“OUR SURVIVAL SINCE OUR ARRIVAL:” BLACK CULTURAL PRODUCTIONS AND CREATIVE TORQUE IN BLACK EXPERIENCE

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By

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores two sites of Black cultural production, spoken word poetry and racial humor, in order to highlight the specific conditions of possibility that arise from Black embodiment, anti-Black racism, and resistance. The project employs methods of participant observation, close readings, film analysis and interviews to provide a more thorough picture of how Black cultural productions emerge from Black experience. The thesis considers how conditions of anti-Black oppression and Black resistance contribute to the content and style of Black creative expressions, conceptualizing these conditions as torque—a twisting tension out of which Black creative works emerge. In addition, the thesis considers how Black cultural productions can provide possibilities for collective understandings. Specific racial humor sites explored include the humor of Dave Chappelle, Paul Mooney and Aaron McGruder. The spoken word poetry site focuses on an open mic poetry series in Washington, D.C. The project builds on theoretical frameworks developed by Saidiya V. Hartman, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Fred Moten, and George Yancy.
This thesis is dedicated to:

...my family. You have taught me how to live in the strange, contradictory space between Black and white with humor, honesty, and love. But mostly, with humor. And so I thrive.

...Patrice and Akoto, whose spoken words have been some of the most powerful moments in my life. We create what cannot be explained when we speak to one another.

...my husband, under whose care and constant encouragement this thesis was completed. You represent the fire out of which precious metals are molded.

If it weren't for the fear in my heart
I'd be an unstoppable
Black woman poet/writer/warrior/queen
Pouring forth truth from my mouth
Healing from my pen
Words from my soul
A channel for the ancestors
Broadcasting what you thought you silenced

Don't you know that not even the grave can silence
A Black woman?
Her shouts can be heard throughout the diaspora
Her cries of pain and joy
Are imprinted in all time and all places
She is Mother of all that lives
She is Mother
And though you may despise her
You will never be rid of her

And you will never be rid of me
An unstoppable
Black woman poet/writer/warrior/queen
For today I looked the fear in my heart
Straight in its cold eye and said
"Enough. Give me the goddamn pen."

With Love, Lydia
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This past November I went to an NWSA conference to present a paper. The conference happened to be in Denver, CO, which is just an hour north of my parents’ house in Colorado Springs. As most of my siblings still live in “the Springs,” I had the chance to catch up with a couple of them a few days before the conference. In my complicated academia-trained way, I was trying to explain to my oldest brother what I was studying most recently. I spouted off some thoughts about humor and pain, and told him that I was trying to understand how it is that Black folks create and find pleasure in Black creative works, despite very difficult circumstances living in systemically, institutionally and interpersonally racist environments. We began to have a serious discussion about humor and its function within the Black side of our family, and its function in our own interracial family. Laughter ensued as we recalled multiple stories we’d been told by our grandmother, aunt, uncle and father as they’d recounted to us happenings in their youth that brought them great joy. These funny stories were often interspersed with stories of a more sobering kind, usually preempted by some detail in the comical story that brought the levity quickly back to earth.

As my brother and I sat in my parents’ living room laughing and recalling, he told me he was glad I was looking at Paul Mooney’s comedy as an example.

“I always find him therapeutic,” Andrew said.

“Me too,” I agreed. We sat for a second with smiles on our faces, and then started reciting our favorite Mooney moments.
“Remember when he took on Greta Van Susteran on Fox News? I mean, why would they even agree to HAVE him on that network? He called her racist!!” We burst into uncontrollable laughter. “The best thing Paul Mooney ever said was, “Everybody wanna be a nigga, but nobody wanna BE a nigga.””

Then we sobered up again. I asked my brother if he thought growing up in our family had been hard. He said yes. We conversed for a few minutes about the challenges of being in an interracial family in the 80s and 90s, when the colorblind doctrine had started to take hold. Growing up in a predominantly white community, we learned early to toe the line in relation to race. We were often stared at wherever we went. People often asked my mother if she had adopted me, even though I bear a striking resemblance to her.

But somehow, these stories brought about more fits of laughter from my brother and I. We started to recall specific instances of racism we’d endured as children—like the time our pastor’s daughter introduced me to her friend, stating “Don’t worry, she’s not a REAL black person.” We couldn’t stop laughing thinking about this girl, and her confusion when I gave her a dirty look, said “Melissa, that is so rude,” and stomped out of the bathroom. I made a beeline for my father, who came quickly to my defense. He spoke with the pastor. Melissa had to apologize. I was vindicated.

“Why are we laughing?” I asked my brother. “What is it about humor that is so prevalent in Black experience?” Sincerely, the lives of my father and grandmother, and even my life, contain an unfair amount of heart-wrenching stories of racism, violence, and pain. My father who was born under Jim Crow segregation in Greenville, Mississippi, took a knife to high school because as one of the first Black men to integrate the white high school in his city,
he was under a constant threat of violence. We grew up listening to his story about being chased as a young child by an angry white man, after my father had accidentally wandered to the wrong (white) side of his city. And yet my father is by far one of the humorous people I know, even to this day.

“We’ve always laughed,” my brother said. “Even if things were really bad we could laugh together. Like really hard. Like till we hurt. It reminds us of our humanity. Laughter reminds us that no matter what people do to us or say to us, we are human.”
INTRODUCTION

I am a child of the moment that Stuart Hall describes in “What is This ‘Black’ in Black Popular Culture?” where he grapples with the need for essentializing in Black popular culture productions in the 1990s. Written 10 years ago, Hall outlines three important “coordinates” that this moment is characterized by: the shift away from European dominance in cultural forms, the United States’ ascendance as a world power, and the decolonization of the “third world” (21-22). Articulating both the greatest fears and possibilities of the postmodern move, Hall questions the need for forms of essentialism—have we moved to a place in time where these forms hinder more than help as Black people carve out necessary space in popular culture?

As a child of this era, I can reflect carefully on Hall’s question. And what I have observed in Black popular culture is first a headlong charge into the undefined spaces of postmodern promise, followed by an intentional and carefully considered retreat back into the comfortable space of essentialism. I notice these shifts primarily as generational—younger people, accustomed to the technologies of the Internet and the reality of not always growing up in segregated schools and neighborhoods, begin life with fierce hope that they, as individuals, will be taken at their own face value. I recall my younger sister telling me that she and her friends “didn’t worry about race,” the way me and “my generation” did, as if I was 20 years older than her instead of a mere 8. What separated my sister and I was the birth of the Internet. At that time, my sister was expressing her own doubts about the need for essentialism as it relates to Black popular culture, self-identity, and political action. My sister and our youngest
brother, grew up in communities where Black rappers were idolized, not vilified, for their lavish lifestyles and glorification of violence. They grew up in a time when their white friends celebrated hip-hop culture alongside them, instead of the time me and my sister’s older brother grew up in, where we couldn’t even hear a rapper on the radio because the local “Today’s Hits” station had outlawed all “Gangsta Rap,” which pretty much meant any Black man with a microphone.

However, my sister, now nearly 10 years after what she considered to be her own enlightenment, has been heartbreakingly scarred in emotional, physical and psychological ways that have deeply influenced the way she views her previous optimism. My sister has come to understand the wounds of anti-Black racism, written on her body in indelible ways. She no longer professes the belief that her contemporaries of all races are “not concerned with issues of race.” Rather, she has come to understand how her body is marked, despite her objections, by white others who view her blackness as signifying worthlessness, ignorance, anger, unmanageability, malleability, consumability, licentiousness, and availability. Some of those experiences were traumatic and life endangering. Others were subtle and occurred within spaces of supposed “safe” friendships, or educational institutions.

This is not to say that my sister is bitter, detached and defeated. There is a certain light of maturity and wisdom in my sister that wasn’t there before. She manifests an embodiment of one that has faced and come through the fires of anti-Black racism that left scars but did not completely destroy. My sister laughs often, even at seemingly painful moments. She also cries more easily than she used to. She articulates a different kind of understanding about what Black means in our culture, and how it deviates from what she understands about being Black. She has
an uncompromising commitment to both defending Black people in the face of anti-Black racism, and the same commitment to pointing out the moments when we as Black people fail each other and ourselves.

My sister is not alone in this turn. I’ve watched among my own peers and in the generation that closely follows my own a growing, angry skepticism about terms such as post-racial, the coded ways that news media speak about President Obama, and a slight disgust for figures such as the Justins—of the Timberlake and Bieber varieties. I watch as people within my generation still create T-shirts, poems and websites that proclaim they are proud their natural hair, their soul music, and their “blackness.” These are the children postmodern thought won’t claim, stubbornly standing in a space that is still delimited by their colored physical manifestation. Postmodern thought was not quite able to account for our material situation.

I do not think these are the vestiges of an old, outmoded way of thinking that gets recycled in younger generations. When I look at my peers, and at my own deployment of Black in my academic writings, my poetry, my love for my own natural hair, and my desire to be around Black people that are able to competently describe the effects of anti-Black racism on individual, communal and structural levels, I have come to understand that what many call “essentialism” is not in fact a moment that came and went in the ‘60s and ‘70s in the U.S. to establish particular goals of equal political participation, increased media representation and other observable changes in Black life. Moving “beyond” essentialism is not a marker of progress. Essentialism is, in and of itself, an essential part of Black negotiations with anti-Black racism that manifests itself anywhere that Black people must engage in the strange dance between the symbolic and the material.
In other words, my response to Stuart Hall is that it appears to me that essentialism is not so much a moment that got us to particular political goals in historical time, but rather a strategy in that gets us to and through this present moment we are always in—the moment somewhere between the space of over-determination and unknown possibility, the space between the constructions of blackness and lived experience. In fact, I would go further to say that what we label as “essentialism” is in fact much more sophisticated and self-aware than academics have articulated essentialisms to be. That the “essentializing moment is weak because it naturalizes and dehistoricises difference, mistaking what is historical and cultural for what is natural, biological and genetic” (Hall 29-30), does not describe the kind of essentialism deployed by myself and by my peers.

Rather, we embody what Fred Moten calls the “im/possibility” of Black social life (188). We are that which we cannot possibly be. We are an undifferentiated mass, only from within which can be seen the diversity and multiplicities that construct us as individuals, communities, regions and a Diaspora. Our essentialism comes from the patterns and trends we see in the historical and present-day systems of anti-Black racism that leaves its telltale signs in material and psychological damage and death. It is a response to, not the root problem of, anti-Black racism.

Questions of naturalness, biology and genetics do not figure into my own conception of what it means to be Black apart from the literal melanin that inhabits my skin, although they do figure for some of my contemporaries. But importantly, all of these differences in definition about Black are still contained within the strategy we employ to emphatically state that the systems of anti-Black racism manifest in specific but similar ways around the globe. We still
deploy essentialism, not because we are confused by or lost in some myth about our own natural origins, but because we still have to find ways to navigate, negotiate, and often outwit anti-Black racism that can change and re-imagine itself in myriad ways within the blink of an eye.

Hall said it best: “By definition, black popular culture is a contradictory space. It is a sight of strategic contestation” (26). Our markers for mapping these contradictory spaces are the very aspects Hall laid out: Black experience and Black expressivity. As he suggests, these are ingredients that come to bear in the test of authorship when examining Black popular culture, and they are the elements we seek when looking at Black cultural productions. But rather than casting essentialism on one side of the either/or conundrum, at this moment I think we can begin to talk about essentialism as one contradictory part of the pastiche which makes up the toolkit for Black consumers and producers of Black popular culture. It lives uncomfortably and comfortably next to love, joy, self-hate, humor, parody, and our artistic productions, all of which have a part to play in our individual and communal emancipation. It also lives around the corner from political organizing, integration, incorporation, and even our own sibling-cidal tendencies that cause us to lash out against those who also experience anti-Black racism inside and outside our communities.

Essentialism is part of the equation that allows us to both love and hate the Real Housewives of Atlanta. It is part of the toolkit that pushes us to look at the show with a critical eye and write a scathing academic paper, and then throw a party with our Black friends to watch the entire 3 season set in one evening. It is what allows my father and I to have intergenerational conversations about music—what allows him to see that hip-hop isn’t only a fearful manifestation of the underside of Black experience within anti-Black racism, but that it can also
be the articulation of a better possibility in light of the underside of Black experience within anti-Black racism. And it is essentialism which is one of many tools that my sister has deployed to craft a life for herself that is not only livable, but that is filled with possibilities that should be foreclosed to her as a Black woman.

Setting out to map any delimited space of Black cultural production is fraught with difficulty because, as Hall has suggested, Black signifies the differences inside what is constructed as a whole, and “which are by definition contradictory and which therefore appear as impure, threatened by incorporation or exclusion” (28). The challenge when looking at Black cultural productions is that they are often shuffled between “good” and “bad” containers, based on the relative worth of their artistry, message, the skill of the producer and their politics. For example, in *Comic Genius or Con Man? Deconstructing the Comedy of Dave Chappelle*, Novotny Lawrence makes the argument that the misogyny and homophobia in Chappelle’s Show diminish the significance of Chappelle’s incisive comedy. Lawrence even goes so far to suggest, “Given the fact that Chappelle belongs to an ethnic group that has been historically subjugated, it would seem that the comedian would be above participating in the marginalization of another group. Nevertheless, there are instances in his comedy when he assumes the position of the oppressor” (41).

In this reading of Chappelle’s comedy, a clear dichotomy is drawn between “good” and “bad” cultural production, in which a “good” cultural production is identified by its ability to transcend the oppressive hegemonies of U.S. culture on all accounts. Lawrence’s statement that Chappelle “assumes the position of the oppressor,” is highly problematic because it draws a
binary between oppressor and oppressed which is impossible to resolve given the position of Chappelle as *both* a man *and* a Black person.

I am not dismissing or excusing the misogyny, homophobia and other very problematic issues that arise routinely within Black cultural productions. These things are certainly present and accounted for. But in my own reading of *Chappelle’s Show*, I have found it difficult to summarily dismiss his comedy because he “reifies hegemony” in these ways. No one really escapes Chappelle’s critical eye, and the manner in which he utilizes stereotypes is more complicated than being either “oppressed” or “oppressor.”

In fact, the manner in which he utilizes stereotypes changes throughout the show, and even by sketch, and deserves closer examination. I am not willing to simply throw the [Black] baby out with the bathwater because the baby is very much a product of its surrounding society. Readings such as the one by Lawrence risk scapegoating Black cultural productions for larger societal structures—structures that bell hooks labels “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” (“Dialectically Down” 48). Instead, we need to push to develop more complicated frameworks and a better vocabulary for describing the situation of marginalized peoples who live within hegemonic societies, especially as it relates to their creative work. To fail to do so is to miss important cracks and fissures that are exploited within dominating frameworks that do in fact hold possibilities for resistance.

In a similar manner, theoretical approaches to live performed Black cultural productions that focus primarily on theories of performativity and identity could be missing important historical, linguistic, and experiential pieces necessary for discerning both resistance and domination within a single site. For example, in her book *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry:*
“Race, Identity, and the Performance of Popular Verse in America,” Susan B.A. Sommers-Willet states that the poetry slam is a “cultural stage where poets perform identities and their audiences confirm or deny them as ‘authentic’ via scoring” (8), and suggests that “[t]he key to understanding slam poetry as a body of work has little to do with form or style” (9). While there are certainly performative aspects to be considered in live spoken word performances, limiting scholarly frameworks of performed creative productions to only how identities traffic according to dominating frameworks elides important resistant and perhaps even life-saving practices. It also elides form, style and linguistic practices I argue have everything to do with understanding different creative traditions (including spoken word poetry) as they manifest in Black cultural productions. These traditions have long histories, codified terms, and hint at their contextual emergence, all of which can provide us clues about resistance and domination as they manifest at the site of creative productions.

It is my goal in this paper is to show how Black popular culture is a contradictory space, and how it is a self-consciously contradictory space that requires tools of essentialism, anti-essentialism, deconstruction, pastiche, parody, satire, humor, speech, intelligence and creativity in order to give voice to Black experience through Black expressivity. The complicated nature of Black cultural productions can be imagined as a tension created by the simultaneous forces of living in a Black body marked for oppression, domination and inhuman-ness, and the force of actually being human and being conscious of one’s humanity (for we must remember that while Black is often constructed as not-human, actual Black people indeed are human, and we know this of ourselves). This tension creates the condition of possibility out of which particular energies, articulations and creative expressions come forth.
It is an unrepeatable, un-replicable tension. Every person who deals with blackness and the pain and suffering it brings, and is also at some level aware that they, in their embodiment, are more than that construction deals with and expresses this tension in unique and un-replicable ways. However, while each person deals with that tension in unique ways, as a collective that is raced Black, we come to recognize the tension in others. We recognize the pain in Mary J. Blige’s music as an expression of the tension. We recognize the energy and passion of the spoken word artist as this same tension. And we recognize the humor of Dave Chappelle as proceeding directly from this tension—an attempt to do something productive with the tremendous pain and suffering that is the lot of the construction of blackness.

This tension should not and cannot be mistaken for masochism, or for absurdism. It is a thing unique unto itself that is a perfect storm of racialized embodiment, subhuman treatment, and resiliency. A Black woman within this tension delineates between the pain resulting from racialization and her own attempts to craft humanity into that space. There is no pleasure in that pain which alienates oneself from one’s own body. To take pleasure in this inhumanity is to release the tension—to stop resisting, to stop fighting. Rather, living in the tension of a Black body is a constant battle to articulate oneself to oneself and to others on terms that you can live with.

It is out of this tension—not just of suffering but simultaneously out of resiliency and resistance—that Black cultural productions are born. The search for “authenticity” that seems to fascinate the world when engaging with Black cultural forms is a result of the perceived charm of that tension. Black cultural forms, perhaps even Black aesthetics, are unique, interesting and appealing because they articulate a space that is unspeakable—barely understandable—and
impossible. They articulate living death, diversity in sameness. It is a space that defies logic—“HOW” can one who is constructed as the abyss, the nothing, the subhuman rise on any day and say that she is not only human, but the reason humans can even claim humanity? How can one body come through so much suffering to live another day in an existence that promises little except more of the same? The assumption of a secret, magical answer to these questions charms those living outside of Black experience, fascinated by Black cultural productions. But that tension cannot be accurately mimicked or replicated without giving away its borrowed roots, and this may explain some of the resentment towards the appropriation of Black cultural forms. As Coco Fusco has observed, “For black peoples, at this historical moment, the postmodern fetishizing of the exchange of cultural property seems less like emancipation and more like intensified alienation” (281).

Perhaps the manifestation of this tension sheds some light on white fascination with Black cultural productions. But make no mistake about it—there is nothing charmed about living within the tension created by Black existence. It is a constant state of negotiation and contradiction. It is all too easy to become overwhelmed by one force or the other—to either become depressed and incapacitated by the suffering of one’s racialized body, or to go into denial and insist that as a raced body you make your own way in the world. Neither force is fully “true” in its own right. Life is not all suffering, and many Black people live satisfying, fulfilled lives. But as raced bodies we do not make our own way in the world. This is why Black cultural performances can be imitated, but never replicated in their authenticity.

So the glamorization of the life of a racialized body—the desire for the authenticity and “grittiness” of blackness—is misplaced. There is nothing glamorous about the belly of a ship,
feces, and dead bodies surrounding you for days. There is nothing glamorous about repeated rapes, or being taken from your family. There is nothing glamorous about being “destined” for prison, or for being pulled over, violated, and perhaps losing your life for driving Black. These things are not glamorous. They are terrifying. However, resiliency in the face of these things is admirable, and perhaps this is what the tension manifests best—the contradiction of resiliency where none was supposed to exist.

As my youngest brother put it, “My biggest frustration with being Black lately has been having to worry so much about what other people expect from me. I don’t want to live my life according to someone else’s racist expectations. I don’t want to live constantly trying to prove people wrong. I just want to live.” Shortly thereafter, we giggled at the fact that no matter how he may desire this free life, he would be living according to people’s racist expectations the very next week in his physics class, as he strives to demonstrate scientific competency while living in a Black body that is not marked for scientific competency. My youngest brother will have no choice but to continue living his life worrying about racist expectations; how he manages it will become one of the greatest dances in his life.

This paper is about exploring the ways that Black people in the United States carve out lives for themselves through their creativity, despite and within oppressive systems of anti-Black racism. It is an attempt to complicate the binary between oppression and resistance, and between essentialism and anti-essentialism, by locating the site of study as strategies enacted by individuals and communities on the ground level where oppressive ideology and individual resistance converge to create shared meanings. It is an attempt to say both/and, instead of
either/or, to frameworks describing systemic racism and individual and community resistance within Black cultural productions.

In other words, Black creativity and Black cultural productions emerge from the simultaneous forces of oppression and resistance, manifesting into what can at best be described as contradiction. In order to explore these contradictory aspects, I employ a variety of methods, two different “sites,” and a particular orientation toward privileging Black experience and theoretical frameworks by Black scholars. The two sites this thesis will focus on are spoken word poetry open mics and the Black racial humor of Dave Chappelle, Paul Mooney and Aaron McGruder (*The Boondocks*).

Building on participant observation research I conducted in the fall of 2010 at a Washington, D.C. restaurant that houses a regular spoken word open mic series, the first site is characterized by improvisation, oral modes of communication, and important interactions between artist an audience. The spoken word space provides a site to interrogate how resistance emerges at the site of the Black body as spectacle, and simultaneously, how resistance emerges as a function of collectivity. By employing participant observation and interviews as my first methods in the spoken word open mic site, the perspectives of artists and audience members constitute a central narrative in my examination of performed poetry. Using many of the words, actions and ideas that Black artists and audience members utilize themselves allows the investigation to stay grounded in lived experiences of spoken word poetry. However, I build a further theoretical framework by conducting a close reading of the details, quotes and events I gathered through my participant observation, paying particular attention to evidence of the active engagement these actors have with broader systems of domination and oppression. This
second step allows me to take into account some of the broader societal forces at work in the open mic spoken word in an explicit manner, and to bring in theoretical frameworks developed by Black scholars that speak specifically to the complicated dance of Black people’s negotiations with constructions of blackness.

The second site in this thesis moves into the realm of mediated representation, which is important because it is where we most often encounter Black cultural productions for consumption. Using comedy produced by Black writers and comedians, I analyze specific scenes and routines to highlight the way that these Black artists engage in a witty but serious elucidation of living in an anti-Black racist context. I do not end my analysis at the productions themselves but rather, where it is possible, I bring contextual research to bear on my interpretations in order to better highlight the artists’ motivations and complex engagements with their own work. This second step is of particular importance in trying to trace artist intentions and motivations, which are particularly important when looking at satire and parody on the verge of minstrelsy. Finally, because mediated representations are received by someone, I include in my analysis interviews with consumers of Black racial humor. I do not employ this methodology in a quantitative manner, but rather use anecdotes and quotes to highlight how Black audience members also have a complex engagement with these cultural works. Doing so allows me to once again make central Black experiences, while also making space for explorations of collective understanding and identity.

Theorizing from lived experience provides an important grounding that is necessary when looking at problems that implicate broader frameworks of power and domination that can obscure narratives of those living under conditions of oppression. However, particularly within
the context of race, theorizing lived experience can lead to a dichotomization of mind and body that associates blackness with the realm of the natural. Aware of these problematics, I utilize an approach outlined by George Yancy to hold both experience and theorization in a productive tension:

I do not hold the view that Blacks only offer experiences while whites provide the necessary theoretical framing of those experiences. … Of course, the objectives are 1) to avoid reducing Blacks to experience and 2) to avoid making whites the oracle interpretative voices of Black experiences. By implication, it is important to avoid a relationship of dependency and to assert an agential Black exegetical role in rendering their experiences meaningful. (66)

By intentionally utilizing theoretical frameworks by Black scholars in my own theorizations, and being a Black scholar myself, I hope to make a methodological intervention that is aware of the tendency to minimize Black intellectual contributions in favor of Black lived experience, and to attempt to explain Black experience only through dominant European philosophies and lenses.

This does not mean that I see no other useful contributions, or that I intentionally exclude other authors on the basis of race; rather, by utilizing scholarship by Black intellectuals I hope to highlight contributions to cultural theory that have intentionally addressed questions of race and representation. My decision to highlight Black experience while demonstrating the ability of Black intellectuals to provide compelling and rigorous theoretical frameworks for those experiences seeks to complicate the binary between Black-experience/white-theorization.
The rest of this Introduction will provide a review of pertinent literature in order to map out the contradictory space from which I am arguing Black cultural productions emerge. Recognizing the many contributions that Black scholars have and continue to make to these arguments, my literature review is not exhaustive; rather, it is targeted towards specific conditions of possibility I think are important to the articulation of the tension that produces Black cultural productions, which I label “torque.” Here, I want to lay out a framework for understanding racial domination, Black linguistic practices, and relevant ontological and epistemological conditions of blackness that create the conditions within which Black cultural productions are rendered.

*Literature Review*

I inhabit the same socially constructed space of being present in my absence, of being a token of danger beyond my control. I am that premarked Black thing, that site of historical white discursive markings that precede my birth, leaving my Black body typified and anonymous. I arrive on the scene already overdetermined. (Yancy 26)

I describe a locus of confounded identities, a meeting ground of investments and privations in the national treasury of rhetorical wealth. My country needs me, and if I were not here, I would have to be invented….In order for me to speak a truer word concerning myself, I must strip down through layers of attenuated
meanings, made an excess in time, over time, assigned by a particular historical order, and there await whatever marvels of my own inventiveness. (Spillers 65)

Analyzing slave narratives and employing what she terms as “fabulation” (12), Saidiya Hartman illuminates the ways in which everyday actions reinforce the relations of domination in the lives of chattel slaves in *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. From stepin’ it up lively to the dances slaves are made to do for their masters’ entertainment, Hartman suggests the slave is hemmed in on all sides, even in moments of pleasure or entertainment (*Scenes of Subjection*, 8). It is the total domination and terror of slavery—not just in spectacular moments of gruesome violence but also in the everyday moments that at first sight may not appear to be violence—that Hartman argues conditions the nature of slaves’ resistance to their masters. Indeed, as the slaves’ free time was often monitored, Hartman notes that the forms of resistance emerging from the slaves involved mimicking the relations of domination to the satisfaction of the slave masters (*Scenes of Subjection* 8). In this manner, it becomes difficult to determine where an act of resistance differentiates itself from an act that reinforces the relations of domination.

Even acts which appear to be resistant on the face, acts that are mundane and might be *claimed* as resistance can be and are still used in the service of racial domination. Hartman suggests that the acts of resistance developed and enacted by slaves were not pure actions, generated outside of the slaves’ context of anti-Black domination. Rather, she argues:

…how does one determine the difference between ‘puttin’ on ole massa’—the simulation of compliance for covert aims—and the grins and gesticulations of
Sambo indicating the repressive construction of contented subjection?…since acts of resistance exist within the context of relations of domination and are not external to them, they acquire their character from these relations, and vice versa.” (Scenes of Subjection 8)

Because slaves had no privacy, their resistance was often in full sight of their oppressors, and therefore had to appear to support the dominating frameworks. Assuming that anti-Black racism—formed in the fires of slavery and stoked for the last 100 years by Jim Crow segregation, lynching, urban isolation and the prison industrial context—still drives our current relations of domination, then we should be able to see evidence of resistance to anti-Black racism in a variety of places. However, these actions will necessarily be conditioned by those symbolic and material acts which work to contain and reshape acts of resistance.

This does not mean, however, that Hartman is suggesting that there is no useful resistance on the part of the slave. Indeed, she recognizes that slaves resisted their domination on multiple fronts. Rather, Hartman’s analysis is a caution that we should be wary of naming acts as resistant or not, based solely on how they appear. Hartman argues that the evidence for an act of resistance lies in the effect of that act:

At the level of appearance, these contending performances often differed little. At the level of effect, however, they diverged radically. One performance aimed to reproduce and secure the relations of domination and the other to manipulate appearances in order to challenge these relations and create a space for action not generally available. (Scenes of Subjection 8)
Of course, open and defiant challenges to the relations of domination often resulted in the death or serious injury of slaves who enacted them, and in this regard, strategies of “masquerade, subterfuge, and indirection” (Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection* 8), emerged as a site for saying what could not be said openly. However, the use of these strategies proves to be a double-edged sword, as they can be repurposed, and can serve to “obscure[e] the small acts of resistance conducted by the enslaved,” (Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection* 8). Nonetheless, it is significant to note the manner in which total domination begets forms of resistance that could be enacted in plain site with multiple meanings.

Strategies of masquerade, subterfuge and indirection are the focus of Henry Louis Gates’ book on Afro-American literary criticism, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*. Gates considers the linguistic and literary tradition of African-Americans through an exploration of the rhetorical strategies utilized in Black vernacular and lays the foundation for a distinctly African-American form of figuration. While his work could be read as a sort of Black essentialism on the face, a careful reading reveals a compelling case for the way in which Black writers, poets and musicians use language to construct meanings and critique domination.

Focusing on instances where Black vernacular contains double meanings (connotative and denotative), Gates argues that the rhetorical game play of Black vernacular is actually a sophisticated system of language “parody and pastiche” (xxvli), which he terms Signification or Signifyin(g). Signification serves not only to embed meanings within meanings but also to critique the power structure evidenced in the semantic register of Standard English (Gates 45). Gates suggests that the speaker of Black vernacular is versed not only in the Standard English
meaning of a word (semantic meaning) but also masterfully utilizes this semantic meaning to create double meanings from the accompanying associative contexts (rhetorical meaning) of those words (49-50). In this sense, the Black vernacular argues against Saussure’s idea of a fixed sign:

The process of semantic appropriation in evidence in the relation of Signification to signification has been aptly described by Mikhail Bakhtin as a double-voiced word, that is, a word or utterance, in this context, decolonized for the black person’s purposes “by inserting a new semantic orientation into a word which already has—and retains—it’s own orientation.”…The sign, in other words, has been demonstrated to be mutable. (Gates 50)

Gates points to Jaques Lacan’s idea that signs are built upon the absence of the “Other” in speech—a sign derives meaning from those things it does not mean (50). Gates, however, argues that it is in this space, the space of Other, the space of absence, that black vernacular arises.

To inhabit the negation, but be not-negated, is to Signify: “Everything that must be excluded for meaning to remain coherent and linear comes to bear in the process of Signifyin(g). Signifyin(g), in Lacan’s sense, is the Other of discourse; but it also constitutes the black Other’s discourse as its rhetoric” (Gates 50). Black vernacular and Signifyin(g), suggest that Black simultaneously is and is not a construction, is simultaneously created and creator. It is a negation, yes, but a living, breathing, active negation. Gates argues that Signifyin(g) challenges the discursive constructions of power in Standard English (45). The sign is mutable. More frighteningly, the Other can change it.
What Gates calls Signification or Signifyin(g) is most simply understood, then, as the “black trope of tropes, the figure for black rhetorical figures” (51), and represents the entire repertoire of rhetorical practices used in Black vernacular. What is more, Signification’s double meanings suggest a level of intentionality and authorship in the use of language by those who have been constructed, as Hartman argues, as objects. According to Gates, “The language of blackness encodes and names its sense of independence through a rhetorical process that we might think of as Signifyin(g) the Black difference” (66). It is out of the historical context of lived blackness that these rhetorical strategies emerge, as opposed to a fundamental quality of Black people. As Gates suggests, “Free of the white person’s gaze, black people created their own unique vernacular structures and relished in the double play that these forms bore to white forms” (xxiv). Gates traces the origins of this form of rhetorical game play to figures from African folktales and sacred stories, making a case that Signification could be considered as an originally African-American form.

Hartman, however, reminds us that forms of resistance cannot be thought of as separate from the contexts of domination which produce them, and in this manner Signification might be productively thought of as the patching together of African slaves’ folklore and forms of language that emerge(d) from slave and Black communities in direct response to the totalizing domination of the U.S. racial system. Gates, in fact, signals the dependency that Signification retains on its Standard English brother, signification:

What we are privileged to witness here is the (political, semantic) confrontation between two parallel discursive universes: the black American linguistic circle and the white. We see here the most subtle and perhaps the most profound trace
of an extended engagement between two separate and distinct yet profoundly—even inextricably—related orders of meaning dependent precisely as much for their confrontation on relations of identity, manifested in the signifier, as on their relations of difference, manifested at the level of the signified. We bear witness here to a protracted argument over the nature of the sign itself, with the black vernacular discourse proffering its critique of the sign as the difference that blackness makes within the larger political culture and its historical unconscious.

(Gates 45)

Signifyin(g), then, is the linguistic, material manifestation of the historical situation of black people who have been subjected to the symbolic construction of blackness.

In other words, Signifyin(g) is a linguistic marker of both the domination and resistance of African peoples brought to the United States as slaves. It marks their historical progression through various forms of racial domination while retaining a stubborn sense of authorship and originality that seems almost absurd in light of the absolute symbolic and physical violence proceeding from the U.S. system of racial domination. As such, Signifyin(g) is a mastery of double meanings, and revels in rhetorical game play. Gates suggests that, “Repetition and revision are fundamental to black artistic forms, from painting and sculpture to music and language use” (xxiv), and signals a site at which we might explore not only Black creative expressions, but the manner in which Black people (situated within the relations of domination) actively negotiate constructions of blackness.

The construction of blackness and how actual Black people negotiate those constructions begs questions of the social construction of race, and the manner in which
different bodies are made to mean in a culture. I use as a starting point George Yancy’s work in *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race*. In this work, Yancy argues for an understanding of Black ontology and epistemology that is located in lived experience and shared history, both of which implicate the Black body’s symbolic meaning in U.S. society. Black ontology, as Yancy renders it, is a complicated terrain with a long historical memory and current experiences that highlight the confrontation between white and Black played out upon the bodies of Black people:

Lynched, castrated, raped, branded, mutilated, whipped, socially sequestered, profiled, harassed, policed, disproportionately arrested and incarcerated, the Black body has endured a history of more than symbolic white violence. (xvi)

Yancy also points to the confrontation between white and Black played out within the symbolic realm of meaning and order:

…I describe and theorize a variety of instances in which the Black body is reduce to instantiations of the white imaginary…These instantiations are embedded within and evolve out of the complex social and historical interstices of whites efforts at self-construction through complex acts of erasure and denigration of Black people. (66)

Yancy’s framework argues for an understanding of Black ontology as shaped profoundly by anti-Black violence that occurs both in both tangible (material) and abstract (intangible) spaces for the purpose of maintaining white racial dominance.

This anti-Black violence implicates not only white supremacists and government institutions that have historically and do currently engage in obvious forms of anti-Black
racism, but also the less evident forms that come from interpersonal engagements with friends, acquaintances, and people on the street. Using a story of his encounter with a white woman on an elevator as the context, Yancy explains:

The white woman’s gaze is reiterated within the context of power relations that not only help to sustain the larger social racist imaginary but also sanction her performance of the gaze in the first place, guaranteeing its performance with impunity and ensuring material effects on the gazed-upon Black body…Although I do not feel my body image slip away from me, pushing me toward the precipice of epistemic violence, ever closer to living in a state of self-hatred, it is precisely within the context of various racist social spaces that I feel as if I become “Black” (read: evil, sexually rapacious) anew within the context of each encounter with the generative dimensions of the white gaze/imaginary. (23)

This example demonstrates the way in which Black bodies are hemmed in on all sides, their meaning constructed the moment they arrive on any scene. This total construction serves as the important starting point of exploring Black cultural productions in this paper, because it calls attention to the contradiction inherent in theorizing agential Black bodies.

Instead of looking to frame these questions of embodiment and agency in terms of performativity, I choose Fred Moten’s “The Case of Blackness” to delineate the complicated nature of Black people’s negotiations with constructions and meanings of themselves. Responding to Frantz Fanon’s characterization of blackness as pathology, Moten uses art as the site to argue that there is an important slippage between the construction of “blackness” as an object (of negation) and the lived experience of “the black” that demonstrates other possibilities
Moten explores the space “in the wary mood or fugitive case that ensues between the fact of blackness and the lived experience of the black and as a slippage enacted by the meaning—or, perhaps too “trans-literally,” the (plain[sung]) sense—of things when subjects are engaged in the representation of objects” (Moten 179). Within this space between object and thingness, is room for differentiation and authorship, creativity and sociality—all possibilities that are foreclosed in the object-status of blackness.

These possibilities are indicated in Fanon’s own writings by his very act of writing itself, and in the jazz music and philosophical ponderings of Cecil Taylor when confronted with the question of “‘[b]lack as a special concept, symbol, paint quality; the social-political implications of the black; black as stasis, negation, nothingness and black as change, impermanence and potentiality” (Moten 190), in an Arts/Canada issue. These possibilities are also indicated by Black spoken word artists and by Black comedians, both who utilize their object-status as the canvas for their creativity. It is this contradiction, the contradiction of Black people as constructed-object/creator-subject, that Moten suggests “is not what it is and, on the other hand, is irreducible to what it is used for” (188). The creative productions of Black people, borne out of the space between the negation of constructed blackness and the lived experiences of those with/in Black bodies, are the “im/possibility” Moten is pointing to in his engagement with Fanon’s characterization of Black ontology (188).

It is out of this complexity that Black creative artists produce their work, and as such Black creative works such as spoken word and Black racial humor need to be carefully interpreted in light of the unique positionalities of Black people. A complex engagement with these works that goes beyond labeling them as either “subversive” or “reifying hegemony,”
provides an exceptional opportunity to view the interconnectedness of racial domination and resistance, and to appreciate the ways that these processes and systems of power manifest in the creative. Focusing on Black cultural productions specifically allows us to explore forms and expressions that seem impossible *discursively* and *symbolically*, but that are evidenced in material ways. We can appreciate the complicated process of constructing cultural productions with the raw material of anti-Black racism, and gain insight about how Black people negotiate these tensions creatively.

This paper will provide a theoretical framework and two case studies in order to argue for a more complex engagement with Black cultural productions. Chapter 1 provides a theoretical framework that outlines the critical elements of a hermeneutic of Black cultural productions. By articulating the tension produced by simultaneous forces of oppression and resistance as torque, this chapter will provide an argument for focusing on language, elucidation and critique, layered meanings and collective experience as central to understanding how Black cultural productions manifest both resistance and oppressive conditions.

Chapter 2 will detail my participant observation with a D.C. spoken word open mic venue, paying particular attention to the ways that artists use themes of domination and resistance to create unique forms of poetry. These performances are as important in terms of their style and the way they play with language as they are in their content. They are also not performed in isolation. Rather, artists engage their productions, and create meanings, in negotiation with their audiences, creating possibilities for collective understandings. Spoken word poetry is a site that manifests torque in a specific space and time, and the moments created by poets and audiences are inimitable, making them an interesting space for resistant action.
Chapter 3 engages the complicated terrain of Black racial humor by looking at the sketches of Dave Chappelle, the stand-up comedy of Paul Mooney, and the cartoons of Aaron McGruder. This chapter looks to move beyond the good/bad binary of analysis often engaged with these artifacts to consider questions of parody, representation, and audience engagement that point to the contradictory nature of Black cultural productions. The chapter aims to extend arguments about torque to the realm of mediated entertainment, while engaging similar themes of language use, layered meanings, and collective experience. Using interviews collected from Black consumers of this racial humor, this chapter will point to the ways that collective meanings can also emerge from mediated forms, and demonstrate how torque is in play for both consumers and producers of these media.
CHAPTER 1
THE CREATIVE TORQUE IN BLACK EXPERIENCE

Cultural hegemony is never about pure victory or pure domination (that’s not what the term means); it is never a zero-sum cultural game; it is always about shifting the balance of power in the relations of culture; it is always about changing the dispositions and the configurations of cultural power, not getting out of it. (Hall 24)

Black Experience: Racial Domination

As outlined in the Introduction, Saidiya Hartman, building from Michel Foucault’s readings of systems of power, has argued that the structural situation of blackness in the United States conditions possibilities for resistance. Hartman points to the manner in which slaves’ resistance to domination was conditioned by the “relations of domination” that slavery placed on those subjected to chattel slavery: “…since acts of resistance exist within the context of relations of domination and are not external to them, they acquire their character from these relations, and vice versa” (Scenes of Subjection 8). These relations, and the broader system they implicate (the system of racial domination), far from being an archaic relic of our social past, continue to operate in similar ways to similar effects in the current day. While Black people may no longer live under conditions of chattel slavery, the effects of over-determination, negation, and violence continue to shape the everyday lives of those with Black skin. As George
Yancy has argued:

…it is clear that part of the meaning of Black embodiment is disclosed within the context of an anti-Black racist world. The disclosure of its meaning, while inextricably and relationally tied to the history of anti-Black racism, is not reduced to that history. The point here is that the meaning of the Black body is historical. And as historical, the Black body…[is] explored not in terms of an ontology of essences, but in terms of a historical ontology that appreciates the fluidity of the historical formation of the meaning of, in this case, the Black body…” (xxi)

Yancy here indicates that while connected to the history of slavery, the meaning of the Black body shifts and changes to take on new dimensions. In this way, the meaning of the Black body is contextual, as forms of anti-Black racism shift and change over time.

Given the position of Black people at the bottom of most quality of life measures in the United States (Fact Sheet: Ethnic and Racial Minorities and Socioeconomic Status; Health Disparities; Cottman; Champion), as well as a symbolic positioning at the bottom of the societal food chain, the meaning of the Black body in the current historical situation is characterized by struggle, negation, criminality and subjugation. These conditions are manifested at a broader society level in terms of systemic racism (take, for example, the lack of quality education in areas with high populations of poor Black and Brown people), as well as on more interpersonal levels between colleagues and friends (such as when a Black person is told they are “surprisingly articulate”). These conditions are also manifested in smaller ways, such as Yancy’s example of encountering a white stranger on an elevator, who then clutches her purse
closer to her body. The point here is that for the Black body, the system of racial domination is ever-present in systemic and interpersonal ways, and in this way the Black body is made to encounter its symbolic meaning as negation (read, the opposite of “white”) at every moment.

In addition, relations of racial domination are evident in mediated and representational culture, particularly by a “white gaze,” or white relations of looking that determine the ways Black bodies are rendered in both mediated culture and in person-to-person interactions. According to Donald Bogle, the precedent for white relations of looking in cinema came from early films that utilized white actors in blackface who performed white interpretations of stereotypical depictions of Black characters:

All were character types used for the same effect: to entertain by stressing Negro [sic] inferiority. Fun was poked at the American Negro by presenting him as either a nitwit or a childlike lackey…All were merely filmic reproductions of black stereotypes that had existed since the days of slavery and were already popularized in American life and arts…Whenever dealing with black characters, they simply adapted the old familiar stereotypes, often further distorting them.

(4)

This historical situation is important to an analysis of current-day considerations of Black creativity, because it points to the manner in which Black bodies are made a spectacle under the white gaze.

The history is particularly relevant to an analysis of racial humor that draws on these stereotypes, but is also relevant to understanding how the Black body is rendered as negative. The social context within which Black bodies are represented is framed by these racist relations...
of power in popular visual media, and most specifically by the pervasive privileging of the white gaze in media representations. The privileging of white looking relations is historically located in the practice of unfettered looking that was the right of white slaveholders and later white citizens, as compared to the restricted and regulated looking relations of Black slaves, and later, of Black citizens (hooks, *Black Looks* 115-118). The privileging of the white gaze is evident in media representations that emphasize Black inferiority, as opposed to allowing diverse and complicated representations of Black identity.

While the circumstances of racial domination faced by Black people are indeed immense, resistance to racial domination is as pervasive as racial domination itself. Indeed, to study resistance is to look at the other side of Frantz Fanon’s dark encounter with the manner in which the Black is constructed: “I came into this world anxious to uncover the meaning of things, my soul desirous to be at the origin of the world, and here I am an object among other objects” (Fanon 89). Even Fanon himself, however, despite being an object of the construction of blackness, saw fit to resist this construction through his scholarship and active role in the liberation of Algeria. And, just as in the days of chattel slavery many slaves resisted the lot they had been given, so too do many Black people resist today. Hartman cautions, however, this resistance is not separate from the domination that begets it, and as such, to look at resistance effectively requires understanding how relations of domination shape it (*Scenes of Subjection* 8).

The long history of Black resistance to the racial system of domination has been documented not only in formal channels but also through family stories, community myths, and creative works. One challenge to understanding Black creative productions in a society still
dealing with the effects and structures of chattel slavery is to understand how and under what conditions resistance is possible. Much groundwork has been done to demarcate the structures and effects of the system of anti-Black racial domination by writers using an “Afro-Pessimist” framework. This paper seeks to continue outlining the manner in which Black people living under those conditions craft livable lives for themselves, taking the totalizing structures of racial domination as the starting point.

This question—of how Black people live under the structures of racial domination in full knowledge of that system and its effects—is of the utmost importance. Understanding how Black people critically engage structures of racism through creative expressions can better reveal the cracks and fissures exist that within the systems of domination. The cracks and fissures that are critically exploited by Black people living within systems of domination evidence the constantly changing nature of the relations of domination at the site of culture. These cracks and fissures shed light on the space between the construction and interpellation of subjects for the purpose of societal ordering, and the lived experiences of those imbued with these subjectivities.

The creative expressions of Black people studied in this thesis emerge from spaces of resistance conditioned by the larger frameworks of domination that must be constantly negotiated. I am primarily concerned with the forms of resistance evident in two sites of creative production: spoken word poetry and racial humor productions. It is at the site of creative productions that the processes of satirical critique, exaggeration and mimicry become useful for exploiting the cracks and fissures within the racial system of domination. It is this complicated tension that Fred Moten points to—*being* the im/possibility, the object that is not
reducible to object-ness—that is reflected in spoken word poetry and racial humor. As though self-conscious of their own impossible existence, many of the Black authors of these works toy with the lines between resistance and reifying hegemony through strategies of critique, rant, satire, exaggeration and misdirection. The line between minstrelsy and subversion in many of these works is painstakingly small, and whether or not that line is crossed is difficult to discern.

In spoken word poetry, much of what makes the space unique is the manner in which poets speak to the concerns and issues that matter to Black people in the African Diaspora. In this way, even the topics that poets write about are conditioned by the system of racial domination that they struggle against every day. The poetry is then performed on a stage that, ironically, often serves to reinforce the impression that Black bodies are spectacular, and exist to be viewed for pleasure—particularly the pleasure of white audiences. In these ways and more, spoken word poetry—even in open mic settings—are conditioned by the very system that much of the poetry is written to resist.

The relationship between racial humor and the system of racial domination is even clearer. Playing off of the racial constructions of different bodies in U.S. society, creators of racial humor shows and standup are on a sort of “front-line” encounter with the ugly side of racial inequality. The most basic material for racial humor is indeed the system of racial domination itself. But far from being simply coon and minstrel shows, many of these productions deserve a more critical look at why and how they have become popular and even treasured while they utilize harmful stereotypes created by the system that they set about to make humorous.
The conditioning of resistance by relations of racial domination is evident when looking at racial humor such as *Chappelle’s Show, The Boondocks* and Paul Mooney’s standup comedy—for one can rarely tell whether the humor is subversive or not at first glance. In fact, Chappelle’s Show has been roundly criticized for reifying stereotypes, and Paul Mooney has been oft accused of being “racist” in his humor. *The Boondocks* continues to be described as “edgy” for its blatant attention to issues of race, such as the episode that chides BET for trying to “destroy Black people” (“The Hunger Strike”). These critiques may be more usefully viewed as indicating the conditions of racial domination (the white gaze) within which Black creative expression emerges, as opposed to sanctioning Black artists for their choice to focus on issues of race, for no Black person within the system of racial domination can ever fully escape the symbolic and material situation of oppression. As Yancy suggests:

…the Black body has, within the context of its tortuous sojourn through the crucible of American and European history, been a site of discursive, symbolic, and ontological, and existential battle….Blacks have struggled mightily to disrupt, redefine, and transcend white fictions. They have struggled with profound issues of identity and place. Yet Blacks have always struggled to make a way out of no way, using the resources they had available. (110)

Thus, it is critical to consider Black creative productions in the context of the raw material of anti-Black racism and the stereotypes, discursive constructions, and epistemological and ontological possibilities that such a system provides to the bodies living within it.
In the United States, the relations of racial domination, specifically anti-Black racism, emerge from the historical location of slavery, which has morphed over the years into Jim Crow segregation, ghettoization, discrimination, police violence, and broad anti-Black stereotyping. As the case of Amadou Diallo indicates (Cooper), the meaning of the Black body in the United States is conditioned primarily on appearance, as opposed to understandings about ethnicity and national origin. This structure of classification based on appearance creates a sort of zero-sum game for all found “guilty” of having Black skin or, in the case of earlier classifications, Black blood. The visibility of Black skin, and how negative constructions attach to that skin, is important in developing a hermeneutic of Black creative productions that speaks to both the lived experience and symbolic constructions of Black people.

The site of the Black body can be considered as a site where two opposing forces—forces of racial domination and forces of resistance to that domination—come to bear in physical, psychological, and existential ways. It is out of these conditions of pressure that Black creative expressions receive their genesis, both in content and form. The tension that produces Black creative expressions can be usefully thought of as torque or “the torque,” which is meant to indicate a twisting force enacted upon a Black body as a result of unique locations in physical and social space. The torque here is offered as a way to conceptualize how a Black person is caught between two opposing and simultaneous forces—forces of racial domination on one hand, and forces of resistance conditioned by domination on the other.

How individual and communal Black people negotiate the symbolic and discursive construction of blackness, which has definite effects on the materiality and physicality of our
bodies and lives, as well as our psychology, is unique and complicated terrain to tread. “The Black body is a historical project,” according to Yancy, “and as such is capable of taking up new historical meanings through struggle and affirmation” (xxii). Productively conceived of as the tension acting upon Black people at the intersection of the material and the symbolic, the torque is the tension that emerges from the space where Black persons in the United States are both figuratively and literally located. In this manner, the context provided by current and historical forms of anti-Black racism as well as the context provided by the forms of resistance offered by Black people are equally important to articulating the torque out of which Black creative expression emerges.

Because of the co-constitutive nature of the relations of racial domination and subjects’ resistance to these structural systems, each is a necessary component of Black creative productions. Black arts have enjoyed a long history of cultural appreciation, financial success and wide acceptance from various cultural groups (take jazz, blues, hip-hop as well as the Dougie, urban fashion and Motown as just a few examples). And, if mimicry is the highest form of flattery, then movements such as hip-hop and blues certainly factor highly in our cultural cache. But far from being produced as a result of some “magic” that Black artists contain as a result of their race, Black cultural arts emerge from a specific location between resistance and domination. That site, the site of Black people—Black bodies—that daily negotiate the symbolic residue left by a system of racial domination, is critical for understanding both the meaning of and fascination with Black cultural productions.
Black Expressivity: The Torque and Black Creative Forms

There are important material, spatial and symbolic aspects of racial domination and anti-Black racism that create conditions for embodied creative expression. Racial identity is a complicated manifestation of the material, historical and symbolic conditions of possibility for different bodies in a cultural landscape. For Black performers and their audiences, stages can become symbolic spaces of catharsis, and material arenas where the gamut in Signifyin(g) skill is thrown. They can also become spatial configurations where we can witness the convergence of the material and the symbolic at the site of Black bodies that manifest Moten’s im/possibility—the “object” of constructed meaning demonstrating itself to be more than just an object.

In fact, because Black resistance is conditioned through the relations of domination, we should expect that resistance would then take the shape of a constant struggle between what is and what is not (supposed to be) possible. For this reason, it is as important to pay attention to the content of the spoken word poetry and racial humor pieces as it is to take note of their forms—which includes how they are embodied, presented, and hidden. Within in these forms lie important clues to the consciousness of the cultural struggle taking place in spaces of representation and cultural production. How Black people embody, present and hide cultural productions, the styles and forms we use, are just as important as the content we present.

There have been numerous frameworks developed by Black scholars that articulate the manner in which Black people, under the conditions of anti-Black racism, have developed artistic forms of resistance that speak specifically to that positionality (Paul Gilroy, Fred Moten, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Amiri Baraka). Stuart Hall notes the way in which “within the black
repertoire, *style*—which mainstream cultural critics often believe to be the mere husk, the wrapping, the sugar coating on the pill—has become itself the subject of what is going on” (27).

While it is not the purpose of this paper to provide a list of all the possible forms or styles that may emerge from torque, I will call attention to forms I think are especially prevalent in spoken word poetry and in racial humor, and highlight those forms within the case studies. Specifically, these forms include Signifyin(g), critique (sometimes satirical) hiding in plain site, and layered meanings. I will attempt to sketch the general outlines of each of these forms below.

*Black Expressivity in Language: Signifyin(g) Black*

Of particular use to this project is the framework developed by Gates in his work *The Signifying Monkey*. This framework serves an important function of situating the language of Black vernacular within the broader historical situation of anti-Black racism in the United States, and serves as an effective departure point for considering the form of language in Black creative productions, both humor and spoken word. Gates points to the importance of Signification—the rhetorical games that Black artists and poets have utilized for many generations—as an intertextual, repetitive process by which Black vernacular makes meaning.

This repetition “with a signal difference” (51), of Signifyin(g) is as important in its form as it is in content. At work here is a critical element of play—play which, at first glance, may seem frivolous, but that is in fact at the heart of Black cultural productions. Gates states: “…the play is the thing—not specifically what is said, but how. All definitions of Signifyin(g) that do not distinguish between manner and matter succumb…to serious misreading” (70). This playfulness is what allows multiple layers of meaning to be derived from Black cultural
productions, and what allows the Black cultural producer to engage Black audiences without being “caught,” for “Signifyin(g)…also refers to a way of encoding messages or meanings which involves, in most cases, an element of indirection” (Gates 80).

The framework of Signifyin(g) offers a useful lens through which to better interpret the complexity of Black creative expressions, and indicates the active engagement of the Black artist with both the symbolic constructions of blackness and his or her own resistance to those constructions. Signifyin(g) and other patterns of creative expression in Black creative come about as a result of the lived experience of Black bodies under the system of racial domination, and their simultaneous resistance to the symbolic construction of blackness. The manner in which Black artistic forms “riff” off of one another creates an element of intertextuality that serves not just as a form of cultural identity. Rather, these patterns of repetition indicate the historical situation of anti-Black racism in re-iterative forms over time, and also indicate critical engagement on the part of Black people with anti-Black racism through creative interventions. Indeed, the racial humor of Dave Chappelle, Paul Mooney and Aaron McGruder rely heavily on “repetition, with a signal difference” that characterizes “black double-voicedness” (Gates 51), indicating these Black artists’ critical engagement with and resistance to the system of racial domination. Signifyin(g) could be said to be a central element of the Black racial humor text.

That Signification emerges from a Black cultural context makes it especially suited for explicating the complicated relationship that Black creative artists have to their own work, as Signifyin(g) pays attention to both the content and the form of Black creative expression. It is equally important to take note of the context out of which each of these forms arise, and to pay careful attention to earlier iterations that indicate a sort of historical merry-go-round. For, before
*Chappelle’s Show* was Richard Pryor, and Amiri Baraka was once LeRoi Jones, long before Saul Williams was born. Indeed, these forms that repeat and reappear indicate not only the existence of systems of racial domination but also the active struggle that people make with the residue it leaves. This repetition also points to the effectiveness of certain types of creative expression to provide its creators with frameworks for resistance.

**Puttin’ On Ole’ Massa: Hidden in Plain Sight and Layered Meanings**

The condition of hypervisibility is a major component of the anti-Black racist relations of domination that shape the manner in which Black creative artists produce their resistant works of art. Deeply affected by violence inflicted as a result of visibility, those with Black bodies understand how skin can “speak.” Survival, as a result of hypervisibility, can actually depend on one’s ability to shift quickly and wittily from one meaning to another without drawing too much attention to the fact that one knows more than others think one knows.

Similar to the manner in which slaves sang songs and spoke in codes that appeared as nonsense to their captors, but that in fact contained important information about revolts and escapes, so too do acts of resistance today hide in “plain sight” within visible constructions of blackness. The creative expressions of Black artists are often on display for the world to see, and receive much criticism for being commercialized, for feeding into stereotypes, and for “selling out.” Hence, spoken word performances are viewable and can be fetishized by white audiences, and racial humor is often consumed within the broader capitalist framework of television media and can be used to reify stereotypes.
In both spoken word and racial humor, artists house critiques of racial domination within more socially acceptable forms. So, for example, spoken word artists use techniques of allegory, singing, and body motions to communicate their poetry. Because these techniques are interesting to watch, are humorous, or take on an air of frivolity, spoken word artists are often able to articulate quite radical politics of Black emancipation and self-determination that may not be possible in face-to-face conversations. Likewise, Black comedians utilize the comedy form to house quite radical critiques of the way racial domination operates on Black bodies. Perhaps most significant to this paper is the how each of these sites situates Black bodies on stages, usually under the auspices of entertainment. While the audiences for each of these sites varies in its racial makeup, there is no structure in either site that prevents white audience members from viewing the artists’ performances, and as such the performances remain subject to the politics of the white gaze.

However, the manner in which the Black body is a site for entertainment for white gazes simultaneously serves as the stage upon which resistant formulations can be constructed and presented in code to other Black bodies. In this manner, Black creative works cannot simply be interpreted as either resistant or supportive of racial domination. Likewise, these creative works cannot be viewed as containing only one “layer” of meaning. Rather, attention must be paid not only to the context of the creative works, but the manner in which they are delivered, the codes used to communicate embedded messages, and the lived experiences that they reference. A closer examination of these cultural productions reveals that the messages are indeed layered, and have double-meanings that function to provide multiple interpretations to a single creative act.
Spoken word poetry, performed in front of an audience, is an example of one such site of layers. Not only are spoken word artists admired for their lyrics, but they also show their mastery through clever puns, word play, and interesting embodiment of their poems. What is more, much of the meaning of spoken word poetry is dependent on audience members’ ability to comprehend and interpret the layered references within a poem, which is made easiest by having personal knowledge of or referents for the coded language within the poem. In this manner, spoken word artists can place obscure references or experiential descriptions within their poetry that may only interpellate specific audience members, while still serving to entertain the broader audience through the spectacle of the Black body.

This mastery of double meanings is what makes spoken word performances and racial humor so interesting as Black cultural productions. They point to Hartman’s argument that forms of resistance often happened in plain sight (Scenes of Subjection 8). And as she argues, “At the level of appearance, these contending performances [subversive and oppressive] often differed little” (Hartman, Scenes of Subjection 8). The acts can only be understood “[a]t the level of effect” (Hartman, Scenes of Subjection 8). In the same way, the speech of a Black spoken word artist or racial humor comedian may semantically say one thing, but rhetorically have a very different effect on Black audience members. It is this hiding in plain sight that spoken word and racial humor personifies so well. What appears to have one meaning to certain audience members is actually Signifyin(g) on the part of the Black artist, and only those familiar with the tradition of Signifyin(g) can fully grasp and understand what is going on.

By insisting on double meanings, indeed, by often insisting on double contexts, these Black cultural forms not only challenge the discursive constructions of blackness, but challenge
discursive construction as only available to those in the dominant position of racial domination. Black vernacular and Signifyin(g), manifested in Black creative expressions, suggests that Black simultaneously is and is not a construction, is simultaneously created and creator. It is a necessary balance and a negation, yes, but a living, breathing, active negation.

*Signification, Racial Identity, and the Torque*

Signification and other layered approaches to understanding Black creative expression also provide an important intervention into the dominant frameworks used to interpret creative expression in theories of identity. By insisting on the historical significance, lived experiences, and embodiment of the Black artists’ creative productions, this project makes an argument for a more complex understanding of how race functions as a system of power or control in a society. Black cultural productions should not be interpreted solely as an issue of identity but in terms of history, relations of domination, and the negotiation of bodies underneath a construction. Viewing Black creative works in this way keeps the stakes of such a project at the forefront, stakes often signaled in the creative works themselves. For some artists, these creative works are a matter of life and death, physically and symbolically, for the toll of living in conditions of anti-Black racism is exacting. How racial meaning is created, changed and maintained over history, as well as how these meanings are acted out upon the body symbolically, materially and discursively requires frameworks that can hold many contradictory concepts in tension.

What is often read as “authenticity” in racial identity, particularly in Black identity, could be the residue of an overdetermined spot in the symbolic order, the material manifestation of the pattern of symbolic meaning attached to physical bodies without regard to each individual body’s path through
culture and life. The way that Black artists use these meanings to create their art is evidence of both the system of racial domination and the critical engagement that multiple Black bodies have had with that system and specific historical moments. Black racial “identity” is the visible negotiation that a body in torque makes to craft a livable life. The patterns of those identity expressions, as opposed to being evidence of an “essence” of blackness, are evidence of the material and historical structures that confine Black bodies within the conditions of blackness over time.

The torque emerges as a result of these engagements with the symbolic in the space of the real, lived experiences of Black bodies. It is the evidence of a creator from the space of negation. My claim here is that many Black creative producers, as Gates has argued about Black vernacular, are unique in their command of rhetorical tricks and word games, and are particularly well suited to activities such as spoken word and racial humor because of their positioning as “an abstract and empty vessel vulnerable to the projection of others’ feelings, ideas, desires, and values” (Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection* 21). The skill of a Black spoken word artist, and of creators of racial humor, comes from demonstrating mastery of double meanings, which is essentially mastery of contexts, mastery of history, mastery of intertextuality and by extension, mastery of symbolic negation and mastery of the realm of the Other.

I am pointing to the unique ways that groups and individuals for whom racial domination is everyday horror construct creative expressions. I am also pointing to the unique way that Black people negotiate their domination and craft lives for themselves, even when constructed in such harmful and negative ways. By pointing to the historical and present-day reasons why Black cultural arts are unique and considering the way that Black creative artists
use harmful stereotypes, I hope to complicate present theoretical frameworks and push for a broader, more critical way of understanding Black creative expression. Concepts such as the torque express the tension out of which many Black cultural productions are born, and this tension is central to those creations. The synthesis of oppression and resistance at the site of an individual and communal body, which expresses the ability to live in the face of great pain, suffering and domination, cannot be ignored in considering Black creativity.
CHAPTER 2
GIVE ME THE MIC: TORQUE AND COLLECTIVE POSSIBILITY IN SPOKEN WORD POETRY

Artistic and creative expression has a long history in Black cultural productions. From the creation of blues and jazz music to the literature produced in the Harlem Renaissance, and later the explosion of emceeing, graffiti and beat boxing during the hip-hop age, African Americans have engaged in creative cultural forms that express their unique experiences living as racial minorities in the United States. While spoken word is not exclusive to Black communities, there is a rich and long history of spoken word traditions in Black culture.

This chapter will draw from observations of a series of spoken word open mic events, at a Washington, D.C. restaurant called Busboys and Poets, as well as the theoretical ground laid in the first chapter, in order to illustrate how torque is at work in spoken word poetry performances. The chapter will highlight poems and reflections by Black poets about their creative productions in order to demonstrate the critical engagement that Black poets have with representations of Blackness and their own personhood. Signifyin(g) and other patterns of creative expression in Black creative arts are important when considering Black spoken word performances, and these patterns of creative expression come about as a result of the lived experience of Black people, and their simultaneous resistance to the symbolic and discursive construction of blackness.
Far from being a piece about the manner in which artists “perform” a particular Black identity, this chapter intends to disrupt the manner in which scholars have too easily invoked “identity as performative” by paying attention to the manner in which Black spoken word artists, hosts and audience members engage in negotiations about Black histories, Black lived experiences, and build a sense of shared understanding that is not rooted in the authentic “performance” of a particular stereotypical blackness. This chapter looks to read the spoken word open mic space as one which builds upon a long history of Black creative expression that emerges from the space between the constructions of blackness in the broader society and the resistance to those constructions by actual Black people.

This chapter looks at the site where Black people utilize creative expression to challenge not only misconceptions that happen as a result of constructed blackness, but also the way Black as embodied Author can complicate theories of identity. The stage here is defined as the physical site where Black spoken word artists negotiate multiple identities, react to constructions of blackness, and evidence their personhood by layering meanings into their poetry and manifesting it physically. All of this is done within a broader context of a “community” of Black audience members who may or may not know the artist performing but who share some of the definitions and meanings presented by the artist, because of shared history and shared experiences with constructions of blackness.

*Historical Context*

Providing historical context for “Black spoken word” is a difficult task. There is no authoritative word on the roots of the Black tradition of spoken word poetry, and there are
multiple strands in the performance poetry tradition that can be traced back to multiple originators. Beat and jazz poetry, Black conscious poetry, and the competitive “Slam” poetry all have an important role to play in the history of Black spoken word poetry in the United States. That said, the purpose of this paper is not to detail a history or do a historiography of spoken word, although that task constitutes a critical gap in Black cultural history. Rather, I intend here to highlight a few predecessors that I see as critical to understanding Black spoken word as a definable object among performance poetry. The object is porous for certain, for many influences weave in and out of Black performance poetry. However, there is also an important genealogical trace that I wish to follow which is often unrecognized in much of the literature on spoken word, particularly as it relates to Black spoken word artists. This trace is important for understanding my definition of Black spoken word as a Black cultural art or expression, and is also important to revealing the layers present in Black performances of spoken word that may be elided without understanding this history.

The beginnings of Black spoken word as it is performed in the current day can be traced at least back to jazz poetry, when poets would compose pieces to or about jazz music in the ‘20s and ‘30s. Jazz poetry was a contemporary of Beat poetry, and included poets such as A.B. Kaufmann and LeRoi Jones, later known as Amiri Baraka (A Brief Guide to Jazz Poetry, Poets.org). Jazz poetry was poetry that revealed aspects of jazz music in written word, relying on improvisation and rhythms to accomplish its unique, lyrical effects. Perhaps one of the most well known jazz poets was Langston Hughes, whose poetry is often invoked at Busboys and Poets’ open mic events.
Another important influence on present day Black spoken word poetry is a group called The Last Poets. The Last Poets combined percussion with their poetry to create a unique sound. Their topics dealt primarily with social issues facing Black Americans, and they produced spoken word pieces including “Niggers are Afraid of Revolution” (The Last Poets), and “White Man’s Got a God Complex” (This Is Madness). While their membership shifted over the course of the next 30 years, members of The Last Poets still record on hip-hop albums to this day (Scott 1).

Somewhat concurrently, in the 1970s and 1980s, Gil Scott Heron’s poetry became known to the broader world. Scott-Heron’s poems were similarly rhythmic in style, and dealt with issues of import to Black people in the United States and worldwide. In addition to appearing on Saturday Night Live (“Richard Pryor/Gil Scott-Heron”), Scott-Heron is probably best known for his poem “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised,” (Small Talk at 125th and Lenox) and his contribution to the anti-Apartheid poem “Let Me See Your I.D.” (Artists United Against Apartheid). Scott-Heron’s poetry is performed to a musical background, consisting of percussion and/or other instruments. His latest CD, I’m New Here, was released in 2010.

There are many other Black poets who contributed and continue to contribute to the present-day forms of Black spoken word poetry. They include, but are not limited to: Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Amiri Baraka.

Spoken Word in Washington, D.C.

The spoken word scene in Washington, D.C. provides a unique opportunity to consider how spoken word as a Black cultural production creates possibilities for negotiated and shared
meanings about race and racial belonging. It also provides a space for making some first steps in considering what, if anything, is unique about Black creative expression in the 21st century “post-racial” era. This study examines the way that racial understandings are constructed and negotiated in a weekly spoken word open mic event in Washington, D.C., and then theorizes the ways that blackness creates the conditions of possibility for these racial meanings.

**The Venue**

The observations for this study took place at a local restaurant called Busboys and Poets in Washington, D.C., between March of 2010 and March of 2011. The restaurant was founded in 2005 by Andy Shallal, an Iraqi-American “artist, activist and restaurateur,” (Busboysandpoets.com). The first location was opened at 14th St. and V St. NW (known as “14th & V”) in the heart of the historic U Street District, also known as “Black Broadway.” The National Park Service describes the Greater U Street Corridor as “the center of Washington's African American community between c.1900 and 1948” (“Greater U St. Historic District”). Busboys and Poets opened two more venues after the flagship restaurant, one in Shirlington, VA in August of 2007 and a second location in D.C. on 5th and K St. NW (known as “5th & K”) in 2008. Central to each of the restaurants that Shallal has opened is a strong belief in “open speech” as a central tenet of functioning democracies (see video “Free Speech, Open Mic ft. Nikki Giovanni”). This project focused on the 14th & V and location, and therefore the descriptions of the restaurant spaces will be limited to that location only.

The open mics at Busboys have a reputation as being a "regular" spot for local and national poets to perform their poetry, and there were multiple poets who cycled through the
two locations before or after attending other events in the city. Busboys and Poets is not the
longest running or necessarily the most popular spoken word performance spot in D.C. Other
regular open-mic events include Spit Dat!, Bohemian Caverns and the spoken word event at
Liv. Many local poets host the open mics at Busboys.

Named for and inspired by poet Langston Hughes, the 14th & V restaurant is decorated
with artwork by local artists and contains both a “progressive” bookstore and a performance
space called the Langston Room. In addition to the Tuesday night open mic nights that Busboys
and Poets runs, the 14th & V location also has a long list of authors, poets, artists, musicians and
independent filmmakers that come to speak and perform at the restaurant, making it a regular
venue for D.C. residents who are interested in progressive politics and independent music, art
and film. Many of the featured authors and poets are Black and other people of color, making it
a popular spot for people of color to frequent. Speakers who have come to Busboys and Poets in
the last year include journalist Amy Goodman, Cornel West, Alice Walker, and Amiri Baraka.
Events were held by organizations such as Al Jazeera—English, Amnesty International, Split
This Rock, DC Poets Against the War, and Code Pink. The large majority of Busboys and Poets
events are free to the public, with the remaining events requiring a small cover charge, usually
no more than $5.

There is a cover charge of $4 per person to attend the open mic, and the tickets at the
14th and V location typically sell out hours before the show. The Tuesday night open mics are
performed in the Langston Room, which is a large room that can seat close to 100 patrons. It
contains a stage at one end of the room, complete with lighting and a basic sound system. The
stage contains pictures of three icons of nonviolent resistance: Martin Luther King, Jr., Gandhi,
and the Dalai Lama. The stage also has a variety of furniture—couches, stools and ottomans—that patrons can sit at when there are no more seats available in the room, as well as a piano. For artists on open mic nights, the stage also has a single mic on a stand and one stool. There are multiple tables in the Langston Room, all of which are set up so that patrons are facing the front of the room. Waiters serve food and drinks to patrons throughout the open mic performances. On the wall opposite the entrance to the Langston Room is a large mural with renderings of famous political figures (primarily non-violent protesters) and quotes from poets and activists.

**Overview of Spoken Word Open Mic Basics/Spaces**

Much of the activity in the open mic setting revolves around the person of the host, who is responsible to emcee the event by introducing performers, interacting with the audience member, and providing spoken word pieces of their own. The host is integral to the flow of the open mic—they affect audience energy levels, maintain the “ground rules” for how the crowd and artists will interact, time each artist to ensure that no artist takes too much time, and provide transitions between each artist that give context to artist statements or audience reactions. The host’s embodiment, their skill with spoken word performance, their comfort with large crowds and their energy level affects the reception, flow and general feeling of each open mic event. Hosts are responsible to negotiate inevitable tensions in a manner that makes “everyone” feel welcome on the stage.

A “good host” might be described as one who is energetic, who provides moments of laughter, who keeps the crowd engaged, who is a talented spoken word poet, and who can effectively manage awkward moments that invariably happen when artists and audiences
convene to share artistic pieces. I focus here on the unique manner in which various Black hosts negotiated their duties, to include observing topics they talked about, their performed poetry pieces, their rhetoric between performers, and the types of references they made to Black culture. Host Derrick Weston Brown (who is the Poet-in-Residence at the 14th and V location) starts each of his events with a poem entitled “The Mic is Now Open” (Kelow-Bennett 10/5/2010). In this poem, Brown invokes historical poetry figures. Many of these individuals are Black poets and performers that are known for their lyrical abilities. Host Bomah began his hosting duties on February 8, 2011 by performing a piece to a beat, which invokes images of a rapper, though the name of Bomah’s site, and his tagline, is “Not A Rapper” (Kelow-Bennett 2/8/2011).

In the spoken word open mic space, the audience and artist engage in a sort of negotiation of meaning making. A central feature of this meaning making is the mantra of “respect the mic.” To respect the mic is to ensure that the person standing at the microphone is given the opportunity to speak his or her mind fully, without interruption and with the attention of the audience. This does not mean that an artist is always accepted for what they say; indeed, respecting the mic does not mean that the audience has to like what is said at the mic. Rather, respecting the mic simply means that an audience will listen to an artist speaking at the mic. Likewise, for the artist, to respect the mic is to bring their best—to put their best foot forward—and to take seriously the charge of speaking their own truth.

Artists come to the stage in a variety of ways. Some artists come to the stage and read from their tattered notebooks. Others read from cell phones, or even single sheets of paper or napkins. Indeed, the urge to write can strike an artist at any moment, and they marshal whatever
resources are available at the moment to capture their thoughts. Some artists memorize their poetry, and their focus is on delivering the poem with the emotion and actions that simply reading a poem cannot convey. Some spoken word artists use musical instruments, background CDs, and props to convey their message. But most simply use their mouths.

During the time of my observations, the crowds at the open mic events were majority Black, but varied by night and always included at least a few white people and other people of color. The crowd composition matters greatly to the open mic space, particularly because Black artists often do pieces that involve criticism of racism, of white identity politics, and refer to Black history and current Black issues. The space of spoken word open mics is indeed a space for negotiation and struggle over varying definitions, histories, identities, racial politics and authenticity. This is not to say that there is no variance in who performs, or who attends spoken word open mics. Rather, the presence of non-Black performers and audience members provides a site for sometimes humorous, sometimes contentious struggles for power that play themselves out on the stage. However, crowd reactions to various performers provide an excellent feedback system for the host, artist, and for my own purposes as I try to discern how different artists affect the majority Black audience.

For example, on December 21, 2010, a night when the large majority of the performers and the host were Black, a white performer stood up to do a comedy routine. Clearly unfamiliar with the norms of spoken word open mic events, the performer was met with a stony silence. The man kept repeating the phrase, “I’m fearless, like, I’m not afraid of anything, you know?” (Kelow-Bennett 12/21/2010), and eventually stated that his friend had dared him to come to the front of the room and perform for the crowd. Both his lack of appropriate material and lack of
preparation indicated his ignorance, and the crowd returned his ignorance in kind through silence and lack of attention. The man received painfully few laughs for his performance, and as the performance dragged on longer and longer, audience members became restless. A young white woman sitting near me leaned over and stated, “I’m so embarrassed for white people right now” (Kelow-Bennett 12/21/2010). It is evident from her statement that the race of performers is not lost on crowds attending open mic events. This indeed becomes a space where meanings about race are negotiated, embodied in the performances of artists, the reactions of audiences, and the focus of the hosts.

*Spoken Word as a Black Cultural Space*

I argue that spoken word spaces constituted primarily by Black artists and Black audience members can be construed as Black cultural spaces—not only because of the overwhelming presence of Black actors, but also because of the type of topics which tend to emerge in these spaces and the manner in which spoken word audiences and artists perform. They include, but are not limited to, recounting experiences of racism at the hands of police and co-workers, stories of the street, poems about Black love, poem about social justice, poems about freedom, poems about Black history, and poems that include references to Black culture and Black music. Artists will sometimes ask audience members to participate by singing along, clapping in a particular rhythm, or snapping, and the back-and-forth between audience members and artist can be reminiscent of the call-and-response of Black churches. In order to participate fully in some of these artist-initiated activities, an audience member needs to bring a prior knowledge of Black culture—and not just the kind seen on TV.
One example of such participation was a host-led rendition of Erykah Badu’s “Tyrone” at a spoken word event on March 17, 2010 at 5th and K. This was followed by one of the feature artists’ spoken word poem performed to a background of the audience singing Bootsy Collins’ “I’d Rather Be With You” (Kelow-Bennett 3/17/2010). Audience members who were unfamiliar with either or both of these productions were not able to participate in the singing, and may not have comprehended the layers of meaning that were communicated through the inclusion of those pieces. Whether or not an audience member understands these cultural references not strictly racial; however, these pieces are less likely to circulate in “mainstream” Black cultural productions found in popular culture, and more likely to circulate among Black people, making them something of a mystery to those without a more intimate association with Black cultural productions than what is represented on television and radio stations.

The inclusion of and reference to outside Black cultural works—music, poetry, heroes and moments in history—creates a strong sense of shared cultural import. Indeed, a person who does not have the background knowledge of the references that spoken word artists make, or songs that they use, may feel lost at moments or may miss deeper meanings at play. It is the use of these cultural self-referents that helps to create the insider/outsider dynamic of Black spoken word cultural spaces. The other, and just as important, aspect to the insider/outsider dynamic is the content of the poetry itself.

By choosing to recount experiences in a manner that highlights life lived in a Black body, Black spoken word artists are calling out to audience members that can relate similarly, without having to overtly proclaim that the space is a “Black space.” Instead, they signify Black spaces through their use of intertextuality via Gates. To an outsider, the space does not appear
very threatening, and this plays a key role in why Black spoken word spaces have survived for so long and continue to thrive. But to an insider, the moment and space of spoken word can very well become a moment of resistance, a space of survival. And these moments of resistance, the space of survival, hides in plain sight of anyone who wants to attend a spoken word performance. It is what happens underneath what the common observer may come to see that holds the key to understanding how Black artists make meaning and communicate shared cultural values in the spoken word space.

In this manner, spoken word functions in much the same way that perhaps slave gospels functioned for slaves on the plantation. These forms of Black resistance take shape in plain view of the public, spoken in vernacular and using references that only those sharing the same experiences can fully grasp or understand. Furthermore, they are engaged at one moment, for a particular purpose. Indeed, in a post-racial society where overt racial pride is frowned upon and narratives of the disappearance of racism contradict the daily struggle of those living in Black bodies, Black cultural arts such as spoken word become not just places for creative expression but places for reaffirming the history and shared continued experience of anti-blackness in the United States, as well as a space where narratives and experiences of anti-Black racism can be actively resisted, undermined and deconstructed.

It is necessary to note that I am not saying anytime a predominantly Black group comes together to share poetry that revolution and resistance are possible, though I also will not preclude that possibility. Nor is it to cast a utopian vision of the spoken word space as a place free of conflict and unified in its definitions, identities and intentions. However, not only are there trends and similarities in the way that spoken word open mics are conducted and the types
of topics that tend to emerge from them, there are also some observable patterns to the style of Black spoken word that should be explored more closely than mere performance or chance. Not only are there patterns and trends to these spaces that can justify closer examination of Black spoken word, but these spaces often create conditions of possibility for Black resistance.

*Conditioned by Domination: Critique In Plain Sight*

At the spoken word open mics that I attended, much of the poetry performed contained references to political and social issues that specifically affect Black communities. However, because these references are housed in a broader framework of “open mic spoken word,” the messages are more easily consumed by non-Black audience members as “creativity.” This does not mean, however, that the messages given at open mic spoken word events are any less controversial or challenging to frameworks of domination. For example, the spoken word artist Afrique¹ gave a poem questioning why Black artists don’t own their own creative work on September 28, 2010. Her hook was:

If music is what we master
How come we ain’t free?
How come we don’t own the rights
To our own unique melodies?

(Kelow-Bennett 9/28/2010)

Throughout the poem Afrique makes reference to Black history, Black musicians such as Billie Holiday and Miles Davis, and issues that are relevant to the Black community such as abuses

¹ Some names have been assigned aliases to protect participant privacy.
from institutions such as Child Protective Services. But as the words are woven into a poem and then performed in a stylized manner, the radical bent of her message is masked by the flow and beat to which she performs.

It is important to note, however, that Afrique’s message isn’t lost to her Black audience; the majority of Black audience members snapped and clapped during her poem in particularly poignant places, such as when Afrique stated:

They think that it’s cute,

to dress an infant in Timbaland boots,

Before he ever wore a suit

And he only wore the suit

When he was dead

(Kelow-Bennett 9/28/2010 )

These lines indicate Afrique’s awareness of the high mortality rates of young Black men, and her invocation of “Timbaland” points to the culpability of consumerism in contributing to the physical and social death of Black people. Afrique calls her audience to look beyond what the mainstream culture promises in consumerism and toward the manner in which a radical Black politics rejects Black death as a given. Her poem reveals this death as tragedy, and sees economic freedom as Black people owning the rights to Black-produced creative works.

However, since Afrique is performing this work in a poem at a poetry event, her message is hidden “in plain site” for all to see. Indeed, the night that Afrique performed there were a few white and other people of color in attendance. But there were no observable objections to Afrique’s radical reading of the institution of Child Protective Services, or her
portrayal of music companies as working against Black self-interest. Indeed, at the spoken word open mic, artists are given the opportunity to speak freely, and for Black spoken word artists this means creating the conditions of possibility for radical Black politics to be spoken in public.

Mixed racial crowds make the spoken word space particularly complicated. In the time that I observed spoken word events at Busboys, most of the white audience members I spoke with or overheard described the events as “exciting,” “magical,” “touching,” and “entertaining” (Kelow-Bennett 10/5/2010; Kelow-Bennett 12/21/2010). These descriptions were poignant in light of some of the radical Black and anti-white supremacist politics that were expressed at the mic by some artists, as the next poem will demonstrate. The most logical explanation for these reactions seems to be that the full meaning of many of the messages was lost to white observers, who were more interested in the manner in which Black bodies took to the stage to “entertain.”

This aspect of multiracial interaction complicates the space in a manner that Hartman points to in her work. In what ways can the Black body truly take pleasure when being observed by those in a position of racial power? Hartman presents a compelling argument that Black bodies are made to perform for white pleasure even in circumstances perceived as “for” and “by” Black audiences and subjects (*Scenes of Subjection* 8). However, the potential for resistance can still exist in this space, and is evidenced by the im/possibility (Moten 188), of Black bodies acting as author and pointing to the gap between their constructed object-status and their lived experience as *subjects.*
Indeed, how Black spoken word artists can point to the gap between constructions of blackness and lived experiences of Black people is most evident in poems that critique frameworks of racial domination. Many times these messages are quite intense, but because they are performed at a spoken word open mic event, the potential for angry reactions by non-Black audiences is mitigated. For example, on September 28, 2010, host and poet Derrick Weston Brown came to read a piece of “Other People’s Poetry”—O.P.P. (Kelow-Bennett 9/28/2010), which he then followed up with a piece of his own modeled after the first piece he read. The first piece Brown read was by Roger Bonair-Agard, entitled, “The All-Black Penguin Speaks.” Brown followed up this O.P.P with a poem of his own entitled, “The MGM Tiger Speaks,” written in a similar style:

[Excerpt from field notes of spoken word performance]

…recently discovered all-black penguin seems unafraid to defy convention… biologists say that the animal has lost control of its pigmentation. Other than (that) the animal appears to be perfectly healthy. “Look at the size of those legs,” said one scientist, “It’s an absolute monster.” [laughter]

“The all-black penguin speaks” by Roger Bonair-Agard

17 facts you did not know about me

One: I was born here; raised here, met my mate and warmed my eggs – here.

Two: Fully ten seasons passed before you noticed me. Don’t make up theories now, Johnny-come-lately.
Three: Penguins are color blind [laughter]

Four: Fuck your bell curve, albino motherfucker [laughter] – I know that’s not a fact. It’s an imperative.

Five: Penguins deliberately don’t read so we wouldn’t have to learn words like assimilate, discriminate, like mutate.

Six: We pray every day. It’s a simple chant: Evolve, Evolve, Evolve

Seven: Can’t you see it’s getting warmer? Don’t you see the ice melting? (Yes, I know these are questions)

Eight: I know the word rhetorical, bitch [laughter]

Nine: I’m actually the same size as all the other penguins

Ten: You suffer from ocular negrophobia, the condition in which all black, all-black things look really large and scary. [laughter]Yes, I know that’s a fact about you, you albino motherfucker. [laughter]

Eleven: I hate you. [laughter]

Twelve: I don’t believe in the same God as you

Thirteen: Evolve, Evolve, Evolve

Fourteen: There are two other all-blacks. We do not know each other. [laughter]

Fifteen: I’m prettier than you [laughter]

Sixteen: I’m making up a song about you. It’s called albino motherfucker [laughter]

Seventeen: We have a few all-white penguins here. We’re cool. They hate you too. [laughter and applause] (Kelow-Bennett 9/28/2010)
This poem gave a searing critique of white attitudes of anti-Blackness, and of white domination of racial knowledge, using human engagement with animals as an allegory. This use of human/animal relations is indicative of the critical engagement Black poets have with the construction of blackness in white fantasy. Blackness, as constructed in slavery, is primitive and animal like, and most importantly in need of a human to tame and/or understand its animalistic nature. The sophisticated critique offered by the poem is carefully housed within what appears to be harmless and humorous language. What is more, by writing the poem based on real-life events, the poet offers his listeners/readers another layer to sort through. This could just be a funny allegory based on current events.

However, to the careful listener, it is apparent that the poem is specifically critical of white racial politics and relations of domination. The laughter and applause heard from the Black audience indicated both pleasure taken in the poetry and agreement with the subject matter. In fact, many audience members nodded in agreement, and two Black women I observed were telling a story about their workplace, where one of the women experienced comments similar to the ones in the Bonair-Agard poem (Kelow-Bennett 9/28/2010). Both the stories that these women told and the Black audience reactions to the poem indicate a sense of shared experience interpellated by the creative recitation of poetry.

Far from being an indication of a shared identity, however, this is a sense of shared experience and shared history—a sense of shared suffering that results from constructions of blackness, often embodied in encounters with white friends, family and coworkers that reinforce the relations of domination between white and Black. Instead of indicating “this is how Black people are,” the poem indicates “these things happen to Black people routinely, at the hands of
white people.” The reactions of the audience and the poem itself is evidence of the symbolic residue that many Black audience members and artists bring into the physical spoken word space to discuss and often “work through.” The poetry, and the audience engagement with that poetry, indicates the struggle of real Black people with the symbolic constructions of blackness that envelop their lives in totalizing ways.

The patterns and trends found in open mic spoken word events can be mistaken for a sort of identity-similarity between Black performers and audience members in the space, but rather than identity-similarity, the patterns and trends indicate the fact of living in a Black body with the residue of constructed blackness. The observations I made indicate the amount of diversity amongst Black people, which is often most evident when Black people are found together in larger numbers. As Moten indicates, these spoken word open mics are the “im/possibility” of distinction that arises from negation—evidence of Black social life and Black sociality (188). Indeed, in the time that I observed artists, I watched Black prison convicts, Black gay men, Black lesbian women, Black teachers, Black AIDS survivors, Black cancer survivors, Black youth, unemployed Black men and women, Black businesspeople, Black fathers, Black grandfathers, Black professional artists, Black singers, Black models, Black mothers, Black grandmothers, Black writers, Black comedians and Black community organizers all perform at and attend the spoken word events. The people are as diverse as their poems.

The diversity of the artists and audience members indicates that there is some other “thing” at work than identity that brings about a sense of shared culture and politics in spoken word open mic spaces. Based on the topics of the poems and the audience reactions, the “thing”
at work is the way constructed blackness rubs against actual Black people, limiting expressions of agency and subjectivity and creating potentially life-threatening situations that must be carefully navigated—such as moments of unwarranted police brutality. However, despite the totalizing construction of blackness, actual Black people still live their lives within those conditions to the best of their ability. Far from unaware of how blackness is constructed and how their actual Black skin “shows up” in a given situation, Black artists and audience members of spoken word open mics demonstrate a complex and layered engagement with and resistance to these constructions.

The N-Word or “I Love to Kill Niggas:” Signifyin(g) and the Mutable Sign

[Excerpt from field notes of spoken word performance]

I normally mention this, every month during Black History Month when it’s my turn to feature…I started a campaign a couple years ago and I like repeating it every Black History Month so that it keeps going. I…I’m trying to ban a word, um, [applause] I hear this word all over the place, I hear it on the news, I hear it on the radio, and in songs, stuff like that, it’s the “N-Word,” I can’t stand the “N-Word,” okay? Not the word “nigga,” the word “N-word.” That shit gets on my nerves [laugher and applause]. Like, for real. You should say “nigga,” or don’t. You act like there’s some magic in the middle three letters that like, every time you say it, a Ku Klux Klansman in heaven gets his wings. It’s like, for real. The power is in the intention of the word. Words have no power other than their intent. There is no good, no bad word. Love is not a good word. Ok, you can say,
“I love to kill niggas,” [laughter]. Ok? It’s all in how you use it. White people, if you ever wanna use the word nigga you need to run it by somebody first, I’ll give you my phone number, run through the scenario, and I’ll let you know if it’ll work [laughter]. Ok? That’s all I wanted to say.

~Host Bomah (Kelow-Bennett 2/08/2011)

One of the most interesting and significant processes that occur at Black spoken word open mics is the Signification that many artists and hosts engage in. Far from being simply the “way Black people talk,” Signifyin(g) is the wealth of rhetorical games played by Black wordsmiths in the spoken word space. Signification is about bringing the full rhetorical possibilities to bear on the semantic register of language. In the example above, host Bomah engages in rhetorical game play using nigga and “the N-word” to provide the very critique that Gates points to. He uses the multiple possibilities of nigga and “the N-word” to explain to the audience that language is easily manipulated, and situates his critique masterfully within a story of white supremacist practices of lynching. Bomah’s articulation of the word he is trying to ban demonstrates Gate’s critique of Sassure’s argument that the sign means because of what it excludes (Gates 50).

Bomah’s excerpt suggests that for Black bodies, it is not enough to know what the semantic meaning of the word is. Instead, Black bodies must understand the context around a word, because no word is truly immutable. He poignantly uses the phrase “I love to kill niggas,” to indicate the stakes of Black people not knowing the full context of the semantics being used in any situation. His statement that “Words have no power other than their intent. There is no good, no bad word,” elegantly demonstrates what Black vernacular has uncovered at the
intersection of the construction of blackness and the lived experience of Black people: context is everything to language, and the intention of the subject speaking that language matters. It is, in fact, often a matter of life and death.

Bomah’s playful articulation is indeed a rhetorical word game, and he Signifies on his crowd by leading them down a path they believe they know—that “nigga” is a bad word. But within that playful articulation is an important lesson in survival to Black bodies: failure to understand the intention behind language can result in death. Context is everything to those who would survive anti-Black violence. This articulation demonstrates both the word play of Black vernacular and points to the knowledge that Bomah has about rhetoric—that the sign is mutable. Bomah’s understanding of the mutable sign is situated in his lived experience as a Black person, negotiating the meanings of blackness.

Bomah also signifies on his white audience members in a manner reminiscent of the Signifiyin(g) Monkey, when he tells his white audience members to call him first before using the word nigga. Described by Gates, the Signifiyin(g) Monkey is “…a trickster figure, like Esu, who is full of guile, who tells lies, and who is a rhetorical genius—is intent on demystifying the Lion’s self-imposed status as King of the Jungle” (56). The Signifiyin(g) Monkey is a folkloric figure that sends his enemy, the Lion, on a hopeless errand through the strategy of misdirection. By telling the Lion that the Elephant has said terrible things about the Lion’s family (which the Monkey takes ample time to repeat in detail), the Monkey is the master of the Lion’s demise, who goes to confront the Elephant and is, of course, thoroughly beaten. When the Lion returns to the Monkey, the Monkey reveals that he was behind all of the insults to the Lion’s family, and basks in the Lion’s humbling at the hands of the Elephant.
Ironically, there are very few situations in which a white person could use the word nigga without receiving a negative reaction from Black people present. But Bomah suggests that perhaps there are few situations where it could be ok, and that white individuals should “check with him first.” The level of laughter from Black audience members in this moment indicated the irony of his statement. Should white audience members truly trust Bomah, a masterful Signifier, to tell them the truth about the use of the word nigga? Will Bomah tell these individuals the truth, or will he send them on a similar mission as the Monkey sends the Lion? Or, is Bomah simply pointing out that in cases of racialized language, a skillful interpreter must have experience in interpreting the context in order to survive the moment of language?

Black Collectivity: Call and Response and the Moment of Joy

[Excerpt from field notes of spoken word performance]

Hi, my name is Pearl, I’ve never done this before in my life, [applause and cheering], so, I’m from Los Angeles, um…ok, so I actually wrote this, I’ve never written anything before in my life, and I was told that I should learn how to express my feelings through paper, so I thought I would just go ahead and do it, and I, I wrote it yesterday and so I thought I might as well come up here. I heard this place was great and I love it, and I hope you guys don’t boo me off the stage [laughter]. Sorry I’m really nervous.

Does it hurt you?

Does the notion that I’m gifted just irk you?

Does it cause you to blow up and cry
As I swope through the sky
Like a vulture in flight
Like a ghost when I rhyme
You can’t see these things
You can’t dream these dreams
That I see in my sleep
You can’t feel the hurt that
Cuts me deeper than deep when I weep
The words that I keep in my sleep in a locket
You dropped my heart to the ground
I took the gun and I cocked it
To the sound of your love
And the sanctity of my mind
So stupid and blind I
Believed the lies you
Whispered in my ear like it was funny
Like honey I sucked the nectar off of your neck
As you worked me and fed me the lies of your intellect
You’re not ready for what I have in store
For your multiple identities
With all these melodies I put into the fire
I’m a liar if I told you you was everything I desire
I’d fire you, stroke you and then kick you out
Like Omarosa
You was my soldier
When was I Sade
These mystical beauties I contain
From mythical creatures that only I’ve slain
Fuck pain
I wanna go up in flames when I reach my destiny
The rest of me will just deplete into ashes into hell
You people not ready for the shit that I’ve lived with my words
I’ve flown, swooped like a bird
And then crashed into a herd
Like a herd of lions
Into your heart
Must I not start
With the past
When we was hurled like darts
Between infinity and the masses
Sail boats couldn’t laugh at the Black pain, white faces
The Indians still never had to ride on top of a slave ship facing the front for days
They’d only have made it if
They’d fade into the ocean as it swallowed them naked
I’m bakin’ in the heat that I feel when I’m tasting the meal
That my people shivered to make
My body quivers with pain
I thought I slayed a herd of lions
But they came back with a bang
And then they tattooed my name on their hearts
They remembered the pain they felt
When I dismembered their mother’s body
And ensconced it,
So still
When will you diagnose me with drugs
That will still my innovative skills and agility
My mind and my creativity
Are you still with me God?
Do you still miss me when I’m not crouching down on my knees and beggin’
You please take me into heaven
And erase the hell that’s within me?
Like a teacher I keep empty pieces of paper in my briefcase
Hoping to see space one day as I pray to your mercy
But seeing his face still irks me
And it messes with my dreams
I begin to hear screams and things when I close my eyes to sleep
The boogie monster only creeps into my room when I’m asleep
Fools only drop into my face when they think I’ve fled into
Weak state of consciousness
They bombed my senses like Saddam
And attacking my mind like Stalin
And I’m trying to hold on to my past
But you’re bringing me back to remind me
Of the master that I held onto on the ship
And the bodies I had to step over just to take a shit
Fuck love I want to hate the people that did this to me
It must have been too much kindness I breathed
Must have been too much wine I needed
To be in a state of ease
To appease my mind
And release the beast that’s inside of me
The pain that collides with the happy feelings I feel
When you peel off three layers of skin
Three layers of sin
I’ve kept deep rooted inside of me
That I kept while cooped and hiding from the world
They couldn’t guide me into what I truly desired
And like a bird I fly up into the sky of my creativity
And doped the weed smoked so slowly
I choked on my dream
I choked in the seams that I saw when your
Hands burst on my neck and choked me
Jokingly you called me a bitch and provoked me to put my hands on you
But you dance too
You knocked me down to the ground and busted my lip
And then with a cigarette butt you dragged me onto my hips
In the parking lot
I almost died when I cried
Never to be the woman perceiving this violence
My spirit was silenced
But to you, I’m still your soldier
Told to hold on to the lies you told me when we was closer
But the gun you bought? I held in my holster
You said you wanted closure?
Well I’m gonna close this chapter of my life and never open it.

(Kelow-Bennett 10/05/2010)

Pearl, a young, black woman wearing leggings and a big puffy coat, said October 5, 2010 was her first time performing at an open mic, and the response from the crowd was supportive. But what occurred during and after her performance was nothing short of miraculous. Not only was Pearl particularly lyrically talented, she also had a compelling flow
and an energy that screamed to be recognized. The power this young woman came to the stage with, and the response from the crowd, was reminiscent of the call and response that is most closely associated with Black churches. This call and response between artist and audience can create moments of affect and possibility.

Call and response is one of the most accurate ways to describe the interactions between artists and audiences. Call and response describes interactions in Black churches, where the pastor or reverend will make a statement and the congregation will respond in kind. There are moments in the spoken word performances that feel very much like Black church; specifically, in the types of calls people make (“tell the truth!” “C’mon now!” “They ain’t ready!”), the sometimes uncontrollable frenzied excitement over a performer that is exceptionally good (such as the crowd response to Pearl), and the requests from artists to hear the crowd respond to what they say (“ya'll hear me?”). This back and forth—call and response—either validates what a poet is saying or invalidates it through silence.

Host Tiffany Okafor actually used church vernacular to welcome audiences to the open mic at 5th & K on September 29, 2010. After performing one of her own poems, Okafor asked the crowd if someone had said “Amen” to her poem. She then invoked a common black church statement. She said, “God is good?” and the crowd responded “All the time!” Then Okafor called “All the time?” and the crowd yelled, “God is good!” (Kelow-Bennett 9/29/2010). Although Okafor was using this as a humorous interjection to try to get the crowd involved, this interaction between the person at the mic and the audience is critical to the open mic space. Crowd responses to various artist lyrics or actions indicate to the artist the quality of his or her
poem and/or performance. A lack of response can lead an artist to disclaim either the audience or the poem.

This process of call and response is critical to creating shared understandings and meanings within the spoken word space. Specifically, it is how audience members indicate not only their understanding of an artists’ poetry, but also their own personal connection with what the artist is saying. It is an additional part of creating the layered space of spoken word. While all members of a particular audience may understand the words that an artist is saying, not all members of an audience will react in a way that indicates a personal connection. Call and response helps account for the differences in audience members’ relationship with the poetry that is performed in an open mic space.

It is this moment of spoken word—call and response—that disrupts centuries of questions about the sentience of the Black body. In this moment it is clear not only that the Black body is sentient, but that this body has felt and perceived every moment of suffering and pain that has been laid into her—throughout history—and is now coming forth to speak for herself. And she speaks not just of her sentience, but also of her resistance and survival—indicating the torque that produces this particular moment of Black creativity. The Black artist in the moment of spoken word performance proclaims that her body and her soul are alive, are intact, are aware, and must be counted. In that moment the Black body, and all of the Black bodies in the room through identification, touch the humanness that has been denied under the conditions of slavery and anti-blackness.

Poet Derrick Weston Brown alluded to this moment while he was recounting what it meant for Black artists to take the stage and to be supported and responded to affirmatively by
Black audience members. Acknowledging that there was something special and unique about a Black artist coming to the stage, Brown said:

> For Black people also, for African American people, young, old, man, there’s just something, something about getting in front of people, and, for five minutes getting to say what’s on your mind, to a degree. I definitely think so, that oral tradition, coming back. “I’m getting ready to tell you something,” they’re like, “I’m about to tell you something,” and then, think about it. Let’s say, you’re a young woman, and you were reading poetry to your friends, and you finally step up, and read a short poem and you get that call and response. I’ve seen people read poetry and they’re like, “Oh, let me start over,” and [the crowd says] “That’s alright, you’ve got it.” You know sometimes it’s that reassurance.

(Brown, Personal Interview)

Brown recalls the call and response tradition of Black churches when he recounts what is unique about Black poets taking to the stage in front of Black audiences. Brown situates his comments within a longer “oral tradition,” suggesting that the tradition “comes back,” in the moment of spoken word. This statement indicates the continuity with which Black historical traditions are perceived, and points toward a narrative that is longer than simply the moment a Black poet finds herself or himself in. Brown’s comments acknowledge how a Black poet affirms her presence, her connection with history, and her connection with the broader audience through the call and response function.

This moment can look like religious fervor. The call and response between the audience and artist, the sheer volume of the audience’s cheers, the nods and the affirmative glances, the
tears that are shed in these moments appear much like a church service. Of these moments, Brown says:

I can go so many ways with it. It’s that saying, when the spirit moves you, you’ve got to say something. Yeah, it’s like church. There was a point where, when you start going to open mics more, and that was our church. Because I would go in and listen and be like, wow, you know, my ears were new to all these different concepts and things, and hearing how people do stuff, and I’d be like, wow. And I would be moved to go home and write or, I’d have my notebook right there. Someone would say something and I’m like, I’ve got to write this or, you know, or, I have an answer to that. I’m inspired. I would leave inspired. I would leave like, wow. Or, there’d be people who’d say something like, yeah, I’m getting ready to do this poem and I’m reading this book by so-and-so. It’s a knowledge transfer or, in some cases, it can also be a place of debate too. This is also a place where now, you get a cross section of people’s beliefs. Diverse among Black people too. I think that’s something you’re really like, wow. (Brown, Personal Interview)

The fervor observed in the spoken word space is not in the name of a god or a religion. This fervor is the moment of joy, as articulated by Gina Dent in “Black Pleasure, Black Joy: An Introduction.” Explaining a framework that Cornel West laid out at a conference in person about the difference between pleasure and joy, Dent repeats his basic description:

…pleasure, under commodified conditions, tends to be inward. You take it with you, and it’s a highly individuated unit…But joy tries to cut across that. Joy tries
to get at those non-market values—love, care, kindness, service, solidarity, the struggle for justice—values that provide the possibility of bringing people together. (1)

Joy, as first described by West and later filled out by Dent, points to the possibility of collective experiences. Importantly, however, it is not collectivity to the detriment of differences. Rather, Dent articulates joy as “a knowledge that by definition critiques some of the oppositions we persist in making, and even goes against the very habits we sometimes confuse as the basis of our collective experience” (18). Joy can be articulated as the moment of collective possibility within the im/possibility of Black social life—the diversity and sentience of the Black community in that moment. Brown’s comments point to both the moment of joy, for which he cannot find adequate words, and the result of that moment—inspiration.

The stakes of these moments are indeed high, and the need for moments of joy are not lost on Black poets themselves. Poet Omekongo Dibinga argues that the spoken word artist has a life-saving responsibility to his or her audience:

I feel like, I’m a witness to history, and I need to document what I see...

Especially, you know, when I’m talking to young people who are into poetry. You have the ability to save lives with your work. And if you have the ability to save lives, or inspire people with your work and you don’t do it, then you’re committing a criminal activity. Somebody may die today because they didn’t hear you. And you have the power to bring a message to them that could save their lives. (Dibinga, Personal Interview)
As both a witness to history and a healer of sorts, Dibinga recognizes how critical these moments can be for individual people. This moment is important, indeed it is critical, because anti-Black racism can be an isolating force in many people’s lives. Much of the political and social progress made by Black people in the United States has been the result of collective actions by communities of Black people who saw fit to work together toward common goals. Is it a surprise, then, that spoken word open mics hold the potential for being spaces of survival for both artists and audience members?

Pearl, on any given day, may be considered a troublemaker. The story in her poem belies tremendous pain—the pain of wanting to be loyal and of fighting self-destruction. Outside of this room, outside of this moment, Pearl is Black. But within this moment, on this stage, Pearl is Black and an author of her own story. She is self-proclaimed and self-spoken. She speaks what she knows to be true, and she is believed, for the force of her words and their resonance with the audience confirms the veracity of her claims. Her body’s presence on the stage confirms the veracity of her words. Pearl and her audience are the embodiment of Moten’s im/possibility—the thing that is and is not object (188). What is more, audience members may recognize themselves within Pearl’s embodiment and her words, and according to Dibinga, be inspired to continue life as a result of her statements.

This is not to say that every spoken word poem recited approaches the moment of joy. There are many poems, and many whole events that fail to provide critical moments of call and response, or the moment of joy. It is also not to say that the moment of joy definitely changes the lived situation of Black people outside the spoken word space, although many people may leave the space inspired. Indeed, the number of poems that deal with the same topics over and
over again—police brutality, living within the confines of anti-Black racism, issues of poverty and social justice—indicate expression in this space does not result in emancipation. But what moments of joy do offer in the spoken word open mic space is a pointing toward the im/possibility of Black social life and Black humanity.

However, just as resistance is shaped by relations of domination, so too visible resistance has consequences. During Reconstruction, after the slaves had been freed and many Black people were able to run for public offices and vote, it appeared that Blacks would become more full and participatory members in society. At that time, white former slaveholders and other whites committed themselves to institutionalized, systematic violence that discouraged Black people effectively from running for office, establishing themselves economically and politically, and placed them solidly into second-class citizenry still in the service of white interests. These aims were accomplished through strategies such as sharecropping, but especially through practices of lynching, race riots, and other forms of racialized violence that were performed against Black people who stepped “out of their place.” In this way, Black resistance was forced, much as it was in slavery, to become a sort of strike and retreat activity. Resistance couldn’t be institutionalized because the cost of resistance was death, and repeated acts of resistance were quickly broken down and eradicated.

That does not mean resistance couldn’t exist at all. Resistance had to become unpredictable, unplanned, and highly effective in small doses. Resistance to the racist violence of reconstruction, Jim Crow segregation, disenfranchisement of voting rights, and the heavy police presence in Black communities today, took and must continue to take the form of moments of joy in the less policed spaces. In a moment, unpredictable and unannounced, Black
spoken word artists can testify to their humanness, and Black audience members can witness and identify with that testimony. And then, just as quickly as it came, the moment disappears and lives on only in the memory of those who participated in it and witnessed it.

It is the fleeting moment of joy that cannot be as easily co-opted by institutions and relations of power for insidious purposes, because the moment is not codified or guaranteed to arrive. Like impromptu meetings among slaves, the moment of joy in a spoken word open mic comes unannounced to the space. The element of surprise, and the element of inimitability make the moment impossible to repeat, and therefore difficult to co-opt. That is not to say that the form of spoken word open mics cannot be co-opted, as they are indeed codified. But what happens within that space, who will speak, what they will say and how the audience will respond are chance encounters. And it is this element of chance and unpredictability that makes certain moments of call and response joyful, and offers narratives and articulations of resistance to those who have been trapped within over-determined constructions outside of that space.
CHAPTER 3
CLOWNIN’ AND COONIN’: TORQUE AND VIEWERSHIP IN BLACK RACIAL HUMOR

...no matter what might be going on, if you’re able to laugh about something, then you know that you’re alive, and you know life hasn’t gotten bad to the point where you’ve given up hope,” (Malcolm, Personal Interview, on the way humor is used in his family).

Dave Chappelle’s Chappelle's Show follows a long tradition of Black comedians such as Richard Pryor in creating outrageous and often offensive racial humor. In the first episode of the show, Chappelle appears as the blind leader of a white supremacist group, who, because of his blindness, did not know he himself was Black. Of the sketch, Chappelle states, “I showed it to a black friend of mine, and he looked at me like, I had set black people back with a comedy sketch” (“Episode 1, Sketch: Frontline: Clayton Bigsby”). However, despite the edginess of his humor, Chappelle’s Show sold over 2 million copies in its first season, and he has become a household name in racial humor (Lambert).

Paul Mooney, a writer for and popular performer on Chappelle’s Show, has a similar brand of offensive and blatant racial humor. Mooney’s illustrious career, which gained traction as a writer for Richard Pryor and spans decades and multiple productions, shows the length and reach of his writing for humor. That Paul Mooney has been one of the writers behind multiple Black comedians who enjoy a wide acceptance from Black audiences makes his comedy
especially important to understand and analyze. In his own standup comedy, Mooney is unapologetic for his dark, in-your-face style of racial critique and rant.

In 2005, comic artist Aaron McGruder brought his long-running comic strip, “The Boondocks,” to television in an animated series. The series features the antics of two young Black brothers, Huey and Riley Freeman, as they move with their grandfather (Granddad) from Chicago to a white suburb after the untimely death of their parents. The series has created a cast of characters providing interesting social commentary on issues relevant to the Black community, such as Uncle Ruckus, a Black man who literally hates Black people and does not count himself among them. The series, in addition to having socially interesting characters, affords searing critiques of issues that matter to Black viewers, including police violence, homophobia in the Black community, intergenerational conflicts, and the potential for revolutionary action on the part of Black U.S. citizens.

This chapter will analyze different aspects of these three cultural productions, looking for the way Black producers of racial humor tread a conscious line between subversion and minstrelsy in their productions of mass media shows. The chapter will include interviews from consumers of Black racial humor in order to shed light on the way that Black audiences critically engage with racial humor as both a site for social critique and a place for catharsis from the stresses of hegemonic anti-Black racism. Throughout, the chapter will offer some insights into how Black racial humor can be better understood and analyzed within the context of Signifyin(g), layered meanings, and resistance hiding in plain sight.
Shaped by Domination: Paul Mooney’s Humor

Black racial humor often treads a thin line between subversion and minstrelsy, and the only cues to which side the actor is on often depend on context. Paul Mooney’s standup comedy wrestles with racial issues in a confrontational manner. Mooney provides commentary throughout his standup routines about the way he negotiates the relations of racial domination within his humor. Specifically, Mooney often responds to accusations of racism in his humor within his humor routines:

White folks didn’t sugarcoat shit to me. White folks didn’t give a goddamn. When they didn’t want me at their schools, they could’ve sugarcoated it: ‘Well, Paul, perhaps next year, we’re overcrowded now, perhaps we can work something out.’ They didn’t say that. ‘No nigger, you can’t go to this school because you’re a nappy-head, wide-nose nigger. We don’t want niggers here.’ They didn’t sugarcoat shit. I got over it, so white folks you get over me. I lived through the shit, you will live through it. Cuz they get mad, they say all kinda shit about me, “Oh it’s Paul,” it ain’t me. This shit was here when I came here. And it will be here, I can drop dead right now, racisms are here, it’s here forever, it’s in the blood. Cuz white folks owned us, and they will never get over it, cuz I’m gonna tell you why. I read the white book. Gettin’ away, wasn’t a chapter, ok? We tricked they ass, we got away. And they ain’t gonna never be the same. They ain’t been happy since. (Paul Mooney’s Analyzing White America 00:21:25)
Mooney calls attention to the relations of domination by recalling how he is often “blamed” for being racist, or for inciting racial tension through his humor. But Mooney consistently draws a line in the sand between his humor, which he considers as a response to the system of racial domination, and the actual system of racial domination itself. Refusing to take responsibility for the conditions under which he lives, Mooney points to issues of agency and blame that come from the historical legacy of slavery. His choice to highlight these tensions within the context of his standup routine provides a sort of flashlight by which the line between subversion and minstrelsy can more easily be seen.

It becomes important, then, to make a distinction between humor that uses relations of racial domination as its raw material to provide a critique, and humor that serves to reinforce relations of racial domination by presenting those relations as natural and correct. Both of these scenarios are shaped by racial domination; however, only one of them creates possibilities for “action not generally available” (Hartman, Scenes of Subjection 8). Specifically, satirical critique draws attention to the sources of anti-Black racism that are often hidden, and can even provide forms of comfort to Black viewers. Malcolm, 27, speaks about comfort in his interview about consuming Black racial humor:

I think especially in humor, especially in Black humor, there’s going to be a line tread anywa. I think in the Black community humor is often used to bring hope or healing or comfort in difficult circumstances. So if you’re laughing about getting harassed or shot by the police, is that somewhat of a contradiction? Yeah, but given everything that the Black community has been through and just in general how difficult life is for everybody, if humor is being used produced in a
way to provide comfort, there’s going to be at least seemingly some kind of a contradiction. I’m not saying it’s right or wrong, but that it just goes along with the territory (Malcolm, Personal Interview).

Satirical critique is an important tool for Mooney and for other producers of Black racial humor, who use satire, parody, and misdirection to shed light on the way relations of racial domination operate in U.S. society. By extension, comfort provided through satirical critiques can be a useful and positive coping mechanism for those dealing with anti-Black racism on a daily basis, such as Malcolm.

*Paul Mooney and Role Reversal: Signifyin(g) Criminality*

They’ve got all the answers in court. Ask the crazy white man: Crazy white man, why did you kill your wife? “I was sleepwalking,” It’s a very unusual case, we’ll have to study it. Crazy nigga, why’d you kill your wife? “I was sleepwalking,” Oh really? Well we’re gonna put you to sleep. We’re going to put an end to all of this. No nigga, there’ll be no more walking around. Crazy white man, why did you wake up, and kill, everybody in the house? “I don’t remember.” He doesn’t remember, what an unusual case we’ll have to study this. Crazy nigga, why did you wake up in the project and kill everybody there? “I don’t remember.” In 2000 years nigga I bet you will remember. Crazy white man, why did you wake up and kill everybody on your block? “I’m twelve different personalities.” Twelve different people? How unusual, we’ll have to study this. Crazy nigga, why did you wake up and kill everybody at BET on your job? “Because I’m
twelve different personalities.” Oh really nigga? Well pick who you want to be because some nigga’s going to jail. Bob, Fred, we don’t give a damn, but some nigga is going to jail today. They don’t let us get away with bullshit. (Paul Mooney’s Analyzing White America 00:46:28)

In this segment, Mooney discusses the differences between the way that white and Black criminalities are rendered in courts of law. In the set, Mooney provides excuses that he says white criminals give for their crimes, then tries these same excuses on a Black subjectivity. In each instance, Mooney leads the audience through the predictable scenario. The white subject’s excuse is taken as true, and rendered as “an unusual case,” which must then be “studied.” When the excuse is given to a Black subject, the Black subject’s excuse is reinterpreted in light of their skin. Mooney offers a perceptive analysis of the manner in which Black subjects are rendered as automatically criminal because of their skin, by placing the Black subject in jail at the end of each set. Mooney’s use of the word nigga serves to cement the construction of blackness as criminal, negative, and viewed through white racist relations.

That Mooney uses humor to express both the conditions of domination and his own resistance to automatic assumptions of Black criminality is an especially poignant example of torque at work. Two contradictory statements are true in this case: 1) The Black body is rendered as criminal under white looking relations because of its visibility, “already overdetermined” (Yancy 26), and 2) Not all Black people are criminal. Humor, in this case, signals to Black audience members that all is not lost. The rendering of the Black body as criminal has not succeeded in putting every single Black person into prison. There are many who have survived this threat.
The automatic assumption of criminality, and the variation in how different audiences might interpret this set, is a topic of Malcolm’s discussion of Black racial humor:

There’s a sketch that Mooney does about OJ, where he says, “All Black people look like OJ to white people.” It’s funny to a Black audience, not that somebody got murdered, but that anytime a crime is committed by a person of color in general, whatever community they belong to, everyone becomes a criminal. But a white audience might look at that and see it as the Black community excusing a criminal for something they did. As a Black person, it’s hard for me to express to a white audience, that, in situations that are a little more ambiguous, that it’s selling out the community if you automatically jump on the “black person is guilty” bandwagon. I think that automatically cheapens everybody’s life.

(Malcolm, Personal Interview)

Malcolm’s quote indicates not only to the differences in the ways that various audiences might interpret humorous treatments of Black criminality, but also to what he finds ironically funny about Mooney’s treatment.

Mooney’s willingness to speak about Black criminality from a Black perspective, casting doubt on the validity of the automatically criminal Black body, gives life to a subversive interpretation of Black criminality: Black criminality is not a fact of Black life but rather the fabrication of white fantasy and imagination. Malcolm’s comments about “selling out the Black community” by assuming Black guilt is a confirmation of his own critical engagement of this theme through Mooney’s humor, and demonstrates that he has experiences which confirm the
things that Mooney points to in his humor. This experiential, contextual knowledge is what allows Malcolm to bring the full meaning of Mooney’s routine to bear in his mind.

Malcolm’s comments also indicate that he is concerned more with what this humor might provide to Black people—hope and comfort—as opposed to what many in the broader society may interpret the humor as:

I think the most important for me is, is when, it’s [humor] done in a community setting, whether that’s me and a Black friend or family member, or more black people, I think it’s almost as if, like coming to terms as a group with some realities and reaffirming that, despite all that, you know, you’re still alive and well because you can laugh about it…I think it can divide segments of the community too but in my experience it always seems to bring me and Black people around me together, because, if we’re laughing at the same thing, then, there’s some kind of common ground there.” (Malcolm, Personal Interview)

The way that Malcolm describes the utility of humor within a community context seems to reflect Hartman’s suggestion that the only way to tell the difference between subversive and non-subversive acts within a system of domination is to trace the effects of each performance (Scenes of Subjection 8). That Malcolm prefers to watch racial humor within a “community” of Black friends and family indicates that there are optimal conditions under which to bring about “space for action not generally available” (Hartman, Scenes of Subjection 8), within the context of racial humor.
Hidden In Plain Sight: Chappelle’s Elucidation

Scrutiny of the white gaze is a consistent theme in Chappelle’s Show sketches, and Chappelle utilizes the persona of the trickster to accomplish many of his aims in his sketches. One game that Chappelle plays particularly well is the game of role-reversal of Black and white subjectivities in order to provide critique of race relations in the United States, and specifically of anti-Black racism. For example, in the sketch “Mad Real World,” Chappelle elucidates the representation of Black people in MTV's The Real World as “crazy” and “out-of-control” by reversing the positionality of Black and white participants. By putting the solitary white character in outstanding circumstances that mirror the white racist relations that Chappelle argues Black characters on The Real World faced, Chappelle’s sketch draws to the conclusion of the white character “going crazy” because of the constant pressure of humiliation, marginalization, and misunderstanding.

The stereotypical depictions of Black people in the sketch can be interpreted as either “true” or “exaggeration.” In this manner, Chappelle’s sketches contain layers of meaning for an audience to decode. However, whether or not an audience understands Chappelle’s work as satirical critique or as minstrel show depends heavily on their ability to understand the manner in which Chappelle utilizes role reversal and other strategies to Signify on his audience. Part of the clue to Chappelle’s purpose or intention in this sketch lies in the context of the sketch itself—and Chappelle sets his audience up with context for his skit:

I gotta tell you guys, man, my favorite TV show for the last few years has been the Real World. Maybe real life is just more interesting than fake life, I don’t know what it is…but that show MOVES ME! But the thing that makes me like,
mad about…not mad but I just don’t like this about the *Real World* is every few years, they always put a black guy on there, and try and make him look crazy. Like, he’ll freak out, you know, but it’s like, of course he’s gonna freak out. You put him around six of the craziest white people you can find…and then expect him to live a normal life. They [white people] would not like that, if we made a show where we put one white guy around six of the craziest black people we could find…would they?! Well guess what?! I got a show just like that!!

(“Episode 6, Sketch: Mad Real World” 7:24)

The additional context that Chappelle points to, which his Black viewers may be most aware of, is the racist looking relations of *MTV’s Real World* and how the show renders Black actors as crazy. By placing the skit within this context, Chappelle indicates that his sketch is not to be read on the semantic register as “white man with crazy Black people,” but rather on the rhetorical register as “white man signifying Black man under extraordinarily racist circumstances, which in turn Signifies on *MTV’s Real World* as reproducing racist looking relations.” However, it is the placement of the skit in mass media production, and its reliance on exaggerated Black stereotypes that makes the skit viewable to a larger audience, and particularly from the perspective of the white gaze.

Malcolm suggests that this humor functions to shed light on racism that occurs in real-life situations. He states:
…it’s also comforting to me in some ways. If you see a comic speaking out on an issue that Black people have to struggle with, or common day “isht”\textsuperscript{2} that’s going on or something…it’s just comforting to see somebody speaking about that and…and…even being able to laugh and to make people laugh about it cuz, if it’s something negative then, a lot of times if you’re able to laugh about it, especially with other Black people and in some cases, not all, but in some cases with people of other races, I think it kind of empowers you in that situation.

(Malcolm, Personal Interview)

It is the placement of these sketches within the context of egregious humor, and Chappelle’s use of stereotypical Black depictions, that allows them to be aired and to be viewed with pleasure by white viewers as well as Black and other viewers of color. But it is Chappelle’s elucidation of racist looking relations, hiding “in plain sight” for anyone to view, that provides a voice for viewers like Malcolm who might find racism difficult to articulate at times. In this way, the sketch’s meanings are layered, and depend each viewer’s ability to decode Chappelle’s use of rhetorical strategies in constructing a particular message. The sketches manifest creative torque in that they use anti-Black stereotypes, but emphasize Chappelle’s resistant reading to those stereotypes. The resulting laughter, comfort, and empowerment that Malcolm speaks of point to the potential effects of this humor—making space for the release of negative feelings associated with racism, and comfort in knowing that whether or not broader society recognizes anti-Black racism for what it is, Black voices are not completely silenced.

\textsuperscript{2} The word “isht” is an alternative word for “shit,” and replicates the sound of the word when it is altered for music tracks. It is often found in hip-hop and R&B music that is censored for radio play.
Signifyin(g) in Chappelle’s Show: Crazy Niggas

Chappelle’s use of exaggerated stereotypes builds on a long history of Black humor performances. According to Donald Bogle, comedian Richard Pryor perfected the persona of the “Crazy Nigger” (259), a Black typecast known for outrageous behavior in socially taboo situations, in the ‘70s. Chappelle himself acknowledges the influence of Pryor in his work (Lipton), and this influence points to the intertextuality of Black creative work that builds on centuries of racial oppression. But the use of exaggerated stereotypes should not automatically be dismissed as the singular message within satirical comedic performances.

Housing opposition to stereotypes within a framework of humor functions in a similar way that the stage functions in spoken word. The humor, and the mass media distribution, serves to mask the subversive bent of the sketches by making them seem “less serious.” Black racial humor, then, has a layered form that allows multiple audiences to engage at various layers. Simon, 19, another interviewee for the project, points to this characteristic of racial humor:

I think with broader society not enough people have experiences with other cultures to understand those shows…So, you know, I mean, to me, the broader society is watching the show for the comedy, but it’s like they don’t tend to understand a lot of the cultural references that go with it. And it is part of the comedy so, you know, they’re kind of missing out on these aspects of it. (Simon, Personal Interview)

Simon’s comments are especially poignant in light of the importance of context to Signifyin(g). Without having many of the experiences that Black people have within anti-Black racism, some
audience members will miss important layers of meaning in Black racial humor. However, rather than being a negative thing, Black producers and consumers of Black racial humor use this hidden layer to craft messages that speak specifically to their own experiences.

Perhaps one of the best examples of Chappelle’s awareness of the way different audiences might interpret his sketches is the piece he does with actor Wayne Brady. Chappelle uses exaggerations of two stereotypes, the Tom and the Black Brute. Bogle describes the Tom as “the first in a long line of socially acceptable Good Negro characters…hearty, submissive, stoic, generous, selfless and oh-so-very kind” (5-6). Early in Season 2, Paul Mooney references Wayne Brady in a sketch entitled “Negrodamus,” and implies that Brady is a Tom. When asked, “Why do white people love Wayne Brady so much?” Mooney’s character responds: “White people love Wayne Brady because he makes Brian Gumbel look like Malcolm X” (“Episode 5, Sketch: Negrodamus” 12:00). Mooney’s statement suggests that Brady is a “safe” Black man that white audiences can fully enjoy.

Chappelle’s subversion of Brady’s Tom persona is accomplished later in Season 2, when Brady appears on Chappelle’s Show as the “new host,” and does a sketch with Chappelle that poses Brady as the Black Brute (“Episode 13, Sketch: The Wayne Brady Show”). Bogle describes the Black Brute as “a barbaric black out to raise havoc...subhuman and feral, [they] are the nameless characters setting out on a rampage full of black rage” (13). Throughout the skit, Brady takes part in violent behavior, to include a drive-by shooting, pimping, and even shooting Chappelle at the end of the sketch. The signature quote of the sketch comes from an encounter with Brady’s prostitutes, when he accuses one of them of not bringing in enough
money: “Is Wayne Brady gonna have to choke a bitch?!” he asks incredulously (“Episode 13, Sketch: The Wayne Brady Show” 00:15:54).

This sketch disrupts the way the previously “safe” Brady persona works by placing him into violent situations that mirror white fantasies of Black violence. This placement of the Black body of Brady, which has been seen previously as unthreatening, into a threatening spectacle calls into question the meaning of the Black body. Is Brady violent, or is it his body in stereotypical depiction that conjures violence? The lines are blurred. The white gaze is disturbed and confused by the embodiment of two opposite stereotypes within one Black body, as these two stereotypes are irreconcilable in white fantasy.

It was not until I watched this sketch with my brother and a white family member that I understood the way the sketch disrupts white looking relations by Signifyin(g) on its white viewers. As the sketch progressed, my brother and I were laughing hard about the exaggerated behavior of Brady. Both of us, having seen the sketch before, laughed because we recognized that Chappelle was playing with two typecasts—as opposed to the actual person of Brady. We wondered aloud, through giggles, what would happen to his career after this sketch. My white cousin, on the other hand, who had expressed great pleasure in seeing Brady at the beginning of the sketch (“He is one of my favorite actors on Who’s Line is It Anyway?”), got progressively quieter as the sketch moved forward. At one point, Chappelle’s trick came to bear fully in her mind, and she blurted out, “I didn’t think Wayne Brady was even like that. He’s…he’s so…nice on the other shows!!”

My brother and I didn’t bother to correct our cousin, because it would have ruined the joke and our pleasure at viewing the sketch. My cousin, looking at the representation of Brady
as a literal (semantic) occurrence, lacked the contextual understanding to interpret Brady’s performance as satirical critique. She wasn’t able to see that Chappelle was playing with the persona of Brady exactly because in his other roles he appeared as a Tom. For my white cousin, the appearance of Brady’s Black body enacting violence had to be considered as literal, and as an indictment against his person. Her comments indicate that a Black body acting in this manner means that Black body is “like that.” What my brother and I understood, in contrast, is that a Black body appears as it does based on who is doing the looking. It is this contextual, rhetorical interpretation that came to bear in our understanding of the sketch. Neither of us attributed Brady’s behavior to his being “like that.” Rather, we both recognized that he was playing a role with historical precedent that was intended to point a finger back at the white gaze.

Layered Meanings: Chappelle as Trickster

The Wayne Brady sketch is perhaps one of the best examples of Chappelle in the role of the trickster, described in one manifestation by Gates as the Signifyin(g) Monkey: “The Monkey—a trickster figure, like Esu, who is full of guile, who tells lies, and who is a rhetorical genius—is intent on demystifying the Lion’s self-imposed status as King of the Jungle” (56). Chappelle’s use of a figure such as Brady reflects Chappelle’s propensity for Signifyin(g) on his audiences through rhetorical tricks and misdirection. While Chappelle’s audience members may believe they know the meaning of Brady’s violence as (semantically) Black violence, Chappelle demonstrates that it is actually he who constructs and later dismantles the meaning of Brady’s violence. He Signifies on audience members looking with the white gaze, such as my cousin, by
misdirecting them toward a stereotypical depiction which has been privileged by white looking
relations, while pointing to his own masterful crafting of Brady’s persona in the skit.

According to Gates: “The Signifying Monkey tales, in this sense, can be thought of as
versions of daydreams, the Daydream of the Black Other, chiastic fantasies of reversal of power
relationships…To dream the fantastic is to dream the dream of the other” (59). It is the
figurative reversal of power relationships that is crucial to understanding Chappelle as a
trickster figure. Chappelle becomes the conveyor of double meanings through his playful
depiction of Brady, and seems to relish the confusion the representations will likely cause:

It is this relationship between the literal and the figurative, and the dire
consequences of their confusion, which is the most striking repeated element of
these tales. The Monkey’s trick depends on the Lion’s inability to mediate
between these two poles of signification, of meaning. (Gates 55)

Much of Chappelle’s humor is dependent on these two layers of signification, and on the
inability of certain viewers to grasp the entire rhetorical meaning of the sketches that come to
bear in their plots and language. In this way, Chappelle can be understood as a trickster figure
that utilizes stereotypes and other damaging constructions to weave multiple meanings into his
sketches.

Chappelle’s use of harmful stereotypes does not come without a cost. By using these
harmful images in mediated representation, it is possible to say that Chappelle simply
regurgitates the stereotypes with humor to make them more palatable. But Chappelle’s work,
particularly in this case, can also be read as the “repetition, with a signal difference” (Gates 51),
that undergirds the intertextuality of Black cultural productions. This signal difference, which in
this case is Chappelle’s decision to use Brady specifically to house the stereotypes within a satirical and exaggerated performance, *alerts his Black audience to the game he is playing*. The sketch, then, becomes a masterful example of the tension of torque, where oppressive stereotypes meet Chappelle’s determination to show that the meaning of the Black body is in the eye of the beholder.

*Signifyin(g) Revolution: The Black Radical Humor of the Boondocks*

In *The Boondocks*, creator Aaron McGruder routinely deals with current events that highlight the many ways that different Black people engage with their society. In the first episode of Season 3, McGruder dealt with the election of Barack Obama, the country’s first Black president (“It’s A Black President, Huey Freeman”). Far from portraying Black people as undying supporters of Obama, McGruder highlighted the complex feelings many Black people faced in dealing with a Black candidate. McGruder’s diverse variety of different characters is part of what Simon finds comforting about the humor:

> It just makes me feel more comfortable in the way that, I know some of the messages that Aaron McGruder, who is the producer and the writer actually, I know some of the messages that he’s trying to convey, and I’ve experienced some of those messages in my real life…I think that the Boondocks was just more social as a whole, just focusing on Black people, and I felt like I could relate to those better. (Simon, Personal Interview)

By creating a show that features diverse Black characters, McGruder is already providing a different possibility within mass media representations of Black positionalities. As opposed to
simply being add-ons, McGruder makes Black characters central to the show in every episode. Going a step further, one of McGruder’s main characters, Huey Freeman, regularly espouses a Black radical politics, characterized by his statement in the first episode that “Jesus was Black, Ronald Regan was the devil, and the government is lying about 9/11” (“The Garden Party” 00:00:10).

McGruder’s critique also “hides in plain sight” in his episode about Martin Luther King, Jr., entitled “Return of the King” (Season 1). In this episode, McGruder imagines what would happen if Martin Luther King, Jr., instead of being killed in 1968, was in a coma after being shot and “woke up” decades later. The episode traces the movements of Huey Freeman as he acquainted King with the present-day. King and Huey make trips to the Apple Store, go to McDonalds, and make television appearances to promote King’s latest book. King’s reception at first is lukewarm, as he has lost relevance to a young generation of Black people and to a post-racial country. But with the terrorist attacks of 9/11, King’s comments about nonviolence and “turning the other cheek” receive angry reception from many Americans, and his infamy grows as he is booked on multiple talk shows and told he is “un-American” and a terrorist sympathizer.

Once his public image is ruined, King and Huey turn their attention back to grassroots organizing and put together a local meeting to discuss the development of a new Black political party. However, unknown to Huey, King calls a local promotion company to get the word out about the meeting, which results in the meeting becoming the “Martin Luther King Emergency Action Party” (“Return of the King” 00:14:54) The organizing meeting quickly turns into a fiasco, with loud music, a series of comedians, singers and preachers doing the speaking, and
random fighting that breaks out throughout the night. In fact, King and Huey can’t even get into the meeting because they fail to meet the dress code.

Through a series of lucky events and some bribes, Huey is able to get King to the stage, where he proceeds to try to give a speech. However, no one is paying attention to him, as the party is in full swing. In exasperation, King shouts, “Will you ignorant niggas please shut the hell up!” (00:18:21). The party comes to a screeching halt, as the attendees are shocked into silence. King then angrily proclaims, “Is this it? This is what I got all those ass-whoopings for?” (00:18:34), and proceeds to offer his critique of the current state of Black Americans. He tells the crowd that he doesn’t see much hope in looking out on them, and critiques many current events, including the television channel BET, as being below his people. At the end of the speech, King proclaims he is moving to Canada, and tells Huey to “do what you can,” (00:20:29).

King’s speech, however, is not lost on his people, and as a result of his honest words Black people all over America begin to take action. Basketball players go on strike until the president agrees to pull out of Iraq. BET’s owner apologizes for the way his channel has portrayed Black people over the years. And the final scenes of the episode show Black people facing off Federal police in front of the White House, while Huey states that the revolution has begun. The final frame shows the front page of the newspaper with Oprah elected as president.

A Nightline interview with Aaron McGruder demonstrates mainstream reactions to the episode (“Aaron McGruder Interview With Nightline”). The reporter, Cynthia McFadden, was focused almost solely on McGruder’s choice to have King, a civil rights icon, use the word “nigga,” in his speech. Focused almost exclusively on the semantic meaning of the word,
McFadden continually directed attention to the “appropriateness” of having King say the word nigga. But McGruder continually directed attention back to what actually happened in the episode, what he felt was the more important message of revolution and protest. This exchange illustrates well the difference between the semantic and rhetorical registers upon which white and Black seem to play. Semantically, the episode signifies the use of offensive words by a revered civil rights leader. Rhetorically though, the episode signifies issues that McGruder sees as standing in the way of Black emancipation, as played through King’s speech.

Viewers of Black racial humor point to this difference in what they take away from racial humor:

Black humor a lot of times is an inside joke, and…so much of it depends…maybe on a knowledge base that’s very much experiential, that’s not, that can’t be taught, that’s implied, that’s intrinsic to the community…There’s just certain things that go on with Black people that we all go through and I think that good Black comedy always draws on that. But I don’t think that it always draws on that in an explicit way, I think it’s more implied, more intrinsic to the group. (Malcolm, Personal Interview)

Malcolm refers to Black humor as an “inside joke,” whose contexts and understandings can only be gained through experience which is “intrinsic” to the lives of Black people. His comments are an echo of the way Black bodies make their way through the system of racial domination, regardless of where they may come from. It is evidence of the patterned and routine ways that racial domination affects those with Black skin, and these patterns provide the blueprint upon which Black humor is built and becomes effective. Humor such as McGruder’s
provides “space for actions generally not available” (Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection* 8), as Simon relates below:

> I feel like, the lessons that are learned in the show always overshadow the comedy itself. So while, there’s comedy, and it’s funny, and you can laugh, there’s always a lesson that you can sit down and say, ok, so this is the message, I’m not just gonna walk away laughing. (Simon, Personal Interview)

Simon’s comment supports the assertion that racial humor such as McGruder’s does indeed contain layers and relies heavily on contextual cues for its interpretation. In this way, these comedians can be considered as Signifyin(g) certain real-life experiences through their forms of satire and exaggeration. Simon’s comments further indicate the spaces that are opened by Black racial humor that provides elucidation of relations of racial domination. Specifically, Simon points to the educational quality of these pieces, and this learning relates to how to live in a Black-raced body within U.S. society.

*Point of No Return: The Thin Line Between Subversion and Minstrelsy*

Because of the nature of the relations of racial domination, and the pervasive nature of the white gaze in mass media, there can come a point where Black racial humor either drops out of popular circulation (as tends to be the case with Paul Mooney’s humor), or when it becomes more supportive of the relations of racial domination in a way that prevents space for resistant action. In the third season of *Chappelle’s Show*, while Chappelle was filming a sketch that would later become known as the Pixies sketch, his own awareness of the line between subversive humor and minstrelsy signaled the end of the show. In the second episode of the
third season, a sketch entitled “Pixie Stereotypes--In-Flight Meal” (“Episode 2, Sketch: Pixie Stereotypes--In-Flight Meal”) featured Chappelle as a minstrel pixie, complete with blackface makeup.

The premise of the sketch was the pressure people of color face in stereotypical situations. In this sketch, Chappelle is flying first class and is asked by a stewardess whether he would like to eat chicken or fish. Once the offer is made, Chappelle’s pixie appears in miniature (as his own conscience) in blackface, trying to convince him that as a Black man, he would rather have the chicken. The sketch follows the struggle between Chappelle and his minstrel pixie, and features a moment when the pixie breaks into song and dance when it appears that Chappelle will be forced to eat chicken.

Shortly after the filming of this sketch, Chappelle abruptly left the U.S. and went to South Africa to seek the advice of a trusted mentor (Farley). In an interview with a Time magazine reporter, Chappelle had this to say about his decision to leave suddenly:

“I want to make sure I'm dancing and not shuffling,” he says. “Whatever decisions I make right now I'm going to have live with. Your soul is priceless.”

The first two seasons of his show “had a real spirit to them,” he says. “I want to make sure whatever I do has spirit,” (Farley).

Since Chappelle had previously recorded many racially offensive sketches, we must ask what made this particular sketch different.

According to Chappelle, there was a specific incident where he encountered white looking relations that made him question his work on that sketch, and by extension, his broader work on the show. While filming the pixie sketch, Chappelle says:
“So then when I'm on the set, and we're finally taping the sketch, somebody on the set [who] was white laughed in such a way—I know the difference of people laughing with me and people laughing at me—and it was the first time I had ever gotten a laugh that I was uncomfortable with. Not just uncomfortable, but like, should I fire this person?” After this incident, Dave began thinking about the message he was sending to millions of viewers. Dave says some people understood exactly what he was trying to say with his racially charged comedy...while others got the wrong idea. "That concerned me," he says. "I don't want black people to be disappointed in me for putting that [message] out there. ... It's a complete moral dilemma." (The Oprah Winfrey Show).

Chappelle’s recollection of the circumstances surrounding the filming of the pixie sketch are significant to understanding how context and looking relations can affect whether Black humor is understood as subversion or minstrelsy. Chappelle was concerned with the way that white relations of looking were playing out in front of him as he performed the sketch, and it was this contextual cue that caused him not only to leave the sketch that day, but to leave the show for good. Chappelle’s reasons for leaving the show reinforce his interpretation of that moment, for Chappelle suggests that he didn’t “want black people to be disappointed” in him.

After returning to the United States (and being painted as drug-addicted and crazy by the news media), Chappelle walked away from a $50 million dollar renewal contract with Comedy Central and ended Chappelle’s Show for good. This turn of events demonstrates that the relations of racial domination, particularly as played out in media representation, are difficult to tread even for skillful Black comedians. While Chappelle may have been successful in
providing interesting and subversive readings of culture in individual sketches and instances, the trajectory of *Chappelle’s Show*, as it follows U.S. capitalist economic flows, would reveal that even when authoring Black comedic works, Black comedians are limited by relations of racial domination. This does not reduce, however, its utility for opening spaces of comfort and learning for Black viewers.
CONCLUSION

Only a worldview that subjugates blackness marks the phrase “it’s just black” as an offensive designation. Why can’t something be black (read, black American) and be influenced by a number of cultures and styles at the same time? The idea that it cannot emerges from the kind of absurd reality that blackness in the United States is constructed as a kind of pure existence, a purity, to most, of the negative kind, defined by a pure lack of sophistication and complexity and a pure membership in a group of undesirables. (Perry 10-11)

Dave Chappelle’s Block Party arrived in theaters around the U.S. on March 3, 2006. Written more as a documentary than a comedy film, Block Party follows Chappelle first through Ohio and then New York City as he invites people to a free concert in Brooklyn featuring Kanye West, Erykah Badu, Common, Jill Scott, Mos Def, Talib Kwali, Dead Prez, and a reunion of The Fugees. Chappelle does no sketches and no extended standup, though he does tell the occasional joke throughout the film. Instead, the film is spent looking at the places he lived, and interviewing different people around Brooklyn to discuss the experiences of growing up Black and poor. Chappelle visits the neighborhoods of Black hip-hop stars and listens to stories by those he’s invited to the free concert. For those expecting sketches full of racially charged humor, Block Party disappointed. However, for those who wanted to see a
production that celebrated Black hip-hop culture and Black cultural productions, *Block Party* delivered.

I had the opportunity to attend the opening night with two of my Black friends and two additional friends who were people of color. The theater was virtually empty, as there were only about 20 people in the room (including us). We were the only people of color in the entire theater. We thoroughly enjoyed watching the movie. However, during the movie, over 10 of the white folks who paid to see the movie left. One white man, as he stepped over my friends and I, proclaimed, “This shit is not only not funny, but it’s obviously not for white people either.” He was clearly frustrated that he’d even come, and launched his comment as a sort of attack directed at us. I found this comment fascinating, and have pondered what it means ever since the encounter.

Compared to *Chappelle’s Show*, *Block Party* has no stereotypical representations. The jokes that Chappelle tells focus on white racism towards people of color. *Block Party* is a celebration of Black cultural productions—primarily of hip-hop—and was an act of love from Dave Chappelle to residents in a low-income neighborhood in Brooklyn. Chappelle’s film reminded me of the beginnings of hip-hop, and reminded me that Black cultural productions, before they are televised, mainstreamed and mass-produced, have their origins in everyday activities of Black people. They emerge from our daily experiences, and tell parts of our stories through music, movement, and word. What a disappointment this depiction must have been to those who were looking to laugh at the stereotypical spectacle of Black bodies in the United States, instead of having to encounter the regular, rather mundane, but definitely human lives of
Black people. The scenario still makes me ponder what exactly it means that a group of people struggled through a film, a positive film, about Black people.

By the time I finished writing this thesis, the demographics of the space at Busboys and Poets had begun to change. With the changes in racial makeup due to gentrification of the U Street area, the open mic Tuesday nights, still as busy as ever, are becoming decidedly less Black. Indeed, Washington D.C., once known as a “Chocolate City,” is being rapidly overtaken by new condominium developments which attract higher numbers of white residents who can afford the higher rents (Kellogg). These developments are being built in the very spaces that once housed Black and Latino residents in public housing projects, and have precipitated a crisis for low-income residents, primarily people of color, who have lived in D.C. for most of their lives. Meanwhile, the U Street district is still recognized for the Black history that occurred there through the 1960s.

What does it mean when the Black people, the actual Black bodies that inhabited the U Street area for years are pushed out because of a lack of affordable housing, but their history and cultural productions are commodified and stylized in a way that makes blackness consumable? As more upper-class white residents move into the U Street district, they are changing the balance of Tuesday night open mics. More white artists are coming to the stage to perform. Less Black people are attending the open mics on a weekly basis. I assume it will only be a matter of time before Busboys and Poets’ Black performance space becomes a different creature.

While the changing of this space is certainly discouraging in terms of the disruption of a unique space for Black cultural productions, the constant movement of Black bodies in relation
to capital flows is not unique. There is a certain transience to Black bodies that have traveled the long paths across the Atlantic and then between North and South—from the escape routes of the Underground Railroad and the great migrations North, and now, a new migration South to spaces of more affordable housing. This movement is no stranger to Black people, who move often out of necessity rather than preferences. But with these movements come new experiences, new communities, and new forms of creative expression. While U Street may change demographically, the art of spoken word poetry, and of oral artistry, will still continue to circulate wherever Black poets are found.

This transience, demonstrated in the geographic migrations and the diasporic distribution of Black people around the globe, points to some important places for future research. Our broader culture still associates Black with negation, a Black whole with no differentiation. More work is needed to demonstrate how U.S. Black cultural productions also emerge from the migration, movement, and transience of Black bodies and Black experience. Even movements such as hip-hop, which may be constructed as a whole from outside the culture, vary tremendously by region and time period. The East Coast/West Coast beef between rappers in the ‘90s perhaps hid a much more interesting point—each region indeed had its own style, adopted from the particular geographies, histories, and cultures of each physical location. It is important to begin to develop cultural theory frameworks that can speak to the diversity and hybridity of U.S. Black cultural productions.

Simultaneously, more work needs to be done in order to move understandings of race in culture away from “identity politics” and closer to understandings of shared history, shared symbolic meaning, and shared experience. Specifically, there is a need to continue to reiterate
differences in choice about how various bodies are identified in U.S. society, and to recognize how those choices, or lack thereof, shape the way individuals, families, and communities negotiate their everyday lives. Of particular importance is tracing how different bodies move through symbolic and physical space as a result of their phenotype. In other words, frameworks need to be developed that speak to the way that bodies mean in and move through a culture, based on how they appear. Those bodily movements and meanings, as opposed to biological “essences,” shape and inform racial identity in profound ways, and certainly constitute more than “identity politics,” a term that seems to reduce racial identity to a game played between different people who are generally assumed to be equal. By refocusing frameworks of race on these aspects, and moving away from race as primarily an aspect of identity, we can open spaces for better describing how race functions on systemic and symbolic levels, while staying connected to people’s everyday experiences.

While Black people don’t live under the material conditions of chattel slavery any longer, we do live in its historical legacy. As Saidiya Hartman notes of our lasting relationship with slavery: “It has been dusk for four hundred years. If this past does not pass by it is because the future, the longed for, is not yet attainable. This predicament and this yearning are centuries old” (“Time of Slavery” 760). Black cultural productions reflect that complicated and contradictory time and space of longing for what has not yet arrived, and being caught in what has not yet passed. Black spoken word artists and comedians can be conceived of as understanding on a profound level their own malleability on canvas of cultural meaning in this space and time of interminable transition. Laughter, play, and our creative arts have provided us with outlets, not to “get over” the legacy of slavery and ongoing anti-Black racism, but for a
momentary catharsis and an embodied reminder that we are indeed human despite encounters that may cause us to believe otherwise.
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