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Laughing Between the Color Line: Mixed Race Humor in *The Key and Peele*
Show

By

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To the Graduate Faculty:

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures	vi
Abstract.....	vii
Chapter 1 – Introduction: Mixed Race in the Age of Obama.....	1
Chapter 2 – Re “Drafting” the Color Line: Dave Chappelle and the Functionality of Mixed Race.....	15
Chapter 3 – Malleable Masculinities: From Black Savages to Exceptional Multiracials.....	40
Chapter 4 – What’s New in “Negrotown:” New Media and Black Radical Activism.....	65
Chapter 5 – Conclusion: Humor, Mixed Race, and Popular Culture.....	86
Works Consulted.....	92

List of Figures

Fig. 2.1. Tiger Woods, Officially Black.....	24
Fig. 2.2. Racial Draft Commentators.....	26
Fig. 2.3. Bi-racial Penis.....	34
Fig. 3.1. Obama in College.....	50
Fig. 3.2. President Obama and Keegan Michael Key at White House Correspondents Dinner.....	58
Fig. 3.3. Obama and His Anger Translator in <i>The K&P Show</i>	60
Fig. 4.1. “Hoodie” Sketch.....	74
Fig. 4.2. Negrotown	81
Fig. 4.3. Negrotown pt. 2.....	82

Abstract

G. Reginald Daniel, in his groundbreaking work *More than Black*, asserts that the preconceived notions of whiteness and blackness in America are inadequate, and cannot support the ways in which mixed race individuals seek to be represented. However, in recent years, two biracial comedians, Keegan Michael Key and Jordan Peele, have begun to interrogate and complicate normative racializing systems along the color line regarding whiteness and blackness in their show on Comedy Central. This thesis examines the ways in which *The Key and Peele Show* highlights the mixed-race experience and emphasizes how the two seek to expand the boundaries of preconceived racial categories in the age of Obama. By situating the comedians in light of Obama's presidency and examining how these mixed race men take agency in constructing their own mixed race identities, this thesis will provide useful and necessary contributions to Critical Mixed Race Studies (CMRS) regarding the role of mixed race in humor and politics.

Chapter 1

Introduction: Mixed Race in the Age of Obama

“...That’s the funny thing about being mixed race. People are always happy to say you’re mixed, and you can say you’re black. They’ll be fine with that. But you can never go white. Ever. No. Race is a one way street, and black is that way.”

Trevor Noah, 2013, *African American*

In 2013 comedian Trevor Noah released a special on Netflix called simply “African American.” Mixed race, of Swiss and South African black descent, Trevor Noah was born in the time of apartheid, a period in South African history when it was illegal for people of differing racial backgrounds, specifically whites and blacks, to be seen together or interact in any sort of intimate or sexual way. The comedian speaks of being part of a mixed race family, or as he so eloquently puts it, his experience as “the mixed one in the family.” In the routine, he recounts a moment in California when he attempted to open a bank account, and a white woman walked him through the process of filling out a form in which he was advised to check a box regarding his race. He decided to check the “white” box, and it was at this moment that the teller did not understand the choice. His comments, illustrated in the epigraph above, reveal something that is genuinely humorous about the mixed race experience, but they also disclose the social and racial complexities that accompany mixed race. Noah’s comments indicate that race has not become any less complicated, nor has our society transitioned into

post-raciality, despite what many white Americans would like to believe; race is still something that needs to be navigated, and humor is a means by which this can occur.

Before discussing mixed race, it is important to contextualize the socio-historical construction of race. In the groundbreaking work, *Racial Formation in the United States*, Michael Omi and Howard Winant define the construction of race as “the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed . . . a process of historically situated projects in which human bodies and social structures are represented and organized” (14). Within this definition, the authors pay close attention to the notion of race coming about as social construct rather than a biological or physiological one. In essence, they tap into a thought process that sees race as something that is constantly in flux, and when dealing with mixed race, this kind of flexibility is crucial in understanding how mixedness functions.

Since Obama’s presidency began in 2008, the idea of mixed race has come to the forefront of national conversations and has been the subject of much debate and research. Numerous think pieces, blog posts, and videos have explored this topic in recent years, with people holding vastly different opinions on what mixed race means and how it relates to racial identity, political capital, and social progress. In the world of academia, a whole field dedicated to this issue, Critical Mixed Race Studies (CMRS) has emerged in the past decade, and academics have

been consistently contributing to the field in valuable ways. G. Reginald Daniel, a professor of Sociology at Berkeley as well as a leading scholar in CMRS, speaks of multiracials as historically being the objects of “historical, social, and cultural processes” rather than the subjects of analysis (5). Thus, the discipline can be broadly defined as placing “mixed race at the critical center of focus” (Daniel 5). However, this is not to say that other scholars and critics have not been writing and talking about mixed race issues in thoughtful and nuanced ways for many years. G. Reginald Daniel speaks of it this way in the inaugural CMRS journal:

What has changed is that there is now recognition of an entire field devoted to the study of multiraciality and mixed-race experiences. After many important scholarly contributions from various disciplines, the field of mixed race studies has seasoned, so to speak. Scholars are looking back critically and assessing the merit of arguments made over the past two decades. Rather than being an abrupt shift or change in the field, this critical turn is an indication that scholars are now defining the contours of the field while continuing consciously to attend to specific concerns spurred by earlier works. (5)

Daniel explains how CMRS is expanding as a field, and to this effect lays out why it so crucial that scholars look back at the work that was accomplished, as well as push forward to add to this growing body of work. This growing body of work

extends to the realm of popular culture¹, and the discipline calls for nuanced, scholarly approaches to mixed race.

In mainstream media, mixed race has often been treated in simplistic and unsophisticated ways, fetishizing mixedness as inherently beautiful or marketing mixed race as the end to racism. To this point, Danzy Senna writes in her satirical *Mulatto Millennium*:

Strange to wake up and realize you're in style. That's what happened to me just the other morning. It was the first day of the new millennium, and I woke to find that mulattos had taken over... Pure breeds (at least black ones) are out; hybridity is in. America loves us in all of our half-caste glory. The president announced that beige is to be the official color of the millennium...They claim we're going to bring about the end of race as we know it. (205)

Written in 1998, Senna's article was almost prophetic in her description of how mixed race would function in the coming millennium. While the multiracial movement of the 90's was already in full effect, with conservative politicians advocating for color blindness and the removal of race and group based policies, Senna hints at the coming century in which multiraciality will not only be

¹ Popular Culture is an extremely broad term, and can be used in a number of ways to describe multiple things. However, for the intents and purposes of this thesis, I use the term as described by the English Department at the University of California, Berkely, as it is "undeniably associated with commercial culture and all its trappings: movies, television, radio, cyberspace, advertising, toys, nearly any commodity available for purchase, many forms of art, photography, games, and even group "experiences."

tolerated but will be worshipped. In her introduction to *The Politics of Multiracialism*, Heather Dalmadge writes, “On the one side are those...who believe that the Multiracial Movement needs to focus on removing the concept of race either through the introduction of a multiracial category...on the other side are those who believe that multiracial people should be a ‘protected’ group” (4). Dalmadge brings up the motivating factors behind different constituencies, while Senna seems to especially disregard the notion of mixed race as a means to ultimately deconstruct race, and in her other writing, she waves off the attempt to claim a unique multiracial identity. Though mainstream media seems to indicate that mixedness can function in one of the two ways, the question must be posed: Can mixed race function outside of these means?

Rainier Spencer, in "Only the News They Want to Print: Mainstream Media and Critical Mixed-Race Studies," claims that “the dominant media in particular are woefully misinformed in regard to race, postraciality, and the meanings and possibilities of mixed-race identity in the United States (163). Though Rainier is speaking to print and online media forums (newspapers, magazines, etc.), I believe that his critique extends to the realm of popular culture. Although there have been attempts in the past to speak to the issue of mixed race in more popular discourse, television shows, books, movies, and other mass cultural items have largely been unsuccessful in representing mixed race in the

nuanced way it requires or in terms of how multiraciality has been manipulated for political and cultural gain.

This thesis addresses this issue by looking at *The Key and Peele Show* and various moments from Barack Obama's presidency, seeing these cultural texts as highlighting the mixed-race experience from the vantage point of mixed-race people. This is not to impose a kind of identity politics that claims that only mixed race people can talk about mixed race issues; rather, it is to claim that the comedians and the president are part of various moments in popular culture where multiracials are the subjects rather than the objects of analysis, as they mostly have been. Keegan Michael Key and Jordan Peele, in the very first episode of Season 1 (S1) of their show, highlight their racial identity, setting it as a framework for the rest of the show. This was a new occurrence in the world of sketch comedy – two biracial comedians breaking into the sketch comedy space having the opportunity to speak on issues of mixed race on a platform such as Comedy Central. My project investigates how Key and Peele situate themselves in the age of Obama and the country's purported post-racialism in an attempt to claim a racial identity that has always been placed upon them without their consent.

The central point of my thesis is to understand how humor addresses the question of mixed race identity; consequently, this takes into consideration issues of blackness, whiteness, and racial and gender performance. My analysis, though

wide in its theoretical range, gathers its framework from three scholars: Erica Chito Childs, Michele Elam, and Ralina Joseph, and is grounded first and foremost in Critical Mixed Race Studies. Each of these scholars approach mixed race in nuanced and multi-faceted ways, examining historical texts, fictional literature, as well as moments from popular television shows and movies that deal with mixed race in some fashion. My thesis falls in line with these scholarly approaches and looks to contribute to the academic conversation about racial perceptions in popular culture.

In *Fade to Black and White: Interracial Images in Popular Culture*, Chito Childs offers a provocative look at “interracial sexuality and marriage through the racial discourses and images used in popular culture and the media” (2). She contends that popular culture and media play pivotal roles in the ways that we as society make meaning out of the world around us (3). This meaning making process is no different when examining the issue of mixed-race. Though she focuses specifically on the constructions of interracial couples within media and popular culture, her analysis of how these images relate to and mirror the social construction of race and racial groups in society can be usefully applied to *The Key and Peele Show*. Chito Childs also grounds her analysis in the historical constructions of race and sexuality, and how these two identities intersect and inform each other. In particular, I rely heavily on her discussion of black male

sexuality as a mode to interpret how the two comedians push back against these kinds of racialized identities.

Michele Elam, in her emphasis on the performance of race, adds to Chito Childs work in *The Souls of Mixed Folk*, focusing explicitly on texts, both written and visual, that “honor, encourage, and study cross-cultural exchanges and multiracial experiences...without making mixed race a political special interest or the national solution to the ‘race problem’”(15). She posits that mixed race (her analysis of perceptions of mixed race in mainstream society) gives insight into economic inequity and social possibility, and more specifically, how it can be used as a means to nuance conversations about blackness (dealing with mixed race from a white/black perspective). Elam spends a significant portion of her book discussing Dave Chappelle and his show on Comedy Central and how he deals with race as something that is constantly being negotiated according to social and political needs. As well as a negotiation, she comments on the performative aspect of race, a useful framework for describing the ways Key and Peele perform different racial identities in various sketches. She provides a useful comparative context for mixed race in different comedic platforms, enabling me to assess how Key and Peele use mixedness in a different way than comedic traditions before them. This kind of analysis reveals connections between the comedians’ work and political and social arenas are able to be interrogated and explored.

Ralina Joseph's work, *Transcending Blackness: From the New Millennium Mulatta to the Exceptional Multiracial*, examines different categorizations that mixed race individuals have been given in contemporary times, and uses Barack Obama and his political campaign as a means to explore the notion of the exceptional multiracial. This latter term is one that I employ throughout my thesis, and she describes it as follows:

Other representations equate multiraciality with progress: the mixed race person functions as a bridge between estranged communities, a healing facilitator of an imagined racial utopia. These images, such as the one Barack Obama's team cultivated during his first presidential election campaign, feature a special, sometimes messianic mixed race character who has moved beyond the assumed confines of his or her African American heritage, and whose very existence portends racial liberation.

(2)

What Joseph describes here is a critique (and sometimes praise) that many have leveled at the president as well as Key and Peele, claiming that their multiracial identity is a tool that can be used to leave blackness behind and usher in the reign of post-raciality, and this is something that will be discussed at length in my work.

My operative question for this thesis asks in the mixed race age of Obama, what is the role of mixed race humor regarding complicating normalized racial systems, specifically blackness and whiteness? Obama's presidency has sparked a

national discourse around what it means to be mixed race and how it is connected to blackness; humor plays a crucial role in adding to this conversation. Critics such as Jared Sexton claim that mixed race and multiculturalism are in fact opponents of blackness and the progress of black people in the United States, and that the notion of multiculturalism undermines the visibility of blackness in the social and political arena of the U.S. CMRS scholars such as Elam speak against this, claiming that there are many ways in which mixed race texts (film and literature that have mixed race as their subjects) “address this tension and explore the possibilities for a mixed expressivity that is continuous with, rather than parallel to, capacious African American tradition constantly in dialogue and debate with itself” (xvi). My examination of Key and Peele and President Obama seeks to examine multiracial identity as a means by which blackness can be complicated, nuanced, and further expanded.

It is crucial to situate the five seasons of *The Key and Peele Show* within the context of Obama’s presidential campaign and election in 2008 as well as his re-election in 2012. The comedians, in an interview, claimed that they would not have had a show if not for the current president (Key). Obama’s election brought mixed-race to the national spotlight and forced people to grapple with the complexities of what it means to be mixed race in the social, political, and economic marketplace of America. In his first campaign, Obama marketed himself as someone who understood both whiteness and blackness because of his

mixed parentage, referencing his white grandmother often as someone who played a crucial role in his upbringing. Though Obama cautions mixed race people not to see themselves as special and different from everyone else, some scholars such as Daniel McNeil claim that this is exactly what Obama is doing.

McNeil, a large influence on my scholarly work, criticizes Obama's position on this issue by contending that at times Obama publicly identifies with symbols of African-American culture (basketball and barbershops), while in other moments he distances himself from the community in order to appeal to a white audience (205). This critique of Obama by McNeil and other scholars is grounded in the fact that he chooses to be "black" when it is suitable or beneficial for his political career. In my initial work on Key and Peele and Obama, I sided with this critique of the president and, by extension, critiqued the two comedians and how they dichotomized their own mixed-race identity. However, in this thesis, my intention is not to simply comment on whether or not they do a "good" or "bad" job in constructing a mixed race identity; rather, I am planning to focus on how these influential men negotiate their intentions and agency.

The concepts of intention and agency are complicated in that they require me to make judgment calls based on what people say, which is not always a reliable source. However, the critiques that many make of *The Key and Peele Show* and Obama are usually without nuance. Like Obama, the comedians are either multiracial saviors or sellouts to the white liberal agenda. The purpose of

this thesis is not to “pick a side” or justify why Key and Peele have structured their show in the way that they have; it is to understand how they are enacting agency regarding mixed race identity, and from this framework there is far more room for nuance in interpretations of the show. There are moments in the show when the comedians may perpetuate stereotypes about black masculinity or a false understanding of what being mixed race in the Twenty-first century means, and there are moments when the show boldly challenges the perception of the color line and racialized power systems in the U.S. Thus, it is my intention to approach *The Key and Peele Show* and President Obama in a multifaceted fashion – by first acknowledging the fact that agency is being taken in these texts and examining the motivations of these works, and then by analyzing how these motivations affected the texts being produced. Obviously, viewing these texts thorough the lens of CMRS is one among a number of interpretive methods, but the president’s and the comedians’ mixed race identity at this point in American culture unavoidably demand their take because of their public persona.

In my first chapter, I address the relationship between *The Key and Peele Show* and *The Dave Chappelle Show*, due to the similar structure that both shows employ – a hybrid of stand-up comedy and short sketch videos. In Season 2 (S2) of Chappelle’s show, there is actually an entire episode devoted to the dilemma of mixed-race people in the U.S. In this episode, a “racial draft” is held in the style of an NFL draft in order to solidify which mixed race celebrities belong to which

monoracial categories. This provides a nice comparative context for what Key and Peele do in various sketches regarding the plight of mixed race individuals, as well as the role of mixedness in challenging presupposed racial codes and identities.

The second chapter of my thesis focuses exclusively on how the comedians approach masculinity from different racial perspectives: particularly white, black, and mixed race standpoints. In order to do this, the interplay between the comedians and President Obama's racial identity as a mixed race man is explored in depth. Obama is a recurring character in all five seasons of the show and is usually accompanied by Luther, a black man from inner-city Chicago who functions as the president's anger translator. In order to appreciate how the comedians understand a kind of mixed race masculinity, it is crucial to provide commentary on their understanding and construction of Obama's racial identity and masculinity in various sketches.

The final chapter of my thesis examines how the comedians deconstruct gross generalizations perpetuated by popular culture as well as respond to the recent wave of social media activism, due to their mixed-race heritage and ability to move fluidly along the spectrum of both black and white (and sometimes Latino) masculinity. Part of this paper relies on contextualizing the two comedians within the age of New Media, a term used by scholars and writers to describe the wave of technology created to enhance the sharing and production of

ideas. Platforms such as YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook exemplify this kind of technology. Key and Peele are well aware of how these platforms function, and use them to place themselves within larger tradition of black comedy and performance in the U.S. The comedians, due to their use of new media and content, purposefully distance themselves from their predecessors, and yet, still align themselves with black social progress. The comedians are not anti-black by any means; rather, they seek to both expand and bring nuance to black culture, while concomitantly celebrating it.

In the twentieth century, the notion of the “color line” was created as a means to describe the “cultural and legal segregation between black and white racial communities” (Ibrahim 23). As mixed race men, Key and Peele find themselves interrogating this line, stepping over it, erasing it, constructing it once again, and all the while laughing. Humor is a diagnostic employed by the comedians to explore the fluidity of race as well as assert an identity that is constantly shifting and performed depending on context. They truly are laughing between the color line, and in their humor, we are able to gather some valuable truths about race and identity.

Chapter 2

Re “Drafting” the Color Line: Dave Chappelle and the Functionality of Mixed Race

The role of black comedians in the entertainment sphere can be a complicated one, as many struggle with representing to white audiences who they are as racially and culturally black without furthering racial stereotypes. However, to this point, Constance Bailey writes:

By conceding to the possibilities that black comics are doing more than telling jokes, entertaining us, or are otherwise there for our consumption, we endow them with agency so that we can begin to consider ways that analyzing said performances yields new and insightful commentary about race, class, gender, sexuality, and a host of other conditions endemic to life in America, indeed to life everywhere. (254)

Since the primary vehicle of a stand-up comedian is language, this is the tool at the black comedian’s disposal when he or she attempts to challenge perceptions about race and hosts of other issues. Bailey makes the point that these are more than simply jokes; they are attempts to correct assumptions and stereotypes while still celebrating the ideas of race and culture and entertaining audiences. This is an extremely complex task, yet when it is attempted, the results can be truly insightful, providing a space for tense subjects like race and identity to be dialogued about.

The *Key and Peele Show* represents a continuation of a style of comedy similar to that of *The Chappelle Show*. In 2003, stand-up comedian Dave Chappelle made the transition from simply performing traditional stand-up material to a hybrid television show, consisting of stand-up and pre-made video clips that included fictional situations as well as live interviews with people in various cities across the U.S. *The Chappelle Show* was predominantly driven by the theme of race relations in America, and the comedian did not hide from this fact; rather, he celebrated and explored the various ways that racial identity affects people of all backgrounds in edgy and provocative ways. Chappelle constructed stereotypical representations of Asian, African-American, White, Hispanic, and Middle-Eastern men and women in order to expose the way that many Americans of varying ethnic backgrounds view one another.

The Chappelle Show has been critiqued in a variety of spheres, and in many respects critics have heralded Chappelle as innovative and precise in his analysis of race and how it functions on multiple levels. Particularly with his representations of African Americans on the show, he seems to have “made art out of carrying out white fantasies about race to their most absurd levels. Indeed, much of the humor presented on his popular series *The Chappelle Show* played on and amplified racial stereotypes while simultaneously revealing their prevalence in American society” (Bailey 254). This was part of the appeal of Chappelle’s show on Comedy Central; if people assumed that black men were thugs and

aggressive in their masculinity, he gave the people what they wanted by amplifying these actions in his sketch videos. Black men were adorned in gold chains and necklaces, drinking 40 oz. malt liquor constantly, and assaulting both men and women who showed them some kind of disrespect.

For many critics who wrote about *The Chappelle Show*, this blatant, over-the-top stereotyping was part of its genius. Chappelle and his writers purposefully and tactfully played out racial stereotypes to their extremes, and in doing this, harshly critiqued mainstream America for the ways it views people of color. In one particular sketch, called “Reparations,” Chappelle plays out the argument made by some that the U.S. government should actually paying black Americans financial reparations, and what ensues is hilarity. Thousands of rap labels are started within hours of the imagined fulfillment of this government vow, FUBU (a clothing company associated with black culture) jumps to absurd levels on the stock market, and a black man who goes by the name of Tron becomes the richest person in America by winning the largest dice game ever played. As all of these actions are taking place, a white newscaster is commenting from the news studio and announces that crime has also dropped to an all-time low. This sketch exemplifies how Chappelle is very aware of the racial stigma African Americans suffer in the United States, but it is also a subtle revelation of how economic policy is connected to high crime rates and imprisonment in the black

community.² These economic policies derive from a government that privileges whites and is based on dominant society's *perceptions* of African Americans. Brought to the public eye by way of his stand-up and television show, Chappelle continued to share his views on racial inequality through numerous interviews. It made sense that issues of racism and discrimination were the main source of his material on the three seasons that aired in the mid-2000's. In a sketch like "Reparations," he and his writers took advantage of the opportunity to broadcast on a national scale how many people of color are still perceived, and in doing this, expose these prejudices.

The Chappelle Show, in many respects, was considered a "black" show – many of the references, jokes, and thematic material played off of popular elements of black culture: rapper Sean "P.Diddy" Combs' *Making the Band* show, the antics of Rick James in the 80's, etc. Alongside this, Chappelle frequently had musical guests perform live at the end of his shows, including Mos Def, Kanye West, Erykah Badu, and a host of others whose influences lie in hip-hop, neo-soul, and R&B. All of these elements grounded *The Chappelle Show* in black culture, and yet the show was wide-reaching until its premature end after three seasons. Chappelle, in later interviews, shared a concern that his show was reinforcing stereotypes rather than revealing how absurd racial stereotypes were,

² *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* is an excellent work written by Michelle Alexander exploring economic policy and drug legislation and how these acts resulted in the mass incarceration of black men.

and this was a determining factor in his early departure after taping a few episodes in the show's third season. He felt as if white audiences in particular were laughing at him rather than with him, and because of this, he felt justified in walking out on his contract with the television network. Still, Chappelle's show set a precedent and a standard for the hybrid structure of stand-up comedy and short video sketches for the duration of an episode. Though the show was not the first of its kind, it was recognized as one of the most successful and popular in that particular genre, and after its disappearance from Comedy Central, many wondered if there could ever be another show like it that would garner as much attention, criticism, and acclaim.

In 2012, *The Key and Peele Show* aired its first pilot episode on Comedy Central, and in the months preceding the initial episode, the comparisons were immediately made to *The Chappelle Show* and rightly so. *Key and Peele* bears striking similarities to the show; both shows employ the use of half standup and half digital shorts, and *K&P* still relies heavily on themes of race and ethnicity for their content and source material. However, the ways in which Key and Peele's show comes across are very different from those of their predecessor. Keegan Michael-Key and Jordan Peele, along with their director Peter Atencio, wanted each of their video clips to come across as a movie condensed into three to five minutes. Thus, *K&P* has a distinct cinematic element present throughout all of the seasons. Becker-Parton asserts that, "with his directing ability, Atencio also

brings focused production design, costume design, cinematography, editing, and visual effects to every *Key and Peele* sketch. “He successfully creates the world of the sketch with a sense of realism and authenticity that is uncommon for the format” (1). This is part of the show’s strength, as well as a factor that differentiates it from *The Chappelle Show*. The cinematic features presented throughout the five seasons are an effective style to communicate the various themes, one that was dynamic and groundbreaking, attracting an audience conditioned by media-saturated culture.

Key and Peele also divert from the content of *The Chappelle Show* in their exploration and commentary of mixed-race individuals. (Keegan and Jordan themselves are both bi-racial, having white mothers and black fathers.) In the past 30 years there has been a steady increase of mixed-race individuals in the U.S., and this increase has been especially brought to light with the election of President Barack Obama, a man of African and Euro-American descent. Thus, the premier of season 1 of the Key and Peele show in 2012 seemed fitting, on the tail end of Obama’s first term as President and the beginning of his reelection campaign. They pay special attention to Obama’s presidency, and focus explicitly on the idea of what it means to black and white in an American context. In this regard, they have distanced themselves from Chappelle’s show.

In the early 2000’s, though there was scholarly attention being given to mixed-race individuals, the subject was not brought to the national forefront as it

was in 2008 with Obama's election (Daniel 5). It is understandable why the Chappelle show wasn't concerned with this issue as a focal point of its material. Chappelle explored race within mono-racial categories, and in this attempt, he masterfully critiqued the perceptions of race in America at the time. While Key and Peele still explore the monoracial categories of blackness and whiteness among other racial identities, they at times tackle the category of the mixed-race individual. The focus on mixedness is a major element of the show, and it deserves scholarly attention due to the fact that their exploration of this topic is the first of its kind on a national comedic scale. The notion of mixed race is a complex issue, and to explore this issue in a comedic and visual manner is no easy task. Before the show was released to the general public, there was anticipation that this show could perhaps start to deconstruct gross generalizations of who mixed-race individuals are. *K&P* set out to accomplish the difficult task of insightfully and entertainingly critiquing culture while depicting the actuality of how mixed-race individuals are perceived by the dominant society. Thus, the lines are blurred at times between what is exaggerated for satirical effect and what is a genuine belief of the comedians. Critiquing a show such as *K&P* must be done carefully because of its comedic nature; while some sketches are stereotypical and seemingly reinforce wrong stereotypes, it must be remembered that the show is not necessarily supportive of these ideas.

This is not to say that Dave Chappelle didn't explore issues of multiraciality within the context of the American social and political spheres; rather, he differed from comedians like Key and Peele in his approach to this issue. The two comedians opened their pilot by immediately stating that they are bi-racial, of black and white parentage – setting the stage for an exploration of mixed race identity from a seemingly personal standpoint, which is a recurring theme throughout the five seasons of the show. Because Chappelle is not himself bi-racial, when he does discuss the idea of mixed-race, he is more focused on how these kinds of people, particularly celebrities, are represented, marketed, and discussed within popular culture. In Season 2 (S2) of Chappelle's show, there is actually an entire episode devoted to the dilemma of mixed-race people in the U.S. In this episode, a "racial draft" is held in the style of an NFL draft in order to solidify which mixed race celebrities belong to which monoracial categories. Michelle Elam, a professor in English at Stanford University, speaks explicitly about this episode in her acclaimed work, *The Souls of Mixed Folk*, writing: "What we need, Chappelle claims - after explaining that he and his Filipina wife argue over whether 'Cablinasian'³ Tiger Woods' athletic gifts come from his black or Asian side – is a procedure, a 'draft,' that identifies those of multiple racial heritage 'once and for all'" (163). Within this sketch a panel of expert

³ Kerry Ann Rockquemore, in her essay "Deconstructing Tiger Woods," documents this phenomenon, speaking of Woods as explaining his identity as an acronym, "created to reflect that his background is actually one-eighth Caucasian, one-fourth black, one eighth American Indian, one-fourth Thai, and one-fourth Chinese."

analysts – not unlike commentators on the popular sports network ESPN– provide commentary on the drafting and trading that takes place between different racial delegations.

Within the draft, a number of surprising events occur, including Tiger Woods (see Figure 2.1) being officially drafted as black, Lenny Kravitz chosen by the Jews, as well as the white delegation choosing Colin Powell (this deal is accepted by the black delegation as long as Condoleeza Rice is also taken). What’s interesting about this entire process is that it seems to go against the typical understanding of the one-drop rule⁴ and its function as a normative social construct. Elam writes, “Significantly, no one kind of mix is culturally weighted or guarantees a draft selection outcome – thus no relevance is given to the fact that the Asian-Black Woods goes black while the Jewish-Black Kravitz goes Jewish, foregrounding the sense that in subsequent rounds the draft could go another way” (164). What Elam so insightfully reveals through her analysis is the way that this sketch comments on the “spectacular nature of race itself” (165). Chappelle invites us to question the spectacle of race, and “the performances of racial identity make visible the production of blackness as it emerges from the debates about mixedness and as it informs national rituals of identity” (Elam 165).

⁴ Historian Winthrop B. Jordan speaks of race relations in the United States being heavily dependent on a social standard (the one drop rule) dating back to the 18th century. “If a person of whatever age or gender is believed to have any African ancestry, that person is regarded as black.”



Fig 2.1. Tiger Woods. “Officially Black.”

In other words, the markers of race are not primarily determined by biological features; the celebrities who are being drafted by the racial delegations are rarely seen if at all. Tiger Woods is the only one to make an appearance at the actual event. In her chapter on this episode, Elam notes that Chappelle does this very intentionally in order to emphasize how race is not dependent on the body for its presence to be there. Elam rightly interprets this intentional omission as a means to show how dependent race is on social and political conversations and needs rather than biological factors (166). More specifically, this conception of race

separates mixed-race from the body, and it is instead commented on and turned into a commodity without a visible representation. The people the audience sees most visibly are the commentators of the event and the representatives for each racial delegation. The commentators are two white men and Dave Chappelle, who is playing the seemingly token black sportscaster in an overwhelmingly white sphere (Fig. 2.2).

Elam comments on the role of these commentators as such:

...the panel of experts (two whites and Chappelle as requisite token) reflects the disproportionate number of white surveyors of the racial action “downstairs” onstage or on the playing field. The panel suggests that for the most part whites are the experts, blacks and people of color the object of their expertise. People of color play the game, but white people putatively understand it: they are the connoisseurs, the evaluators, the arbiters of race. (167)



Fig. 2.2. Racial Draft Commentators

The key part of this quote to focus on is Elam's usage of the three terms to describe the commentators – connoisseurs, evaluators, and arbiters. These words relay the idea that it is ultimately white power structures that decide on the stability or malleability of racial typologies. Within the spectacle, although people of color are making decisions as to which mixed race individuals belong to which monoracial category, it is ultimately the commentators who are making the judgment calls on what is taking place and guiding the fictional (and real) audience in how they are to interpret the events taking place. Furthermore, the episode critiques and calls into question the very premise of race and how it is

decided. Chito-Childs, in her book discussing interracial images in popular culture, writes: “People of color ‘have been the objects of representation rather than its subjects and creators because racism often determines who gets access to the means of representation...the question of power at issue in the ability to make and wield representations’” (Childs 16). Childs goes on to claim that representations of people of color in different spheres are a means by which those in power can create and sustain powerful images of themselves as opposed to those who the images represent (16). In essence, this author argues that the popular representations we have seen within varied forms of art and popular culture – particularly coming from white systems of production – serve to establish whiteness as normative and authoritative. This kind of ideology plays into how Chappelle and his writers construct the relationship between dominant white culture and everyone else.

Speaking further to this notion of white dominance, Childs writes, “There is a possessive investment in whiteness,’ and whites help maintain their dominant position by constructing and strengthening ideas about whiteness, often through this construction of otherness” (Childs 16). When everything else is constructed as other, whiteness is implicitly set up as the standard by which everything else is judged and placed against. This is what the commentators of *The Chappelle Show* racial draft illustrate in a subtle manner; though they joke and comment on the happenings of the draft, their remarks are a reminder of who evaluates race and

ultimately judges the decisions made. This ultimately points back to the origins of race in America where white men made the decisions of who belonged to which race. Judith Berzon, in her foundational work discussing the history and literary tracing of mixed race individuals, *Neither White Nor Black*, asserts how the leading scientists and biologists of the 1800's – almost exclusively comprised of white males – decided on the biological effects of race and how it caused men and women to act in different ways (27). This kind of thinking was influenced by a racist scientific view that was dependent on popular social Darwinism and eugenics (Berzon 27). Essentially, this racist-scientific view was a means by which whiteness was strengthened as a dominant force and power structure within American society. Though the sketch on the Chappelle show is a very different context, it stresses the similar point of white men in positions of power evaluating and deciding what race means.

A crucial distinction about *The Key and Peele Show* and how these two comedians tackle issues of race and mixed race, is the fact that their perspective is from a much more personal mixed race standpoint than that of Chappelle, and this changes the ways the two comedians construct images of race within their sketch videos and stand-up material. In the opening episode of their first season, Key and Peele appear before a live audience in which they introduce themselves as biracial. With this in place in the minds of their audience, the two launch into witty banter about what it means to adopt white and black cultural sensibilities on

a daily basis, and to essentially code switch depending on the contexts they find themselves in. The introductory remarks made by the comedians serve as a framework for the originality in their approach to their show. This is not to say that mixed race had not been talked about before in a comedic sense, but this was the first nationally televised comedy show in which the main writers and actors were claiming a very specific mixed race identity and addressing issues of race, culture, and politics from this standpoint. This kind of framing asserts mixed race as a focal point of analysis rather than a byproduct of a larger discussion.

When speaking of mixed race as a focal point of analysis, G. Reginald Daniel explains the way in which Critical Mixed Race Studies places “mixed race at the center of focus and encompasses analyses, portrayals, and renderings of the racial consciousness and agency among racially mixed people” (18). Key and Peele enact this kind of thinking by forcing people to see them as mixed race individuals. This kind of agency foregrounds *The Key and Peele Show* as an example in popular culture where mixedness is not seen as a commodity to be appropriated for different agendas; rather it is two men speaking about personal identity and how it connects to larger spheres of culture, race, and politics. Of course, one could make the argument that Key and Peele are commodifying their own mixed race identity as a means to a profit, but this kind of Marxist/capitalistic critique is irrelevant in my opinion, due to the fact that in a society dominated by capitalism, any kind of art is essentially commodified. The

comedians are going to make money regardless; however, within this process, they are also injecting more nuanced and smarter notions about what mixed race is into popular culture. Thus, a show like *Key and Peele* raises multiple questions: (1) How does mixed race function within the show in regards to personal identity, cultural affiliation, and social progress? (2) How do Key and Peele construct images and ideologies about whiteness and blackness as mixed race men?, and from the introduction to “Rethinking Mixed Race” (3) Is it possible to think about mixed race without reifying the concept of race? (Parker and Song 2).

In the “Racial Draft” sketch, Chappelle sees race as a spectacle, a game if you will, in which players are drafted – signaling that race is seen to be less about personal choice and identity than as a “public commodity with a value decided according to certain protocols” (Elam 169). The performance aspect of race is stressed within this sketch, and in similar fashion, Key and Peele pay attention to the performative aspect of race. This is evident in the way they speak of their daily interactions with people and each other, and how they change the way they speak depending on context. What Key and Peele enact in this kind of discourse is a common element in the actions of people in general – code-switching. In everyday life, many people change the way they express themselves in subtle and reflexive ways, going back and forth between “different cultural and linguistic spaces and different parts of our own identities — sometimes within a single interaction” (Dembe 1). In Gene Dembe’s first piece of writing for the NPR blog

entitled *Code Switch*, he references the first sketch video of the *K&P Show*, in which Keegan and Jordan find themselves standing next to each other on a street corner waiting for the light to change so that they can go their separate ways. As they are standing next to each other, a shift in tone and vocabulary choice begins to occur in the way that they are speaking on the phone, as a result of them both becoming aware of another black person in their vicinity.

What Key & Peele and Demby illustrate here is the fluidity of race and performance, and in the case of the two biracial comedians, how this is apparent in their everyday interactions. Minelle Mahtani speaks of everyday spaces as containing diverse social dynamics, power, and subjectivity, and this causes identity to be constantly shifting and never stable (1). Drawing on Judith Butler's theory of performativity, which states that "'performed spaces are not discreet, bounded spaces, but threatened, contaminated, stained, enriched by other spaces,'" (Butler), Mahtani calls attention to not only the fluidity of racial performance, but also the spaces in which these performances take place. Throughout her essay, she explores how multiracial women "choose among a multiplicity of invented identities that accommodate various situations, dependent upon their reading of their encounter, and their temperament at the time" (Mahtani 431). The parallels between this and what Key and Peele do are indeed striking, as the comedians are constantly choosing between a multiplicity of identities. In an interview with NPR, the comedians speak of growing up and constantly having to code-switch,

or alter their identity, depending on the spaces that they found themselves in. This bleeds through the work of the comedians in a myriad of ways.

In virtually every episode that has aired on Comedy Central, the two comedians move in and out of racial identities in their different sketches – playing white, black, Hispanic, and Middle Eastern men as well as women of differing ethnic backgrounds. The spaces where these comedians construct their videos provide a setting where they are required to perform a different racial identity, and because they play these roles so convincingly, they illustrate just how dependent on performance race is. However, within these roles, mixed race functions as a tool that allows them to move in and out of spaces fluidly as well as a means to critique and start to deconstruct racial stereotypes about whiteness, blackness, and mixed race persons. This kind of performative negotiation of identity resembles Spivak’s notion of “strategic essentialism,” or strategically ‘using’ one’s perceived racial or cultural (or other) ‘essence’ when called for, such as to counter white dominance (see Spivak).

It should be clear, then, that whereas Chappelle used mixed race to display how race is a marketplace commodity as well as a social negotiation, Key and Peele use their self-proclaimed mixed race identity as a means to complicate and destabilize the notion of race. In their NPR interview, Peele speaks about one of the main goals of the show as a medium by which the concept of race becomes muddled: “I want people to walk away from show confused as to what race

actually is” (Peele). Though it is difficult to ascertain the intentions of any artist, it seems as if one of the motivations behind the show is to dialogue about race in a manner that exposes how subjective and socially constructed race is. In S2 E4, the duo produce a sketch provocatively titled, “Biracial Penis.” In this video, the comedians provide the audience with a mixed race character in high school. The student is played by Peele, and early on in the sketch, he reveals that he has a white penis due to his biracial heritage. However, this poses a problem because of a girl that he intends to have sex with later that night at a high-school party. Because his penis is white and implicitly small (a bite-sized Snickers according to Jordan), he is fearful that it will not be enough to please the prospective girl. After this admission, his best friend claims that it will go well because the girl is white; a white penis and a white girl will match on a physiological level. Thus: logic, so rooted in the body, seems to make sense to the high-school students, and Jordan leaves the scene feeling a bit more confident in his ability. The next day, after the party, it is apparent that the night did not go as planned. In Figure 2.3, Jordan’s face displays how upset he is with the advice that was given to him. When asked what happened, Jordan responds with two words: “black vagina.”



Fig. 2.3. Bi-racial Penis

The first thing that needs to be acknowledged about this sketch is the absurd level at which it plays out – reminiscent of how Constance Bailey described *The Chappelle Show* as carrying out white fantasies about race to their most absurd levels (254). The idea that a mixed race individual can somehow have all the genetics from one monoracial parent focused into one body part is irrational, and yet this is a common perception about multiracials. Thus, Key and Peele play with this erroneous notion as a way to critique and bring to light false perceptions. This sketch is anchored in the attention paid to the body and how mixed race is codified and constructed within the Jordan's character. This differs immensely from the "Racial Draft" sketch, where the body was left absent from the screen; Elam claims that this was purposeful on the part of Chappelle in order

to emphasize how race functions apart from the body. Key and Peele's cognizance of how people perceive of race as tied to physiology comes across clearly in this sketch. "Whether in the guise of the new millennium mulatta or the exceptional multiracial, the mixed-race African American body is still tied to an imagined, excessive sexuality" (Joseph 33). The comedians are aware of this kind of thinking and purposefully create a sketch in which a young mixed race black student is intensely connected, in an exaggerated way, to sexuality.

As the "Biracial Penis" sketch progresses, the references to the body become more and more absurd, and at the end, the audience understands the incredulity of a bi-racial girl having a "black vagina." Though I believe that a sketch like this is an attempt on the part of the comedians to deconstruct false notions of mixedness and blackness, some do feel that they are more harmful than helpful regarding reifying stereotypes. Myra Washington, a professor at the University of New Mexico writes, "The sketch engages ideas of Black sexuality, as embodied by the lack of a sizeable penis, and miscegenation - 'White girl, White penis, you're all good,' the takeaway being that here authentic Blackness resides somewhere in the genitals" (1). Washington makes a fair critique of this particular sketch in bringing up notions of authentic blackness and sexuality and how they are represented. She is right in asserting that authentic ideas of race are represented in the body: blackness and whiteness are both authenticated in male

and female genitalia. However, the question must be asked, what is the effect of the comedians constructing these notions of sexuality and race?

It is possible that an audience could interpret this sketch and walk away with a more entrenched stereotypical view of race and sexuality, but this is the danger of any satirical or comedic art form – the lines can become blurred between what challenges stereotypes and what reinforces them. Alongside this possibility, there is also the danger of satire not being as precise as it should be. Perhaps a critique of K&P could be that their biracial penis sketch is not as well done as others, but regarding the motivation of the sketch, the medium of satire and humor must be given significant attention. Because the show is satirical, the understanding of the material (hopefully) will be examined and interpreted through this lens. A large part of satire is hyperbole, and in my opinion, the exaggeration and absurdity of this sketch is apparent. In this case, exaggeration serves the purpose of destabilizing how people think about race and sexuality. As biracial men, the two recognize that they are perceived in a specific light, particularly because of their black heritage, and are expected to fall in line with certain behaviors and mannerisms as well as have certain physiological traits. Thus, in this sketch mixed race functions to show how ridiculous views of race can be.

The complex and performative aspects of race are a foundational aspect of the show's written and visual material, and through their mixedness, Key and

Peele find ways to talk about blackness and whiteness. However, what is interesting is the lack of attention given to white characters. Though they do play white men and women at times, the comedians' mixedness seems to fail them in these ventures in light of the relative absence of white characters. One of the innovative parts of this show is Key and Peele's ability to cross racial borders convincingly and dip in and out of different racial identities, but when it comes to whiteness, their mixed race subjectivity still distances them. They have the ability to play convincing Hispanic, Middle Eastern, and black characters, but their mixedness does not give them entrance into white spaces. As mixed race men, it would seem logical that the comedians could dip in and out of whiteness as easily as they do with other racial identities, but this is not the case, displaying how unmarked whiteness can be at times, how it is structured as the standard against which everything else is placed. In later seasons, however, the comedians do attempt to deconstruct white power structures through sketches involving law enforcement, and this will be analyzed further in chapter four.

In the first two seasons especially, Key and Peele provide the most commentary on the issue of mixed race, talking about it in numerous stand-up sections as well as devoting multiple short sketch videos to it. The primary mode by which they approach this subject is from a personal standpoint, and it seems as if mixed race is a lot more of about identity than it is about politics. Granted, these burdens of making art political cannot be placed entirely on the shoulders of the

two comedians, yet this is one of the larger critiques made about the show as opposed to Chappelle's. Some critics claim that Key and Peele hold back in certain sketches in order to appease a white audience and not ostracize certain viewers and there is some truth to this, but as a whole project spanning over five years, they have grown as artists and critics of race and culture.

What Key and Peele display throughout their show is an awareness of how unstable race is. In her book *Transcending Blackness*, which discusses different mixed race people on television, Ralina Joseph writes that "the characters' explicit racial border crossing demonstrates how racialization is indeed quite malleable: in a number of cases the characters are presented as trying on different racial and sexual personae by altering hair, speech, partners, and manners of dress" (33). This speaks explicitly to how the comedians seem to become different persons on the show. What they represent on screen parallels the performances that many mixed race individuals execute on a daily basis. Regarding their theatrics, it is essential to understand that "the inherent constructedness of performance and the malleability of the devices of the theater serve to reinforce the theory that blackness, specifically, and race in general, are hybrid, fluid concepts whose meanings depend on the social, cultural, and historical conditions of their use (Elam Jr. 5)" This hybridity and fluidity is something that the comedians emphasize as a means for comedic effect as well as a way to alter the perceived stability of race. Thus race is not something that is

finished or completed at some point; it is constantly in flux, being negotiated, being performed, with elastic boundaries that are adaptable to suit different contexts and interests, and when this is realized, more honest conversations about race and progress can occur (Elam 175).

Chapter 3

Malleable Masculinities: From Black Savages to Exceptional Multiracials

As mixed-race men, Keegan Michael Key and Jordan Peele find themselves roaming the color spectrum, displaying a racial fluidity that allows them to represent different ideals, or perceived ideals, of black, white, mixed race, Latino, and other racial masculinities. This racial fluidity is used by the comedians to explore and interrogate different racialized identities, challenge stereotypes, and bring nuance to perceptions of black and mixed race men. When the comedians create sketches with these different kinds of characters, they provide insight into how dominant society perceives race and gender, but they also insert their notions of what these categories mean. Thus, for the purpose of this chapter, I will discuss primarily those sketches that reflect white, black, and mixed race masculinities.

In order to fully understand the images projected by Key and Peele, it is crucial to understand the historical backdrop of the intersection of race and sexuality regarding the black man. In her 2009 book, *Fade to Black and White: Interracial Images in Popular Culture*, Erica Chito Childs provides useful commentary on background on sexual identity and how it was constructed:

This new nation was also constructed through ideologies, including sexualized beliefs about different groups. The issue of power can never be overemphasized in terms of who has the ability to and access to create the

images, determine the discourses that prevail, and ultimately construct the framework in which we live and watch. People of color have been the objects of representation rather than its subjects and creators because racism often determines who gets access to the means of representation in the first place ...the question of power at issue in the ability to make and wield representations. (16)

Childs observes how society at large sees a black man's masculine identity as residing in his strength, savagery, and sexual prowess – a carefully constructed identity by those in power. What Childs so eloquently states in her book is the fact that America's racial hierarchy and formation of racial groups and identities were essential to the economic and social climate that helped the white population flourish. In order to ensure this supremacy, black bodies had to be constructed as savage and uncivilized in contrast to white bodies, which represented civility, safety, and, in the case of women especially, purity. Speaking to this contrast, Childs writes, "Whites inscribed racial difference, with whiteness defined as free, civilized, and superior against blackness, which was defined as savage, inferior, and destined to be enslaved" (18). With this ideology being so dominant within society, the exploitation and subjugation of black bodies became that much more palatable to whites, allowing the mistreatment and brutalization of the African American slave community.

Specifically speaking to the construction of the male black slave identity, Childs writes: “Countless laws were passed, and a racist discourse was constructed that portrayed black bodies as degenerate, excessive, and animalistic...at the same time black men were construed as sexual savages” (18). This is a common trope that many scholars have attempted to critique and deconstruct through their writing, and despite changing attitudes, this projection continues to persist in popular culture. Childs goes on to speak of the first major American film, *Birth of a Nation*, and how it perpetuates this animalistic savage stereotype of the black man – portraying black characters as sexually deviant and threatening towards innocent white women. Griffith, the director of the film, stated that his goal of the film was “to create a feeling of abhorrence in white people, especially white women, against colored men” (qtd in Childs 22). Clearly, this kind of overt racism is not present in film today, and yet the trope of the hyper-sexualized black man clearly still exists, as black men are still represented as the sexual fantasy of white women in movies, television shows, and music. This is the troubling, contradictory relationship that Childs bring to the forefront of her first chapter, a relationship comprised of fear and lust, of projection and subjugation, of hate and desire.

These images of sexualized, animalistic, threatening black men, which continue to appear on screen, are still products of society dominated by white male hegemony, one that still constructs the identity of people of color in order to

distinguish between what is black and deviant. Even films such as *Monster's Ball* (2001) and *Training Day* (2001), films in which actors of color received Oscars for their roles, display Denzel Washington and Halle Berry in stereotypical black roles: a crooked cop who abuses the law to his advantage in order to gain money and status and a woman who is primarily the sexual object of a white male protagonist. There is an obvious bias and misrepresentation still occurring in popular culture regarding people of color. Rainier Spencer's work on misrepresentations in news media of multiracial people is crucial in understanding how these instances are widespread and undermine the agency that people of color have in constructing a racial and cultural identity of their own.⁵In part, this is what this thesis attempts to do: to interpret and analyze the ways mixed-race comedians of African and Euro-American descent are pushing back against constrictive stereotypes and the white impulse to objectify and deny agency to people of color.

Key and Peele, two comedians who are of similar light-brown complexion, are almost always perceived as black men by mainstream society, and they are aware of this; that is, they do not attempt to completely distance themselves from their blackness. In the pilot episode of *The Key and Peele Show*, the two refer to the fact that they are bi-racial— they are biologically of mixed parentage, but their mixed race identity does not come across as a desire to

⁵ Rainier Spencer explores this topic further in his essay, "Only the News They Want to Print": Mainstream Media and Critical Mixed-Race Studies.

transcend blackness or claim something exceptional about themselves because of this mixture. Throughout their sketches, they grapple with and attempt to nuance black masculinity by attacking the very tropes that were discussed previously.

In one particular sketch, provocatively titled *Sex with Black Guys*, the two comedians explore the notion of the black man being seen as a purely sexual body. The premise of the sketch is as follows: Keegan and Jordan portray two black men drinking at a bar and in the middle of their conversation, they overhear two white women behind them speaking about the sexual prowess and mental state of black men. The two women have never had a sexual encounter with a black man – this is clear from their dialogue. One woman says to the other, “No, but I mean, like, have you? Have you—have you ever slept with a black guy?” The friend responds that she has not, to which her friend agrees with. Throughout the course of their conversation, the women go on to highlight many stereotypes and tropes that Childs discusses at length in *Fade to Black and White*. These stereotypes include how black men are simply better at pleasing white women sexually, the fact that they have bigger penises than their white male counterparts, and the natural rhythm that they possess as a result of their African ancestry. Throughout all of this, Keegan and Jordan are listening intently with their backs turned to the women. They portray a sense of intrigue, frustration, pride, and disgust in the two minutes of the sketch. When the women speak of black men as having some secret knowledge of how to please women sexually, however, the

two give each other a look of satisfaction, showing a sense of pride in the sexual prowess that they have. But when the women support this claim with racist and offensive “facts,” the demeanor of the two men begins to change again and they revert to their feelings of disgust.

For instance, when speaking of the bigger penises that these men have, one woman remarks, “I guess that’s because of Africa?” and for the rest of the conversation, the comments become more and more offensive. The women go on to say that black men are with you “in the moment” because they have no future and never see their children, but the most offensive comment by far comes when the women speak of their sexual ability saying, “Oh, well, it’s probably in their blood ’cause they’re used to pleasing their white masters.” At this point, Keegan and Jordan react audibly and throw their hands in the air and start to close their tab at the bar, but as they are in this process, they overhear one of the women exclaim that she is going to the bathroom and will perform a sexual act on a black man if she runs into one on the way. The two black men, in comedic fashion, are once again intrigued despite the overt racism that they have indirectly experienced. As she makes her way to the bathroom, Keegan remarks, in a non-related manner, that he has to go to the bathroom and will be about thirty seconds.

The clearest reading of this video involves the way in which Key and Peele structure the relationship between white women and black men, and more explicitly, how the masculinity of black men is viewed by white society and still

very much attached to the body and sexuality. The key to this sketch involves the exaggeration of certain features, an element that is present in most comedic sketch videos – that is, in order to critique something, an exaggeration must be present in order to show how incredulous something is. It is highly unlikely that two women, in a public setting, would make such racist assertions so openly and loudly, yet their conversation still gives voice to the stereotypes that many hold about the black man and his sexuality. Key and Peele, in this video, begin to deconstruct the problematic ideals that some hold of black male sexuality, while also providing nuance to what black masculinity is and how it is performed. In the opening seconds of this same video, the viewer catches the end of a conversation between the two men, and in these opening lines, there is a juxtaposition of who these black men are according to what they are saying as opposed to how the white women construct their identity.

In these early seconds of the video, Keegan says to Jordan, “I want to know what’s going on with the huge woman, and I want to know what the deal is with the red witch lady,” to which Jordan responds, “Yes. Yes. Yes.” What Keegan is doing in this moment is referencing the award winning HBO show *Game of Thrones* – asking questions about pivotal characters and the roles they have in the plot. But what is striking about this conversation is that it precedes the coming stereotypical identification of black men from the two white women. In keeping with what mainstream black culture is, that is, what it is best known for

in mainstream media – hip-hop, basketball, football, sexual prowess, etc. – *Game of Thrones* falls to the fringes, in that it is more associated with a white fan base. Key and Peele, in my estimation, are very intentional in setting up this sketch with this brief reference to a show dominated by themes of fantasy magic, dragons, prophecy, and various kingdoms/clans vying for the domination of a constructed realm. This brief snippet, if forgotten, allows for a simplistic yet still powerful reading of the video, claiming that black men are more than uneducated, lazy, sexual beings. A closer reading of these opening seconds reveals that Key and Peele are doing more than saying that black men are not these hyper-sexualized beings; they are extending the scope for what is socially acceptable for black men to do, showing that they can do more than be interested in sports and rap music. By referencing *Game of Thrones*, they are providing nuance to and expanding the range of what black masculinity entails and how it is lived out.

On a consistent basis, Key and Peele continue to complicate blackness in this way, and part of this is, as I have been arguing, due to their identity as mixed-race men. To borrow the language of Ralina Joseph, Key and Peele could be considered *mixed-race black men*, and though the terminology may seem unimportant or arbitrary, Joseph provides compelling reasons for why these terms are important:

The notion of “mixed race” and “monoracial” as separate categories to describe certain African Americans can seem almost nonsensical and

voluntary, and yet representations of mixed-race blackness do just this. Contrary to much popular discourse on mixed-race, the fact of mixing does not automatically disprove racial categories because the terms themselves include race: the names for mixed-race people signal their grounding in race itself. Indeed, the very ability to “mix” races rests upon the premise that race is a stable and singular entity. (7)

Although race is not a stable entity, Joseph’s point exemplifies how mixed race is not in and of itself a means by which race can be deconstructed. It is connected to and dependent on the racial categorization that has taken place over hundreds of years. This is part of the reason why Key and Peele are so fascinating in the ways in which they navigate race and masculinity through their stand-up and sketch videos. As mixed-race black men, they explore various kinds of masculinities, including a mixed-race masculine identity.

One of the many ways in which Key and Peele continue to explore the notion of race and masculinity is through the person of Barack Obama. In the sketches and stand-up material that the comedians devote to the president, they both interpret his racial identity in a number of ways as well as present a picture of what they see as mixed-race masculinity. Their coverage of Obama covers a wide range of settings and contexts, including the president in his college years at an Ivy League institution, his reactions to Republican criticism, teaching his daughter how to drive, and interactions with the First Lady. In each of these

moments, Key and Peele showcase a kind of mixed-race identity through the way that Obama acts and speaks to those who are around him.

In S2, E1 (2012), the comedians introduce a sketch in which Obama is presented as a young college student organizing a party to happen later on campus (Fig. 3.1). Jordan Peele (as Obama) finds himself giving a speech to a room full of people in order to persuade and inspire them to host the greatest party the campus has ever seen. In a leadership position, the young Obama bears striking similarities to the current president in the manner in which he commands the room, but more importantly, the Obama of this sketch uses a particular kind of rhetoric that aligns itself with the message of Obama's presidential campaigns – diversity and inclusion.



Fig. 3.1. Obama in College

In his book, *The Bridge: The Life and Rise of Barack Obama*, David Remnick, editor of *The New Yorker*, argues that “Obama’s multiple points of origin and reference – his biracial birth and multicultural upbringing— have made him adaptable to any situation. This explains in part Obama’s signature ‘cool.’ It also imbues him with the skills necessary to build a bridge between racial groups” (qtd. in Daniel and Williams xv). This notion that academics and writers have attributed to President Obama – the multiracial savior of race relations – is no new phenomenon. Since his initial campaign leading up to the 2008 election, this kind of rhetoric has surrounded the president, and was crucial to his success in the

American political arena. Though Obama cautions against this idea that mixed race individuals occupy such a unique and coveted space along the racial spectrum that they will be able to bridge the gap between conflicting sides, he at times has claimed to be this very thing.⁶

As Jordan portrays the president in his college years, Obama is once again perceived as the bridge between different cultures, races, social classes, etc. However, instead of overtly claiming that Obama is able to close the racial divide in the United States, *The Key and Peele Show* portrays him as a figure of inclusion and diversity in a university setting, one who is able to unite the collective group of people in order to achieve the goal of a unified successful party. When speaking of the kinds of women that should be present at the party, Jordan's Obama says, "We need some bodacious jock babes. We need some punk rock babes...It is imperative that we have a diversity in the ladies department." In this section of Obama's speech, he is portrayed as the means by which diversity can be achieved, but rather than using race as the medium by which this diversity is achieved, the show situates diversity in the different kinds of women desired at the party.

⁶ In 2005, Barack Obama said, "I don't think you can consider the issue of mixed-race outside the issue of race. And I do think that racial relations have improved somewhat. To the extent that people of mixed-race are part of those larger movements and those larger concerns — I think they can serve as a useful bridge between cultures. But what I'm always cautious about is persons of mixed-race focusing so narrowly on their own unique experiences that they get detached from larger struggles. It's important to try and avoid that sense of exclusivity and feeling that you're special in some way."

The ways in which Key and Peele construct the President in this sketch fall in line with Joseph's notion of the *exceptional multiracial*: "In the exceptional multiracial typology, prizing mixed-race blackness over 'pure' blackness, just as denigrating mixed-race blackness over 'pure' whiteness, serves the purpose of valuing whiteness over blackness" (Joseph 21). Essentially this is what many have done to Obama as a representative of mixed race people and the social, racial, and political capital they hold in the U.S. Though the one-drop rule is still very much in effect within popular culture and mass media – the idea that a drop of African blood within someone's genealogy inherently places them in the racial category of black (Jordan 5) – there is also the idea that someone of mixed heritage is more palatable to white America because of their dual position. This is a contradictory and problematic depiction of the how mixedness functions. On the one hand, many mixed-race celebrities and popular culture icons are perceived as monoracially black, yet it seems as if they can also be placed into the category of mixed race if it proves to be advantageous to those in power. Many on both sides of American politics market multiracial bodies as figureheads of inclusion and post-raciality, and Joseph describes this phenomenon as such: "representations of multiracial bodies transitioned from discursively maligned intolerable creations to celebrated future bridges to a color-blind utopia" (Joseph 21-22). This phenomenon is inherently tied to a kind of color-blind based politics that disregards the need for race-based policies. Neo-conservatives such as Newt

Gingrich wholeheartedly supported the multiracial movement in the 90's in order to affirm that race is indeed being dismantled, that society had progressed to a place in which the marker of race was no longer necessary as a defining characteristic of people. The mixing of races blurs these once distinct racial categories and showcase how far society had come regarding race relations. Mixed-race individuals for many white politicians are the products of a successful civil rights movement in the 1960's, one that has culminated in the rise of interracial marriages and the births of interracial children. These children are the key to the future racial utopia, and part of this misguided belief relies on a discourse that enables multiracial men and women with exceptional qualities to bridge the racial divide.

Key and Peele essentially market Obama as this multiracial figurehead in their "College Years" sketch. For some, this is in no way problematic, as the comedians are simply highlighting the president's ability to unify a group of people regardless of context – an Ivy-League campus party or the United States presidency. And in some regards, this is a fair assessment to make of President Obama; for anyone to win the United States presidential election two terms in a row, there has to be a certain mass appeal in order to unify millions of Americans. This justifies the interpretation of the comedians' sketch as one that celebrates and recognizes Obama's ability to unite a constituency in order to accomplish a particular task.

However, though these claims may hold some truth, they do not take away from the exceptional qualities that Key and Peele place on Obama as a multiracial president, and this kind of identity construction sheds light on how mixed-race men in particular are seen in the political arena. Essentially, Obama is marketed as displaying an ideal of diversity and inclusion that must only be due to his mixed race parentage. Joseph speaks further to this claiming that “some of the exceptional multiracial’s primary characteristics are that he or she is smarter, more attractive, and generally more redeemable because of the residue of whiteness” (26). One reporter from MSNBC, Ed Gordon, stated the following in 2008: “If ever there was an African American man who had that entrée to those folks [white folks], it would be Barack Obama. He’s half-white, he’s Ivy League. He’s all the things that white America considers safe” (qtd. in Daniel 16). What Gordon states here is a kind of multiracial identity that Americans are comfortable with – educated, well versed in standard English, etc. Furthermore, this kind of identity is explicitly gendered and highlights the difference between mixed race masculinity and femininity.

At the 2016 national Pop/American Culture Association Conference, Michelle May-Curry, a Ph.D. student at the University of Michigan, presented a paper on the multiracial politics employed by New York Mayor Bill Di Blasio through his mixed-race son Dante. In speaking of a particular portrayal of mixedness tied to masculinity, she writes,

... the focus on the mixed individual as a mediator of progressive politics is informed by hyper-visual gendered notions of what the future looks like in relationship to the past. Unlike mixed-race femininity which has more flexibility to be read as exotic or volatile, mixed-race masculinity is historically tethered to blackness, unflinchingly coded as black often regardless of skin tone or background, while still able to function in white or multicultural spaces as a "mixed-race narrative" as needed. (6)

What May-Curry states here is a pivotal distinction in how mixed-race men and women are represented and marketed in popular culture spheres as well as political spaces. Neo-conservatives and liberals alike have historically found the mixed-race narrative helpful when trying to establish an ideal that promotes post-racial sentiments. This narrative is most often coded in the mixed-race male body, as seen in Dante di Blasio, and, on a more national scale, in President Obama. Thus the bridge narrative is explicitly tied to mixed-race masculinity, rather than mixed race femininity.

In the 2010 census, President Obama indicated African American as his sole marker of racial identity, which some multiracial camps see as damaging to the progression of the fight for the multiracial identity and a reification of the one-drop rule that stemmed out of racist and segregated policies. And yet, Obama's marking of one box at the census displays just how tethered to blackness mixedness is; despite his mixed parentage, he is racially coded as black, and

though this was a personal decision made by Obama regarding his own identity, his platform as President made this act political. Speaking to this, Michele Elam writes:

When Obama became president, Barack became black again. The inauguration was the climax of his transformation from a black suspect, to a suspect black, to a mixed-race cosmopolitan, to MLK's heir, to, finally, America's Native son. The fact that he checked 'African American' on the 2010 Census was a personal choice that only threw into greater relief the way his racial identity had already been and would continue to be publically negotiated. (7)

The idea of Native son implies that Obama is representative of all the progress that America has made regarding issues of race and racism. As a mixed-race black man, his presidency highlights progress, inclusion, and acceptance of diversity. Though he may perceive himself as racially black, Obama still references his mixed race parentage as a means to occupy multicultural spaces and even employ a particular narrative – a kind of narrative that, while it may not explicitly state a post-racial future through the mixed race body, implicitly states that there is an understanding of both sides of the issues. In *Dreams From My Father*, the president clarifies this point: “As it was, I learned to slip back and forth between my black and white worlds, understanding that each possessed its own language

and customs and structures of meaning, convinced that with a bit of translation on my part the two worlds would eventually cohere” (82).

Although Obama’s deft negotiation of his multiracial “bridge” status suggests that he has psychologically resolved the contradictions that surround this status, he nevertheless senses very acutely the allowable (that is, socially permitted) expression of his true emotions. Key and Peele, sharing as they do Obama’s predicament, are able to accurately perceive, and to freely express, such feelings. It is clear, too, that Obama values their comedic perceptiveness since he invited Keegan to enact his “anger translator” sketch while he, Obama, spoke at the White House Correspondents dinner in Washington (Fig. 3.2). The president’s reenactment of the anger translator digital short in a live setting essentially aligned him with the rhetoric and message of the comedians, signaling not only an appreciation of their humor, but perhaps a desire to express himself in a manner that he is unable to due to the presidency and the stigma attached to angry black men.



Fig. 3.2. President Obama and Keegan Michael Key at the White House
Correspondents Dinner

Key and Peele introduce Obama into the narrative of their show early on, in the first episode of S1. They consistently present Obama in what is known as the “Obama’s Anger Translator” videos. These videos appeared periodically throughout the show, and the format of each was generally the same, with Obama speaking and an anger translator “translating” Obama’s speech. In an interview with Conan O’Brian, the comedians reveal the thought process behind the anger translator videos. There was an instance in which Obama was addressing Congress, and during his speech a Congressman yelled out, “You lie.” Key and

Peele both remark that at this instance, they wanted the President to simply get angry and do something that would be unprofessional and inappropriate. Since he was unable to do so, the comedians provided Obama with the outlet to do so; thus Luther (played by Keegan), the anger translator, was created.

In S1 E1, the comedians introduce Luther as an African-American man from inner-city Chicago (Fig. 3.2) who understands very clearly how to be angry and express himself in an aggressive manner, something that Obama does not have the liberty of doing (again, due to his awareness of what kind of expression is socially permitted). Luther expresses Obama's anger for him, and does this through a variety of means – “black speech,” yelling angrily and loudly, and using numerous expletives. Whenever the President (played by Jordan), makes a remark to the camera, in a clear, polished, and civil tone, Luther “translates” and supposedly reveals what the President would truly like to say. The exchange on the first episode follows as such:

Obama: “Concerning recent developments in the Middle East, I want to reiterate our unflinching support for all people and their right to a democratic process.”

Luther: “All ya’ll dictators out there. Keep messin’ around and see what happens. Just see what happens. Watch!”

Obama: To the governments...we urge you to discontinue your uranium enrichment program.”

Luther: “I already done told ya’all!” (grimaces menacingly and clenches fists tightly)

Obama: “I hear your voices, and I am aware of your concerns.” (speaking to his critics)

Luther: “So maybe if you could chill the hell out for like a second, then maybe I could focus on some shit!”



Fig. 3.3. Obama and His Anger Translator in *The K&P Show*

The intention of this digital short, according to the comedians, was to vicariously enable Obama to express his anger about issues that he legitimately has the right to be upset about. At face value, these sketches can be perceived as the political Obama and the Obama “off camera” and out of the public view (Luther). In other words, because he is the President of the United States, there is a certain level of decorum and civility that he must maintain regardless of the situation or unfair judgments that the country makes of him. Luther is the voice that he keeps internalized because it would come across as abrasive and offensive to the general public. This aspect of the anger translator videos is a crucial component of the narrative, but the question must be asked – Is this also a representation of the “white” and “black” Obama?

Though the comedians may not have intended for Luther to be viewed as the black version of President Obama, this is a possible interpretation of the digital short. The language that Luther employs in his “translations” is consistent with the “black” speech that the comedians have set as the discourse of the black community. Furthermore, the construction of Luther as an angry black man fortifies the stereotype of African-Americans as loud and aggressive, unable to restrain themselves and keep their tempers in check. As President, Obama must always conduct himself in a manner that is associated with whiteness – he uses the most polished of grammar, and keeps an even tone throughout this speech, maintaining a calm and collected persona. This is what is acceptable in American politics and these qualities in and of themselves are not problematic, but the fact these qualities are inherently perceived as white is. The version of Obama associated with whiteness is respectable and polite, while the version of Obama associated with blackness is angry and volatile. What this does is reinforce the binary of whiteness and blackness that exists in American society. K&P, in their construction of Obama, reveal that he is not a unified mixed-race individual; rather he must perform as a white man, though he secretly wishes to express the anger he feels in a “black” manner.

At varying points in the show, the two comedians make it clear that they are very sympathetic towards the President and his policies. Their depiction of Obama acting properly, or as what is perceived to be “white,” but wanting to

express himself in a “black” manner at other times, falls in line with a critique that many make of Obama. Daniel McNeil, an associate professor of history at Carleton University, introduces a radical critique of Obama and other members of a post-civil rights generation, claiming that they “assert or rescind racial identity in order to seize the gains of a civil rights movement” (204). McNeil contends that at times Obama publicly identifies with symbols of African-American culture (basketball and barbershops), while in other moments distancing himself from the community in order to appeal to a white audience (205). This critique of Obama is grounded in the fact that chooses to be “black” when it is suitable or beneficial for his political career, and could also be considered a kind of “strategic essentialism,” pointing back to Spivak’s theory. In light of this, it seems that McNeil holds to an essentialist idea of race and racial culture that Obama—and Key and Peele—are attempting to resist. Thus another way to read the comedians is not necessarily as reinforcing stereotypes, but more of a negotiation of the complex ‘zone’ between McNeil’s understandable worry about cooptation, on one hand, and Spivak’s equally understandable belief that, given our current social inequities, someone like Obama is at times compelled to adopt different personae in order to shape mainstream culture to his own needs.

The relationship that the comedians have to masculinity and race is a complex one, and at different moments in the show, their representations and perceptions of these issues change depending on context. Obama is a crucial

component of the show's navigation of different masculine identities, and though the comedians market him at times as exceptional, it must be understood that Obama's presidency does, in a sense, elevate him to an exceptional position. Still, the unique status that some give to the president can be problematic, as it may place Obama as a prototype for the bridge narrative or even market him as a "celebrity half-caste," who is paraded as the success of multiculturalism (McNeil 206). The anger translator that Key and Peele create for the President gets at one of the central paradoxes of the exceptional multiracial figure, the fact that everyone has to code-switch in order to navigate the differing requirements of different social situations. However, what's interesting about K&P's anger translator is that we don't see "normal" code switching (obviously the president can't fully express his anger when he's addressing the nation in the same way he might express it during a conversation with a close friend). The code-switching in this case is racialized, so that the switching depends less on the social situation and more on the performance of racial identity that responds to the situation.

In all of the sketches examined throughout this chapter, Key and Peele observe and represent the malleability that accompanies race and masculinity. From the black men at the bar to Obama and his anger translator, each of these constructions bring to light just how different masculinity can come across depending on context. The fact that Key and Peele move in and out of these racialized masculine identities so fluidly and convincingly is a testament to this

malleability. They do effectively push back against specific black male stereotypes, particularly the sexualized images that have come to represent black men, complicating this reading by introducing characters in their show that display characteristics that go against mainstream media perceptions of blackness. Yet in the same breath, the comedians create Luther, a black man from inner-city Chicago who displays all the stereotypical characteristics of the angry black man. Thus the spectrum of masculinity in the *K&P* show covered is wide in its range and reveals how diverse masculinity can be. The comedians prove that race and gender are indeed intertwined, and while this is a positive effect of the show, it does not remove the need to critically think about the constructions of masculinity throughout the five seasons. Key and Peele can create problematic ideals about exceptional multiracials or angry black men, but at the same time they reveal how performative these identities are, and how these identities depend on context and different social situations.

Chapter 4

What's New in "Negrotown:" New Media and Black Radical Activism

In the fourth season of *The Key and Peele Show*, the comedians altered the format of their show, switching from a hybrid style of digital shorts and stand-up in front of a live audience to the two comedians speaking with one another in a car driving through the desert as the introduction to each of their sketches. The show took a darker turn, with the theme music and background imagery reflecting the popular HBO drama *True Detective*. In a 2014 *New York Times* article, Mike Hale speaks of the interstitial segments in which the comedians performed in front of a live audience as being replaced by Keegan and Jordan talking to one another in the car as seeming "sometimes almost surreal in their inconsequentiality" and setting up the sketches in loopy indirect ways (1). From a cinematic standpoint, Hale and other critics find that the show's transition from staged banter to the car scenes makes more sense, in that it avoids the abrupt transitions between video shorts and stand-up sketches. This shift in format also removes the presence of a live audience, making it only accessible to Internet and television audiences. And this has been a key part of the comedians' success in the past four years: their online presence has propelled their show to new heights not seen before by sketch comedy shows.

The success that the comedians have achieved on Comedy Central as well as on various online platforms like YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook has come in

part from their attention to the age of New Media and their development of a show that was cognizant of its effects. In the NPR podcast “Pop Culture Happy Hour,” Gene Demby speaks about the success of Key and Peele and attributes it to two things: the entrance of two black comedians into a predominantly white comedic space (sketch comedy), and the construction of the show lending itself to bite-sized YouTube portions, which allows it to spread quickly and widely over various platforms. In *YouTube*, a book in the Digital Media and Society Series, Burgess and Green write, “Love it or loathe it, YouTube is now a part of the mainstream media landscape, and a force to be reckoned with in contemporary popular culture” (vii). Many if not all television shows and networks have a presence on YouTube in the form of a YouTube channel. Though many have adjusted to this new format, the innovation of *The Key and Peele Show* is that it seemed to have been aware of this as the show was in its early stages of production. Along with director Peter Atencio, the two comedians created sketch videos with the intent of making them highly accessible on the YouTube platform. The short, two-to four-minute clips fit the format perfectly, essentially giving people the means to share short mini-movies easily. In this case, the medium is truly a large part of the message (see McLuhan). Rather than restricting the show to a television format that would later have to be broken up and edited into shareable segments, the show was already edited in this fashion, enabling their material and messages to become that much more potent because of

the availability of their show. Thus, their content had a wider influence on popular culture and digital media, and they used the participatory aspect of new media to respond to social media activism, as well as to challenge popular culture notions about race and culture by injecting their own ideas into the popular culture sphere.

In multiple interviews on different late night television shows, Key and Peele talk explicitly about how their show is spread among different viewers through social media and the sense of ownership that many feel when introducing friends and users on the internet to clips from the show. What this kind of action illustrates is the participatory nature of digital media at this moment. The launch and popularization of Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, Vine, and dozens of other applications as the comedians were premiering their first season have only increased the ways in which visual media is spread. Speaking about YouTube as a site of participatory culture, Burgess and Green write:

Participatory culture is a term that is often used to talk about the apparent link between more accessible digital technologies, user created content, and some kind of shift in the power relations between media industries and their consumers (see especially Jenkins, 2006a). Indeed, Jenkins' definition of a 'participatory culture' is one in which 'fans and other customers are invited to actively participate in the creation and circulation of new content... YouTube proves that in practice the economic and

cultural rearrangements that ‘participatory culture’ stands for are as disruptive and uncomfortable as they might be potentially liberating.’(10)

There has been a clear shift in the last decade regarding the power relations between mainstream and new media and those who actively consume their products, in that it is no longer solely up to these kinds of industries to determine who sees their content. When Jenkins speaks of fans and customers participating in the circulation of new content, this speaks directly the kind of success that *The Key and Peele Show* has achieved since 2012. Overall, the show has hundreds of millions of views on their Comedy Central YouTube channel, and their most popular sketch video, “Substitute Teacher,” has amassed over 92 million hits alone. These kinds of numbers far exceed the viewership that the show on Comedy Central gets on a weekly basis and because of this phenomenon, the show can at times be seen as web-based with the backing of a television network, a kind of feat that could only be achieved in this era.

This unprecedented sharing and circulating of popular culture has only increased its impact on the way people think and internalize ideas about race, gender, identity, and so on. Popular culture has been talked about within Cultural Studies for decades and critics have gone back and forth discussing its legitimacy as art as well as its impact on people. Burgess and Green speak to this vacillating relationship, claiming, “For cultural studies theorists at various times, culture is both ‘ordinary’ and a potential site of symbolic struggle, empowerment, or self-

expression” (Burgess and Green 11). Further elaborating on this point, Stuart Hall writes, “Popular culture is one of the sites where this struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged: it is also the stake to be won or lost in that struggle. It is the area of consent and resistance. It is partly where hegemony arises, and where it is secured” (11). What Hall and others are referencing is the complex and at times contradictory role that popular culture can play in regard to social interactions, politics, and the creation of ideas in general. This sphere can reinforce and reify certain problematic notions like sexism and racism, but at the same time, it has the ability to challenge hegemonic power structures and create opportunities for useful dialogue about important issues.

YouTube has become one of the foundational pieces of the new popular culture sphere. It is “experienced in a range of different ways by consumer-citizens via a hybrid model of engagement with popular culture – part amateur production, part creative consumption... There is no doubt it is a site of cultural and economic disruption” (Burgess and Green 14). YouTube and other social media platforms like it have given an innovative kind of agency to consumer-citizens. People now have the ability to decide what goes viral; that is, information can only be spread by actual people who are active on these sites. Particularly among millennials, the use of these platforms is the source of entertainment, news, and knowledge, and companies are becoming more and more aware of this. Henry Jenkins speaks about this kind of participation within

YouTube and classifies it within three categories—production, selection, and distribution (275). “None of these activities is new,” he observes, “even in the context of digital media, but YouTube was the first to bring all three functions into a single platform and direct so much attention on the role of everyday people in this changed media landscape” (Jenkins 275). In essence, these “everyday people” have the ability to choose and distribute content freely, and by doing this, they are impacting the culture and deciding what is spread and what dominates platforms. In this democratic distribution, a myriad of cultural texts—with both negative and positive impacts—have the ability to be shared.

However, in the case of *The Key and Peele Show*, this shift of power has ultimately been to their benefit. The release of their bite-sized clips has encouraged its spread not only on YouTube, but also within the larger social media sphere. The show has a presence on Instagram, Twitter, Tumblr, and Facebook, and within these different outlets, there are links provided that can send users directly to YouTube’s website in order to watch the different videos. Particularly on Facebook, YouTube videos can be imported directly to the site and can be liked, commented on, and shared. The popularity of these videos has undoubtedly profited the comedians, but to their credit, they have also taken advantage of this opportunity to challenge stereotypes about race and respond to grass roots activist movements that have started on social media sites.

Lisa Nakamura, in *Digitizing Race*, speaks of the Internet as “a privileged and extremely rich site for the creation and distribution of hegemonic and counterhegemonic visual images of racialized bodies” (13). This idea echoes the sentiments of other scholars and writers in new media in the way they conceive of the possibilities of new media regarding race and the body. In her book, Nakamura repurposes Omi and Winant’s prominent theory of racial formation in order to establish a digital racial formation (14). Michael Omi and Howard Winant define the construction of race as “the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed . . . a process of historically situated projects in which human bodies and social structures are represented and organized” (17). Nakamura posits that these very things occur within the sphere of the internet, but alongside this, she claims that new media allows for resistance to occur:

While earlier racial formation theory assumed that viewers were subject to media depictions or racial projects that contributed to racialization, and that these projects were ongoing and differential but nonetheless worked in a more or less one-way fashion, new media can look to an increasingly vital digital cultural margin or counterculture for resistance. (18)

In other words, new media has the ability to be countercultural as well as resistant to problematic ideas. Though Nakamura discusses this through the medium of online avatars and Instant Message services, her framework is useful when talking

about *The K&P Show* and the way the show at times challenges hegemonic power structures. On a broader level, it can also be used to contextualize the show within a larger online movement that seeks more equal representation for people of color in online spaces as well as social and political ones.

A popular term used to describe this recent phenomenon in the last five years is “new media activism.” In his 2011 article, “Facebook, Twitter, YouTube – and Democracy,” Bob Samuels, describes how, in 2009, a protest movement arose in California against “tuition increases, furloughs, state budget cuts, and mass layoffs of school teachers, faculty members, and other public-sector workers” (32). Thousands of students and hundreds of professors participated by refusing to teach and attend classes. However, what is crucial to recognize about this movement was its conception within the platforms of Twitter and Facebook. Through these social media applications, the word was spread to thousands of users in an almost untraceable manner. “By first taking a small step online, people were able to take a larger step off-line. Online action translated into direct social action” (Samuels 33). Samuels’ article, though it describes how people of varying backgrounds were able to unify over mutual issues, focuses on the way the current generation of students use and manipulate the media. To this point, he writes:

One can argue that since the current generation of students has grown up in a media-saturated culture, they not only have been shaped by the media but also have learned how to talk back to the dominant media sources.

While decentralized media produce decentralized events, a culture of decentralization and personal empowerment has also produced technologies of mass participation. (34)

YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter have been especially useful in the development of mass participation, and have been a key part of the way that new media activism has begun to emerge as a mode of civic participation.

In the Twitter sphere, the emergence of Black Twitter has become a space where black people have found a voice and a medium by which they can speak to and against dominant power structures. Makeba Lavan, a doctoral candidate in the English program at the City University of New York, speaks of Black Twitter as initially referring to the large numbers of African Americans using the site, but as the momentum gathered it evolved into “a news base, think tank and digital archive...a site of counter-narratives and counter-memory, assembling supplementary information that challenges the dominant narrative propagated in traditional media” (57). Black Twitter has become a political watchdog in this digital age, enabling people to speak out against social injustice – most noticeably police brutality against black and brown bodies. The Black Lives Matter Movement has been and is currently a powerful site for social justice. As Lavan observes, “Black Twitter’s import has been clearest in the wake of the numerous high-profile cases of police-induced mortality over the past three years...It provides an invaluable counter-narrative that informs mainstream narratives

regarding race and justice in America through the use of highly effective hashtag campaigns like #IfTheyGunnedMeDown and especially #BlackLivesMatter” (Lavan 59). It is in light of this kind of exposure that the two comedians have responded in multiple ways through their comedic platform.



Fig. 4.1 “Hoodie” Sketch

In season three of *The Key and Peele Show*, which aired in 2013, the comedians released a sketch called “Hoodie,” in which Jordan, as portrayed in Figure 3.1, finds himself walking through a predominantly white suburban area sometime in the afternoon. As he is making his way through the neighborhood, there are similar reactions to his presence by mothers, fathers, and children alike. Jordan is dressed as a typical high-school student, wearing a black hoodie, jeans, sneakers, and a backpack. However, it is clear that he is unwanted in this

neighborhood; a white mother rushes outside to bring her two young children in the house, and a middle-aged man mowing his lawn stops to stare at Jordan menacingly while shaking his head as if to say he doesn't belong here. Up to this point, Jordan is a bit surprised by these reactions, attempting to smile and off-handedly wave, but it is clear that his actions will not change anything. The video reaches a climax when a policeman in a cop car turns onto the street and starts to speed up when he notices Jordan. It is at this moment that the camera shots go back and forth between the face of Jordan and of the white officer as the car continues to gain ground. The music swells dramatically in the background, and right as the two are about to converge, Jordan puts on his hood, presenting the profile of a young white male on its side. The cop takes one look, smiles, nods his head, and rides off whistling, pleased that his initial assessment of the situation was wrong.

This sketch marks a pivotal moment in the tenure of *The K&P Show*. Previously, the show had dealt with issues of race and inequality, but in this video, it responds directly to a crucial moment in America's racial consciousness – the 2012 murder of Trayvon Martin. Issues of police, deadly force, and the African American community are not new to this nation; there is a long history of violence and brutalization committed by members of law enforcement against black men and women. Indeed, this kind of violence stems from the moment the first European settlers brought African slaves into the country. Speaking to this

inhumaneness, Ta-Nahesi Coates writes, “Here is what I would like for you to know: In America, it is traditional to destroy the black body—it is heritage” (1). The legacy of destroying, brutalizing, and victimizing black bodies, for many writers, thinkers, and critics, is something that has not dissipated with the passing of Civil Rights laws or the election of a black president; it has merely adapted and reared its ugly head in a different, multimedia form. After the trial of Martin’s killer, George Zimmerman finished, and he was pronounced not guilty, President Obama spoke to the media and said: “You know, when Trayvon Martin was first shot I said that this could have been my son. Another way of saying that is Trayvon Martin could have been me 35 years ago” (1). Although other presidents have spoken to issues of violence enacted against the black community, Obama was the first to connect something like this to a lived experience. His recognition of a racial divide in this country and implicit denunciation of a post-racial fantasy was not received well by the media and popular opinion, but it nevertheless marked a moment of solidarity between Obama and black Americans who felt these sentiments.

Obama’s comments intensified the national dialogue surrounding case, but even before his remarks, the story and subsequent case had gained traction in the cultural sphere, predominantly through social media and Black Twitter. Lavan writes, “Major pressure from the social media community helped publicize the case and secured a trial for George Zimmerman after police in Sanford, Florida

refused to make an arrest” (59). Thus online organization pressured law enforcement into giving the incident the judicial attention it deserved. It is this same kind of pressure, in my opinion, that has influenced *The K&P Show* to speak about issues of police brutality and how black men and women have been affected. Like many sketch comedy shows, part of its success relies on topical humor, paying attention to relevant cultural events, and in the case of the “Hoodie” sketch, it is clear that the comedians are very aware of the new media activism that is occurring in the current digital age.

The sketch video in which Jordan plays the young man in the hoodie directly mirrors the incident involving Trayvon Martin and George Zimmerman, and the ending of it reveals a stark truth: if Trayvon Martin was white, perhaps he wouldn’t have been killed. Jordan’s character is a portrayal of the disparity between white and black communities. In a predominantly white suburban space, the presence of Jordan’s blackness is disruptive and threatening, and is seen as something with the ability to corrupt and damage the presumptions of white society. The white police officer is perceived to be the only line of defense between the white inhabitants of the community and Jordan, and his tenacity in hunting the young man down is representative of the “us vs. them” mindset that can at times exist within police forces. Jordan is unarmed and alone, yet he is perceived as the threat. By the end of the video, his actions show that the only defense against police violence is to physically change and become white.

Whiteness is still associated with non-deviancy and civility, and the only means by which police brutality can be transcended. Though Key and Peele drew laughs from the live audience as they showed the clip, they also chose this opportunity to speak out against injustice directly to their audience.

In their third season, Key and Peele have become even more political, and this has been in response to many of the police shootings involving young black men – Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, and others. In May of 2015, the comedians released a promo video for their new season, titled “Negrotown.” The video constructs a fictional world, Negrotown, which is a utopia of sorts for black men and women where racism no longer exists and they are able to function without experiencing any kind of trauma. Though this video was released before the start of the fifth and final season, it was not aired on television until the very last episode, and it was the final sketch shown before the episode’s, as well as the show’s, finale. The concept of Negrotown is a bold statement from Key and Peele, and one that has significant implications when examining the *K&P Show* as a narrative that spans over five seasons and that reflects Key and Peele’s changing attitudes toward black struggle, as self-proclaimed bi-racial men.

In this final sketch Keegan plays a black man walking late at night down an alley where the only other person present is a homeless man (played by Jordan). As he continues to walk down the alley, a police car suddenly appears,

and a white officer begins to threaten Keegan and apprehends him for seemingly no reason. He resists the officer, and it is at this point that the officer slams Keegan's head against the car door, and he loses consciousness. In this dreamlike state, the homeless man takes him through a portal to another world, as seen in Figure 3.2. The rest of the sketch takes place in musical form, with Jordan singing most of the lyrics explaining how Negrotown functions. Keegan is skeptical at first, unable to believe that this utopian realm for black men and women could exist, but as the song continues, the lyrics begin to make clear what this place is. "In Negrotown you walk the street, without getting slapped, harassed, or beat . . . You can wear your hoodie and not get shot . . . No trigger happy cops or scared cashiers" ("Negrotown"). A significant portion of these lyrics magnifies the violence inflicted upon black bodies, and reveals the desperate need and desire for a place that exists without these dangers. These lines shed light on the comedians' sympathies towards the black community as well as their political leanings regarding social justice issues. The portion of the song referring to wearing a hoodie without getting shot is reminiscent of their "Hoodie" sketch in Season 3, displaying continuity in their exploration of police brutality and the growing Black Lives Matter movement. The comedians have always been political, but the direct lyrics of the musical reveal a critical assessment of the racism that is still prevalent in American culture at large, and the video's placement in the finale solidifies this irrefutable image in the eyes of viewers across the country. Key and

Peele explicitly comment on the injustice experienced by men and women of color by suggesting that the only escape from inequality can be found in a utopian black society, and not only that but this society only exists in one's mind – in a dream-like state induced by unconsciousness. Negrotown came on the heels of the Baltimore riots surrounding the Freddie Gray case – another black man who was killed while in police custody. This was especially significant because the harsh conditions of inner city life for black Americans were broadcast on a national scale, and a voice was given to the oppressed though their voices were not received well. Thus, Negrotown is both affirming and damning, because it creates a fantasy of hope, and yet this fantasy comes crashing down when it is realized how illusory it is.



Fig. 4.2. Negrotown

By the end of the song, Keegan has become fully invested in the ideology of Negrotown, joining in with the communal singing and final dance number (Figure 3.3). There is a collective sense of unity and hope among the Negrotown community, and yet, this hope is grounded in something unattainable. When the number finishes and Keegan returns to consciousness, he is still being arrested, and he exclaims to the officer, “I thought I was going to Negrotown,” to which the officer responds, “Oh, you are.” The officer’s response is an obvious reference to prison, and the sketch ends with the harsh truth of the black man’s relationship to the law, law enforcement, and the prison system. What Key and Peele accomplish through this text is, on one level, a scathing critique of police brutality

within this country in response to grass roots social media activist movements, but on another level, revealing of their relationship to blackness as mixed-race men.



Fig. 4.3. Negrotown pt. 2

When speaking of mixed men and their relationship to blackness, one has to consider President Obama and his self-proclaimed blackness. The president has never positioned himself as multiracial or alongside the multiracial movement, constantly referring to himself as a black man with white heritage. However, this white heritage is something that he has referenced at times, as a mode by which he can understand both sides of the color line. This kind of assertion has at times caused him to be categorized as a bridge figure, one that is able to truly establish

authentic inclusion and diversity. However, when returning to Obama's remarks about the Trayvon Martin shooting, May-Curry writes:

To white voters, Obama's honesty was retrograde and tribalistic, and aligned him more with the black political rhetoric of the past instead of the post-racial, multiculturally progressive leadership of the future. Even more frightening: his comments signaled that the death of Trayvon Martin was not an isolated incident but part of America's persistent racial tensions. (7)

Part of Obama's appeal to many voters and to his constituents is grounded in his ability to represent himself as a black man with mixed heritage without using the same rhetoric as black politicians of the past, such as Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton, among others. But in this moment, he made a clear statement to the American public, claiming that if he was not in office his life could have been in danger, exposing his belief in the heritage of violence that America has had against the black body. In the same way, Key and Peele have left behind a post-racial, multiculturally progressive ideal in order to align themselves with a more traditional, politically charged black comedic tradition. Comedians such as Chris Rock, Paul Mooney, and Dave Chappelle have made a career out of inflammatory and provocative comments against white government systems and institutional racism, and when *The K&P Show* was first released, their material was perceived by some critics as "safer" and perhaps more palatable for white audiences to digest. Their mixedness and self-proclaimed multiculturalism allowed them to

reach a certain demographic that perhaps the comedians mentioned could not have reached. But by the final episode of their show, it is clear that they are in no way attempting to transcend blackness or claim a biracial identity that disconnects them from the black experience. What these comedians end up doing is addressing the tension that exists, exploring “the possibilities for a mixed race expressivity that is continuous with, rather than parallel to, a capacious African American tradition constantly in dialogue and debate with itself” (Elam xvi).

Throughout the course of the five seasons of the *K&P Show*, the comedians have broached a wide range of topics, but as the show has progressed, so have the comedians. In earlier seasons of the show, their mixedness was used as a way to talk about personal identity and the way that they are perceived, but by the finale, it is clear that the comedians are not trying to assert a new racial identity; they understand that they are mixed race black men, and though this may subscribe to the “one-drop rule” that has dominated America’s racial consciousness for hundreds of years, they are read as black and are inherently connected to black struggle and social inequality. It is because of this that they are able to respond to *Black Lives Matter* and use their humor as a diagnostic to address racial tension within multiple spaces. In this digital age, they have created a space to view how race is constructed, consumed and circulated on the Internet (Nakamura 15). They are not the multicultural saviors of comedy who can unite the races, but they are comics, who at times inject sharp and cutting humor that

can start much needed conversations about personal identity, race, politics, and social justice.

Chapter 5

Conclusion: Humor, Mixed Race, and Popular Culture

“But it’s the same stuff—the claim that mixed-race is a rapidly growing category; the idea that this will by itself transform society; the almost complete focus on personal comments and narratives rather than economic and political inequalities.”

Jason Antrosio, *Race Remixed*, 2011

The discourse around multiraciality since the 1990’s has reflected many of these sentiments expressed by Antrosio in the epigraph above, particularly the notion that mixedness has the ability in and of itself to transform society and usher humanity into a post-racial era. As noted by Ranier Spencer, these claims have been perpetuated by mainstream media; sources such as the *New York Times*, *Time Magazine*, and *Newsweek* have constantly reinforced problematic ideas associated with mixed race individuals and the roles they play in culture and social progress. Spencer goes on to call for better representations of mixed race in mainstream media, claiming that the conversations around mixedness generally stem from “the uncontested authority of young mixed voices, a gaping deficit of countervailing scholarly perspectives, and spectacular pronouncements that race as we have known it is dying before our eyes have been the staples of mainstream mixed-race media coverage”(177). Essentially, he is cautious of a representation of mixed race that predominantly calls attention to personal identity and not social and political inequalities. This cautious attitude is not to say that personal identity

is unimportant or not worth exploring; it is to say that conversations about mixed race cannot start and stop with personal identity.

The *Key and Peele Show*, over the course of five seasons, has given substantial attention to mixedness, and the comedians started this conversation from the standpoint of personal identity, but is this where the conversation stops and starts for Key and Peele? I contend that throughout the course of five seasons, they established a mixed race black identity that is still explicitly connected to blackness and black struggle. Key and Peele have asserted a racial identity that comments on political, social, and economic inequities, and this assertion has become clearer as their show has progressed. While the early seasons dealt with racial issues, it seemed at times as if the comedians were only attempting to deconstruct race or leave viewers with a more complex and nuanced view of it. But in the last two seasons, the comedians paid equal if not more attention to the struggles and inequalities that accompanies race; the attempt to complicate notions of race is still present, but this parallels the affirmation of race's existence and the effects that it has for people of color.

Though race is socially constructed, Key and Peele recognize that this construction is a part of America's fabric, and it plays a crucial role in the way we as a people deal with politics, economics, and a host of other issues. Thus, Key and Peele show that to turn a blind eye to the reality of race or to establish a racial identity that supposedly transcends race is problematic and only serves to

disparage racial communities in need of help. The creation of racial categories in the eighteenth century was problematic, as they served to establish an economic and social hierarchy that privileged whiteness above other racial groups, but their continuation today can serve legitimate social needs, and this is something that the comedians are aware of. Their recognition of blackness in their final sketch about a black utopia serves as a reminder that race is real and has real consequences. Thus, Key and Peele do not attempt to leave blackness behind in favor of a new “progressive” mixed race identity; they understand how connected they are to blackness, and how crucial their platform is for speaking out against injustice and inequality.

The comedians have set a precedent for themselves in that they are complicating blackness rather than transcending it, and this complication stems largely from their mixedness. I tend to side with critics who speak of mixed race as something that speaks to the complications of race rather than a means to assert a new and different racial identity. The issue of personal identity is a valid one, but the goal of mixed race should not be claiming a new category on the census. Mixed race has the ability to function as a complicating factor of race because it asks us to question the perceived stability, and solidity, of racial categories. Key and Peele have displayed this time and time again through their performance of race and awareness of its malleability in different sketch videos, and this ability stems, as I have argued, from their mixed heritage. They have spoken out and

claimed that as mixed race men, they find themselves constantly code switching as well as self-consciously examining how race works from a performative standpoint. Throughout their show, they were able to employ these tactics in order to successfully play men and women of different races. By doing this, they begin to deconstruct simplistic notions of how race functions as well as complicate it. As mixed race black men, they are aware of how they are perceived and read as black, but in the midst of this, they bring nuance to what blackness is and how it functions.

The comedians also implicitly address how people perceive mixed race and bring to light the assumptions and misunderstandings that many hold: the idea of multiracial saviors, the fetishism of mixed race women as exotic, etc. In this regard, Key and Peele may at times assert a problematic identity of the exceptional multiracial through their constructions of Obama in their show, and this is a fair critique of them. However, if they are examined over the course of five seasons, the exceptionality is not something they consistently return too. The comedians could have marketed themselves as bridge figures, able to understand both sides of the color line and bring whiteness and blackness together in perfect unified harmony, but they stray away from this unrealistic ideal. Thus, their omission is in fact a statement – one that shows how mixed race is not the end of racism. They instead speak of being mixed as something that does not enable

them with special insights and abilities; it is merely something that allows them to see things differently at times.

Part of this insight is simply addressing how mixedness can be genuinely humorous at times. Key and Peele speak of how some people, once finding out that they have mixed heritage, expect the comedians to have the “best” qualities of both races – athleticism, intelligence, etc. – and they can only laugh at how absurd these conceptions are, creating sketches and stand up material along these lines. The comedians do well at relating why mixed race is funny, and this is an issue that deserves to be further explored, because the process of discovery can be truly insightful. The medium of humor is a buffer of sorts, one that can be entertaining and revealing at the same time. When the average person thinks about mixed race and its functionality within culture and society, the initial reaction may be laughter, but when comedians like Key and Peele structure it in that way, it opens the door for conversation to take place. *The Key and Peele Show* has addressed hard topics over the course of five seasons: masculinity, sexuality, racism, police brutality, economic disparity, etc. And yet, somehow, viewers are able to laugh at these very real and problematic issues, showing that humor is a way to ease tension, but not just so that issues can be avoided and swept under the rug. Humor actually relieves tension so that conversations can be started that may not have come about in any other way.

The platform that Key and Peele obtained over the course of five seasons and four years was a truly remarkable one, and they will always be remembered for this moment in popular culture. Obama's presidency and recognition of the comedians was something that propelled the comedians to the status that they held and took advantage of. However, because their show has finished and Obama is leaving the oval office, it will be interesting to see what the future holds for Key and Peele. It is my belief and hope that the comedians will be written about more in academic spaces, as is true of Dave Chappelle and his network show, in order to explain the important work they have done. Their presence on social media platforms will ensure their longevity and their videos from the show will consistently be shared and commented on, though not in the same capacity as when their show was on television, that reflect on his on presidency and the impact that he had on popular culture. And when speaking of Obama and popular culture, it would be a disservice to not talk about *The Key and Peele Show*. In a sense, the president and the comedians are intertwined due to their mutual recognition and this mutual respect deserves to be and will continue to be written about, analyzed, and discussed from multiple perspectives. In the midst of all this discourse, perhaps we can all learn a little bit more about mixedness, race, humor, and the need for these conversations to continue.

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