discussion of color when she says "darkly or lightly pigmented skin, therefore, provides evidence only about the nature of the past environments in which people have lived, rendering skin pigmentation useless as a marker for membership in a unique group or 'race.' "\textsuperscript{357} Jablonski's research emphatically disavows the argument that race is skin color. Here is further evidence that race is a socially and culturally constructed idea.

Many critics state that Huey is McGruder's alter ego because Huey expresses many of the same opinions as McGruder. This assessment may be accurate as Huey is McGruder's creation. Huey, wise beyond his years, serves as the conscience of Grandad and Riley. He is also the character who makes readers sit up and take notice of their own actions, thoughts, and attitudes towards race, whether they are Black or white. Huey thus plays dual roles. He says what a lot of Black people think about race and share amongst each other. In this sense he brings the community's discourse to the mainstream which helps to open up the discussion about race with whites. Additionally, Huey points out

\textsuperscript{356} Quoted in Jablonski, 601.
\textsuperscript{357} Jablonski, 615.
issues that people shy away from in talking about race. McGruder took risks with creating a character like Huey who is very direct in his ways and militant in his thinking about race, blackness, and whiteness in America. As a way to balance the highly opinionated Huey, Riley with his cute face and wannabe gangsta ways, provides a bit of a buffer and comedic relief for The Boondocks' critique of American racial issues.

Riley “Escobar” Freeman: Cursed with Cuteness

Riley, Huey's eight-year old brother, is young and naive, which is fine for a child. However, along with that naïveté comes an understanding of race and class based on Riley's observations from his environment and involvement with mass media. Riley functions as one side of a triangle of Black philosophical viewpoints, representing the commercial or popular hip-hop sensibility. Whereas Huey's concerns are the oppression of Blacks and wanting Blacks to do better, Riley's concerns are stacking paper, becoming a rapper, and being hard. Essentially, Riley cares only about Riley and how people perceive him. He wants to be viewed as hard and not a "punk."

In Riley’s first solo strip, McGruder gives the reader greater depth into his character, with Riley making strange facial expressions (figure 25). The six cell strip, which contains text only in the last cell, shows Riley displaying a different look in each cell. Facing the audience, in the first cell Riley wears his signature black skull cap, a fashion staple in hip-hop culture. His face fills the entire space. He furrows his brows with his mouth closed demonstrating no expression. In the next one, Riley’s brows are still furrowed but he has a grimace or smirk. The following two cells show Riley with his
right eye closed, his left eye open with furrowed brow, and Riley gritting his teeth and mouth wide open. All this occurs with Riley facing the reader. It is not until the fifth cell that the vantage point changes, and the reader views Riley contorting his face in front of a mirror. Prior to this cell, the reader played mirror for Riley. McGruder’s use of the reader as a mirror encourages readers’ engagement with the joke as well as making them part of the strip.

The final cell which contains text shows Huey, standing in profile in the bathroom doorway and asking “Still practicing your ‘thug mug?’” Riley, also in profile, in front of the mirror with a sink and medicine cabinet to his left, answers with “‘Keepin’ it real’ is hard work when you’re cursed with cuteness.”

Riley uses the alias “Riley Escobar,” following a trend in the hip-hop community where many rappers and deejays take on pseudonyms alluding to their street credibility. Riley also stays loyal to his South Side Chicago roots and hip-hop culture by dressing in baggy clothing and focusing on making money, quick money. As a way to cement his street credibility, Riley scares his white neighbors, calling attention to the racial-class dynamics between suburban and urban life.

While developing, Riley’s hip-hop, wannabe gangsta persona, McGruder critiques people who buy into the construction of Black masculinity in terms of the gangsta or thug. This construction perpetuated by late twentieth and early twenty-first century rappers dominates popular perceptions of Black men. McGruder’s criticism comes in the

358 Riley represents the late 1990s, twenty-first century hip-hop culture where the culture is commercialized and the focus for a large number of participants in the movement is on making as much money as they can. There is also a group of hip-hop artists whose authenticity to the culture deals with street credibility, namely selling drugs, violence, and prison time.
quotes around the phrases thug mug and keepin’ it real. The phrases are important to the post-soul state of hip-hop, the Black community, and Riley’s character.

Thug muggin’ is ubiquitous in contemporary hip-hop as an essential part of the persona of the gangsta rapper. A vernacular term, thug mug is a glaring look with furrowed brows, with either a grimace, scowl, or no expression of emotion. According to urbandictionary.com, “mug” is to look at someone with a hard glare.359 Adding the word thug to mug extends the definition as a visual description of someone who represents himself as hardcore or gangsta. Although many rappers practice the thug mug or mean mugging, perhaps the quintessential example of this is Ice Cube.

On the cover of the 1990 “Amerikkka’s Most Wanted” album, Ice Cube (nee O’Shea Jackson) stands in the foreground, with skyscrapers behind him, wearing an all-black ensemble of a knitted skull cap and black shirt, presumably a Dickie brand, button down shirt (figure 26). Looking out at the viewer, Cube’s eyebrows are furrowed and he has a scowl on his face. He looks a bit menacing because he does not smile and glares at the viewer. This look corresponds with his rap persona of a gangsta as found in the lyrics of his debut album. The title alone, plays on the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s (FBI) “America’s Most Wanted” list, signifies Ice Cube’s assumed status as a thug/gangsta. This is especially the case when one understands that the FBI’s list was and still is to a certain extent, comprised of mobsters and gangsters. Ice Cube’s insertion of KKK, changing America into AmeriKKKa, puts the law and the government on the side of the white supremacist Ku Klux Klan, adding the message that the gangsta is a kind of Black freedom fighter in a war fought on the street.

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Ice Cube’s mug or thug mug also refers to mug shots—photographs taken after a person’s arrest as a way to document the person’s official entry into the criminal justice system. Again, this connects to criminal behavior. Furthermore, this idea of the mug shot links to the album cover of N.W.A.’s (Niggaz with Attitude) 1996 greatest hits album. Ice Cube was a member of the Compton, California based rap group, which included four other members: MC Ren, Eazy-E, Yella, and Dr. Dre. Ice Cube described the group as “five brothers from the streets of Compton, tellin’ it like it is...we’re just tellin’ it exactly how it is, like a newspaper reporter.”\(^{360}\)

The cover of the album features black and white imagery of the members. A photograph or portrait of each member is below the title of the record. Black bars give each rapper his own space—denoting their individuality while demonstrating the group dynamics. The black bars also suggest their presumed criminality as they reference bars of a jail cell. The subtitle of the album, “The World’s Most Dangerous Group,” is in keeping with the theme of criminal status, and the portraits recall mug shots, particularly because of the close-up shots.

Each man looks directly at the viewer. Ice Cube, at the left of the images, dons a black knit cap while everyone else wears a baseball hats that represent a California city and sports team: Sacramento Kings, Los Angeles Lakers, and Los Angeles Dodgers. Eazy-E, the founder of the group, wears the only cap that solely reps a city—Compton, their hometown. The men display stoic expressions. However, Ice Cube’s expression draws the eye to him.

His position to the left of the image, customarily the beginning of how we read, marks his role of setting the tone as hard and gangsta. This is emphasized when you see his narrowed eyes and furrowed eyebrows. His head, cocked slightly to the right, gives the impression that he is not someone to mess with. The black skull cap provides the viewer another entry into the image because in contrast to the others, it is blank. Though it does not reference a city, it does signify a large community within the hip-hop community, a space where they can insert themselves.

Ice Cube’s thug mug on both album covers serves as a great model for Riley’s “thug mug,” and for that matter Huey’s permanent scowl. This look is the quintessential expression in hip-hop and street culture as a sign of toughness. As an eight year old, Riley is working early to get the look down just right, just one part of Riley’s wannabe gangsta persona. *Keepin’ it real* is the other as McGruder lets his readers know.

McGruder placed the phrase “keepin’ it real” in quotations as a way to draw attention to African American vernacular as well as to question the phrase. The slang term has a number of meanings like “living life with an eye toward survival with no pretention,” or “to be true to oneself.”\[^{361}\] The irony McGruder presents is that Riley is only eight-years old with very little life experience. How can an eight-year old living in suburbia keep it real?

By quoting the phrases, McGruder not only questions the absurdity of an eight-year old to keep it real but also the use of the phrase as a defining principle of being hard in the Black community. Other cultural workers like Chris Rock and Dave Chappelle

have also examined the “keepin’ it real” phenomenon in the Black community in their own ways.

Chris Rock defines keeping it real in his 1996 comedy special *Bring the Pain.* In a bit simply titled “Black People vs. Niggas,” Rock extols the supposed difference between these groups of Blacks. Differences include class, education, and most importantly attitude. At the core of Rock’s commentary is the ignorance that niggas proudly display. Within this ignorance are low expectations as Rock claims “niggas want credit for what they’re supposed to do” like taking care of their children and being a law abiding citizen. However, for Rock the most disheartening characteristic of “niggas” is that they like not knowing anything outside of their own situation. In this way Rock defines “keepin’ it real” when he jokes “Ask a nigga a question like ‘what’s the capital of Zaire?’ ‘I dunno that shit...keepin’ it real!” Rock responds with, “Niggas love to keep it real...real dumb!” In this instance, the phrase is not about being hard or being true but about ignorance. Chappelle continues the dialogue and comes up with a similar take on the phrase in a segment on *Chappelle’s Show,* “When Keeping It Real Goes Wrong.”

In the sketch, two Black women sit watching television, when the telephone rings. One of the women answers the phone and the person on the other end, also a woman, hangs up when she hears the woman’s voice. The woman who answered the phone gets upset, believing that someone is playing on her phone and may be having an affair with her boyfriend. She calls the number back and when the person who answers is a female, the caller accuses her of sleeping with her boyfriend. When the woman hangs up on the

363 Rock, *Bring the Pain.*
caller, she gets mad. This is where the sketch’s title comes into play: when *keepin’ it real* goes wrong.

The Black woman, determined to find out who this woman is, goes on a rampage. She harasses the caller, ends up in jail, and loses her boyfriend. The irony is her friend, the woman we see at the beginning of the sketch, is the person having an affair with her boyfriend. After all the drama, the person was right in front of her. The sketch ends with a voiceover “when keepin’ it real goes wrong.”

While Chappelle is not in the sketch, he clearly makes his view known about the meaning and implementation of *keeping it real*. In the popular lexicon, it means to be true and authentic but there is another side as well—taking a tough stand in the wrong direction out of ignorance. When taken with McGruder’s use of it via Riley, *keeping it real* shows diversity in blackness through a straightforward yet complex street term. Moreover, the phrase works perfectly as a defining characteristic of Riley.

Riley wants to be real but his youth and innocence lead him to the ignorance and naïveté of Rock’s and Chappelle’s satire of *keepin’ it real*. His use of the term is appropriate simply because of his cluelessness as a child. Of course, the argument can be made about Huey’s youth, since he is only two years older than his little brother. However, Huey’s knowledge, while bordering on the extreme, is appropriate as he is at the age and grade level where he begins to understand the world and differences around him in a larger context.

Hip-hop clothing, expressive looks, and vernacular language define Riley, individually and in contrast to Huey and Granddad. Riley is the comic relief needed in *The Boondocks* particularly because of the intensity of the subject matter and delivery of
the message through highly conscious and highly militant Huey. Riley’s childlike look at life is like a palate cleanser. At the same time, he represents a large proportion of young people who have uncritically adopted the unattainable hip-hop life with its philosophy of money and material goods. Riley is the vessel through which McGruder can lovingly critique Blacks as well as Other whiteness.

Riley is the second side of the trio of blackness McGruder portrays in his comedic vehicle. Granddad, the elder Freeman, completes the trinity and represents the dominant Black philosophy—the age of uplift and the Civil Rights Movement. Robert Freeman provides some wisdom as well as comic relief when he tries to relate to his grandson Riley.

Robert “Granddad” Freeman: “But These Clothes Make a Statement”

Seventy-something year old Robert/Granddad symbolizes the generation that fought for equality. McGruder shows the contradictions within that generation that also lie within Granddad. Considering his age, Granddad has a lot of life experience and has witnessed many social changes that had an effect on race and racism. After living a life in the city, he wants to enjoy the rest of his life in the suburbs as he explains to the Huey and Riley.

The first sequence that shows who Granddad is occurs early in the run of the strip (figure 27). Granddad wants to have “family talk time” with his grandsons. He begins the talk with “I know you’ve both been wondering why I moved us halfway across the
country to Woodcrest. Well boys, your grandfather has survived nearly seventy years on
this Earth as a Black man and you know that ain’t easy…”

Granddad continues to tell the boys that he always “dreamed of owning a house”
in a neighborhood like Woodcrest where he can “retire and live the rest of my life away
from the problems of the city.” With this statement, McGruder leads the reader to
understanding that Blacks want the same thing as whites—a home in a peaceful
neighborhood where they can live the way they want to live. Embedded in “problems of
the city,” are serious issues of poverty, schooling, crime, and housing. Granddad also
points to the possibility of unwelcoming neighbors when he says “I don’t have to like any
of these people here, and they don’t have to like me.” Implicitly race is at the core of
what he is saying to the boys, especially when the reader learns that Woodcrest is a newly
integrated neighborhood. Through Granddad McGruder speaks to the bitter fights against
housing discrimination during the Civil Rights period.

The boys wait impatiently for Granddad to finish and then ask “Well, what about
us, Granddad?” He responds, “You don’t have to like me either. Now scoot—it’s time for
‘Celebrity Deathmatch.’” Granddad informs the boys that everything is not about them.
McGruder solidifies Granddad’s position as retired with the mention of a claymation
television show on MTV. The show is similar to wrestling and boxing matches but with
clay animated celebrities fighting each other. He has time to watch television and
mindless television at that. Granddad is also hip because he watches MTV.

This sequence shows that Granddad is the disciplinarian and a man who wants to
enjoy his life. It also connects the character to his generation and cultural philosophy in
the strip—the Civil Rights period. McGruder accomplishes this by giving Granddad’s age
range and desire to live in a place like Woodcrest. In addition to this generational connection to the Civil Rights period, McGruder shows how Granddad tries to connect with the younger generation.

Granddad attempts this unsuccessfully with his grandsons in a sequence where he uses vernacular language and dresses in hip-hop fashion. In the first frame, he says “Now, boys. Don’t be mad just because I’m ‘ziggy’…” One of the boys corrects him saying “Uh… that’s ‘jiggy,’ Granddad.” A little annoyed Granddad responds with “Whatever. The guy at the store said this was a Black-owned company, so I thought, why not get with the times?” A somewhat old-school mentality but important one, supporting Black-owned was crucial in the Black community especially during the Jim Crow and Civil Rights eras. Blacks patronized Black-owned businesses and continued to do so through the 1970s, when many more businesses opened up to Blacks spending their money. This philosophy appears just as outdated as Granddad’s fashion as Huey tells him that “Black-owned or not, gratuitous logo fashions are just… tacky. You look like a reject from The Source magazine.” Riley cosigns when he says “Man, I never realized how goofy these clothes looked until just now…”

The last frame shows Granddad decked out in FUBU gear—hat, baseball jersey, and long sleeve t-shirt. FUBU, which is an acronym that means for “For Us, By Us,” is a hip-hop brand founded by Daymond John in 1992. FUBU or FB was one of the earliest hip-hop clothing brands to make hip-hop fashion mainstream. The earliest spokesperson for the brand was rapper LL Cool J. The brand’s popularity diminished over the years as other hip-hop clothing lines became popular, particularly brands with higher star appeal like Sean “Puffy” Combs and Jay-Z. That Granddad wears the clothing in late 1999-early
2000 speaks to his not being in touch with fashion as well as being quite gullible, particularly when he tells the boys “but the guy said these clothes make a statement…” Huey says “Yeah, like ‘I’m a walking gump.’ That’s it—no more unsupervised shopping trips for Granddad.” Riley tells Huey to “remind me to burn all my FUBU stuff…”

Here McGruder demonstrates the generation gap between the boys and their grandfather. Granddad looks silly with all of the FUBU gear. Though McGruder pokes fun at Granddad, he is also poking fun at older Black men who wear these kinds of clothes, from head to toe, trying to be fashionably relevant and hip. McGruder is also commenting on how young Blacks jump on the logo/label craze by wearing clothing that clearly advertises the company’s brand, collectively spending millions of dollars on brands. Just as the age differences belie the generational gap so to does the idea of making a fashion statement.

A pertinent example of the generational differences occurred during the 2008 Presidential Election when civil rights activist Rev. Jesse Jackson made disparaging remarks about President-Elect Barack Obama.\(^\text{364}\) In July 2008, Reverend Jackson was a guest on a Fox News channel talk show. As he waited to go live on the air, Reverend Jackson said to another guest that he did not like the way candidate Obama spoke to Blacks during his speeches at Black Churches, saying the he was “talking down to Black people”\(^\text{365}\). He then said he wanted to “cut his nuts off.” Reverend Jackson’s microphone was live and the comments were headline news. The Reverend’s comment exposed his


feelings about the younger politician in no uncertain terms. McGruder’s visual medium illustrates the generational tug-of-war within the Black American community through Granddad and the boys.

With the political ire McGruder stirs up, most people do not notice absence in *The Boondocks*. The Freeman brothers live with their grandfather, a situation widespread in today’s Black community. Grandparents are increasingly raising their grandchildren and one has to ask, in *The Boondocks*, where are the boys’ parents? Why they are never mentioned in the strip? These are important questions, overlooked by the mass media, which hail the strip’s contributions to race relations. However, questioning the absence of the boys’ parents leads to more questions about the current cultural condition of the African American community.

McGruder does not mention the parents in the strip, which leaves the reasons for their absence to our imagination: Death? Incarceration? Drugs? With the absence of the mother and father, the boys bond with their grandfather, connecting with a generation that has a tenuous relationship with youth of today. It is possible McGruder is speaking on absentee parents, the parents who shun their responsibility of raising their children. A contemporary and widespread problem plaguing the Black family is the lack of fathers, fatherless children. In this instance, grandparents frequently step in, taking up the slack and filling the void left in the family.

More often than not, the grandparent that takes on the responsibility of raising children is the grandmother. Granddad’s character illuminates the absence of women in the strip, especially with his character raising two young boys. McGruder has not addressed the absence of women or why Granddad is the sole parental figure. I believe
McGruder deliberately centers males and creating a household we rarely see: an all-male household.

Granddad fills a void within the community and family structure through his role as the boys’ legal guardian. He also symbolizes a generation, who took pride in being able to provide for their family. McGruder could be honoring this generation’s ideology while calling attention to the contemporary issue of Black men running from taking care of the children they helped to produce. This is most evident in a Father’s Day sequence where Riley graffitis “Happy Father’s Day” on the side of a neighbor’s house. Riley demonstrates his appreciation the best way he knows how, in a public display of creativity. Graffiti is the one of the ways to pay the ultimate respect to a person, and McGruder pulls from the tradition with Riley’s act. Grandparents taking care of their grandchildren deserve more public recognition, which McGruder gives them in this sequence.

**Jazmine Dubois: “I Resent Racial Categories”**

McGruder establishes the heterogeneity of Blacks and blackness, which includes biracial identity. He approaches this subject through the character Jazmine Dubois, daughter Tom and Sarah Dubois. As the offspring of an interracial couple who claim not to see race, Jazmine deals with identity issues, particularly as she is the new girl in the neighborhood. Her issues come to the forefront when she befriends Huey, the blackest Black boy, and Cindy, the whitest white girl. McGruder raises many issues involving Jazmine and biracial identity before the reader sees her.
Jazmine’s introduction comes by way of Riley observing her Black father and white mother moving in across the street from the Freemans (figure 28). When Huey asks what race they are—Black or white—Riley answers with “both.” Riley then says “they got a daughter, too.” Huey asks again about their race and Riley replies, “Depends. Can a white person have an afro?” His response speaks to both Jazmine’s biracial identification as well as the issue around hair as a racial marker.

In the strip that follows Riley’s observation, McGruder visually introduces Jazmine (figure 29). She has light shading or benday, denoting her “tan” colored complexion, wears a dress, and her hair is pulled into a ponytail. Jazmine introduces herself to Huey and in turn Huey tells her his name. Then, in true Huey fashion, he says “It’s good to have more black people around.” Jazmine, standing in profile, looks at the viewer with her right eye and timidly asks him why he thinks she is Black. After calling her Mariah, after pop entertainer Mariah Carey, he explains to Jazmine that “Your afro is bigger than mine.” Taking issue with the afro reference, Jazmine retorts that her hair is frizzy not an afro. Never one to let an issue go, Huey cracks “Angela Davis’ hair was ‘a little frizzy.’ You have an afro.” Jazmine continues to say that she does not have an afro and then asks “Who is Angela Davis?”

Characteristically, McGruder merges the funny with commentary. McGruder complicates the discussion of race with a biracial character and the issues she faces because of her ambiguous racial identity. He does this when he mentions Mariah Carey, hair, and Angela Davis. Throughout the strip, Jazmine has no desire to connect with race, particularly when it comes to her hair. However, Huey’s reference to R&B singer Mariah Carey leads readers to categorize Jazmine as mixed. Carey’s father is African American
and her mother is Irish. Carey has spoken about her mixed-race identity, deciding not to identify with one race over another, but to claim her biracialness. This identification coincides with Jazmine’s personal philosophy. While Carey may not self-identify as Black, during a television interview she stated that in America, she is Black, citing the “one-drop rule.”\(^{366}\) Furthermore, as Michele Elam argues, McGruder “visually locates Jazmine in a political history in which black women appear in all shapes and colors.”\(^{367}\)

Though Huey jokingly calls Jazmine Mariah Carey, as a way to position her as biracial, the focus of her connection to being Black is her hair. In the previous strip, the boys marked Jazmine as Black because of her hair. In this strip, Huey continues the dialogue about Jazmine’s hair and blackness when he continually talks about the afro.

As I mentioned in the overview of *The Boondocks*, hair is a sensitive issue for many in the Black community. Some people are criticized for wearing their hair a certain way, and feel pressured to “authenticate” their blackness through their hair. Jazmine receives some of this pressure from Huey.

Regardless of the hairstyle—Huey’s afro or Jazmine’s tightly coiled hair—Kobena Mercer argues that “all black hairstyles are political in that they each articulate responses to the panoply of historical forces which have invested this element of the ethnic signifier with both social and symbolic meaning and significance.”\(^{368}\) This political investment is perhaps best embodied by the political and social activist Angela Davis.

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\(^{366}\) Mariah Carey was a guest on the short-lived late night talk show “Lopez Tonight.” She told the host, Mexican-American comedian George Lopez, that she is Black in America, when he asked her what is she. “Lopez Tonight” Season One, December 16, 2009. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UpCxkO2up4w&feature=related> accessed 25 October 2011.
\(^{367}\) Elam, 68.
\(^{368}\) Mercer, 104.
When one thinks of Angela Davis, it conjures up images of Davis with a large, full round afro. She and the afro are significant icons of blackness, empowerment, and the Black Power movement. Her photograph was a key image in 1960s visual culture. Davis was a major factor in the Black Power movement, even though she was not recognized as such at the time. The leadership was presented as exclusively male—a situation many women accepted because Black masculinity had been assaulted by whites for so many generations. She is a freedom fighter—a fighter for equality for all people. She presents herself as very much aware of her blackness, how it—blackness—unnerves whites, and most importantly, the hierarchy of race and its effects. Unlike Angela Davis, Jazmine is not sure about her identity and works through her mixed-race identity throughout the strip, particularly through her friendship with Huey and Cindy.

Huey keeps Jazmine in check about her biraciality, trying to get her to own her blackness. In one strip, Jazmine adamantly proclaims that she resents racial categories. She feels that she should not have to choose between her parents in order to identify with one racial group. Huey tells her “I understand, Jazmine. I’m mixed too…I’m part Black, part African, part Negro, and part Colored…poor me, I just don’t know where I fit in.” From Huey’s point of view, there is no problem: Jazmine has a Black parent, so she is Black. Huey continues with racial signifiers as a way to force her to accept that she is part Black. This also counters the color-blindness people think is the answer to race. Being color-blind does not deny race’s existence. On the contrary, it accepts that race exists but pretends to ignore it. Therefore, color-blindness is still about race and very much part of the discourse on race.
Huey's statement about being part Black, African, Negro, and Colored also speaks to historical issues of race and identity within the Black community as nomenclature changes over time. In a way, McGruder says that all people work through identity issues, especially Blacks in America as they have been labeled a number of group names by others and by themselves. The list of names calls attention to this as well as how Blacks also resent racial categories and labels imposed by whites because of Black difference.

At the same time, McGruder points to the one-drop rule with his fractional statement on blackness. The one-drop rule stated that if a person had any African blood, no matter how far up the genealogical line, that person was Black. The racist and flawed concept emerged during slavery mainly so the offspring of white fathers, often slaveholders, would be legally enslaved from birth. One-drop continued as a rule through Jim Crow. McGruder makes the one-drop concept more clear when, in a later cell, Jazmine explains her racial breakdown in fractional terms, particularly when she breaks down her white European heritage. She clearly identifies the white side but when discussing her father's side, she uses "I think," which speaks to the difficulty Blacks have with uncovering their genealogy. However, Jazmine can certainly identify that she has African ancestry. This is what makes her Black in Huey's eyes and the eyes of segregationists of yore. McGruder's examination of Jazmine and the complicated identity issues biracial/mixed-children face does not make light of her or these issues but instead shows the fluidity of race and identity. While Huey may appear to be the foil for Jazmine, the character Cindy plays that role perhaps better than Huey.
Cindy McPhearson: “I’ve Never Even Seen a Black Person Before, Have You?”

After having tiresome conversations with Huey, Jazmine meets Cindy. Around the same age as Huey and Jazmine, she is the only white child character to receive more than a cursory inclusion in The Boondocks. Cindy, with her blonde hair and presumably fair skin, is bubbly and friendly. She is very much the epitome of white beauty and the all-American girl (figure 30).

Cindy sees Jazmine and introduces herself and immediately asks “Would you like to be best friends?” Jazmine, desperate for friends, responds with an emphatic “Ok” before telling Cindy her name. In this frame, McGruder provides a stark contrast of the girls’ physical attributes.

Placed at the left of the cell, Cindy stands on one leg and has one leg bent up behind her. She looks as if she is rocking towards Jazmine, who is at the right side of the cell. Cindy’s hair is pulled into a long and bouncy ponytail. She wears a top and skirt, and has her hands behind her back, demonstrating her openness and friendliness. Cindy’s physical features—skin, hair, and nose—contrasts with Jazmine’s features. Jazmine’s nose is rounded and her hair is bushy. Jazmine stands with her legs together and hands in front of her stomach. Wearing a jumpsuit or overalls and her hair in the customary ponytail, Jazmine’s body language suggests her cautiousness towards Cindy.

McGruder’s calls attention to three specific issues: our propensity to visually categorize others; how whiteness and white beauty dominate our space; and how at the core, once we ignore physical differences, we are all the same.
Interestingly, before we see Cindy, we hear her, loud and clear, as she yells “Hey!! Over there!! Hello!! Are you new here?” The verbal encounter happens in a cell with Jazmine walking alone. Even though Jazmine is the focus, Cindy’s voice dominates the space in the cell. Cindy’s words are not in a bubble but are above Jazmine’s head. In this way, McGruder sets up the hegemonic relationship between Cindy and Jazmine, and most importantly, the continued relationship practiced within racism. He defines whiteness as dominating and moves on to questioning white beauty in the visual introduction of Cindy.

Once we see Cindy, to complement the position of her words in the previous cell, Cindy is taller than Jazmine, as if to show physical dominance. Her height also speaks to her presumed beauty. As previously mentioned, Cindy also wears her blonde hair in a ponytail. Her hair takes up half of the space she has in the cell, which is about two-thirds of it. The dominance of Cindy, physically as well as her all-American beauty, positions her as the generic representative of whites, whiteness, and white beauty ideals. The amount of space Cindy receives cannot be overlooked because of the limited amount of space in a four-cell comic strip. McGruder could have given equal space in the composition to each character. However, he did not, perhaps because he wanted to give visual form to the dominance of whiteness in a confined space, particularly for his white readers. It is one thing to theorize whiteness; it is quite another to render it visible, just as Pinder and Chappelle do in their respective works.

Looking at the two girls, they are just that, girls. Though McGruder presents the differences between them, they are at the core the same: around the same age and wanting to be friends. This sameness within difference is often ignored as the we give
more attention to differences rather than similarities we all share. Perhaps this is one of the purposes of using children as the spokespersons for open dialogues about race. Although these children, between the ages of eight and ten, have some understanding of race, they are still young and innocent. And, with the exception of Huey, they are not jaded about race and present a glimmer of hope for changing how we talk about race and confront racism.

Just as the reader thinks Jazmine has finally found a friend in Cindy, and that her non-race is not a factor, in the last cell Cindy asks “Did you hear? The BLACKS have moved in! Have you seen any yet!!??” As the cell ends, McGruder throws a wrench in the utopian possibilities of the girls’ impending friendship. Race will be an issue between Jazmine and Cindy. Furthermore, Cindy’s use of “the blacks,” speaks to the early conditioning children receive concerning race because she has probably heard the term spoken between adults. It also firmly sets Cindy up to be the foil: the white character that fetishizes Blacks.

In the next strip, Cindy’s can barely contain her excitement at seeing and meeting a Black person. She tells Jazmine, “Real black people! Here! I’m so excited! I’ve never even seen a black person before. Have you?” Jamzine, standing to Cindy’s left, with her head poking out from behind Cindy’s ponytail, timidly says “Um...well...actually.” Blacks are exotic to Cindy because as she states she has never seen a “real” Black person. Of course, what she does not know is that her new best friend is part Black. The irony is that she sees a Black person but just not in the way she naively expects. Cindy continues to put forth stereotypical perceptions of whom she thinks or hopes “the blacks” will be:
“Ooohh, I hope one of them is a gangster rapper or a basketball player!! That would be soooo coool!!”

McGruder accomplishes two things in this particular cell. First, he demonstrates how the Black male entertainer—whether a musician or athlete—is on the receiving end of fetishization in white America. These Black men are adored because of their skill in American popular culture and have become mainstays in the American culture. What is problematic about Cindy’s excitement is that her only point of reference is the small percentage of Black men that become successful in cultural arenas. Her comment makes us wonder: why do they have to be entertainers? Couldn’t the new neighbors be working professionals? Furthermore, Cindy’s reaction is akin to the racial attitude of whites in Columbia when the working and lower class Blacks moved into the community, and probably when the middle and upper class Blacks moved there as well. I will return to this in the analysis of the third cell of this panel.

Secondly, McGruder Others Cindy by her use of “so cool” and by her identification of the new Black neighbors as rappers or basketball players. Adding “so” to the word “cool” takes it’s meaning out of the urban vernacular and situates it within white vernacular. Urbandictionary.com supports this argument with the following definitions: 1) The best way to say something is neat-o, awesome, or swell and 2) awesome. When Blacks want to Other or mimic whites, very often they use “so cool” in the joke or mimicry because it differentiates the vernaculars and distances them from whites through language use. The way Cindy, a white girl, uses cool is different from the way cool used is in the African American community. In the African American

community cool means to be hip, calm, stylish, relaxed. Whereas Cindy uses it just the opposite way: as an excited exclamation. The way McGruder Others Cindy is very similar to how Chappelle othered white people like the Chuck Taylor character on his show.

In addition to Othering Cindy and calling attention to popular perceptions of Blacks in a white neighborhood, McGruder slyly comments on the romantic relationships that often occur between Black male entertainer and white women. In essence, Cindy's fascination begins at the prepubescent stage and may continue as she gets older. It is not a coincidence that the person most excited about "the Blacks" is a young white girl. McGruder understands the popularly perceived phenomenon of successful Black men marrying white women. This is a "myth" continually perpetuated within the Black media which outrages many Black women. McGruder may be commenting on how young white women are conditioned to idolize Black men in a different way than Black women, because of Black men's presence in popular culture, most notably in sports and hip-hop.

In the third cell, Cindy continues with more stereotypical nonsense when she says "My dad keeps saying he's afraid of declining property values, juvenile delinquents and set-aside programs." This statement is so ridiculous that it has become a joke. What is of particular importance is that what Cindy's dad says plants the seed for raising racist children. As the adage goes, people are not born racist, they are taught to be racist. While there is a school-girl charm to what Cindy says, at the core, it is racist.
This is the beauty in McGruder using children as his primary vehicle against racism as well as static notions of identity. Children are disarming; the critique is a common device in comic strips and cartoons, such as South Park.

After Cindy shares what her dad said, she tells Jazmine she does not understand what her dad meant. Jazmine tells her: “Lucky you.” This last cell solidifies McGruder’s agenda with these two panels—demonstrate hegemony of whiteness, how whites Other Blacks and blackness, and how children become part of the discourse on race and racism. McGruder positions Cindy’s statement of ignorance as a privilege of being white, which is what whiteness is all about. Not only does he use her ignorance to further the discussion on whiteness, he also uses Jazmine’s “Lucky you” to show that Cindy does not have to know what her father meant because she is safely within the dominant group. Jazmine, even with her bi-racialness, completely understands what Cindy says and what her dad believes. When Jazmine foregrounds their social difference, McGruder provides a glimmer of hope that Jazmine will realize that race and racism are factors not only for Blacks and whites but also for her as a mixed-race child. Jazmine’s new friendship with Cindy forces her to see her “racial category,” particularly in the three strips that follow Cindy’s excitement about Black people in the neighborhood.

Looking doe-eyed, Jazmine feels the need to disclose her Black heritage, telling Cindy “if you’re going to be my best friend, then I think you should know my father is

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370 This is a common device in comic strips and cartoons, as demonstrated in Brumsic Brandon, Jr’s Luther as well as the cartoon show South Park. South Park is an animated series on Comedy Central, the same network that gave Chappelle’s Show a home. South Park may be the next best-animated series, next to The Boondocks, that successfully uses satire to question socio-political issues plaguing our society. See www.southparkstudios.com, South Park and Philosophy: Bigger, Longer, and More Penetrating, ed. Richard Hanley, and Taking South Park Seriously by Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock.
black.” Surprised, Cindy exclaims “No Way!! You’re Black!!!???” Jazmine says that she is not really Black but that her father is Black, and Cindy interrupts her “But you don’t look black! You’re just a little tan, like Mariah Carey!” Much to Cindy’s surprise, Jazmine lets her know that Mariah Carey is also “half-black,” to which Cindy responds with “No Way!! I wonder who else is Black? What’s wrong with me that I can’t tell?...Omygod!!! Maybe I’m Color-blind!!!!” Jazmine sheepishly says “Uh, I don’t think so…”

With so much in this panel, McGruder shows the ambiguousness of race with the Cindy and Jazmine interactions. Cindy reveals her naivety when she says that Jazmine and Mariah Carey have the same skin tone and when she says that she is color-blind. Of course, as a young girl who has never interacted with a “real” Black person, she would not know that Jazmine and Mariah are of mixed-race. The other side of this argument is that neither one feels it is necessary to ascribe to a specific racial category. Either could easily pass for another race or ethnicity. McGruder connects Mariah Carey and Jazmine through Cindy and Huey, continuing the discussion of racial markers via skin tone and hair.

McGruder’s insertion of the term “color-blind,” highlights the misunderstanding of the term because color-blindness requires one to notice race before purposefully trying to ignore it. Jazmine points out that no, Cindy is not color-blind. This condition means that someone is not able to see certain colors. McGruder plays with the term and Cindy’s awareness of color as she concerns herself with “the blacks” in the neighborhood and the tanness of Jazmine and Mariah Carey’s skin. Again, McGruder calls out the frequent use
of the term by whites as a way to ignore the issues of race, racism, and avoid critical understanding of the term.

In the next panel, Cindy cannot believe she “met my first black friend” and did not know it. Jazmine promptly corrects her by saying “half-black.” In the next cell, Cindy looks curiously at Jazmine, who gives a nervous smile, trying to figure out how she missed the visual cues of Jazmine’s blackness. Here McGruder undercut assumptions about clear physical differences between whites and Blacks, showing that Blacks exhibit varying degrees of skin tones. A disappointed Cindy asks “I don’t suppose you’re a gangster rapper by any chance?” Jazmine responds that she is not allowed to listen to rap. Cindy’s fascination with the gangster rapper counters the common perception that only white suburban boys financially support hip-hop. Cindy complicates this popular belief, and again, highlights one-dimensional views of Black men.

The girls counter the belief that you can tell someone’s racial and ethnic background by looking at them. Jazmine asks Cindy if she really could not tell that she was “part-black.” Cindy reassures Jazmine that she could not tell and says “I just figured you were having a really bad hair day.” Coming full circle from Jazmine’s introduction, which came by way of her frizzy hair, McGruder ends the introduction of the girls with hair and the stereotype that white women with long blonde hair set the standard for beauty. He also dispute the idea that blackness and whiteness can be determined by hair and hair textures. McGruder’s attention to hair speaks to the fascination some whites have with African American hair. Although it does not seem to be an issue with Cindy in
this panel, she does become interested in Huey’s hair, when they finally meet in the same
elementary school class.371

In an interesting way, McGruder inverts the white stereotype of Blacks as
infantile and ignorant to whites, by giving Cindy these traits. If such stereotypes come
from ignorance, what better way to show it than through a child, who is ignorant because
of the lack of life experiences? Since we expect this of children, they can get by with
saying things that would be more offensive from adults.

Being Othered: The Othering of White People

McGruder is adept at Othering whites and calling out the normative aspects of
whiteness. He not only uses the Cindy character, but also a number of secondary
characters in the strip, who remain, for the most part, nameless. Throughout the strip,
most of the Othering comes from Huey and Riley as they observe their new surroundings.
Often the Othering occurs through two avenues of thinking—historical atrocities against
Blacks and popular culture. For example, the earlier example of Huey calling his
neighbor who is washing is car Bull Connor, instigator of violence against Blacks during
the Civil Rights Movement. In another strip, Huey wants to form a Klanwatch, a satirical
take on the Neighborhood Watch programs that proliferate throughout the suburbs.

Huey informs his grandfather of some “suspicious characters” outside their home.
Grandad says it is probably not an issue and Huey replies, “Probably, but we should

371 Interestingly, this particular strip is where Cindy wants to touch Huey’s hair is first depicted in The
Diamondback, as examined in the overview section. However, the white girl in that strip did not have a
name and did not receive the same introductory treatment as she does in national syndication.
notify the ‘Neighborhood Klanwatch’ just to be sure.” When Granddad is not sure of what his grandson is talking about, Huey explains “The ‘Neighborhood Klanwatch’! This neighborhood does have a klanwatch, doesn’t it? I mean, this is a recently desegregated community. Someone has to monitor the scourge of hate groups.” Beside himself, Granddad sighs, saying “You’re going to make me pay for this move for the rest of my life, aren’t you?” Huey is very serious as he says, “Ok, joke over. Where’s the Klanwatch?”

After bugging his grandfather for materials to help him start a klanwatch, such as flamethrowers, night-vision goggles, and a bulletproof Hummer, Huey receives a flashlight and baseball bat. Disappointed, Huey says “I’m a little disappointed in you, Granddad. You know you only get out of your neighborhood Klanwatch what you put into it.” After being chastised by his guardian, Huey thanks Granddad for the flashlight.

McGruder inverts the gaze from the Black family to the neighborhood of whites with this episode on the Klanwatch. On the surface, the message appears light-hearted. However several components add to the process of Othering such as the association of the violent Klan with the of the neighborhood watch system in suburbia, and its unstated premise that if “suspicious characters” are caught, they will be Black.

To these historical connections, McGruder culls from television, most notably the television comedy series Seinfeld. Early in their time in Woodcrest, Riley tells Huey to “check this out across the street,” meaning look at the white people. Coming from the inner city, it is from the margins that the boys Other whites. Because their point of reference in life is mainly the inner city, in their world whites are the marginalized group.
When Huey tells Riley “Yep, white people. You’ll see them everywhere out here,” Riley states “Well, this ain’t so bad. I mean, at least we’ll be entertained regularly.” McGruder turns the tables on whites, again, now with the “entertained” comment. In popular culture, stereotypes of Blacks existed for the entertainment of whites, beginning with coincidentally enough, the graphic arts or cartoons. This is McGruder’s opportunity to call attention to the history of Black stereotypes as well as to show how someone from the inner city, with very little experience with the “average” white person, gains knowledge of white culture. The third cell of the panel, with Huey and Riley and no text, provides a space for the reader to think about what Riley meant and perhaps to think more deeply about the contradictory stereotyping of Blacks, not whites, as the entertainers.

In the final frame, Huey tells his brother “real-life people are not all as funny as the ones on ‘Seinfeld.’” A perplexed Riley says “They’re not!!!??” Like Cindy’s point of reference of gangster rappers and basketball players for African Americans, the characters George, Elaine, Kramer, and Jerry, on Seinfeld serve as points of reference for Riley.

Conclusion

Aaron McGruder through his comic strip The Boondocks broadens the conversation about race in a direct way while incorporating jokes in his message. The strip provides insight into his own thinking while also reflecting issues of concern with American culture. Although McGruder has said that the strip is not an educational tool
for whites to understand Blacks, the strip is educational nonetheless. It educates its readers about the harm stereotypes cause, the effect of racism on Blacks, particularly during the Civil Rights period, and the ways in which we, collectively and individually, need to do better in order to be better. This is the beauty in using a comic strip to encourage critical thinking and dialogue.

Comic artist Scott McCloud points out this potential when he says “the cartoon is a vacuum into which our identity and awareness are pulled...an empty shell that we inhabit which enables us to travel to another realm. We don’t just observe the cartoon, we become it!” A\textsuperscript{372} The Boondocks is thus a mirror and the reflection is not always pretty, especially when it reflects the systemic racism present in American culture.

Like any visual broker uses various representations to make his point. Perhaps more than Pinder and Chappelle, McGruder has a longer history of representation to pull from because of his graphic medium of comic art. Baxandall says it best when he discusses that the creator uses devices to gauge the viewer, they “make pointed use of the repertory of stock objects.” A\textsuperscript{373} McGruder follows this by using objects recognizable to all viewers—from the homes and neighborhood to children as the protagonists. Furthermore, in his “representations of people in terms of precisely that—represented people assess not by standards applied to real people by by standards adapted from experience of real people.” A\textsuperscript{374} Again, to stress the representations that Pinder, Chappelle, and McGruder create, their representations are connected to experiences of real people, real experiences.

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\begin{itemize}
\item A\textsuperscript{372} McCloud, 36.
\item A\textsuperscript{373} Baxandall, 87.
\item A\textsuperscript{374} Baxandall, 81.
\end{itemize}
The Boondocks demonstrates the multiple ways in which culture influences artistic works. Aaron McGruder understands how to draw upon history and popular culture in order to communicate his message, which is that we must create a better society. Although McGruder considers African Americans the target audience for the strip, the reality is that his audience is predominately white. Thus, his messages about race and racism reach the audience that needs it the most.

As a reluctant spokesperson for the African American experience, Aaron McGruder states, “Usually if you’re doing the job well, you’re dead by 34, which is not in my plans.” Huey Freeman, the revolutionary, some writers note, is the willing spokesperson McGruder claims not to be. Pint-sized Huey espouses wisdom and knowledge, beyond his ten years, which some would call an old soul. Huey speaks the hard truth, truth that Blacks and whites alike have a difficult time acknowledging and accepting about ourselves. The Boondocks echoes a call to action from bell hooks, “Loving blackness as political resistance transforms our ways of looking and being, and thus creates the conditions necessary for us to move against the forces of domination and death to reclaim black life.”


Chapter 4: Walk Into the Light

“Real Talk” presented post-soul artists Jefferson Pinder, Dave Chappelle, and Aaron McGruder as interrogators of blackness and whiteness in American society. The artists seem an unlikely grouping because their works are in different areas of visual and popular culture: the visual arts, television, and graphic media and animation, respectively. While they work in these mediums, the artists share characteristics as well as differences. Their similarities and differences prompted me to include them in my dissertation because they serve as examples of the heterogeneity of Black people and Black culture.

What the Artists Share and How They Differ

As I pointed out in the Introduction, all three artists work in white-dominated fields. At the same, the artists mediate their position within the Black community. They honor African American history and social conditions. The artists also utilize traditions, expressions, and practices of the community: signifying, satire, and style, to name a few. These kernels of “insider” knowledge—meaning those in the know will recognize the expressive culture that lives within the Black community—demonstrates the artists’ place in the community.

Each artist uses his craft to expose how hegemony informs and constrains their identity, as shown in the examinations of Pinder’s *Invisible Man*, Chappelle’s *Chappelle’s Show*, and McGruder’s *The Boondocks*. In addition to interrogating how race and racism shape their identities, they also show how whiteness shapes blackness. By naming whiteness and putting it into the discourse of race, the artists proclaim that the
burden of race should not weigh down the Other but should be shifted to whites who created and perpetuate race as a problem. Although, as Du Bois pointed out, whites treat people of color as a problem, whites themselves continue to expend enormous energy in maintaining a system of oppression—a system based on fear of difference, and most importantly, fear of not being in control.

Pinder, Chappelle, and McGruder are fully aware of the social and political contestations that continue to divide people. They understand that race is at the core of these fights because race is the structure created in the modern period to maintain a system of marginalization and hegemony primarily for economic gains for the few at the expense of the marginalized. These differences are not only part of their work but also make their status as artists all the more interesting because they are part of a marginalized group.

As much as the artists have things in common, there are differences relating to their works of art. One difference is their audience crossover. Although Pinder, Chappelle, and McGruder each work in white fields, as previously mentioned, the audiences are quite distinct for each artist. For Pinder, because of his work in the visual arts, he does not have as much audience-crossover, like Chappelle and McGruder. Pinder, generally, has one type of audience: the art establishment. Chappelle differs in that he has an audience base or crossover from movies, comedy concerts, and television. This crossover helped Chappelle’s Show become a success. McGruder’s audience crossover comes from The Boondocks days in University of Maryland’s campus newspaper The Diamondback. Many of the readers of the campus strip were the college community and
people in the DC metro area. Moving from the university audience, the strip had audience crossover to mainstream newspapers, and later television.

Much of the audience crossover has to do with the make-up of the audience. McGruder’s and Chappelle’s audiences are mixed-race and various ages. Again, because of Pinder’s placement in the visual arts, his audience is predominately white and middle-aged. Given the venues of where their works are shown, I believe this to be an accurate assessment of their base.

The artists, while culling from Black expressive culture, incorporate different sources in their work. For example, Pinder coupled his personal experiences with the literary text—*Invisible Man*. Chappelle relies heavily on Black expressive culture and media representations, thus looking to the Black community and visual culture. In McGruder’s case, he also uses the sources that Chappelle does but mixes it up with history.

**Where Are They Now?**

Pinder, Chappelle, and McGruder have each shifted focus and changed jobs, respectively since they produced the work discussed above. In fall 2011, Pinder left the University of Maryland to take a position at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. He teaches Contemporary Practices and continues to do video and performance art. However, Pinder has added live performance art to his oeuvre.

After two successful seasons of *Chappelle’s Show* and a lucrative contract deal with Comedy Central, much to everyone’s surprise Chappelle quit the show in 2005. To date, Chappelle has not disclosed why he quit but has alluded to the workload, the
pressure to produce, misunderstandings of some of the jokes, and his reasons for doing the show in the first place. In the middle of production of the third season, Chappelle made a pilgrimage to Africa, following a similar path to his predecessor, Richard Pryor years before him. It is quite possible that Chappelle did not expect the overnight success that came to him with the show. No longer an underground artist, Chappelle became mainstream.

McGruder like Chappelle quit but fulfilled his primary goal with The Boondocks. McGruder envisioned the comic strip as a television show and in 2005, the television show debuted on the Cartoon Network. Due to the demands of working on an animated television show, the comic strip ended in spring 2006. There are three seasons of the show, with a fourth season in production.

I have argued how artists of color work to oppose the boundaries of race and racism. The specific methods I used to illustrate how the artists accomplish their work include contextual histories that connect the artists to a wider practice of race interrogation, close analysis of specific works, and examination of their works in relation to critical theories about race and culture. Approaching the artists’ work in this manner helps to reveal the multifaceted nature of not only their work, but also visual and popular culture, generally, and post-soul specifically.

One of my main goals with this project was to show how visual and popular culture, which consists of the fine arts, film, television, music, and the graphic arts, are

intimately intertwined with each other. Nothing happens in a vacuum; although we often talk about the visual arts as divorced from the larger culture. Although some argue that, of course the visual arts are influenced by popular culture, the interdependence of “fine” and “popular” arts is not always recognized or respected. I want to note that although I focused on artists working in the twenty-first century, this melding of so-called “high” and “low” cultures has always been present in our society even in the European art of the fifteenth-century as Michael Baxandall showed.

Another goal I had was to provide a critical view of the post-soul generation. What makes the post-soul generation of artists like Pinder, Chappelle, and McGruder, so important is that their work speaks for their generation’s frustration with rigid definitions of race and blackness. Inherent in their work is the understanding of what the generations before them, most immediately the Civil Rights generation, endured in order for them to work fervently to collapse damaging notions of race.

Many of the elder generation criticize the post-soulers for taking their social and cultural gains and sacrifices for granted. By looking closely at those in the post-soul generation doing good work, the Civil Rights generation will understand that the sacrifices are not lost on the generations after them. We are fighting the same fight but in a different way, as the younger generations will as well. The artists in this project, as well as many more post-soulers, have taken up the proverbial baton. It is important to recognize those making significant contributions to advancing race discourse and calling out racism. Doing so advances the Black community also, because these artists question internal as well as imposed divisions.
“Real Talk” gives recognition to the work of artists making a difference in how we talk about and think about race, racism, and the role of cultural works in marginalized and mainstream communities. “Real Talk,” like the works examined, gives a nuanced look at how we can use visual and popular culture to push the discourse about differences to a new level of understanding, acceptance, and celebration.
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Figure 1. Ernest Withers, *I Am a Man*, 1968, gelatin silver print.

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Figure 16. Aaron McGruder, *The Boondocks*, national syndication debut.

"It's no use! I'm sending you back your letters and everything. I'll just keep the ring for sentiment!"

Figure 17. Elmer Simms Campbell, *Cuties*. 

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"Here, brother Bootsie, take this extra hammer I got here in case the gentlemen of the law decides that this demonstration is too peaceful!"
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Figure 20. Aaron McGruder, The Boondocks.

Figure 21. Aaron McGruder, The Boondocks.
Figure 22. Brumsic Brandon, Jr., *Luther*.

Figure 23. Brumsic Brandon, Jr., *Luther*. 

EVERYBODY IS HUNG UP! I CALLED MARY FRANCES A NEGRO - SHE GOT MAD!

SHE SAID SHE'S BLACK!

I CALLED PEE WEE COLORED - HE GOT MAD! HE SAID HE'S A NEGRO!

WHAT DO YOU WANT TO BE CALLED?

I CALLED OREO BLACK - SHE GOT MAD!

SHE SAID SHE'S COLORED!

LUTHER!
Figure 24. Aaron McGruder, *The Boondocks*.

Figure 25. Aaron McGruder, *The Boondocks*.
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