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RACIAL SATIRE AND *CHAPPELLE'S SHOW*

by

KATHARINE P. ZAKOS

Under the Direction of Mary Stuckey

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines *Chappelle's Show*'s use of racial satire to challenge dominant stereotypes and the effectiveness of that satire as a tool to achieve perspective by incongruity. I use a variation of D'Acci's circuit of media study model to examine the institutional challenges and limitations on the show due to the context in which it was created, produced, and distributed; to interrogate the strategies employed by the show's writers/creators to overcome these challenges through the performance of race; and to analyze the audience's understanding of the use of racial satire through a reception study of the show's audience. I argue that using satire often has the unintended consequence of crossing the line between "sending up" a behavior and supporting it, essentially becoming that which it is trying to discount, though this is not to say that its intrinsic value is therefore completely negated.

INDEX WORDS: *Chappelle's Show*, Satire, Stereotypes, Performance of race, Representation of women, Perspective by incongruity, Audience reception, Circuit of culture

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by

KATHARINE P. ZAKOS

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2009

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2009

RACIAL SATIRE AND *CHAPPELLE'S SHOW*

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May 2009

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES vi

CHAPTER

1. INTRODUCTION 1

Circuit of Media Study Model 8

Institutional Challenges to *Chappelle's Show*'s Use of Racial Satire 9

The Performance of Race on *Chappelle's Show* 11

Audience Reception and Understanding of Racial Satire 13

Conclusion 13

2. SOCIO-HISTORICAL AND INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXTS OF *CHAPPELLE'S SHOW* 14

Historical Context 14

Chappelle's Show and Comedy Central 19

Additional Contexts for Viewing *Chappelle's Show* 26

Conclusion 31

3. THE PERFORMANCE OF RACE ON *CHAPPELLE'S SHOW* 32

Performing Blackness 33

Performing Whiteness 40

Multilayered Performances: Clayton Bigsby, the Black White Supremacist 42

Conclusion 44

4. AUDIENCE RECEPTION OF *CHAPPELLE'S SHOW* 46

Misunderstanding and/or Misinterpretation of Satire 46

Method and Limitations of Study 48

Description and Context of Sketch Chosen for Analysis 52

Fan Reception—Analysis 54

Conclusion 66

5. CONCLUSION 68

Summary of Project and What I Have Learned 68

More Questions: Areas of Interest for Future Research 69

Final Thoughts 74

REFERENCES 78

APPENDIX: TRANSCRIPT OF CLAYTON BIGSBY SKETCH 82

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Tyrone Biggums 34

Figure 2. Black Pixie 37

Figure 3. Black Pixie and Sidekick 37

Figure 4. Asian, Hispanic, and White Pixies 39

Figure 5. Anchorman Chuck Taylor 40

Figure 6. Chuck Taylor Later in Series 41

Figure 7. Clayton Bigsby, Black White Supremacist 43

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

"I'm Rick James, bitch!"
"Shoot the J—shoot it!"
"I'm rich, bitch!"
"I am in no way, shape, or form involved in any niggerdom!"
"Is Wayne Brady gonna have to choke a bitch!?"
"What did the five fingers say to the face? Slap!"
"I can't understand you, go back to your country—white power!"
"I'm a tell you something about me, Joe Rogan, that you might not know: I smoke rocks."
"Cocaine is a hell of a drug."

If you were in high school or college in the United States from 2003-2005, chances are you have at least heard of *Chappelle's Show* and many of you probably have watched at least an episode or two. Those who have seen the show will recognize the lines above as some of the most popular catch phrases from the show which, through constant mimicry by fans, have become part of pop culture. My own friends certainly did their part to contribute to the spread of the gospel according to *Chappelle's Show*; during my tenure as an undergraduate I heard virtually nothing else. Every time we got together to hang out, no matter what the plans were, we would inevitably end up watching the show, because one of the guys had purchased the DVD box sets, so we did not even have to wait to catch it on TV. It was on one of these occasions that I first became intrigued by the use of racial satire on the show. My particular group of friends happened to be made up of largely non-whites, with the majority being African American, so I often found myself the only white person at these viewing parties. When sketches heavy with racial satire would air, I sometimes felt slightly uncomfortable and unsure if I, as a white person, should be laughing. It was never about worrying what the others might think if I did; rather, it had more to do with what I thought—was this humor meant to make me laugh, and, if I did

laugh, was it only okay as long as I “got” the message the show was trying to send about the ludicrous nature of racial stereotypes?

These questions grew to be increasingly troubling for me and I often nagged my friends with even more questions about how they each viewed the portrayal of race on the show and what they thought of my issues of racial guilt. These experiences and the conversations that emerged from them inspired me to undertake this project on *Chappelle’s Show’s* use of racial satire.

As a comedian, Dave Chappelle's primary goal is to make people laugh. However, I believe that there are other, slightly less obvious, implications of his work, and it is on these that I will focus in my analysis. I argue that the purpose of the type of racial envelope pushing that occurs on *Chappelle's Show* is to make people think. By satirizing the stereotypes and assumptions that people make about different races, and African Americans in particular, *Chappelle's Show* attempts to encourage its audience to question both the reliability and the validity of such stereotypes. This encouragement is enacted through the performance of race and racial identities. Through a variety of sketches, focusing on topics like the inexplicable black white supremacist Clayton Bigsby (who is blind and never knew he was actually a black person himself, until he is told so by a *Frontline* reporter, which then leads him to divorce his—also blind—white wife immediately for being a "nigger lover") or the life of the white "Niggar family" (where "Niggar" is actually the family's surname in a 1950s style television show, much to the amusement of the neighborhood's black milkman, played by Chappelle), *Chappelle's Show* calls into question many of the stereotypes based on race that America holds dear.

Some sketches even dealt with the topic of stereotypes explicitly. Episode Three from Season One of *Chappelle's Show* begins with a sketch called "Dave Chappelle's Educated Guess

Line." The Miss Cleo-inspired parody begins with a voice over that says, "Dave Chappelle is not a psychic, he is merely a racist who believes that stereotypes dictate our futures" (*Chappelle's Show*, 2003). Chappelle then goes on to (correctly) guess certain facts about his callers' lives based on many of the most popular stereotypes in American culture today. This sketch is typical of the fare one will find on *Chappelle's Show* about the crazy and often dangerous practice of stereotyping.

As a popular and successful cable televsion show, *Chappelle's Show* had the power to reach millions of viewers on a weekly basis. Many of the people who originally tuned into the show could have been Dave Chappelle's fans from his days as a stand-up comic and his work in movies like *Robin Hood: Men in Tights* and *Half Baked*, but I would argue that his audience started out as consisting largely of viewers who continued watching after the network's *South Park* lead-in, which was Comedy Central's highest rated program at the time. I also think, though, that as the show's popularity grew, its fan base grew as well, broadening into a more mainstream audience. Furthermore, the subsequent release of *Chappelle's Show* on DVD greatly increased the number and diversity of the show's audience.

Because the show had (and still has) the ability to reach so many people, it would therefore seem that a certain amount of responsibility should also follow. As noted earlier, *Chappelle's Show's* audience does not consist of only African Americans, but of members of many other racial and ethnic groups as well. For members of other races, the show was possibly one of the only sources of exposure to hip hop culture (and, possibly, to African Americans in general) that they experienced on a regular basis. It is for this reason that I believe that the creators and other people behind *Chappelle's Show* had a responsibility to pay careful attention to the way that the show portrayed race in our culture, both through hip hop artists themselves,

the music, and the commentary made by the show on life in the African American community today. However, even the most diligently and carefully created satire is not immune to misunderstanding or misinterpretation.

This difficulty in ensuring that others can actually understand the challenges to the dominant stereotypes about minorities (which is the purpose of racial satire) is examined in Sanchez and Stuckey's article on the film *The Indian in the Cupboard*, where they emphasize the fact that

> [m]ost citizens of the United States get most of their information from the media, especially from television (Manheim, 1991). The images thus conveyed undergird many of the population's ideas and emotional reaction to peoples that are somehow "Other" (Entman, 1991). Just as residents of foreign countries may be installed with distorted images of life in the U.S. by being exposed to episodes of *Dallas*, *Baywatch*, and other television shows, non-Indian residents of the U.S. also receive distorted images of American Indians from mediated sources. In both cases, the issue is less the presence of one or two badly distorted depictions than the problem created by the lack of any countervailing images. When all we know about "Others" stems from media images, then those images create reality, a particularly important concern for members of minority populations, for as Lippmann (1922) noted, we act upon our perceptions of reality, not upon some inaccessible 'true' reality (p. 10).
>
> Challenging hegemonic codes then, is difficult, not least because whether by using them, contradicting them, and/or adapting them to different purposes, these codes are still present. The more deeply embedded and pervasive those codes are, the more difficult it is to replace them. (Sanchez and Stuckey, 88-89)

Although Sanchez and Stuckey were looking specifically at the case of American Indians, it is easy to see how their observations are relevant for other racial and ethnic minority groups as well, and particularly relevant to the present discussion. Because *Chappelle's Show* must present the stereotypes it is trying to make people question in order to actually do so, is there any way of doing this without reinforcing them? This, in turn, leads me to the all-important question—is there any way of employing satire that is not dangerous, where there is no risk of

misinterpretation? To answer this question, I now turn to a discussion of Kenneth Burke's theory of perspective by incongruity.

For this thesis, I rely on the definition of perspective by incongruity as introduced by Burke in his 1964 work, *Perspectives by Incongruity*. According to Burke,

> perspective by incongruity, or 'planned incongruity,' is a methodology of the pun. 'Pun' is here itself metaphorically extended. Literally, a pun links by tonal association words hitherto unlinked. 'Perspective by incongruity' carries on the same kind of enterprise in linking hitherto unlinked words by rational criteria instead of tonal criteria. (Burke 95)

By juxtaposing such seemingly contradictory images like virulently racist white supremacist rhetoric that is being spouted by a blind, middle-aged black man, *Chappelle's Show* has artfully employed perspective by incongruity in order to expose how ridiculous these stereotypes actually are. However, if the audience sees the stereotypical images as congruous rather than incongruous, *Chappelle's Show* will have effectively endorsed that which it was trying to challenge.

This seems to be a problem inherent in the use of satire and perspective by incongruity in general rather than an issue facing *Chappelle's Show* specifically. Whenever someone raises material in order to critique it, they always run the risk of privileging it. As Jason Mittell noted in *Television and American Culture*,

> [w]hile satire can be a successful way to offer social commentary in an entertaining format, it risks being misunderstood. Since most satire uses irony to present an exaggerated form of what it aims to critique, viewers might not recognize such representations as satirical. (296)

This lack of understanding on the part of viewers is not unique to *Chappelle's Show* or the sketch comedy format; Mittell points out that shows from different genres such as *The Daily Show*, *All in the Family*, and *South Park* have all faced similar issues of misperception (296).

It is important to realize here that *Chappelle's Show* is not the first series to struggle with its representations of African Americans or other minority groups. In an article for *Newsweek* magazine, writer Joshua Alston pointed out that

> Jeff Foxworthy and Roseanne Barr, among others, have built careers on caustic portrayals of how poorer whites live. But it's telling that when Dave Chappelle joked about poor blacks on 'Chappelle's Show,' he became so racked with guilt over the material that he walked away from a $50 million TV deal. Why? Because when the camera is trained on African-Americans, there is still concern among blacks that whites view them as a monolith of poverty and poor taste. Pair this concern with a perceived dearth of depictions of any kind of African-American life on television and the sometimes wrong-headed, yet perfectly understandable, logic starts to form: depictions of African-Americans must be precisely calibrated to present an image that counteracts the deleterious effects of 'Good Times' and 'Soul Plane.' This is the same logic that lead Bill Cosby to micromanage his '80s sitcom down to the most hair-splitting detail: scripts that called for a soul-food dinner were changed so that the family was instead dining on lean protein and vegetables, while casting agents had to ensure that Cosby's fictional son didn't date only light-skinned women. Two decades later, the same anxieties exist. (Alston par. 3)

I agree with Alston's assessment in that I feel that America's long history of relegating African Americans to the lower rungs of the social hierarchy makes presenting stereotypes in the course of performing perspective by incongruity extremely problematic. Artists like Dave Chappelle and Bill Cosby feel the pressure from this double standard and have dealt with this issue by attempting to monitor the portrayal of race on their respective shows, albeit in different ways.

This extra care and concern by Dave Chappelle is not unwarranted, as can be seen in some of the more negative evaluations of the show. The show certainly had its fair share of detractors. Matt Feeney of *Slate* maintains that

> a challenge, though, when watching *Chappelle's Show*, is to resist the temptation to grant it—because Chappelle is black, and because he deals in harsh racial caricatures and because you're laughing your ass off, and because you want to believe you're a progressive person—a political significance that it doesn't have. *New York Press* film critic Armond White, for example, credits *Chappelle's Show* with 'subverting racism, sexism, and the clichés you might call blackism.' But Chappelle doesn't 'subvert' these things—he exploits them. That is, he takes eager advantage of an obvious double standard: White comedians have either to avoid race or treat it with exquisite caution,

> but black comedians like Chappelle are able to extract laughs from America's racial hang-ups, not necessarily from a solemn underlying commitment to racial justice, but often with an unfettered and indiscriminate comic malice. I'm not complaining though. At least somebody gets to do it." (par. 2)

He goes on to state that, in reference to the "Mad Real World," "this sketch is both hilarious and discomfiting. But if you find a redemptive satirical point in it, or some determinate subversive meaning, you put it there yourself" (par. 9). Judging by his comments, Feeney either did not understand the satire or he did not "buy" it, so to speak. While I agree with Feeney's assessment of the racial double standard that exists for comedians today and cannot conceive of a white comedian being lauded for writing and performing the same sketches, it would appear that he and others are missing the point—the big picture here is that Chappelle is using his position as a black comedian to not only point out what does not make sense in terms of how we as a culture view and respond to racial difference, but also to address black people in particular as a member of that group and say "hey, it's not just everyone else."

However, not all critics have viewed the show negatively. In his newest book, *Is Bill Cosby Right?*, Michael Eric Dyson lauds Dave Chappelle, claiming that he

> illumines the idiocy, the sheer lunacy, of racial bigotry while also fearlessly pointing the finger at black folks' loopy justifications of questionable black behavior. He's great at taking particular events, episodes and escapades and using them to show America the unvarnished truth about itself. (quoted in Farley par. 41)

As compared to Feeney's opinion, Dyson's view of the show confirms the notion that producing a show such as this one and employing satire to get the point across is always going to be tricky because people can watch the exact same thing and yet have completely different interpretations of the material. Clearly, scholars and critics alike are divided in their own interpretations of the show, its message, and how the people should (or should not) view it, much in the same way that

they were divided over previous attempts by African Americans at prime time comedy-variety shows.

In this thesis, I examine *Chappelle's Show*'s use of racial satire to challenge dominant stereotypes about race and the effectiveness of that satire as a tool to achieve perspective by incongruity. I use a variation of D'Acci's circuit of media study model to examine the institutional challenges and limitations on the show due to the context in which it was created, produced, and distributed; to interrogate the strategies employed by the show's writers/creators to overcome these challenges through the performance of race; and to analyze the audience's understanding of the use of racial satire through a reception study of the show's audience. I argue that using satire, the purpose of which is to point out the ludicrous nature of racist rhetoric and practice, often has the unintended consequence of crossing the line between "sending up" a behavior and supporting it, essentially becoming that which it is trying to discount, though this is not to say that its intrinsic value is therefore completely negated.

Circuit of Media Study Model

As a way of framing my argument, and in order to present the most accurate and complete picture of *Chappelle's Show*'s use of racial satire as possible, I chose to employ Julie D'Acci's circuit of media study model. D'Acci's model is itself a variation of the circuit of culture model, an interdisciplinary approach widely used in cultural studies and commonly utilized to study the media in general and television in particular (D'Acci). D'Acci's model consists of a circuit of four main areas of importance: socio-historical context, production, cultural artifact, and reception, while also positioning the researcher as a relevant part of the model but not directly in line with the circuit (D'Acci 432).

While I am basing my methodological approach on the framework of the media study model, I have not replicated D'Acci's use exactly; in order to keep this project manageable within the reasonable bounds of a master's thesis, I have not interrogated each of the four areas in the same amount of depth that D'Acci seems to recommend. However, each area is represented to some degree in the present study, and, as I am ultimately concerned with making sure that I am viewing the text in context, I employ a more holistic perspective rather than a strict top down model positioning the text in a set place within the media industry.

I have organized my project into five chapters. This introduction constitutes chapter one, and chapters two, three, and four contain the bulk of my arguments (as well as the four areas of the circuit of media study model), with chapter five being the conclusion. I have outlined each chapter briefly below.

Institutional Challenges to *Chappelle's Show*'s Use of Racial Satire

Chapter two examines the institutional challenges to *Chappelle's Show*'s use of racial satire. In this chapter, I am concerned specifically with challenges resulting from its historical context in the genre of prime time black sketch comedy, its institutional placement on cable channel Comedy Central and within that channel's specific brand identity, and the different methods and/or mediums through which audiences could have viewed the show. By examining each of these areas at length I am able to provide a better understanding of some of the less visible factors that influenced the development of *Chappelle's Show* and its content.

There are quite a few institutional challenges facing *Chappelle's Show* and the achievement of its goal of trying to use satire to refute some of the commonly-held stereotypes about racial/ethnic minority groups, which I will discuss below, followed later by a look at some

of the performative strategies employed by *Chappelle's Show* co-creators Dave Chappelle and Neal Brennan to overcome these obstacles.

Chappelle's Show is not the first black prime time sketch comedy show, and Dave Chappelle is not the first black comedian who has tried to turn his own unique brand of humor into a television series. As a matter of fact, Dave Chappelle and *Chappelle's Show* are part of a long history of black comedians and each one's attempt at hosting a comedy/variety series, including such notable comedic legends as Flip Wilson and Richard Pryor.

One institutional obstacle facing *Chappelle's Show* is the restrictions on the show's content in order for it to meet the network's standards. Because *Chappelle's Show* originally aired on the cable television channel Comedy Central, the creators/writers did have a certain amount of freedom that they would not have had if it had aired on broadcast television, but they still had to watch what words they used and what situations they depicted. This could definitely present a problem since *Chappelle's Show* is constantly trying to find new ways of pushing the racial envelope. Dave Chappelle has often expressed his frustration over dealing with the censors and the constant need to explain himself and justify his language and the content of his skits. Chappelle seems to realize the injustice inherent in the fact that to many, his race is yet another obstacle in the way of his message. This leads directly to my next point—Comedy Central as the brand with which *Chappelle's Show*'s message is associated is actually an obstacle in and of itself.

Because he is the face of, and driving force behind, *Chappelle's Show*, Dave Chappelle becomes part of the message he is trying to send because if his audience does not trust him as a credible source, they will in turn not see his message as being credible, either. However, since the show airs on Comedy Central, it is also a part of this message. In its original run,

Chappelle's Show aired immediately after the animated comedy series South Park (Comedy Central's highest rated program at the time), which was known primarily for its poop jokes and the recurring death of one of the show's main characters in extremely violent ways. When people watch other Comedy Central shows like *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*, they expect there to be a healthy dose of political commentary mixed in with jokes; however, when they view sketch comedy, like that featured on *Saturday Night Live* or *In Living Color*, they are often only expecting to see actors mocking celebrities or playing incredibly outrageous made-up characters.

While there is a fair share of the latter on *Chappelle's Show* (popular sketches featuring Chappelle dressed up as Rick James, Prince, and Little Jon come to mind), his main fare is the racial satire. I think that the audience just is not expecting to get a lesson on race relations from Dave Chappelle, the comedian, and Comedy Central. If one considers his demographic characteristics—he is a young, black, stand-up comedian with no formal education beyond high school, and the star of the stoner hit *Half Baked*—it only seems to further compound the stakes against him and his message.

The Performance of Race on *Chappelle's Show*

The third chapter focuses on the strategies of performance utilized by Chappelle and Brennan in an attempt to overcome the aforementioned challenges to the use of racial satire and perspective by incongruity. This chapter consists of an analysis of the performance of race on the show. The purpose of this portion of the project is twofold: first, to examine the performance of race on *Chappelle's Show* and, second, to interrogate the issues surrounding this performance. Namely, I will address how race is performed on *Chappelle's Show*, and, how this

performance at times either supports or detracts from Dave Chappelle's stated agenda in terms of the use of racial stereotypes on the show. For my examination of performance on *Chappelle's Show*, I have used qualitative content analysis to evaluate the performance of race on the show, breaking it down into an examination of three different areas: the performance of blackness and otherness, the performance of whiteness, and, finally, the multilayered performance of the character Clayton Bigsby which constitutes some mixture of the two. By analyzing specific segments and sketches from the show, I am able to interrogate the different costumes, props, and conventions used to facilitate these performances.

On *Chappelle's Show*, performances of blackness and whiteness provide the vehicle for Dave Chappelle's brand of social commentary. Dave Chappelle and the guest stars that appear on his show are constantly engaged in performances of race, whether during the monologues which occur before and after sketches, within the context of the sketches themselves, or during musical performances. There are some very significant aspects of the performances of blackness and whiteness that contribute to the use of racial satire on the show which I will discuss at length in my analysis; I have provided a brief overview of these points here.

Interestingly, on *Chappelle's Show*, blackness is presented as the norm as opposed to the exception, with the added consequence that the negative characters are also often portrayed as African Americans as well. Conversely, the performance of whiteness on *Chappelle's Show* is often the same in nearly all of the show's sketches; when Dave Chappelle is performing whiteness, he consistently employs certain "props" and sticks to a set trope of whiteness. Another significant dimension of the performance of race on *Chappelle's Show* is the use of black face and white face as props in the performance of race, and the meanings that are subsequently derived from these performances. These are some of the ways in which

Chappelle's Show utilizes different performances to facilitate perspective by incongruity. However, these performances do not always have the intended effect.

Audience Reception and Understanding of Racial Satire

Chapter four will focus on the audience reception of these performances on *Chappelle's Show*, as observed through the media coverage of the show and through comments posted on internet message boards. I am interested in how fans and different fan communities view the use of racial stereotypes and the performance of race on *Chappelle's Show*, and whether or not they understand that the show is intended as a form of parody and not merely a reinforcement of racist attitudes and beliefs. My research in this section is primarily driven by the question of how different fan communities respond to the racial stereotypes presented on *Chappelle's Show* and whether or not they view the racial satire as constructing perspective by incongruity. In the chapter, I have provided an explanation of the methodology of this portion of the study, including limitations, as well as a description of the online sources used in this analysis, and an explanation of the sketch from the show that I use as the subject of much of my analysis, followed immediately by the analysis itself.

Conclusion

My fifth and final chapter will conclude the project by discussing the overall impact of the show and whether or not it achieved what its creators intended, a reflection on the strengths of this project as well as the limitations or weaknesses of the present study, and suggestions for future studies of this topic.

CHAPTER TWO

SOCIO-HISTORICAL AND INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXTS OF *CHAPPELLE'S SHOW*

In order to interrogate *Chappelle's Show's* use of racial satire through the performance of race and the audience's reception of this performance as perspective by incongruity (or lack thereof), it is first necessary to understand the context in which this show was created and distributed. There are many institutional factors that shape and often limit the content of a show but these factors often go unnoticed by the general public due to what seems to be general lack of understanding of the importance of context. Because "context" has the potential to encompass a vast range of meanings and possibilities, I have narrowed my focus to what I believe to be the most significant elements, which inlcude: the place of *Chappelle's Show* in the history of primetime black sketch comedy, the show's institutional placement on cable channel Comedy Central, and the various contexts available to the audience for viewing the show. Each of these factors plays an important part in shaping the identity of *Chappelle's Show* and its position in today's society, but more importantly, its attempt at perspective by incongruity. Therefore, this chapter will consist of a discussion of *Chappelle's Show*'s position in the larger world of black sketch comedy, the institutional circumstances of its production, and the variety of ways in which it has been distributed and consumed, as they contribute to the overarching goal of achieving perspective by incongruity.

Historical Context

It is important to note that Dave Chappelle is not the first African American performer to host a primetime variety or sketch comedy show, and he probably will not be the last. Before Chappelle, a few other black comedians had the opportunity to do comedy shows. Two of the

most notable were Flip Wilson and Richard Pryor. These two performers did not have a lot in common in terms of their comedic styles, but their shows were both significant in terms of the progression of primetime black sketch comedy. *The Flip Wilson Show* ran for four seasons, but *The Richard Pryor Show* did not even make it past four episodes (Sutherland, Haggins) Why, of the two similarly structured sketch comedy shows, did one have what can be considered a successful run while the other was cancelled almost immediately after it began? I believe that attempting to find an answer to this question will bring us closer to understanding the institutional reasons behind why *Chappelle's Show* was initially able to enjoy such widespread critical acclaim yet then end its run so abruptly.

All three of these men—Wilson, Pryor, and Chappelle—have had their own unique performance styles and their own brands of humor that shape their individual routines. In her publication *Laughing Mad: The Black Comic Person in Post-Soul America*, Bambi Haggins traces the formation of the black comic persona from its beginnings on the Chitlin Circuit to its more recent manifestation in the form of Dave Chappelle. Haggins places Wilson as by far the least political, painting him as preferring instead to perform his humor under no agenda except that of making people laugh (Haggins). She claims that on the opposite end of the spectrum one could find Richard Pryor, whose short-lived series was highly criticized and often censored by the network brass for its bold and biting social commentary. In spite of their differences, both Wilson and Pryor provided the historical foundation on which Dave Chappelle and Chappelle's Show are able to exist today.

Of the two, however, and perhaps due in part to its avoidance of political humor, the influence of *The Flip Wilson Show* is often negated or simply overlooked, a curious occurrence

that is examined at length by Meghan Sutherland in her book, *The Flip Wilson Show*. In it, she states that

> [f]ew contemporary television comedians, either white or black, cite Wilson among their influences. Most casual reminiscences of the great African American comedians of the seventies revolve around Bill Cosby, on the one hand, or Redd Foxx and Richard Pryor, on the other. Perhaps Wilson's competing reputations for selling out and speaking out place him in an awkward position in popular memory, somewhere between the very proper Dr. Huxtable played by Cosby in the eighties and the inimitably improper Foxx and Pryor. Yet, in the years since Wilson's pathbreaking success on network television, the comedy-variety format that his show introduced has effectively been instituted as one of the most prominent genres for black comedians trying to make it on television. (xxii-xxiii)

I think that the puzzling disjunction that Sutherland points out above (where no one wants to claim Wilson as an influence yet everybody attempts to utilize the successful comedy-variety format of *The Flip Wilson Show*) is key to understanding the conflict that still persists among black comedians over choosing success and then having to deal with the resulting guilt and accusations of selling out for the white mainstream. Sutherland's point about the widespread dismissal of Wilson as an influence among contemporary television comedians is valid; even the retro television station TV Land and Nick at Nite, the programming block on cable channel Nickelodeon that features older TV shows, largely ignore *The Flip Wilson Show* (though I must concede that Pryor is often overlooked as well), choosing instead to devote much more air time to other popular syndicated comedy series featuring African Americans, such as *The Cosby Show* or *Sanford and Son* (though often this may be a rights issue).

There are many similarities between *Chappelle's Show* and *The Flip Wilson Show*. *Chappelle's Show* follows the comedy-variety format introduced by Wilson fairly closely and, as mentioned in the introduction, Dave Chappelle is often subjected to many of the same criticisms leveled at Wilson, though the most vocal critic has indisputably been Chappelle himself, evidenced by the fact that Chappelle left the show in the middle of taping for the third season

due to overwhelming guilt over what he began to see as the negative portrayal of African Americans (Alston). In one attempt to overcome the risk of the show's audience missing the racial satire or seeing it as just a commentary on the problems that exist solely in the black community, the writers of *Chappelle's Show* present sketches that do not focus solely on the stereotypes about only one group in particular. Though the show does have many sketches that target stereotypes about African Americans, there are also sketches about Asian people, Hispanics/Latinos/as, Native Americans, white people, and, sometimes, even some combination of the above. One such sketch that employs this strategy takes place on an airplane which has passengers of many different racial and ethnic groups aboard. Below, I have reproduced a good description of this scene written by Katrina E. Bell-Jordan that can be found in her article entitled "Speaking Fluent 'Joke': Pushing the Racial Envelope through Comedic Performance on *Chappelle's Show*":

> A brief, but no less meaningful sketch from season one of *Chappelle's Show* has no title or lead-in from Dave. Instead the show returns from a commercial break and the viewing audience sees two Arab men sitting together in the front row of a plane, arguing in their seats about the Fox Television show *American Idol*. Subtitles translate the conversation between the two passengers, the first of whom says, 'The Americans have picked wrong once again as I knew they would', to which his companion replies, 'Justin was the only choice in *American Idol'*. The next scene of the sketch shows us the two black men sitting to the rear of the Arab men. Both of these passengers are shaking their heads while stretching their necks to look at the passengers in the front row. One of the men thinks to himself, 'Of all the flights to be on, I've got to ride with those terrorist sons-of-bitches! I've got my eye on you, Al Quaeda.' Behind the black passengers are a white, middle-aged man and a young female passenger. Looking extremely concerned, the male passenger thinks to himself, 'What are those *Negroes* doing in first class? Must be rappers. (Holding the young woman's hand) I'd better keep an eye on Sarah.' Sitting behind the white passengers are two Native American men wearing traditional tribal attire. One of them says to himself, 'Me no trust a white man. We better not go to the bathroom. White man will steal my seat and call it Manifest Destiny.' The scene takes a seemingly absurd turn when we see two wild boars stuffed into the seats behind the white passengers. The subtitle reads, 'At least you Indians got casinos. You corn-eating bastards!' In the last shot of this scene, and sleeping in the back row of the plane, are Dave and another white male passenger [who is actually the show's co-creator, Neal

> Brennan]. The headline of the *Daily Truth*, a newspaper Dave is holding, reads 'America United'. (Bell-Jordan, 81)

By including the stereotypes that each group holds about another, the writers of *Chappelle's Show* clearly make their point that we are all guilty of having stereotypical beliefs about others and that this should only serve to increase our awareness and make us question these attitudes and beliefs. As evidenced in the example above, Chappelle, too, is known for speaking out on hot-button issues. As you will see further in the next chapter on the performances of race utilized in the text, *Chappelle's Show* is replete with biting racial satire about the state of race relations in our society.

However neither Flip Wilson nor Dave Chappelle has been criticized as often as Richard Pryor. Even though it only lasted four episodes in the 1977 season, *The Richard Pryor Show* has had a substantial impact on later comedy-variety shows (Acham 156). In *Revolution Televised: Prime Time and the Struggle for Black Power*, Christine Acham positions *The Richard Pryor Show* as "a living critique of network television's attempt to shape black life" (157). Throughout the four episodes of his show, Pryor often satirized the limitations inherent in his role as a black comedian on network TV by making frequent references to the many things he was and was not allowed to do, like saying certain restricted words or behaving in a manner that the networks worried would alienate their coveted (white) core demographic. The short-lived run of this series has not prevented it from contributing to the long-running debate over the place (or lack thereof) available for African Americans on prime time television.

As a matter of fact, Dave Chappelle himself has often commented on Pryor's influence and achievements. In an interview with *Essence* magazine, when asked about who he considered to be his comedic influences, Chappelle said "I could write a book about Richard Pryor. He was primarily entertaining, but he was also political, influential, all those things. He gave a voice to

the voiceless, made the black experience accessible to all, but he was funny first" (par.3, pg. 208). I would argue that the same could be said for Chappelle's use of humor today. *Chappelle's Show* couches its biting social commentary in sly racial satire so that the message is a little easier to take, which will be examined further in chapter three. Furthermore, in line with the previous discussion, note that Chappelle did not mention Flip Wilson in this capacity.

Now that I have briefly outlined the sketch comedy of Flip Wilson and Richard Pryor as two prominent examples of what has and has not worked for black sketch comedy in the pre-cable era, I turn to an examination of the institutional structures and constraints surrounding *Chappelle's Show* when it was produced and first distributed on cable channel Comedy Central.

Chappelle's Show **and Comedy Central**

Chappelle's Show first aired on the cable television channel Comedy Central on Wednesday nights at 10:30 pm, Eastern Standard Time, beginning on January 22, 2003. The show is formatted as a thirty minute comedy/variety show and includes: monologues delivered by host Dave Chappelle before and after the sketches, the performances of the individual sketches themselves, and the occasional musical guest star performance. That the show was an instant success is not debatable—the series premiered in the coveted 10:30 pm time slot immediately after *South Park*, the network's reigning ratings winner, and immediately became the only series on the network to ever build on the ratings in the key 18-49 year-old demographic from the *South Park* lead-in (Comedy Central Press Milestones, 1-22-2003). It is common practice in the television industry for new shows to be scheduled immediately after a hit show (meaning that the show has high ratings and appeals to the channel's target audience) in the hopes that viewers from the first show will stick around and flow right into the second. In an

ideal world, the new show is essentially piggy-backing on the success of the hit show and benefitting from the leftovers of the hit show's audience. However, for a new show (i.e. *Chappelle's Show*) to actually become the main course and draw more viewers than the leading hit show is not a very common occurrence. This is no small feat in the television industry and it should help to explain why *Chappelle's Show* is such a unique and intriguing cultural artifact to study.

Furthermore, *Chappelle's Show* was also Comedy Central's highest rated series premiere ever in that 18-49 year-old demographic, as well as being the highest rated series premiere overall since the premiere of *That's My Bush!* in 2001 (Comedy Central Press Milestones, 1-22-2003). Additionally, the show was also nominated for three Emmy awards in the 2003-2004 awards season, including Outstanding Variety, Music or Comedy Series, Outstanding Writing in a Variety, Music or Comedy Program, and Outstanding Directing For a Variety, Music or Comedy Program, which all directly increased the show's cultural currency in the eyes of critics and viewers alike, even though the show did not actually win any of the awards (Comedy Central Milestones, 7-20-2004). All of these honors and distinctions serve to further underline the relative success of *Chappelle's Show*, both in and of itself as a comedy/variety program and as a part of Comedy Central's pre-existing brand identity (which will be discussed in more depth later in this chapter).

Critical acclaim and record breaking accomplishments aside, I believe that in order to understand the context in which the show aired, it is extremely important to note that the show aired on a cable channel (Comedy Central), and to also understand all that this entails. I think that stating that it boils down to the fact that, in the words of Dave Chappelle, "it's not HBO. It's just regular ass TV" (*Chappelle's Show*, Episode One, Season One, 2003) oversimplifies this

distinction; the inquiry should not stop there. The institutional placement of the show on a non-premium (but still specialty programming) cable channel like Comedy Central has an enormous effect on the show's use of racial satire and its attempt at perspective by incongruity, both through the performances of race that are allowed (or not allowed) to air and the specific audiences that are either meant to or able to receive this message. Both of these factors—restrictions on the performances of race and racial satire and the construction of a certain audience for the show—play a big part in determining the success of *Chappelle's Show*'s attempt at perspective by incongruity. I examine the exact ways in which the institutional placement of the show limited its ability to engage in racial satire at length below.

At times, the institutional placement of the show on Comedy Central definitely presented a problem for the show's creators, Chappelle and Brennan, since *Chappelle's Show* is constantly trying to find new ways of pushing the racial envelope. Dave Chappelle has often expressed his frustration over dealing with the censors and the constant need to explain himself and justify his language and the content of his skits. In an interview with *Esquire* magazine in May 2006, Chappelle remarked on his aggravation over repeatedly finding himself "sitting in a room, again, with some white people, explaining why they say the n-word" (Powell par. 37). That Dave Chappelle, a black man, had to explain his use of the n-word to a group of white men in order to be able to use it on his show illustrates one major way in which the show's institutional placement on Comedy Central hindered its use of racial satire. If the executives had not understood or agreed with Chappelle's use of the word and forbade him from using it, his ability to perform racial satire would have been severely limited.

He ultimately concedes that, for him "the bottom line was, white people own everything, and where can a black person go and be himself or say something that's familiar to him and not

have to explain or apologize? Why don't I just take the show to BET -- oh, wait a minute, you own that, too don't you?" (Powell par. 37). Clearly, *Chappelle's Show* had a very real awareness of the problem of censorship on the show's content, as well as the institutional constraints that follow from working in a society where white people own the vast majority of major media outlets. Battling with the network executives over the content of the show was a common occurrence during *Chappelle's Show*'s three year run.

In the audio commentary for Episode One, included in the DVD release of the first season, Dave Chappelle and co-creator Neal Brennan describe the constant negotiations that have occurred between them and Comedy Central over many different aspects of the sketches right from the beginning of the show's run (*Chappelle's Show*, 2003). These negotiations, in which Chappelle and Brennan fought to have the show aired as they had written it and intended to have it aired, are the main strategy used by Chappelle and Brennan to overcome the network's censorship. Furthermore, in the instances where they were on the losing side of these negotiations, they have released the uncut and uncensored versions of *Chappelle's Show* sketches on the DVD's, where they can use the language and images they intended to use, without the large amount of "bleeping" and "blurring" that was used when the episodes originally aired on Comedy Central.

However, even though *Chappelle's Show* had to deal with more restrictions on content that if it had aired on one of the premium cable channels (like HBO or Showtime), it still experienced a great deal more freedom than if it had been on one of the broadcast television channels, where content is strictly policed through federal regulation by the FCC. Many of the sketches containing racial satire featured on Chappelle's Show probably would not make any sense if they had to be edited and censored to meet FCC regulations; one sketch from the show

that revolves entirely around the use of the word “nigger” could not be altered to remove that word because the sketch would lose all meaning—the use of the dreaded-word is what makes the content relevant. Chappelle’s frequent use of touchy racial humor probably had a lot to do with the failure of his previous attempts at working in broadcast television.

Dave Chappelle had been offered series pilots on the broadcast networks before eventually signing with Comedy Central; however, these prior attempts never made it past the preliminary stages of production due in large part to the disparity between Chappelle’s unique and often controversial brand of humor and the bland, easily digested fare that is often standard on regular broadcast television stations (“I’m Rich, Bitch!!!” 322-323). According to Chappelle, the choice to do the show on Comedy Central, or more generally, on cable, was due to the fact that

> [o]n network TV you don’t have much freedom because the audience is so large and you have to keep everything nice and generic. This is a comedy network, and they’re at a place corporately where they’re willing to take these kinds of chances. [This show] is kind of a celebration of my freedom. (Mathis, as quoted in “I’m Rich, Bitch!!!” 323)

It is important to note, though, that although this was Chappelle’s initial view of (and probably what he hoped would be) his partnership with Comedy Central, the relationship changed greatly over time, especially after he and Brennan repeatedly found themselves arguing with the network executives over their attempts to stretch the boundaries of what is allowed to be shown on cable. However, what I am attempting to show is that restrictions on the content of a show are all relative—premium cable’s restrictions are more lenient than basic cable’s, which are in turn more lenient than broadcast TV’s.

The freedom from the strict(er) censorship of broadcast television came with a price of its own—Dave Chappelle and *Chappelle’s Show* were expected to assimilate into Comedy Central’s pre-existing and carefully crafted brand identity. When *Chappelle’s Show* joined the line-up at

Comedy Central in the 2003 television season, the network's shows included *South Park*, *The Daily Show*, *The Man Show*, *Reno 911*, *Win Ben Stein's Money*, *Beat the Geeks*, *Crank Yankers*, *Comic Groove*, *Tough Crowd with Colin Quinn*, and *Primetime Glick* (Comedy Central Milestones). From personal experience I can attest to the fact that most of these shows contained the type of content that is often promoted as appealing to teenage boys—fart jokes, half-naked women, pranks or practical jokes, violence, and stoner comedy (Hilmes 303-304). This was the type of content that fit into the brand identity of Comedy Central. As the writers of the cult hit and stoner classic, *Half Baked*, Dave Chappelle and writing partner Neal Brennan were adept at writing and producing such juvenile fare in order to stay in line with the Comedy Central brand identity; however, the fart jokes did not always mesh well with the use of racial satire on the show. In an attempt to compensate, Chappelle and Brennan often crafted the sketches themselves in such a way as to point out the institutional limitations in the way of their message and to attempt to refute some of these positions, though they often still included enough of Comedy Central's brand humor to be passable.

One such sketch was featured on Episode Two of Season One of *Chappelle's Show* and it addresses the issues surrounding black comedian Dave Chappelle as the medium for transmitting the show's message about the fallibility of racial stereotypes and other racist assumptions by using a "pretty white girl" as the messenger. The sketch clearly points out, within the context of the show, the problem of Dave Chappelle, a comedian, working within the Comedy Central brand, as the medium for the messages. No one is looking for a lesson in race relations in the programming offered on Comedy Central—it is a comedy channel after all. By writing and performing this sketch, Chappelle and Brennan are attempting to address the issue by poking fun at American audiences and their fear and reluctance to hear the thoughts of black America, and

especially the thoughts of a black comedian hosting a sketch comedy show on the all-comedy channel, personified in this case by Dave Chappelle.

However, as a side note, this sketch does nothing to address the problem of the contradictory messages *Chappelle's Show* is sending to its viewers. In fact, I would even argue that sketches like this, with lines like "gay sex is gross. I'm sorry -- I just find it to be gross," or “Oh, I want to stick my thumb in J. Lo's butt” and “I wouldn't mind sticking a finger or two up that singing white girl's butt either” are actually a very real part of the problem. This sort of chauvinistic and juvenile humor fits right in with Comedy Central’s brand identity, but it detracts from the show’s use of racial satire. Unfortunately, I cannot find any efforts on the part of *Chappelle's Show* to try to overcome the problems created by the mixed messages they are sending. This seems to be one area that the show’s writer/creators have either knowingly or unknowingly failed to identify as a problem, perhaps in part because they ultimately have to answer to the brand identity that is Comedy Central.

Institutionally speaking, *Chappelle’s Show* will never truly be free of the Comedy Central brand, even after the episodes’ initial airing on the network, because all merchandise for the show (including t-shirts, toys, etc.) has the Comedy Central logo imprinted on it. Even the DVD box sets for the show have “Comedy Central Presents…” stamped on every side of the packaging, as well as on the individual DVDs themselves. There are many other side effects of having to reconcile a show and its star’s image to a brand identity, one of which is the loss of control of one’s own identity. This circumstance comes about in many different ways, but the most common is through the network’s press machine, which creates and manages a star’s back story and persona for them. Dave Chappelle is no exception to this rule.

Many people hold the common misconception that *Chappelle's Show* is actually just an extension of Dave Chappelle's stand-up comedy routine—as a matter of fact, Comedy Central even promoted the show by saying that it "takes Chappelle's own personal joke book and brings it to life" ("Dave Chappelle and Comedy Central Ride High on the Success of 'Chappelle's Show' into a Second Season"), but this is not actually the case. As someone who has seen Chappelle's stand-up both before and after the original run of *Chappelle's Show*, I can attest to the fact that although both the show and his stand-up routine make frequent references to race, the similarities end there. The sketch comedy/variety format alone of *Chappelle's Show* is enough to ensure that the type of material being performed is very different from that of his stand-up comedy routine. This is a significant factor in my analysis because it shows how even Chappelle's image had to be molded to fit into the Comedy Central brand identity and television's generic conventions and, noting this inaccuracy in the marketing of the show, it places historical boundaries on the text that I am studying by making it clear that *Chappelle's Show* is a specific and limited text.

Now that I have established both Chappelle's Show's place in the history of prime time black sketch comedy and its position as part of the Comedy Central brand, I provide a brief overview of the different ways that the show's audience could have viewed the sketches and the racial satire.

Additional Contexts for Viewing *Chappelle's Show*

As part of my analysis of the historical and institutional contexts in which *Chappelle's Show* occurred and how these shaped the show's use of racial satire and perspective by incongruity, it is also necessary to take the time to discuss the many different ways in which the

show has been industrially positioned and how audiences have been able to consume the show. This is important because of the unique characteristics inherent in each alternative method of viewing and the challenges that they pose to the show's use of racial satire, as well as potential challenges to audience understanding.

Apart from the series' original run on Comedy Central, *Chappelle's Show* has also been released uncensored on DVD box sets, shown in syndicated form on both Comedy Central and basic cable channels, and posted on numerous video hosting sites throughout the internet. Each of these possible industrial contexts for viewing *Chappelle's Show* has its own unique circumstances and challenges to the show's use of satire and I examine them below.

TV on DVD Box Sets

The first installment of the show to be released on DVD, the *Chappelle's Show Season One: Uncensored* DVD box set, was released on February 24, 2004,which is about the same time that the second season of the show premiered on Comedy Central (Comedy Central Milestones, 10-19-2004). Releasing the first season on DVD concurrently with the start of the second season was clearly no accident. The release immediately generated an immense amount of attention for Dave Chappelle, the show, and Comedy Central, and even resulted in some record-breaking sales. Comedy Central website's "Milestones" page for the date of October 19, 2004, proudly proclaims

> COMEDY CENTRAL Home Entertainment and Paramount Home Entertainment announce that "Chappelle's Show Season One: Uncensored" DVD box set has become the #1 all-time best-selling TV show on DVD ever with over two million units sold, according to Videoscan and retail sources. The two-disc collection of Dave Chappelle's top-rated COMEDY CENTRAL series has moved ahead of the previous record-holder, "The Simpsons: The Complete First Season," which has sold 1.9 million units. (Comedy Central Milestones, 10-19-2004)

This pat-ourselves-on-the-back message by Comedy Central clearly shows that the DVD release of the show was hugely popular and an indisputable success. The obvious success of the DVD release of the show makes it clear that people are definitely viewing the show in this manner, which is significant to this study in that it allows us to understand how different methods of viewing *Chappelle's Show* could have affected the audience reception of the show's use of racial satire.

The DVD box sets (there are three total—Season One, Season Two, and a special release of the "Lost Episodes" that would have been part of the third season) are unique viewing contexts in that they contain all of the episodes from each season uncensored, including all monologues and musical guest star performances, as well as audio commentary on some episodes from co-creators/writers Dave Chappelle and Neal Brennan. However, the shows are not necessarily uncut; in at least one instance in particular a scene that was originally part of an episode was cut from the DVD release (the circumstances surrounding this choice will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Three). Other than this interesting (and unexplained) move, it seems that watching the DVD release of the show is very similar to watching it on television, except, naturally, without commercials or the possibility of channel surfing. Furthermore, audiences viewing the show on DVD can watch the episodes as many times as they want and they can even skip to specific sketches within the individual episodes and start, stop, rewind, or fast forward those sketches if they so choose.

Re-Runs on Comedy Central and Basic Cable

Chappelle's Show was being re-run on Comedy Central concurrently with the weekly release of new episodes. When it aired in this form, the episodes were replayed exactly as they

had originally aired; they were not censored or in any way edited for content. However, just because these re-runs followed the format for the original airing of the show so closely does not mean that they do not imply any other differences in the context of viewing. Re-running the show on Comedy Central had the potential to expand the viewing audience as more people could catch the episodes after their original air dates. Furthermore, before the release of the series on DVDs and for those who could not or did not purchase the DVD box sets, the re-runs on Comedy Central provided an opportunity to view the episodes at least more than once. All of these are important dimensions of watching the show in its second run on Comedy Central.

When *Chappelle's Show* is shown in syndication on basic cable (or broadcast television), the episodes are edited for content and the language is censored. This is a common practice employed by broadcast stations to avoid fines for explicit content from the FCC; when HBO sold the syndication rights for its highly popular original series *Sex and the City* to broadcast network TBS, for instance, the show was edited almost beyond recognition in order to meet FCC regulations. I believe that a similar butchering has occurred with *Chappelle's Show*. Because many of the show's sketches involve and sometimes even center on the use of the word "nigger," these sketches often lose some of the impact of their message when this word is edited out of the broadcast. It does not seem likely that a show with such biting racial commentary could be edited to meet FCC standards and still be as successful or transmit the same message, especially when every other word is bleeped out. As I mentioned earlier in reference to the series' placement on cable channel Comedy Central as opposed to broadcast television, any sort of censorship on the show's content will in turn make the racial satire less effective. However, on the upside, re-runs on broadcast TV are often scheduled at a different time from their original time slot, so that might also lead to more people being able to view the show. These are just a

few of the big differences inherent in viewing *Chappelle's Show* when it is re-run on Comedy Central and basic cable.

YouTube.com and Other Video Hosting Sites

There are probably hundreds, if not thousands, of video hosting sites currently on the web. One of the most popular sites to offer streaming video on the web is YouTube.com (which will be discussed at length in Chapter Four as part of the reception segment of this circuit of culture model), where any registered user can post his/her own videos for others to view and/or comment on. This site, like most of the other sites like it on the web, is not supposed to allow copyrighted material to be posted without permission from the owner, but, as is often the case with the internet, this rule is often extremely difficult to enforce and, therefore, blatantly disregarded. Many clips of sketches or segments from *Chappelle's Show* are posted on YouTube.com and other video hosting sites. This has enabled many viewers to watch the sketches again after seeing them first on television, but it has also resulted in many viewers watching the sketches in this context on the internet for the first time.

There are a few drawbacks to watching the sketches for the first time in this format; one of the biggest drawbacks is that these clips usually only show one sketch at a time, without the monologue given by Dave Chappelle to "set up" the sketch and entirely removed from the original context of the episode in which these sketches originally aired. Furthermore, these clips are sometimes not even the complete version showing the sketches in their entirety. This could lead to a discussion of the pros and cons of only viewing television shows as they were initially released and as they were meant to be seen, which is already a hot topic in the world of media studies (Klinger 2-6); however, that is too complicated and lengthy of an analysis to begin here

and it is not entirely pertinent to the focus of the present study, but it is certainly one that hopefully will be explored at length at some point in the future. Overall, I think that viewing the sketches over the internet contains the most challenges to the show's use of racial satire because of the removal of the sketches from their context within the larger episode, resulting in the complete loss of their contextual significance and a great deal of their original meaning.

Conclusion

Understanding the context in which a show is created and distributed is vitally important to understanding the resultant content of the show as well as the audience response. The significance of *Chappelle's Show* being produced at this exact point in the long history of black sketch comedy as well as it appearing on a cable channel were both key factors in determining the kind of show that it was allowed to become, as well as the audiences it was able to reach. The manner in which *Chappelle's Show*'s audience viewed the episodes also plays a significant part in determining how they viewed the use of racial satire on the show and whether or not they understood the perspective by incongruity. In the next chapter, I examine the actual performance of race that is utilized on the show, including the performances of blackness and whiteness and the multilayered performances of race that make up the content of *Chappelle's Show*.

CHAPTER 3

THE PERFORMANCE OF RACE ON *CHAPPELLE'S SHOW*

An interrogation of the text of *Chappelle's Show* is the second area I wish to examine in this variation of the circuit of media study model. Now that I have established that the show's writers and creators, Chappelle and Brennan, intended to use racial satire to perform perspective by incongruity, I now examine how this is done by conducting a qualitative content analysis of the performance of race on *Chappelle's Show*. In the course of my analysis of the performance of race in *Chapplle's Show*, I have broken it down into an examination of three different areas: the performance of blackness and otherness, the performance if whiteness, and finally, the multilayered performance of Clayton Bigsby that constitutes a mixture of the two.

The overarching theme in the performance of race on *Chappelle's Show* is the positioning of blackness as the norm. By attempting to invalidate whiteness as the dominant framework of racial performativity and replace it with blackness, *Chappelle's Show* intends to flip the script, so to speak, and show the incongruities inherent in the dominant framework. However, in order to accomplish this perspective by incongruity, *Chappelle's Show* must first succeed in positioning blackness as the norm, which is done through carefully planned performances of blackness and whiteness. *Chappelle's Show* is largely successful in this effort and, through the performances of race on the show, effectively works to create a figurative mirror through which the audience can see the incongruities inherent in this micro-representation of the dominant framework (Fanon). Unfortunately, though, the mirror is only so big, and cannot reflect all of the incongruities that exist in the larger frame of whiteness, but that does not mean Chappelle will not try.

Performing Blackness

On *Chappelle's Show*, blackness is presented as the rule as opposed to the exception. Most other television shows (notwithstanding those which air on the token minority friendly networks, the CW and BET) feature predominantly white characters unless the storyline specifically requires the presence of a black character. On *Chappelle's Show*, however, blackness is matter-of-factly depicted as the norm—for instance, if there is a sketch that requires a family, they will be presented as African American unless, of course, the script requires it to be played otherwise. This is no small feat and it should be duly noted. Not only is he attempting to replace the dominant framework of whiteness with one of blackness, but he is doing it quietly and without fanfare, because if he called attention to this move, it would not work—it must be presented and accepted as the norm without debate. To call attention to this move would be to acknowledge that blackness is not the dominant framework, therefore negating his positioning of it as such.

However, the flip side of this re-setting of the frame is that the negative characters are also often portrayed as African Americans as well. I believe that it would have been more beneficial to the satire if the negative characters were performed as the "token" white characters in the show in order to fully position blackness as the new dominant framework, because shows where the majority of characters are white employ this practice all the time. Whenever a drug dealer or other criminal figure is needed, even if there are no other black people represented in the fictional society, one will be brought in to play the negative character. This is a reflection of the racial tropes played out in the larger society—when we think criminals, we overwhelmingly

think black. Challenging this dominant narrative in particular would be admirable, but nearly impossible.

However, this was not done on *Chappelle's Show*, so I find it necessary to examine one of these negative characters and the way in which his blackness is performed. I have chosen the character of the drug addict Tyrone Biggums because he is without a doubt the personification of almost every negative characteristic attributed to black people—he is homeless, drug addicted, immoral, criminal, thankless, and not able or willing to be helped.

Figure 1. Tyrone Biggums

Tyrone Biggums, played by Dave Chappelle, first appears in episode two of season one and later goes on to appear regularly throughout the show's run. Biggums is a drug addict, the prototypical "crackhead" who will do anything for a fix, no matter how harmful, illegal, or disgusting. His costume consists of a tattered and soiled polyester suit worn over a torn hooded sweatshirt and battered sneakers. His look is completed with a wool hat and a generous smear of white powder (meant to be interpreted as either cocaine or extremely dry skin) across his face and lips.

In episode two of season one, Biggums has been asked to visit a local middle school as part of the school's anti-drug program (modeled after the "Scared Straight" and "just say no" programs of the Reagan era). Immediately upon his arrival, he proceeds to tell the children how much fun he had doing drugs as a kid, as well as locations where they can buy drugs today. The

scene culminates with Biggums sharing all manner of disgusting and graphic anecdotes with the class, until, finally, he is stopped by the teacher. The sketch opens and closes with a Tyrone Biggums theme song that is played over footage of Chappelle as Biggums engaged in what are presented as his day-to-day activities.

I found one part of Chappelle's performance as Biggums in this segment to be particularly troubling. There is a brief shot of Biggums in the middle of a group of people on the street dancing in a manner that is discomfortingly reminiscent of the shucking and jiving common of minstrelsy. This scene is fairly isolated from the rest of the opening in that it does not appear to be necessary or connected to the rest of the story. While it is true that the distinction of Biggums being a black crackhead versus a crackhead who just so happens to be black is never made, Chappelle's race is an undisputed part of every scene and every character he performs, including his performance as Tyrone Biggums due to the presence of his black body, and this scene is certainly no exception. If Dave Chappelle were not a black man performing this role, this dance could be read in an entirely different manner. As it is, however, it comes off as being very similar to a bit of cooning performed solely for the entertainment of the white man, harkening back to the days of minstrelsy and the personas commonly utilized by the likes of Mantan Moreland and Stepnfetchit, which was probably part of the creators' intent since Biggums is portrayed as being all of the stereotypes associated with black people.

However not all of the performances of blackness on *Chappelle's Show* require the presence of a black body, as evidenced in the "Reparations" sketch. The "Reparations" sketch from season one, episode four manages to incorporate a performance of blackness that often occurs without the presence of a black body. This sketch imagines what would happen if black people were given reparations for slavery and it is shot like a news report covering the events of

the day. Chappelle introduces the scene by saying "the only thing that I would say is that if we do ever get our reparations, which I doubt...we black people have got to get together and come up with a plan for the money. This is a consumer based economy. You can't just give black people all this money and turn 'em loose on the streets. That could be a potential disaster" (*Chappelle's Show*, 2003).

The white news anchor (played by Dave Chappelle in white face, discussed in more depth later) along with his all white news team, reports on the effects this decision has had on the nation; this amounts to a rundown of virtually every stereotype commonly attributed to African Americans, including things like their poor money management skills (apparently due in large part to their extravagant and irresponsible spending habits), their consistent failure to pay their bills, their criminal tendencies, and their overwhelming preference for such vices as smoking, drinking, and decidedly unhealthy eating habits. These ideas are presented as certainties and the only thing the news team expressed surprise over was when one of their stereotype-based predictions did not actually prove true.

This sketch is interesting in its use of the white performance of what blackness is in place of the actual performance of blackness, made clear by the near complete absence of the black body. This is a practice common to real television news shows, where blackness is constructed in a certain image for public consumption, often without any input at all from black voices. On the rare occasions where African American bodies are present, they are carefully edited to fit smoothly into the dominant framework of racial performance. Needless to say, I find this “editing” to be extremely troubling–showing only positive or only negative images of any group will result in an inaccurate depiction regardless of which way it is skewed. Mixed in with the racial satire on *Chappelle’s Show*, some of these sketches and commentary seem to call out

African Americans on the "truth" of many stereotypes about them. Sketches such as these could potentially hurt *Chappelle's Show*'s message because they come dangerously close to teetering on the brink of endorsing the stereotypes they are supposedly trying to refute. Dave Chappelle was very aware of this danger; his growing feelings of guilt and shame ultimately resulted in his flight from the show, Comedy Central, and the country.

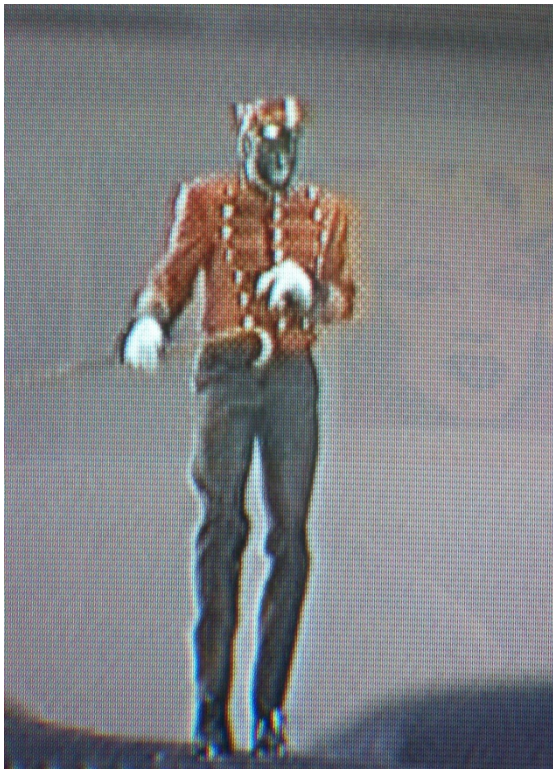

Figure 2. Black Pixie

One of the last sketches Chappelle worked on before he fled the show was an especially daring venture featuring racial “pixies,” where each pixie was supposed to be the visual personification of all the most prevalent (or just downright offensive) generalizations about that particular racial or ethnic group. The Asian pixie (Figure 4), for instance, is portrayed as having a samurai top knot, a Fu Manchu mustache, and a kung fu outfit, and as unable to say words containing an “l” correctly, instead using an “r” sound. The white pixie cannot dance and does not like women with large bottoms, and the Hispanic pixie has a penchant for Jesus air fresheners, illegal leopard skin seat-covers, and maracas (both are also represented in Figure 4). The pixies’ role in the sketch is to encourage each of their counterparts to give in to their innermost desires and not to worry about whether or not their

Figure 3. Black Pixie and Sidekick

actions will confirm commonly held beliefs about their specific minority group (i.e., black people like fried chicken and white people cannot dance).

The most troubling representation in this sketch is the black pixie because he encompasses the most sensitive and widespread stereotypes about a minority group. The segment of the sketch featuring the black pixie occurs on an airplane and centers on the choice between chicken and fish for the in-flight meal. As you can see in Figure 2 and Figure 3, Chappelle played the black pixie in black face while wearing a porter's uniform, complete with shiny gold buttons on his bright red jacket, white gloves, wooden cane, and a hat. At certain times throughout the sketch he is accompanied by a banjo playing sidekick (played by Mos Def), who was edited out of the final version of the sketch released on *The Lost Episodes* DVD. The use of black face alone in this performance is probably enough to make this sketch at least a little uncomfortable (which is a necessary component of perspective by incongruity), but when the pixie proceeds to badger his counterpart in the scene (also performed by Chappelle) about ordering the fried chicken that he really wants, the performance jumps from slightly uncomfortable to mildly offensive. The pixie sings, dances, and, basically, coons for the benefit of the audience, all attributes that are holdovers from the black face tropes of minstrelsy.

This discussion leads me to an interesting dimension of this performance: the implications of an African American using black face as a prop in the performance of race. This is certainly not the first time it has been done, and I am sure that it will also not be the last. To really understand the implications of using such a prop for the purpose of racial satire, it is first necessary to get to the heart of what blackface really is—what does it mean? As part of her discussion of *The Jazz Singer* in *Racechanges: White Skin, Black Face in American Culture*, Susan Gubar quotes Sander Gilman from *The Jew's Body*: "'Does blackface make everyone

who puts it on white?'" (Gilman 238, as quoted in Gubar 73). It is crucial to consider this question when examining the performance of race on a show which aired on, as I established in chapter two, what is widely known as the "white frat boy network" ("I'm Rich Bitch!!!" 325), and after such juvenile fare as *South Park*—if the audiences for these two shows are overlapping there is a good chance that the viewers might not get that this is, indeed, satire and not straight performance.

What I need to determine then, is whether the intended message is the same as the message the show is actually sending with this performance of blackness in blackface. If it is true, as claimed by Manthia Diawara, that "every stereotype emerges in the wake of a preexisting ideology which deforms it, appropriates it, and naturalizes it. The Blackface stereotype, too, by deforming the body, silences it and leaves room only for white supremacy to speak through it" (Diawara 9), then Chappelle can only be contributing to his own marginalization and appropriation by the dominant framework rather than reflecting its hypocrisy back to the audience. Therefore, despite Dave Chappelle's claims of positive intentions his use of black face in the performance of race may only be succeeding in silencing his own unique voice and transforming his show into yet another vehicle to support the dominant framework of whiteness.

Figure 4. Asian, Hispanic, and White Pixies

Another interesting dimension of this sketch serves to complicate this performance even more—the performance of race as portrayed through the other three pixies. While the Asian and Hispanic pixies (Figure 4) are similarly offensive, one-dimensional portrayals, the white pixie seems to lack much of the exaggeration and outlandishness that is consistent throughout the performances of the other three pixies. In a "town hall" segment at the end of the episode, the white pixie is labeled by many audience members as "generic" and as having no decidedly negative traits associated with him (*Chappelle's Show*, 2007). This line of discussion naturally leads to an examination of the performance of whiteness on *Chappelle's Show*.

Performing Whiteness

Interestingly, the performance of whiteness on *Chappelle's Show* is often the same in nearly all of the show's sketches, meaning that the white guys Chappelle plays all appear to be the same white guy. When Dave Chappelle is performing whiteness, he consistently employs certain props (see Figure 5). These props include a pale blond wig of short, straight hair, always carefully parted off to one side; full "whiteface" makeup, which includes white foundation (which gradually moved from a stark optimum white to a pale peach color as the series progressed—see Figure 6 for a later version) on his face and hands; conservative clothing that often consisted of the same muted tan sweater over a button up shirt

Figure 5. Anchorman Chuck Taylor

with bow tie or neck tie, usually paired with a blazer, khaki pants, and tan loafers; and, finally, a deep, rigid voice with which he carefully enunciates every word. Furthermore, Chappelle's performance of whiteness is also informed by the use of a particular racial trope—his white characters are consistently played as uptight, inhibited both socially and sexually, and possessing more stereotypically feminine traits than their black male counterparts.[1] These elements are largely consistent (with some minor alterations) throughout all of Chappelle's performances of whiteness, including that of news anchor Chuck Taylor; the father of the white family in "Trading Spouses", Todd Jacobson; the white delegate in the "Racial Draft" segment, and even the white pixie.

The use of white face in this context virtually necessitates that I follow up Sander Gilman's point about black face with the following question: does white face, in turn, make everyone who puts it on black (Figure 6)? I believe that on *Chappelle's Show*, it does. While Chappelle is unable to completely remove or reposition the dominant frame, he succeeds in knocking it by using white face as a re-appropriation of black face, a performative element that has historically been used to marginalize African Americans. However, can we even really look at the use of white face as a prop in racial performance in the same way or with the same tools that we employ for black face? I believe that the answer to the second question is no, simply because white face as a prop has not been employed for as long or to nearly the same degree as black face. That does not mean however, that we cannot interrogate the use of white face as a response or challenge to the use of black

Figure 6. Chuck Taylor Later in Series

[1] The performance of gender on *Chappelle's Show* is interesting in its own right, but is outside the scope of this project.

face. This performance may be in fact a coded statement of resistance toward the white majority and its blanket colonization of the media, or perhaps a way of positioning oneself firmly within the ranks of the black community and affirming a black identity.

In "The Blackface Stereotype," Manthia Diawara claims that "inherent in the Blackface myth is a white fantasy that posits whiteness as the norm. What is absent in the Blackface stereotype is as important as what is present: every black face is a statement of social imperfection, inferiority, and mimicry that is placed in isolation with an absent whiteness as its ideal opposite" (7) and that "stereotypes always rob people of their history and shun their realism" (9). If this is true, that black face represents the social imperfection of African Americans and makes them somehow less real, then Chappelle's use of white face represents the social imperfection of the dominant white framework. Perhaps Chappelle has succeeded in being able to achieve the opposite effect of black face performance through his use of white face and, by repeatedly performing whiteness as the same dull one-dimensional archetype, flip the script on white America by taking away their agency and individuality just as they have done to African Americans in television for the past 75 years. Chappelle's attempt at re-appropriating whiteness is a key strategy in his racial satire because it provides the white audience a mirror for viewing their own agency in creating incongruities in the representation of African Americans.

Multilayered Performances: Clayton Bigsby, the Black White Supremacist

The case of the "Frontline" sketch from the very first episode of the series involves perhaps the most problematic performance of race in the entire show. Chappelle plays Clayton Bigsby, a blind African American man who believes that he is white and a dedicated member of the white supremacist movement (see Figure 7). It is interesting that Chappelle's most notable

prop in this performance is his speech: as Bigsby, Chappelle speaks in a very high pitched, nasal backwoods dialect that includes frequent use of the n-word and other racist, homophobic, or sexist epithets. The use of this particular voice and the associated speech are key in this sketch because you cannot tell just by looking at him that Bigsby, a black man, possesses a virulent hatred of black people. Instead, the audience must rely on his speech, which displays all of the commonly associated signifiers of racism in America—southern, un-educated, etc.

The most striking aspect of this sketch is the multi-layered performance that Chappelle turns in—he is, in effect, performing blackness performing whiteness, but, with a clever twist of the storyline, he is able to do so without his usual prop of white face. Bigsby's blindness isolates him from the visual signifiers of race and makes them irrelevant in his world (at least for a time). For those who may have not seen the sketch in its entirety (or at all), I have provided a transcript of it in the appendix so that discussion of the performance of race can be better understood in reference to the sketch.

Figure 7. Clayton Bigsby, Black White Supremacist

This sketch brings to light several issues regarding passing and the role of the body in racial performance. Through the performance of Clayton Bigsby as a black white supremacist, Dave Chappelle provides social commentary on the art of passing in the present society—not through the usual route of skin color, but rather through words and actions. It is in this way that Chappelle effectively removes the body from the discussion of race. Because of Clayton Bigsby's white supremacist beliefs (expressed in his many books and his actions within the movement), he is able conceal his true identity as a black man (even from himself) and pass as a white man.

Another interesting bit of commentary on passing in this sketch occurs when Bigsby is being driven to a Klan meeting and comes across four young white men who are blasting rap from their car stereo. Because Bigsby, unlike the majority of the rest of the population, is denied the luxury of visual signifiers of race, he assumes that the young men are black because of the music they are listening to. He shouts derogatory statements at the men, one of which is the n-word, and they, in turn, appear to be flattered to have been mistaken for African Americans and to have been able to pass for black males. This sly removal of the visual aspect from the performance of race is truly one of the most sophisticated facets of *Chappelle's Show*'s commentary on race. Chappelle's clever use of a blind black man to hold up the mirror for the dominant framework so that white society can see the incongruities in its notions of race is the sharpest, most pointed bit of social commentary on *Chappelle's Show*.

Conclusion

After conducting my evaluation of the performance of race on *Chappelle's Show*, I find that it would be fitting to end with a quote from "The Blackface Stereotype":

> Today, as artists like Hammons stereotype the stereotype, they draw our attention to the distance as well as the similarity between the old Blackface and the new. Chris Rock's posing in Blackface on the cover of Vanity Fair, or playing a naïve black child ready to be eaten up by crocodiles on Saturday Night Live, is a new stereotype that steals from the old. True to the function of every stereotype, stereotyping a Blackface stereotype corrupts it by giving it a new, reified content. By giving the impression of surrendering to the old stereotype—through referencing some of its distinctive features—the artist addresses a new historical content. The new Blackface is therefore the criterion of transtextuality: an artifice which enables the performer to fill all the spaces that the old stereotype occupied and to be the star of the new show. If the old stereotype is the projection of white supremacist thinking onto black people, the new stereotype compounds matters by desiring that image, and deforming its content for a different appropriation. (Diawara 15)

Clearly, the performance of race in the pursuit of any sort of social commentary is still extremely problematic as even the use of racial satire must inherently rely on the very images, depictions, and beliefs that it is trying to refute. Dave Chappelle and *Chappelle's Show*'s use of black face and white face on a black actor as props for various sketches only serves to complicate matters even further. After taking each of these sketches and examining how race is performed in each of them, my personal feeling is that however you regard the message of *Chappelle's Show*, it cannot be denied that it is sending a message in an age where that is not as common as you would think, and I feel that this should count for something. I want to believe that the racial performances on the show are doing more good than they are harm and so, I for one will keep watching.

CHAPTER 4

AUDIENCE RECEPTION OF *CHAPPELLE'S SHOW*

Now that I have established the historical, institutional, and distributional context in which *Chappelle's Show* occurred and dissected the performances of race on the show, I now turn to a look at the reception of the text. For the third and final step in my circuit of culture model, I examine the audience reception of *Chappelle's Show*'s use of racial satire and its attempt at perspective by incongruity in order to determine the relative effectiveness of the show's efforts. I have chosen to utilize a reception study to examine the ways in which *Chappelle's Show*'s audience views (or has viewed, in the case of the message boards whose comments date back to the show's original run on Comedy Central) the portrayal of race and racial satire on the show, and whether or not viewers understood these portrayals as perspective by incongruity.

Misunderstanding and/or Misinterpretation of Satire

I believe that the greatest obstacle to *Chappelle Show*'s message by far is the potential for misunderstanding or misinterpretation of the purpose of the satire. If audience members misunderstand the show's use of satire to debunk racial stereotypes and instead see the content of the skits as just plain funny, the show will actually end up reinforcing the very stereotypes it meant to overcome. Spike Lee's 2000 film *Bamboozled* depicts such an occurrence by telling the story of a young black man who creates a modern day minstrel show. He intends to put on this show and then plans (and fully expects) audiences to reject it, which would then, in effect, show the producers how ludicrous their stereotypical shows about minorities have become. However, his plan backfires when audiences actually love the show and it becomes a hit, despite his

increasingly desperate attempts to make the show more and more outrageously racist. He ends up reinforcing all of the images he initially fought so hard to have audiences reject. This film depicts exactly what could happen if *Chappelle's Show*'s message is misinterpreted by his audience. This issue is perhaps the greatest challenge in the way of *Chappelle's Show*'s achievement of perspective by incongruity.

However, Chappelle and Brennan were well aware of the dangers inherent in misinterpretation. Unfortunately, though, the writers of *Chappelle's Show* have still run into this problem and have often blamed the issue on lack of audience sophistication, as Dave Chappelle did during a stand-up performance in Sacramento, California, in June 2004. Tired of trying to perform for an audience constantly haranguing him with a line from the show (specifically, the ever-popular, "I'm Rick James, bitch!"), Chappelle lashed out, saying to the crowd "you know why my show is good? Because the network officials say you're not smart enough to get what I'm doing, and everyday I fight for you. I tell them how smart you are. Turns out, I was wrong. You people are stupid" (as quoted in the *Sacramento Bee* by Jim Carnes, 2004). It seems that Dave Chappelle was not only frustrated with his audience's lack of understanding, but also with himself for writing and performing in sketches that he later referred to as "socially irresponsible" because he started to feel that some people were getting the message he was trying to send while others most certainly were not (*The Oprah Winfrey Show*, 2006). This portion of my study is intended to examine how a very specific segment of *Chappelle's Show*'s audience (those viewers who post or have posted in the past on a few specific internet message boards) viewed the racial satire presented on the show and, namely, if they recognized the satire as satire and were able to achieve perspective by incongruity.

Method and Limitations of Study

For my examination of the audience reception of the show, I have based my terminology on Jonathan Gray's work in "New Audiences, New Textualities: Anti-fans and Non-fans" in which he discusses the benefits of conducting reception studies by using fans, including pointing out that "once our informants are fans, though, we do not need to call them in for screenings. Fans live with in-built, intricately detailed memories of their text(s)" (66-67). This fan memory serves my study very well since I am trying to examine the audience for a cultural artifact that is no longer current. Gray distinguishes between "fans," "anti-fans," and "non-fans" because he feels that different things can be learned from each distinct group. Gray positions "anti-fans" as "those who strongly dislike a given text or genre, considering it inane, stupid, morally bankrupt and/or aesthetic drivel" (70), and the non-fans as "those viewers or readers who do view or read a text, but not with any intense involvement" but who are instead "grazing, channel-surfing, viewing with half-interest, tuning in and out, talking while watching and so on" (74), and may not have any sort of viewing commitment to the text at all. I have chosen to focus on message board posters/participants in general for the present study and I am not able to say for certain whether or not these viewers fall into the category of "fan," but I do venture some informed guesses as to which group these viewers belong. I feel that future reception studies of *Chappelle's Show* should delve deeper into the issues surrounding reception of the show by each of these groups individually as well.

There are many methodological difficulties associated with studying a show that is no longer on the air. Since *Chappelle's Show* went off the air in 2006, the biggest issue has been trying to find fan sites that are still up and running. Even the message boards on Comedy Central's website have been removed and the comments deleted. I did not have any choice but

to gather my data from the only boards I could find that were still active and had more than just a few comments.

Furthermore, as I discussed in Chapter Two, I have no way of knowing how fans were first exposed to the show in general, or this sketch in particular, unless they have explicitly stated it in their comments. They could have seen the sketch in a myriad of different ways: in the context of its original airing when the show premiered on Comedy Central, when it was subsequently rerun on one of the networks (and possibly edited even more than when it aired on Comedy Central), when it was released on DVD uncut and uncensored, or in one of the various video clips posted on the internet. As discussed in chapter two, the mode of reception is an important factor to consider in whether or not the audience understood the show's use of satire as perspective by incongruity because each context of viewing has its own implications and/or limitations.

The websites used in this study were The Internet Movie Database (IMDb) Message Board for *Chappelle's Show* (2003), "*Chappelle's Show* Forums" on TV.com, and YouTube.com, which had a few videos posted of sketches from the show. The Internet Movie Database (IMDb.com) is an extensive database containing listings of movies, television shows, actors, writers, producers, and anyone else involved in the production of film and/or television. The message board for *Chappelle's Show* was linked to the main database entry for the show. My next online source, TV.com, is a similar venture that operates on a much smaller scale because it is concerned solely with television. Like IMDb's message board, the *Chappelle's Show* Forums were linked to the site's main entry for *Chappelle's Show*. Finally, YouTube.com is a video posting website where users can create profiles for themselves and upload videos onto the site for others to view. It was not intended for users to post copyrighted material (such as

clips from movies, TV shows, etc.) but it has often been used for that purpose until the moderators find these violations and remove them.

I include the user comments from YouTube.com posted in response to video clips from *Chappelle's Show* because these responses are of a slightly different kind from those posted on the other two boards since YouTube.com users are responding immediately after viewing the material on the same site. I have no way of knowing if the users are viewing the clips for the first time on the site, or if they viewed the show on television when it originally aired, or if they watched the series on DVD; however, what I can know is that the users have viewed the clip that they are commenting on at least once on YouTube.com, and that the clip is fresh in their mind when they are posting their comments, which would create a distinction between those who are posting comments in this manner and those who are posting on one of the other boards. Having just seen the clip should imply that these users will have a more accurate idea of the specific content of each sketch, rather than the more thematic and emotion-based responses that tend to be posted elsewhere.

I looked for three specific categories of comments: the general trends in discussions on the message boards overall, comments on the show's portrayal of race in general, and comments on the portrayal of race on the show as seen specifically through the Clayton Bigsby sketch (see Appendix). I counted the number of comments that I was able to locate in each category and then examined the content of the comments in order to determine how *Chappelle's Show*'s audience viewed/views the portrayal of race on the show. Before I discuss the results of my research, I first provide a brief description of the sketch I have chosen for analysis; for further discussion of the Clayton Bigsby sketch, refer back to Chapter Two.

After searching out and reading all of the threads I could find that related to the posters' opinions on the portrayal of race on the show as a whole, I then recorded the number of threads and selected some of the more detailed comments to include in my analysis. Next I searched for threads that dealt specifically with the Clayton Bigsby sketch to examine how people viewed that racial satire in particular. I selected that sketch because it is fairly well known and because the best example of perspective by incongruity on the show.

Before I begin to discuss the conversations/comments that I found on these sites, I want to briefly examine the sites themselves and those whose post them. One of the drawbacks of conducting research using online sources exclusively is that the researcher has no way of knowing who the subjects are—basic demographic characteristics including age, race, gender, socio-economic class, ethnicity, or sexuality are all unknown. However, because I am conducting my research on internet message boards that are not devoted exclusively to *Chappelle's Show* or Dave Chappelle, I face an additional limitation in that I am not even sure if the posters are fans, anti-fans, or just casual viewers. I have been able to make some educated guesses based on their comments, but overall I find no hard evidence that would lead me to identify the fan status of the majority of these viewers. Furthermore, another factor that complicates this discussion even more is how I am defining "fan"—for the purposes of this study, I argue that it does not matter to me if viewers are fans, anti-fans, or casual viewers, because my main concern is that they are audience members who have viewed the show and who have been moved enough by what they have seen to take the time to log on to these message boards and comment on it. I feel that in this case I do not label this audience one way or the other because it is active enough to have felt the need to respond to what it has seen in the present study—that is enough for me.

All of these methodological procedures, concerns, and limitations are important to remember when considering the message board users' comments and discussions that I analyze below.

Description and Context of Sketch Chosen for Analysis

I have selected *Chappelle's Show's* Frontine parody about a blind black man who also happens to be a die-hard white supremacist (here after referred to as the Clayton Bigsby sketch) for analysis for a number of reasons. First of all, the subject matter of the sketch is extremely controversial, a fact well recognized by Chappelle himself. Knowing that this sketch would spark controversy, Chappelle introduced the sketch by saying, "I still haven't been cancelled yet, but I'm workin' on it. And I think this next piece might be the one to do it. This is probably the wildest thing I've ever done in my career and I showed it to a black friend of mine…he looked at me like I had set black people back with a comedy sketch. Sorry. Just roll it" (*Chappelle's Show*, Episode One, Season One, 2003). While it is clear that Chappelle does understand the controversial nature of this piece, what is not evident from his monologue is whether or not he feels that the sketch is socially responsible—I am inclined to believe that his willingness to air the sketch means that he finds it to be worth showing.

He references the sketch again in the second episode of Season Two, when he tells the audience

> Last season we started the series off with this sketch about a black white supremacist. Very controversial. Yes, very. It sparked this whole controversy about the appropriateness of the –the n-word, the dreaded n-word. You know, and then when I would travel, you know, people would come up to me, like white people will come up to me like man that sketch you did about them niggers, that was hilarious. Take it easy! You know I was joking around. I started to realize these sketches in the wrong hands are dangerous, and that 'n-word' is a doozie—especially for us black folks, you know. And a lot of different feelings come up when they hear that word. But I'm thinkin' is it because

> black people actually identify themselves as n-words? No, I don't know, maybe. But what if we just use the word for other people—would it be so bad? I don't know. So I made a sketch, it's about a white family whose last name happens to be nigger, that's all. Let's see how offensive the word sounds then. (*Chappelle's Show*, 2004)

In this monologue, Chappelle remarks on one of the most talked-about issues surrounding the show, which is the constant use of the "n-word." Apparently, he has received a lot of feedback on this word choice and many different opinions concerning its appropriateness. The frequent use of the n-word in the Clayton Bigsby sketch is another point that factored into my decision to use it in my analysis to study audience reception of stereotypes on the show. Also, the fact that the video of this sketch was available on You Tube was another big part of my decision to use it as part of my analysis.

The Clayton Bisgby sketch appeared on the very first episode of the first season of *Chappelle's Show*, which aired on January 22, 2003, at 10:30 PM Eastern Time on Comedy Central. This sketch effectively set the tone for what was to come in the next two and half seasons of the show. As I mentioned earlier, however, I have no way of knowing how or when viewers were initially exposed to the sketch, as they could have potentially seen it in a multitude of ways. This sketch provides a specific case study for my examination of the audience reception of the performance of race on *Chappelle's Show*. However, before I look at how viewers' responded to this specific sketch, I feel that it is first necessary to discuss the general climate of the boards in terms of what people are/were talking about, as well as the observable trends of comments concerning the ways in which viewers view race on the show in general.

Fan Reception—Analysis

General Reception

Overall, the threads and comments on these sites were largely positive, which is somewhat surprising—especially when one considers that these sites are not specifically designated as fan sites, per se, but are rather positioned as being general discussion boards about the show. Generally, the discussions on IMDb.com and TV.com consist largely of "what's your favorite sketch from *Chappelle's Show*?" type threads; in the same vein there are also discussions about users' favorite lines or favorite characters from the show.

However, another interesting element of the larger conversations going on on these sites is the treatment/discussion of women on the show. I must first make note of the almost complete absence of responses concerning gender and women on the show. Other than the comment about the use of the word "bitch" on the show, I could not find any threads that discussed the issue of gender or the portrayal of women, unless I count the threads that were concerned with "Whos The Sexiest Girl In His Skits" from the IMDb Message Board for *Chappelle's Show* (2003) or the many threads started by users where they are trying to find out the names of "hot" girls who appear in certain sketches. As a matter of fact, I found twelve threads on IMDb and one thread on TV.com that were created solely for the purpose of finding out who these women were, which was more than a little discouraging in my search for some acknowledgement of audience recognition of perspective by incongruity.

Additionally, in terms of the general discussions of women on the show, there was one comment in a "Things you dont like about the chappel's show" thread that mentioned the treatment of women on *Chappelle's Show*, and this comment pertained specifically to the use of the word "bitch" on the show. One user remarked

> FIRST OF ALL b????I DONT LIKE A MAN WHO CALL A WOMAN Ab????HOW WOULD HE LIKE IF SOME ONE CALL SOME ONE IN HIS FAMILY A b???? I HAPPLY TO SEE A BLACK MAKE IT IN THE WORLD BUT HIS MOUTH IS KILLING HIM. (*Chappelle's Show* Forums)

Immediately following this remark was a comment from another user who responded with "So. Its just comedy" (*Chappelle's Show* Forums). The overall treatment on these message boards of women on *Chappelle's Show* leads me to venture the guess that the great majority of those posting on these sites are male, which may be significant if one is interested in looking at how the posters' gender affects the sense of community that develops on the message board. This is a good area for future research because there is not a lot of work on male social networking in tele-participation (the relationship of television and the internet) (Ross).

Despite the treatment of women on the boards, some of the only exceptions to the positive trend of the threads overall, interestingly, are a few that seem to have been started by fans of *Chappele's Show* who are also active anti-fans of Carlos Mencia. I found this fascinating because I personally have never thought there was much of a parallel between the two comedians but it appears that the two fan bases (or at least those who have posted on these sites) are not one and the same, or even overlapping. This means that there is something about the brand of comedy offered on *Mind of Mencia* that is different from the humor that is typical fare for *Chappelle's Show*. I am unfamiliar with Carlos Mencia's work, but perhaps this difference if explored further could tell us more about what makes *Chappelle's Show* unique in the world of sketch comedy and within the Comedy Central brand.

Also, on TV.com there were a few threads that attempted to provoke a discussion about the negative aspects of the show. Two threads in particular contained some interesting comments on this side of the show, one called "Things you dont like about the chappel's show"

and the other "does this show use the word nig ger [sic] too much?" and I have included some of the comments here.

In the "Things you dont like about the chappel's show" thread, the only comment that dealt specifically with the portrayal of race on the show was, ironically, concerned with how whiteness is performed on the show, with the user remarking,

> one thing I always complain about is how white people are portrayed. As being preppy and talking properly. I cannot stand preppy and am very far from it. I don't fall into that stereotype. But every group is stereotyped, so I pry shouldn't complain. Just that the stereotype for whites is so annoying. Ugh. (*Chappelle's Show* Forums)[2]

I found this comment to be very interesting and somewhat confusing in that the user is upset by the "stereotype" of whites because she does not find it to be representative of all whites—does she think that the other stereotypes are representative of all members of other ethnic groups? Yikes. If this is the case, it is apparent that she definitely missed the intended perspective by incongruity that was implied in the racial satire employed on the show, and fell prey to one of the inherent risks of satire discussed by John Strausbaugh in *Black Like You*. The poster was not aware of the purpose of this performance of whiteness and, as a result, viewed the satire as racist (albeit in a surprising way in that she is a member of the dominant framework), missing the point entirely (Strausbaugh).

Furthermore, if she finds the "stereotype" presented of white people "annoying," does she think that members of other ethnic groups are pleased or proud of the stereotypes attributed to them? Sadly, I can only shake my head at this viewer and hope that she goes back and takes a closer look at the content of the show and realizes that there is more going on than she initially thought.

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[2] I have reproduced this and all other comments exactly as they were written on the original website, and without the user name attached to prevent the user from being identified.

The other thread, “does this show use the word nig ger [sic] too much,” was not very informative to the purpose of this study either. It began with a post debating the use of word because of its negative associations and history, but devolved into a sniping match that makes it appear as if the poster only started the thread in order to denigrate others who do not share his or her opinion. The thread was basically one long rant by one poster, interspersed with comments by others who attempted to present a different perspective, most of whom ultimately just gave up and left to post elsewhere. Despite this user’s best efforts to prove otherwise, it seems as though most people who frequent these message boards could actually be classified as fans who did not want to engage in any negative criticism of Dave Chappelle or the show.

One final thread on TV.com that is worth mentioning in this section of the analysis is called “Opinion on the Pixies,” and it dealt specifically with how users responded to the show as racial satire. The “pixies” referred to in the thread title are from the racial pixie sketch I discussed in chapter two, where four pixies (played by Chappelle) are depicted as either black, Asian, Hispanic, or Caucasian, and each is supposed to be the visual personification of all the stereotypes attributed to that particular race. Users’ comments ranged from those who did not find the sketch funny or offensive (one user simply said “The pixies were pretty stupid...” while another said “…I didn't find this skit offensive, but I also didn't laugh. It just wasn't funny to me. I really felt no emotion towards it. I was just watching images flicker across my tv screen.”), to those who recognized the material for the satire that it was meant to be (one user commented “I think it did its purpose. I thought it wasn't the best satire but I still thought it was strong enough to make a point at the absurdity of stereotypes,” while yet another user remarked “I thought it was funny in it's own little way. Some of you got it correct, I think the message was to make fun [of] racist people and show them how stupid they are.”) (*Chappelle’s Show* Forums). This

dichotomy between those who essentially "got" the perspective by incongruity and recognized the material as satire and those who were offended by the representations, harkens back to my earlier point from Strausbaugh about the inherent dangers of satire—there are always going to be people who simply miss the point.

Taking the discussion in a slightly different direction, but still recognizing the intended function of the sketch as satire, another user even went so far as to cite some outside sources for his/her take on the pixie sketch, and tried to defend Chappelle by distancing him from the sketch:

> I'm pretty sure that the pixie skit was part of the reason why he left the show. (He thought it was playing into sterotypes rather than making fun of them) also, i heard that he has been publicly speaking out against Comedy Central showing the skit. my sources? TIME magazine May 23, 2005 "Dave Speaks" *and* the little part Charlie Murphy and that other guy said before showing the skit. don't get me wrong, i thought that the skit, in addition to being offensive, was not funny. i just don't think it's fair to blame him when he has publicly said that he didn't like the episode and didn't want it shown. (*Chappelle's Show* Forums).

Comments such as these point to a reason to hope that there are in fact people in the audience who recognize the satirical element of the show. Sadly, however, for each post that mentions the show's use of satire, there are hundreds that seem to have missed or ignored it completely. This pattern of oversight was not unique to IMDb.com and TV.com, however; this response was most common on the video hosting site YouTube.com, which may be significant due the limited and incomplete context in which these sketches were viewed, without the benefit of the framework that is developed in the rest of the show.

On You Tube, I looked at the comments posted about a few different videos of segments on the show to get an idea about how fans responded to the show in general. The comments were largely positive, including statements like "priceless," "funny as hell," "on point," "I miss dave," "lol," "rofl," "fucking hilarious," "dave chappelle at his best," "lmao," and "love this shit" ("Black Bush"). After reading through all the comments left on this particular video of

Chappelle's "Black Bush" sketch, it became clear that the positive comments outnumbered the negative at least ten to one, but did not say anything about the audience understanding of the use of satire on the show.

Now that I have established the general trends and topics of discussion that were posted on the message boards overall, I look at the viewers' comments about one particularly obvious use of racial satire on *Chappelle's Show*, the Clayton Bigsby sketch.

Clayton Bigsby, Black White Supremacist

When I first started looking at the message boards for users' comments about the Clayton Bigsby sketch, I was initially looking for threads that dealt specifically with this sketch in the subject line. However, this search proved to be virtually fruitless, as I was only able to find one thread that was devoted exclusively to the Clayton Bigsby sketch. On IMDb's message board for *Chappelle's Show*, there was a thread entitled "That guy's head exploding during the Clayton Bigsby piece," and it contained only five comments—the initial post and five responses.

> User one: What was it supposed to mean? That he couldn't take it that he was black?
> User two: uh, duh
> User one: Yes would've sufficed smartass.
> User three: According to Dave on the dvd audio commentary, the realization literally "blew his mind". That guy with the exploding head btw, is the show's co-creator; Neal Brennan.
> User four: You deserved it moron.
> (IMDb Message Board for *Chappelle's Show* (2003))

Clearly, this line of comments indicates that some people were having trouble following the satire, confirming one of the major points of my argument. This thread is significant even considering that about half of it is devoted to bashing the initial poster. It does not contain any references to the racial stereotypes presented in the sketch or the users thoughts on these stereotypes. So, from this point on I turned toward a different line of research for my analysis

and began to look for the mention of the Clayton Bigsby sketch in other threads not specifically devoted to it.

While it may not have been as popular as some of his less controversial or more pop culture infused sketches (like the Prince, Lil John, or Rick James bits, which are much more commonly cited as fan favorites on the message boards and are frequently available on any number of viral videoing sites), the Clayton Bigsby segment was often listed as one of fans' favorite sketches on both the IMDb and TV.com message boards. One thread posted on IMDb's message board for *Chappelle's Show* called "Moments in Chappelle's Show That Had You Laughing Forever" contained a total of forty-one comments, five of which mentioned the Clayton Bigsby sketch, either as a whole or as one specific scene. I have reproduced each mention of the sketch below:

> "Let's talk about Chinese people! With their king-fu and their silly ching-chang-chong talk! We can't understand you! Go back to your country! White Power!"
> "Black White Supremacist"
> "The Clayton Bigsby: Black White Supremacist skit is one of the funniest things I've seen and just brilliant stuff. :)"
> "the only Black man in the KKK (who is blind) is hilarious."
> "the KKK one."
> (IMDb Message Board for *Chappelle's Show* (2003))

In a thread entitled "Favorite Skit?" posted on TV.com's message board, the Clayton Bigsby sketch garned a total of seven mentions (out of 43 total comments), with one user referring to the sketch as the one about "the blind dude who believed he was white and hated the blacks. But divorces his wife because she was a (racial slur(trying not to be offensive)) lover or something." Another user who listed "Clayton Bigsby Black White Supremisist" as his or her favorite also said "I think its impossible to top" as part of his or her comment.

Another similar thread on TV.com contained users' lists of the "Top Ten Rememorable Sketches of Chappelle" and out of sixty-six total responses, twenty-two users listed the Clayton

Bigsby sketch in their top ten, with two users even going so far as to cite specific quotations from the sketch as part of their lists ("When asked why he divorced his wife after 23 years of marriage Clayton replied 'She was a n***** lover'" and "I am in no way involved with any n***erdom!") (*Chappelle's Show* Forums). This shows that many people have at least seen the sketch and that users also found it to be funny, but does not speak to an audience understanding of perspective by incongruity.

This sketch was also cited as containing some of fans' favorite quotations from the show. On IMDb's message board for *Chappelle's Show*, there is a thread called "Best quote can't be beaten" which contains ninety-three responses from users, each listing his or her own favorite quotation (or quotations) from the series. Two of these responses list quotations from the Clayton Bigsby sketch as their favorite:

User wrote:

> "HEY! You jungle-bunnies turn that music down!!!!!! You n***ers make me sick!!!! Woogety boogety, n***er! Woogety boogety!!!!"
> "Dude, did he just call us n***ers? AWESOME!!!!!!!!!!"

and another user wrote:

> "Why did Bigsby divorce his wife of 50 years. Because, she was a n***** lover."
> (IMDb Message Board for *Chappelle's Show* (2003))

These lines form the sketch are examples of racial satire but it is unclear if viewers enjoy them for that reason or because they simply find them to be funny. Even though these comments are not indicative of the feelings of the majority of posters, I maintain that they are important to my argument in that they show that the Clayton Bigsby sketch did not go unnoticed by viewers. Similarly, on IMDb, there is a thread called "FAVE LINE/SAYINGS" which includes twenty-eight total comments, one of which includes a quotation from the Clayton Bigsby sketch:

User wrote:

> What is your exact problem with Nig..uhh African Americans?
> How much time ya got buddy? Well first of all they stink, there good for nothin tricksters, crack smoking swindlers, big butt havin, wide nose breathin all the white mans air. They eat up all the chicken an watermelon, they think there the best dancers, and they STINK! did I mention that before? (IMDb Message Board for *Chappelle's Show* (2003))

This comment is difficult to interpret for the same reason mentioned above—it is unclear what it is about this particular comment that viewers are responding to, but again, it shows that people are watching.

On TV.com, there was a thread called "Favorite Chappelle Show Quotes?" which contained two quotations from the Clayton Bigsby sketch (out of a total of 40 comments). One of the two listed the line "Woogie Bogie n***er Woggie Bogie," and the other "In the past few weeks, Clayton Bigsby accepted the fact that he is a black man. And three days ago, he filed for divorce from his wife. When we asked "Why after 19 years of marriage?" He responded, "Because she's a ****(n-word) lover" (*Chappelle's Show* Forums). At the very basic level, each of these comments illustrates the point that these viewers did not see the show's use of racial stereotypes and slurs as being negative, but rather, most seem to have viewed the sketch as being very humorous. I would like to have seen the audience reaction to the use of such racist rhetoric and practice as it relates to the pursuit of racial satire expressed more explicity, but that was not the case.

After I had exhausted these message boards, I turned to You Tube to see if video of the sketch was even posted on the site and, if so, what comments had been posted about it.

On YouTube.com, it was incredibly hard to find a complete video of the Clayton Bigsby sketch. The best I could find was video of the sketch posted in two parts by the same user. The first part was called "White Supremacy KKK," and the second part was listed as "KKK White

Power Supremacy." The comments left on these two video clips were distasteful, to say the least. One user posted the following in response to the first video:

> The problem is that this will never be accepted by main stream whites. You need to re organize and not be racist as to bring white men and woman TOGETHER as one people so that there is still a race left!! Stop this foolish racism that isn't making a difference in the world. ORGANIZE a system to bring us together in this modern time with out the hatem THEN we can and will succeed. But this, through this hate, it will never be! ("White Supremacy KKK")

This comment confused me because I was not sure what the user was referring to in terms of the sketch; I suppose that he/she could be implying that the racism of Clayton Bigsby and the other white supremacists in the sketch is actually working against the goals of white supremacy and race purity, but I cannot be sure. At the very least, this person is definitely not in favor of racial mixing and unity among all people, and seems to have read the racial satire on *Chappelle's Show* as satire pointing out what is wrong with the white supremacy movement—not the fact there is one, but that it is destined to be unsuccessful unless it changes its tactics.

Another user responded to this post by saying "How stupid it it [sic] to shout 'white supremacy' under the BLACK president Obama in U.S.A. lol" ("White Supremacy KKK"). This comment does not even address the Clayton Bigsby sketch or *Chappelle's Show* directly, yet it maintains the air of social commentary that epitomizes this sketch. Clearly, there are other things (like deeply-rooted social issues and perhaps reactions to the changing ideas about race in our society—as illustrated by the election of this country's first black president) at work here besides Dave Chappelle's sketch about a black white supremacist. If this sketch has the ability to spark debates about race in America, *Chappelle's Show* is succeeding in its goal of creating perspective by incongruity, because questioning the dominant framework, rather than blindly accepting it for what it is, is an important part of doing perspective by incongruity (Burke).

The comments on the second part of the sketch were largely consistent with those from part one. One user posted "how can he not know he is black just feel your lips u dumb nigger," which prompted others to reply with "wow get that shit out of here…" and "ummm dude it's a comedy!!!!!/second take your rastic ass out of here/stupid omg we are all the same/black, white, brown, tan, RED!/we are all the same….why can't you fucking ku pooo Klan see that!/really stupid:]]]/stop the hate!!!!!!!!" ("KKK White Power Supremacy"). The comment about *Chappelle's Show* being a "comedy," is interesting because it illustrates how some people will attempt to prevent themselves and others from seeing the racial satire as anything beyond a simple performative device for creating funny sketches—even in the midst of a debate that emphasizes the fact that the racial satire on *Chappelle's Show* is anything but simple.

As if this debate were not heated enough, other users decided to enter the fray with testaments of their own, including this one:

> "I hate niggers. Niggers are worthless. niggers and their lovers are ruining this country. Death to the niggers, kikes and nigger lovers! We need to bring the Klan to tens of millions of members, get our people in power and build gas chambers to fix the nigger and jew problem once and for all.
>
> STAND UP FOR YOUR RACE AND NATION! JOIN THE KKK!"

and this one:

> "I like going around and getting white bitches pregnant. I love doing MY part to erase the white race off this planet one black baby at a time.
> Even the Sun hates crackers. And they are too stupid to realize it. How much cancer do you need before you get the message?
> I guess y'all think it's normal to turn 35 and look 75. Liver spots and humps in your back with leather looking skin and smelling like wet dogs.
> Thank God for melanin.
> LOL LOL!!! I love it."
>
> ("KKK White Power Supremacy")

Though they represent completely views from opposite ends of the spectrum, these comments are in fact very similar. Neither has anything to do with Clayton Bigsby, Dave Chappelle, or

Chappelle's Show, but they both illustrate how racial satire can often be extremely provocative and how it has the ability to inspire people to voice their own beliefs and positions on the central issues at work in the satire. Sharon Marie Ross discusses the merits of this sort of debate occurring on the internet in *Beyond the Box: Television and the Internet*, pointing out that

> [w]hile one cannot examine such exchanges (either in a show or online) and state definitively that any kind of real learning is occurring, at the very least something useful socially is happening as viewers *use the Internet* to revisit an original story, bringing their own lives to bear upon the narrative. (157-158)

They may not be engaged in a productive discussion of these issues, but at least they are talking about them—the dialogue would have to start somewhere.

Comments like these were fairly common for both parts of the sketch and they only offer limited support for what the show is trying to do. The ignorance and hate that many of these users display is clear proof of the continuing need for more to be done to eradicate such hatred in our society. When passionate comments such as these are being posted in response to a television show, they illustrate the show's ability to strike a chord with its audience, regardless of whether that audience consists of fans, anti fans, or non fans, because all seem to be moved to comment, which is actually a good thing. As I said earlier, generating interest and sparking debate is necessary to obtain perspective by incongruity, so *Chappelle's Show* is at least on the way to doing what it set out to do. It is unclear whether or not this debate will result in people eventually realizing the incongruities in the dominant framework; however, it is a good first step in that direction.

Conclusion

I have to admit that I was slightly disappointed with the lack of support for my thesis in this reception study. I had a hard time finding posts that dealt with the issues that I wanted to

focus on in my analysis, namely, fans' response to the use of racial stereotypes on the show. As I said before, I was hoping for a greater amount of understanding of the show's use of racial satire and I also wanted to try to find some evidence that the audience had been able to recognize, at least partly, some type of perspective by incongruity. While I found many users who did get it, there seemed to be just as many who missed the point entirely.

Furthermore, after reading many comments and posts on the message boards, I have come to realize that this sort of reception study is incredibly difficult and time consuming. One dilemma that I encountered in conducting this sort of internet-based reception study was the issue of censorship of users' comments and of their video clips. When all or part of a comment is deleted from a discussion thread, it makes me wonder why—perhaps the content was so obscene that it was deemed unacceptable for posting by the site moderators. This seems to be the case, though I was fairly surprised at the number of people who left harsh and hateful comments, not just about the show, but about people and different races in general. This was most prevalent among the comments posted on the videos on YouTube.com. It seems apparent that in the case of the videos posted on YouTube.com, many posters took the Clayton Bigsby sketch as an opportunity to voice their own white supremacist views and missed the satirical point of the sketch entirely, assuming that their comments can be read at face value. It would not be outside of the realm of possibility to question whether some posters may have intended their comments to be read as satirical, in an (albeit badly executed) attempt to do the same sort of social commentary as *Chappelle's Show*. So often in fan studies researchers take the fans and their activities so seriously (see Bird), rather than entertaining the idea that fans could be engaging in active audience practices and producing material of their own, like many researchers, including Henry Jenkins, have maintained.

My overall feeling after conducting this study is that the majority of viewers who posted on the sites that I examined did not see the show primarily as being a form of social commentary expressed through racial satire, but rather as just plain funny. It appears that they did not try to delve any deeper into the intent of the show's creators, finding it to be instead purely entertainment, which I realize should not be surprising as most people probably do not watch television in general, or comedy specifically, looking for enlightenment. This is exactly what I did not want to find, because perspective by incongruity cannot be achieved if no one understands or chooses to see it as such. However, this is only a small sample and a limited study, so perhaps there is hope for future research to find different fan communities (as well as anti-fans and non-fans) who may have viewed the show a little differently. After all, there were a handful of comments by audience members who clearly understood the show's use of racial satire as perspective by incongruity, which, to me, makes the whole venture worthwhile.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

To conclude my examination of *Chappelle's Show*'s use of racial satire and its ability to achieve perspective by incongruity, I have offered a brief summary of the present project followed by a discussion of what I have learned and what still needs to be addressed in future research, as well as some final thoughts on the use of racial satire on *Chappelle's Show* and in the media in general.

Summary of Project and What I Have Learned

In this essay, I sought to examine *Chappelle's Show*'s use of racial satire to challenge dominant stereotypes and the effectiveness of that satire as a tool to achieve perspective by incongruity. I used a variation of D'Acci's circuit of media study model to examine the institutional challenges and limitations on the show due to the context in which it was created, produced, and distributed; to interrogate the strategies employed by the show's writers/creators to overcome these challenges through the performance of race; and to analyze the audience's understanding of the use of racial satire through a reception study of the show's audience. I argued that using satire often has the unintended consequence of crossing the line between "sending up" a behavior and supporting it, essentially becoming that which it is trying to discount, though this is not to say that its intrinsic value is therefore completely negated. I learned that the show's audience was pretty evenly split in terms of their understanding of the use of racial satire—some recognized it and clearly realized its purpose, while others either dismissed the show as pure comedy and nothing more, or saw it as condoning and/or spreading racist rhetoric and hate.

More questions: Areas of Interest for Future Research

This project was designed to explore *Chappelle's Show*'s use of racial satire to perform perspective by incongruity. There are many additional interesting and import aspects of *Chappelle's Show* that can and should be explored; however, in order to conduct a coherent project with a limited scope, I had to avoid the temptation to try to do everything. Since I was unable to delve deeper into many issues surrounding black sketch comedy, the complexities of fitting a show into a network's existing brand identity, perspective by incongruity, and racial satire in general, I include some of them here in the hope that others will pick up where I have left off and continue to build upon and expand the existing scholarship in these areas.

One area which is definitely ripe for future discussion is the use of racial satire within the context of an African American-centered television show. Because I was specifically interested in the use of racial satire throughout the history of prime time black sketch comedy as a way of comparing previous attempts with those made by Chappelle's Show, I was looking for shows that utilized a format as close to this one as possible. This led me to examine prime time black sketch comedy shows hosted by a black stand-up comic, as opposed to sitcoms starring African Americans (i.e., Redd Foxx's *Sanford and Son*, or Bill Cosby's *The Cosby Show*) or general sketch comedy shows with guest hosts (like *Saturday Night Live* or *In Living Color*).

Another area of interest lies in the field of new media today, namely viewer interaction with television and the internet, called tele-participation in Sharon Ross's recent publication, *Beyond the Box: Television and the Internet.* For a sketch comedy series like *Chappelle's Show*, it is important to understand generic limitations or challenges to tele-participation for sketch comedy viewers. Can the same level of multimedia interaction exist for sketch comedy shows as there has been for sci-fi or other "cult TV" shows? If not, my next question is why? As tele-

participation becomes more and more mainstream for viewing audiences in the twenty-first century, how can sketch comedy shows, whose format has not traditionally lent itself to this sort of interaction, adapt and continue to thrive in this emerging multimedia world?

Other questions that have come up in the course of my research which I hope will be addressed in future studies are: how can racial satire/succeed in an institutional climate that increasingly pushes for a uniform brand identity on niche networks? Is satire the most effective way to do perspective by incongruity, or are there better ways to send this message to audiences? Also, does perspective by incongruity always run the risk of misinterpretation or are there ways to manage this risk? How will we view *Chappelle's Show* years from now when it has become part of the history of black sketch comedy—will his satire stand up over time, or did the show merely represent a very topical sketch comedy show that when removed from the immediate context of its creation will no longer be meaningful to future audiences? Also, how does the often derogatory and marginalized portrayal and representation of women on *Chappelle's Show* affect its contradictory message of racial satire? These are just a few of the topics that I see as potentially being expanded on for future studies.

As for the part of this project that dealt with the reception study of audience response to *Chappelle's Show*'s use of racial satire is concerned, I realize that there are many areas of this project that hold the exciting possibility for further inquiry in future projects. These areas include audience response to the DVD releases of the show, the significance of the general topics of discussion on the message boards, and the potential for studying *Chappelle's Show* as an artifact of male fandom. In this essay I will briefly examine each of these areas and how they would benefit from a closer look in future studies. I also include suggestions for structuring these future studies and potential research questions.

The first area that I would like to see interrogated further is the audience's response to the DVD releases of the show in particular. In the present study I looked at comments from viewers who posted on internet message boards for the show and did not attempt to distinguish between the possible contexts in which they each consumed the sketches. However, for the purpose of examining *Chappelle's Show*'s viewers further, I am interested in how audiences in the present and those at the time of the initial release respond to the use of racial satire as viewed on the uncensored DVD box sets of *Chappelle's Show*. One very interesting aspect of studying the DVD audience would be looking at audience reception of the DVDs at the time of their original release and comparing that with audience reception of the DVDs today. I think that it would be intriguing to see if there has been a change in the way audiences view and respond to the DVDs and, if so, perhaps delve a little deeper into the possible reasons for those changes.

However, I must acknowledge that it is difficult to conduct a reception study of this particular industrial context because it is hard to determine who has viewed the show specifically through the medium of DVD without relying largely on self-reporting or a controlled experimental setting. From my experience with the present study, I think that it may be useful to try to conduct a study of audience reception of the DVDs through user reviews of the products posted on the websites of online retailers like Amazon or Ebay. While this would probably not constitute a representative sample of the DVD audience, it would at least serve to start the discussion of this topic and provide a basis for further inquiry. This sort of study would add much to the existing conversation around the differences that are inherent in viewing a program in various industrial contexts and/or mediums.

Another area that would benefit from further research is an examination of the general topics of discussion going on within the internet message boards. For the present study, I was

chiefly interested in examining how audience members who posted on a few specific internet message boards discussed and viewed the use of racial satire on *Chappelle's Show*. To do this, I weeded through pages and pages of discussion in order to find any mention of the portrayal of race on the show, or any mention of sketches that explicitly dealt with racial issues or themes of racial difference. While I noted the general trends among the topics of discussion that seemed to dominate the boards, I did not delve any deeper into the reasons why some discussions seemed more prominent than others or why the show might lend itself to the discussion of certain topics over others beyond pointing out that the limited discussion of race on the boards proved to be a limitation on my study.

Since I was primarily interested in the audience's response to the portrayal of race on *Chappelle's Show*, I did notice that race was often only a secondary or tertiary point of interest among posters, with humor being the primary topic that appeared to resonate most with posters, followed closely by inquiries about the identity of female actresses who appeared on the show. Also, I find it necessary to point out that many of these conversations are not archived from the period of *Chappelle's Show*'s original run, but rather consist of ongoing discussions in the present. Obviously there is some reason why people are still talking about all of these things and I think that it would be useful to figure out what motivates this continued interest in the show and the themes that it portrays. Attempting to understand the reasons for these things would not only help us to understand more about the success of and continued interest in *Chappelle's Show*, Comedy Central's brand identity, and sketch comedy as a genre, but also more about internet fandom and especially the developing link between television viewing and the use of the internet. The latter is an increasingly important area of research in the field of media reception

studies and it is uniquely positioned to experience even more growth over the next few years as the internet becomes more and more prevalent across the world.

One final area of the study that I feel deserves to be examined at length is the potential for *Chappelle's Show* to be studied as an artifact that allows and, I would argue, even promotes the development of a distinctly male fandom. Most media reception studies focus largely on fandom as a primarily female phenomenon (i.e., much of the early science fiction work or soap opera fan studies), so studying a show which appears to run counter to this trend would be a significant contribution to the field of fan studies. I am basing my assumption that *Chappelle's Show*'s fans are largely male on the comments made by users on the internet message boards that I utilized in the present study. The tone, topic and content of viewers' comments often made each one's gender abundantly clear, providing of course that most were being honest in their posts and not pretending to be something else. The large number of threads devoted to discussing the attractiveness of female guest stars on the show was one of the main factors contributing to my identification of the majority of my subjects as male. I do feel, however, that additional research should be done to confirm this hypothesis and determine if a significant number of *Chappelle's Show*'s fans (but not necessarily its larger audience) are indeed male.

For those interested in furthering this research, some possible research questions for a study of this sort might deal with issues such as: the unique ways that male responses to a program like *Chappelle's Show* might be different from female responses; the potential for reading male interest in *Chappelle's Show* at face value versus interrogating this interest as created masculinity; and, exploring exactly what men as a specific social group get out of the sketch comedy format. All of these are important questions to consider when studying *Chappelle's Show*'s fandom as largely male-centered and male-dominated.

The three areas that I have discussed above—audience reception of the DVD releases of *Chappelle's Show*, in-depth examination of the general topics of discussion on internet message boards devoted to the show, and the potential for *Chappelle's Show*'s fandom to be studied as specifically male-based—are all interesting and important sites for future research. I hope to see the body of work on *Chappelle's Show* expand over the coming years and these topics given the appropriate amount of attention that they deserve.

Final Thoughts

Overall, it looks as though, even if one considers that some people will misunderstand *Chappelle's Show*'s message, the positive effects outweigh the negative. I think that it is a worthwhile venture if the show is able to show even a few people that stereotyping is wrong and, in some cases, just downright ridiculous. Unfortunately, there are certain things that can only be understood if audience members are willing to challenge their supremacist position and one show cannot override that. That some individuals do manage to understand the message probably says more about those individuals who get it than the text itself. I believe that Dave Chappelle and Neal Brennan did the best they could to make their satires as accessible as possible for the audience, artfully using comedy to send their message rather than preaching at the audience, and to overcome the other obstacles that interfered with the show's message, including the problems with censorship and issues of network control and the challenges that resulted from the performances of race that constituted the vehicles for the message.

After all, there are always going to be those people who just do not get it, a fact we were reminded of last year by the case of the Ohio state trooper who wore a handmade Ku Klux Klan costume while on duty and even went so far as to send pictures of himself wearing the costume

to other troopers, saying that he was just making a joke in reference to one of *Chappelle's Show*'s skits ("Ohio State Troopers Disciplined for Ku Klux Klan Photo"). I simply do not think that the lack of sophistication of some audience members should cancel out the worth of the message to others who do get it, in spite of the fact that Dave Chappelle apparently believed just the opposite and left the show because of it ("Dave Speaks"). I do think, however, that it is extremely telling that one of the last sketches Dave worked on before he fled from the show was a sketch about racial pixies, where each pixie was supposed to be the personification of all the most prevalent stereotypes about that particular racial/ethnic group.

In his article for *Time Magazine*, Christopher John Farley described Dave's discomfort with the scene, explaining that

> Chappelle thought the sketch was funny, the kind of thing his friends would laugh at. But at the taping, one spectator, a white man, laughed particularly loud and long. His laughter struck Chappelle as wrong, and he wondered if the new season of his show had gone from sending up stereotypes to merely reinforcing them. 'When he laughed, it made me uncomfortable,' says Chappelle. 'As a matter of fact, that was the last thing I shot before I told myself I gotta take f****** time out after this. Because my head almost
> exploded.' ("Dave Speaks" 7)

I think that if the reaction to this sketch made Dave Chappelle feel that incredibly uncomfortable, perhaps that is just a reaffirmation that his show is needed in the world to educate people like the unnamed white man of his story, and that maybe it would be more effective if he would just dig in his heels and try harder, rather than leaving.

After all, Burke did not say that people should stop trying to employ the tactic of perspective by incongruity because some people did not understand it; from what I have read, I would be more inclined to believe that he would just say that people needed to do some research and pay a little more attention to the messages they are receiving from the media (but that is just my opinion). I do feel that there are some messages in the sketches on *Chappelle's Show*

concerning women and gay people that I do not agree with or condone. However, it is also my belief that all shows, like all people, are inherently flawed, so we must take the good with the bad, unless, of course, Dave Chappelle returns to *Chappelle's Show* and those of us who object to his show's portrayal of women start a campaign entreating him to stop airing sketches that are derogatory to women or gays. Even though the single female hip hop artist to appear as musical guest star on the show was portrayed in an arguably positive light, that still does not negate the fact that she, as a female artist, was the exception. One major question I have to ask is why there was only one female musical guest? I suppose that it could just be a coincidence, but I do not really believe that. Could it have been that others were contacted about being guest stars, but no other female musicians were available to appear on the show? This also sounds less than convincing. Perhaps there were just so many male artists lined up to appear on the show that they just could not fit any more women in, although I doubt it. No, it seems to me that this was a conscious decision, so the next question would be, why?

Even if I try to look past the lack of female hip hop artists as musical guests and guest stars, there is still the issue of the roles given to black women in the skits on *Chappelle's Show*. Before I go any further, I think that it is important to note that because many of the sketches on *Chappelle's Show* were aimed at satirizing popular racial stereotypes, choosing a woman of a certain skin color over another was necessary to make his point. However, there were also many scenes where this excuse cannot apply and where *Chappelle's Show* is simply reinforcing certain stereotypes about black women. After looking at the types of roles played by black women on the show, it has become apparent to me that whenever there is a "'ho" in a scene it is going to be played by woman of color, and, nine times out of ten, it will be played by a black woman. On the other hand though, in the skits where Chappelle walks the streets speaking to passersby, like

the "New York Boobs" sketch from Season One, the women that he stops to talk to are often white women. Furthermore, whenever there is a spot for a female lawyer or other powerful figure, it is a white woman, like the lawyers in the "Jury Selection" sketch from Season Two. Obviously, *Chappelle's Show* is seriously at fault for reinforcing racialized gender stereotypes through its sketches and practices, and through its exclusions.

I think that this sort of disparity just reinforces the idea that we as a society should not discard something that is good on one issue just because it is bad on another. *Chappelle's Show* really tried to do something revolutionary by way of challenging racial stereotypes, but it did nothing to counter the racialized gender stereotypes that oppress black women. If we as consumers can remember to consume media like *Chappelle's Show* critically, we can take in the good while still recognizing and (hopefully) rejecting the bad. If we can do this, then I truly believe that at some point we will have evolved enough to correct such inadequacies and eventually do away with them altogether.

If we cannot change everything all at once, we might as well change that which we can. For me, the bottom line is that we have to work with what we have, and right now, *Chappelle's Show* provides one of the most effective attempts at overcoming the socio-historical, institutional, and performative challenges to utilizing racial satire and makes the effort to encourage its audience to question the dominant narratives and frameworks of race and develop perspective by incongruity.

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APPENDIX: TRANSCRIPT OF CLAYTON BIGSBY SKETCH

[Screen Reads] Warning: For viewers sensitive to issues of race, be advised that the following piece contains gratuitous use of the "N" Word. [Then] And by "N" word, I mean Nigger. There, I said it. [Then] FRONTLINE

Reporter (Voice Over): For the last fifteen years a man named Clayton Bigsby has been the leading voice of the White Supremacist movement in America. Though not sold in any major bookstores, his books *Dumptruck*, *Nigger Stain*, *I smell Nigger*, and *Nigger Book* have sold over 600,000 copies combined. Despite his popularity, very few have ever seen him due to his reclusiveness, but in an effort to bring his message to a wider audience he agreed to give his first public interview ever to Frontline. But getting to Mr. Bigsby was an odyssey in itself, riddled with backcountry hollows, shifty go-betweens, and palpable danger.

Reporter: Excuse me, not sure we're in the right place—we're looking for Clayton Bigsby.

Clayton Bigsby: Well, look no further fella you found me.

R: Uh, Clayton Bigsby, the author?

CB: What, you don't think I can write them books? Just cause I'm blind don't mean I'm dumb.

R(VO): How could this have happened? A black White Supremacist. Our search for answers led us here to the Wexler Home for the Blind, where Mr. Bigsby spent the first 19 years of his life. Bridget Wexler is the home's head mistress.

BW: Well, he was the only negro we'd ever had around here, so we figured we'd make it easier on Clayton by just tellin' him and all the other blind kids that he was white.

R: And he never questioned it?

BW: Why would he?

R: You've written four books now?

CB: I've written six books; they've published four.

R: What would you say is the overall message of your books?

CB: Sir my message is simple: Niggers, Jews, Homosexuals, Mexicans, Arabs, and all kinds of different Chinks stink! And I hate 'em!

R: You refer to n—uh, African Americans, what exactly is your problem?

CB: How much time you got buddy? Where would I start? Well first of all, they're lazy good for nuthin ' tricksters, crack smokin' swindlers, big butt havin', wide nose breathin' all the white

man's air… They eat up all the chicken, they think they're the best dancers, and they stink! Did I mention that before?

R: Yes, I believe you did sir.

CB: Matter of fact, my friend Jasper told me one of them coons came by his house to pick his sister up for a date. He said, "Look here, Nigger—that there is my girl! Anyone has sex with my sister, it's gonna be me!"

R: You've never left this property, have you, Mr. Bigsby?

CB: No Sir, not in many years.

R: What if I were to tell you that you are an African American?

CB: Sir! Listen! I am gonna make this clear—I am in no way, shape, or form involved in any niggerdom! You understand!?

R: Yes Sir, but—

CB: But, but nothin'!

R: But Mr.—

CB: Now if you'll excuse me, I have a book signin' to go to. Why don't ya bring your media cameras over there if you wanna see some real truth! Prudence! Prudence, have Jasper load the truck!

R(VO): And Clayton Bigsby, black White Supremacist, ventured out into the unsuspecting world.

R: Sir, you're a friend—why not tell him he's African American?

Jasper: Listen man, he's too important to the movement. If I tell him he's black he'd probably kill his self, just so there'd be one less niggra around. His commitment is that deep.

R: I'm overwhelmed by the irony.

Random White Men: [Beating on hood of truck] Hey you boy!

J: Uh Oh

Random White Man #1: You lost boy? Move along, move along!

Random White Man #2: We don't like your kind around here!

RWM #1: You better get outta here before somethin' bad happens!

RWM #2: Yeah!

CB: That's right! That's right! Tell that nigger! Beat it you scary nigger!

J: C'mon Clayton, we gotta go.

CB: Oh, Jasper, there's a nigger around here. That scary monkey was beatin' my hood! White Power! Nigger!

R(VO): The confusion did not end there.

CB: [Yelling at car full of white boys listening to rap music] Hey, why don't you jungle bunnies turn that music down!? Niggers make me sick! Woogie-Boogie, nigger, woogie-boogie!

White Boy: Did he just call us "niggers"? Awesome! [High fives]

R(VO): The anticipation was at a fever pitch as we arrived at Mr. Bigsby's book signing.

White Supremacist: The man who should be the next President of the United States.
[Cheering among crowd]

CB: Alright Jasper time to show these people what white power's all about.

J: You better put your hood on Clayton—

CB: Alright.

J: Might wanna hide your identity, be safer, you know in case some radical ain't sympathetic with the cause wants to shoot you.

CB: Yeah that's good thinkin'. Alright, I'ma put my hood on. [Puts hood on backwards]

J: Here let me get that.

WS: Without further ado, the man who made us proud to be white, none other than Clayton Bigsby!
[Cheers from crowd]

CB: White Power! Everybody I have a lot of things to discuss mainly niggers. America's at war with Al Qaeda, but we're still losin' the war against Al Sharpton!

R(VO): The Asian community was a target as well.

CB: Let's talk about Chinese people, with their Kung Fu, all that silly ching-chang-chong talk, I can't understand you, go back to your country, White Power!
[Audience cheers]

R(VO): Mr. Bigsby was also critical of the entertainment industry.

CB: Don't let the liberal media tell you how to think and feel. If you have hate in your heart, let it out! If you don't like Will and Grace that don't mean there's somethin' wrong with you, means there's somethin' wrong with Will—he's a homosexual!

R(VO): Politicians weren't spared either.

CB: White Power! Colin Powell, Cunnilingus Rice, "Cunnilingus Rice", sounds like a Mexican dish. Maybe we should put her on a plate and send her to Mexico so the Mexicans'll eat her. White Power. [Crowd cheers] Just open up your heart n' let that hate out! [Crowd cheers]

White Guy: Show us your face! We wanna see your face!
[Crowd cheers]

CB: Who said that? You wanna see my face?
[Crowd cheers]

WG: Clayton, go on brother!

CB: You wanna see my face? Don't be afraid Jasper! [Crowd cheers] Jasper don't be afraid! [Pulls off hood] Shine your light!
[Woman vomits; crowd gasps and screams; WG's head explodes]

CB: There is cookies and punch for us to enjoy and we can meet, talk about white brotherhood. Thank you all for comin'. White Power!

R(VO): Mr. Bigsby was not harmed that night, but irreparable damage has been done to his reputation, and in many ways, to the white power movement. We're told that in the last few weeks, he has accepted the fact that he is a black man. And three days ago, he filed for divorce from his wife. When we asked, "why, after nineteen years of marriage?" He responded, "Because, she's a nigger lover."

R: I'm Kent Wallace, goodnight.

VO: Major funding for Frontline provided by the Trent Lott Foundation for peace and understanding. Loving black people, one at a time.