Texts and Subtexts in Performing Blackness: Vernacular Masking in Key and Peele as a Lens for Viewing Paul Laurence Dunbar’s Musical Comedy

Spencer Kuchle
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as a Lens for Viewing Paul Laurence Dunbar’s Musical Comedy

A Dissertation Presented

by

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DEDICATION

For my family, who first taught me the language of laughter.
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I was privileged to be raised in a household in Woodstock, Connecticut with parents who demonstrated a deep and abiding commitment to fostering racial and social justice through work redressing racial inequities within the criminal justice and health care systems and in the environment. Through their dedication to nonviolent social change, I came to meet leaders from the civil rights movement, who inspired me to see the world from new perspectives. At the same time, I was introduced to the power of performance, through mentors Cheryl Foster, Tony Estrella, and Judith Swift, who encouraged me to intern as a high school student at the Gamm Theater in Pawtucket, Rhode Island—mostly for dark comedies like Martin McDonagh’s “The Lonesome West.” I came to understand the capacity of comedic performance to create a shared experience among audience members from vastly different backgrounds, eliminating the distance imposed by race, class, and gender and reinforcing Victor Borge’s quip that “Laughter is the shortest distance between two people.”

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and research, to pursue graduate studies focused on how representations of blackness in
the form of the black body can be read as text and performance.

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ABSTRACT

TEXTS AND SUBTEXTS IN PERFORMING BLACKNESS: VERNACULAR MASKING IN KEY AND PEELE AS A LENS FOR VIEWING PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR’S MUSICAL COMEDY

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When Kegan Michel Key and Jordan Peele’s sketch-comedy show Key & Peele took Comedy Central by storm in 2012, the perceived need by the comedians to “adjust their blackness” to gain social recognition became a recurring theme. Throughout their comedic performances, language becomes a proxy for identity, and Key and Peele’s parodic employment of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and linguistic variation serves to challenge notions of black authenticity, while emphasizing the absurdity of racial essentialism.
An embodiment of Jonathan Rossing’s concept of emancipatory racial humor, Key and Peele’s comedy creates nonthreatening spaces that facilitate the contestation of cultural authority by interrogating how social categories are constructed via linguistic practices, revealing the interconnectedness among the ontology of the black body, epistemic authority, and linguistic authenticity.

This dissertation examines the adoption of identity tropes by Key and Peele through their use of AAVE in relation to Paul Laurence Dunbar’s dialect musical comedy and the poet’s struggle to represent black subjectivity and folk culture without lapsing into minstrelsy. Particular attention is paid to how Dunbar responded to the political dynamic of subordination and resistance that defined linguistic conflict at the end of the nineteenth century and the inability of his critics to recognize the subversive and resistive nature of much of his work.

Exploring the dialect comedy of Dunbar alongside Key and Peele in the context of controversies surrounding linguistic minstrelsy in mediatized performances of AAVE from *Amos ‘n’ Andy* to *The Boondocks*, I conclude that far from lapsing into minstrelsy, Dunbar’s dialect musical comedy catalyzed resistive ideologies, resulting in the emergence of a new black modernism. Like Key and Peele, Dunbar engages in meta-parody by placing himself in the performance, deliberately showcasing the richness and complexity of AAVE as a medium for conveying social commentary in which the
audience comes to appreciate the intellect of the person telling the joke. The knowing and strategic inauthenticity in their performances invites audience interpretation of a deeper message, positioning Dunbar, along with Key and Peele, as tricksters who employ sophisticated vernacular masking to contest racial stereotypes, even as they enact them.
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INTRODUCTION

“White Sounding Black Guys”: Linguistic Representation in Key and Peele

Three years after their debut on Comedy Central in January 2012, comedians Keegan-Michael Key and Jordan Peele are described in a New Yorker article by Zadie Smith as switching the familiar “race card” with “the whole pack fanned out.” The fact that Key and Peele are both biracial sons of white mothers and black fathers has shaped their lives and their brand of comedy. Indeed, Smith describes the essence of Peele’s talent as “multivocal,” something he attributes to a childhood of anxiety over having the wrong voice, namely speaking “white.” Peele reflects, “It cannot be a coincidence that I decided to go into a career where my whole purpose is altering the way I speak and experiencing these different characters and maybe proving in my soul that the way someone speaks has nothing to do with who they are” (Smith).

In fact, the way someone speaks takes center stage in many of Key and Peele’s skits, including “The Substitute Teacher,” “Soul Food,” “Obama Translator,” “I Said, Bitch,” “Phone Call,” “East/West Collegiate Bowl,” “Yo’ Mamma Has Health Problems,” “A Cappella Club” and “Text Message Confusion.” These performances signify on the lived experiences of Key and Peele as “half black, half white,” which Key draws attention to during their first episode in a skit entitled “White-Sounding Black
Guys” by joking, “And because of that we find ourselves particularly adept at lying, er, because on a daily basis we have to adjust our blackness” (“White Sounding Black Guys” Episode 1). To demonstrate, the two comedians proceed to engage in code-switching between Standard American English and African American Vernacular English (AAVE), launching into dialogue that employs a highly performative, over-exaggerated mock language relying on familiar linguistic patterns which index stereotypes of blacks. Though clearly travestying, the performance is believable in its ability to portray the types of rules of interaction, sounds, word combinations, and speech events, such as signifying, loud talking and woofing that are associated with AAVE.

In Key and Peele, language becomes a proxy for identity and is ideologically linked to categories of race through linguistic representation. These performers’ stylization and creation of mock AAVE satirizes representations of black English in the media while simultaneously highlighting pressure to engage in linguistic variation to gain social recognition. As with their other skits focusing on race, these vignettes seek to challenge notions of black authenticity and emphasize “the absurdity of race” through the parodic employment of AAVE phonology, changes in tonal register, and shifts in syntax, lexicons, and morphology.

Yet the need for black performers and authors to “adjust their blackness” by adopting identity tropes to meet audience expectations is nothing new. Following
Emancipation, controversies over the nature of an authentic black voice became a significant element of African-American literature and its criticism. Late nineteenth-century African-American performers and writers were steeped in dialect literature and the “cult of the vernacular” that encouraged the use of dialect as a representational technique and cultural theme, appealing to both black and white audiences. The dilemma for black artists was how to represent black subjectivity and folk culture without lapsing into a type of minstrelsy that reinforced racist stereotypes. At the center of these controversies was Paul Laurence Dunbar, arguably the most famous and successful poet of his day.

Constrained by the political dynamic of subordination and resistance that defined linguistic conflict at the end of the nineteenth century, Dunbar, like the characters in Key and Peele, frequently engaged in code switching, seamlessly shifting between the dialect of the African-American folk subject and the “high poetry” of Standard English. Dunbar used dialect for several reasons, not the least of which were to capture the African-American experience and to attract as broad an audience as possible in promoting black racial pride through his readings.

Dunbar was a great performer by all accounts and read his poetry in both black and white spaces. In fact, wildly popular with audiences of all races during his lifetime, he was even more so upon his death in 1906. Blacks, such as A. Philip Randolph, and
whites, including drawing-room performers Kitty Cheatham and Clara Alexander, built
careers reciting Dunbar’s dialect poetry. In black communities, schools, housing
complexes, social halls, athletic clubs, libraries and hospitals were named after Dunbar as
a symbol of excellence and achievement. This coincided with the initiation of public
reading tours of his poems and memorial concerts in his honor. Students committed his
works to memory and sang his words put to music (Robinson and Robinson 215).

Nevertheless, the anti-essentialist and black pride aspects of Dunbar’s poetry were
often overshadowed by criticism from the intelligentsia that his dialect, while “a medium
for the true interpretation of Negro character and psychology,” devolved into minstrelsy
and sentimentalist plantation depictions of slavery as paternalism (J.W. Johnson xxxiii).
For instance, Sterling Brown accuses Dunbar of engaging in a “cruel misreading of
history” through his omissions of the hardships of slavery, a concentration on a pastoral
picture of Negro life, and emphasis on the nobility of forgiving and forgetting (S. Brown,
_Negro Poetry and Drama_). Brown speculates that this lacuna could have been a result of
“his literary school, his audience and his publishers, or of the professional conciliators
who in that day guided racial expression” (S. Brown, _Negro Poetry and Drama_).

There is no doubt that Dunbar had a number of white benefactors and champions
who encouraged and influenced his use of dialect, including noted literary critic William
Dean Howells, who praised Dunbar in the introduction to _Lyrics of Lowly Life_ for
providing an authentic black voice. Though initially grateful to Howells, Dunbar later contended that the review, which racialized the poet’s work, had done him irreparable harm by suggesting that the best pieces are those “where he studies the moods and traits of his race in his own accent of our English” (Howells xviii). Dunbar’s lament, captured in the autobiographical poem, “The Poet,” was that despite his perception that the best poetry he wrote was in Standard English, “... ah, the world, /it turned to praise/ A jingle in a broken tongue” (Dunbar, *Lyrics of Love and Laughter* 82).

The task before Dunbar was to write black poetry expressing an authentic self, rooted in black folk culture, which appealed to the white audiences upon whom he was reliant, but in a manner that broke with minstrelsy and “coonery.” The insidious “coon” caricature of blacks as inherently lazy, childish, cowardly, and hapless, dominated the minstrel stage, and these attributes used to characterize blacks had come to be featured in “coon songs,” which gained recognition as a genre following the publication of Paul Allen’s “New Coon in Town” in 1883. Yet, their association with black life emanated from already well-entrenched stereotypical images of African Americans that focused on physical characteristics of skin color and hair texture, language and African-American naming rituals, buffoonery, and duplicity, especially with respect to satiating an appetite for watermelons, chicken, and possum (Oliver 49).

The minstrel shows of Dunbar’s day, as Ralph Ellison eloquently described,
functioned as “a ritual of exorcism” for the white audience, serving “to veil the humanity of Negroes thus reduced to a sign, and to repress the white audiences’ moral identification with its own acts and with the human ambiguities pushed behind the mask” (Ellison 103). Dunbar’s moral conundrum was whether to attempt to remove the veil created by minstrelsy using the minstrels’ tools, with full knowledge, as humanistic geographer Yi-Fu Tuan points out, that “within the realm of comedy, laughter is in the form of active participation that breaches distance between performance space, spectator, and performer” (Carr-Dickson 52-53).

Though audiences and critics may not always have been adept at distinguishing between subversion and exploitation, particularly when his messages were coded, Dunbar’s comedic dialect poetry and his coon songs provided possibilities for double parody or double masking, concomitantly highlighting the humanity of blacks and, inevitably, the inhumanity of whites. Like the linguistic features and discourse strategies characteristic of the AAVE spoken by Key and Peele, including intonation, signifying, and tag questions, Dunbar’s representation of AAVE in his comedic songs and poems is often exaggerated and double-voiced. Dunbar attempted to capture the formal and rhetorical devices of African American Vernacular speech through unconventional spelling and punctuation, echoing a speaking persona that signaled solidarity with the African-American community (Davies 5.3.1).
In their accusations of Dunbar as capitulating to the desires of white audiences at the expense of black empowerment, what many of his critics missed was the potential of dialect to shape the dominant mainstream culture. Thus, as Gavin Jones reminds readers in *Strange Talk: The Politics of Dialect Literature in Gilded Age America*, dialect carries the capacity to “encode the possibility of resistance, not just by undermining the integrity of a dominant standard, but by recording the subversive voices in which alternative versions of reality were engendered” (G. Jones 11). Dunbar offered such a voice, and his traversing between Standard and black vernacular English allowed for re-contextualizing his dialect poetry.

In fact, through his code-switching, he catalyzed a linguistic remapping in which new, resistive ideologies became associated with the black voice and its elements of accent and intonation. The result was the emergence of a black modernism, perhaps belying the conviction behind his comment to a reporter at the Waldorf Astoria that “We must write like white men. I do not mean imitate them; but our life is now the same” (Dunbar, *In His Own Voice* 206).

**Key and Peele as a New Lens for Understanding Dunbar’s Dialect**

Though separated by more than a century, the comedic dialect poetry and “coon songs” of Paul Laurence Dunbar and the skits of contemporary comedic performers Key
and Peele raise parallel questions regarding the role of racial stereotypes and linguistic representation in portraying “an authentic black voice.” Key and Peele have made clear, “We concern ourselves more with our comedic voice than with making a point. That other part’s always going to be dappled and peppered into the show, because that is still part of what we’re saying, but it doesn’t have to be the focus” (Berkowitz 2013). Because of this, and similar to criticism Dunbar received regarding his comedic dialect, Key and Peele have been charged by some critics with perpetuating white racist perceptions of African Americans. For instance, commenting on Key & Peele, Katrina Richardson maintains,

The only sketches that are explicitly about racism are historical and the only racists in the first few episodes are Nazis and slave owners. This makes the black characters seem like fools and the result is a show that makes fun of blacks in a way white liberals will allow themselves to enjoy under the guise of ‘talking about race’. (Richardson 2012)

In this dissertation, I contest such claims by arguing that Key and Peele’s use of code-switching, linguistic-crossing and vernacular masking provide the basis for an emancipatory racial humor within the context of a post-soul aesthetic that ultimately upends white racialist norms proffering racial essentialism and white superiority. In the process, I provide a new lens for understanding the double-voiced nature of Dunbar’s comedic work, illustrating shared linguistic strategies with Key and Peele that utilize
irony, parody, satire, and signifying, in marking off black from white speech in ways focusing on the absurdity of race.

While other black comedians, such as Richard Pryor, Chris Rock, Keenen and Damon Wayans, Dave Chappelle, Tyler Perry and Katt Williams, have built their careers around racial humor and speak unequivocally from a black male perspective, Key and Peele, unlike these “in your face” performers, “make race elemental yet somehow beside the point” (Berkowitz 2013). National Public Radio commentator Gene Demby’s essay on the impetus for comedian Wyatt Cenac’s departure from The Jon Stewart Show contributes to an understanding of how Key and Peel take a different approach from their predecessors in the world of Comedy Central.

Demby admits to being Cenac’s friend and sought to draw attention to what it means to be a black man in America and the burden of having to be a representative of one’s race as a result of being “the only one in the room.” He does so by appeal to Key and Peele’s skit about two young black men vying for a spot in an otherwise all-white a cappella group. The duo’s engagement in repeated, overt competition with respect to who is the “cooler black person,” serves not only as the basis for this skit, it became fodder for the entire first season of Key & Peele. Throughout the process, they invite us to imagine real-world dilemmas around “What happens when you’re in a space that seems to have room for Just One, and the racial currency that helped you get in the door suddenly
becomes much less rare? And what happens when your racial identity is part of what got you picked for the team, but you know you’ll get booted unless you play to the crowd, never letting your identity confuse or disrupt?” (Demby)

Demby elaborates on the pressure to never let one’s racial identity confuse or disrupt using Tanner Colby’s history of black performers in the 39 years of *Saturday Night Live*, recounted in his *Slate* article, “*SNL*’s Real Race Problem.” Colby suggests that beyond typecasting and racial dynamics, the black comedians who struggled the most were those whose careers were built primarily in black comedy clubs performing for black audiences. In contrast, those who flourished the most on *SNL* rose through the ranks of “super-white comedy proving grounds” such as Second City. Colby insists that what producers really want in the name of diversity are “Faces and voices that are black but nonetheless reflect a cultural bearing that white people understand and feel comfortable with” (Colby).

Key positions the comedy he does with Peele as falling within this interstitial space, maintaining, “We get the absurdities of both the African American subculture and mainstream culture and that informs how we look at comedy. It allows us to see things from different angles than a person who is wholly immersed in either one of those cultures might miss…. Being biracial means we have to look at things as humans, more so than racially” (Reeves). Indeed, he suggests a bidirectional relationship between
culture as a product of the show and *Key & Peele* as itself a partial product of a contemporary culture in which individuals interact in ways that go beyond race, reflecting a new identity politics centered around culture.

Thus, while paying tribute to *Chappelle’s Show* and *In Living Color* as influential in the creation of both the format and content of their work, Key and Peele argue that their being biracial offers the opportunity to take “the next logical step” in moving past these black sketch comedy shows. Comedy Central’s tagline in advertising the show, “If you don’t watch, you’re racist,” signaled the rejection of a black/white binary and the issuing forth of a new era where “we are all in on the joke” (Akitunde). The added element, according to the comedians, is that they are writing and performing cultural comedy, as distinct from racial comedy. What they regard as unique is a biracial point of view—something they describe in terms of serving as “racial referees” or “tightrope walkers.”

As the biracial children of white mothers, Key and Peele had a lifetime of forced practice negotiating in a “super-white” world and deconstructing what it means to be black. Citing President Obama’s election as responsible for their securing a television contract for their own comedy show, Key and Peele, like Obama, occupy a unique position among self-identified African Americans in having to bridge the divide between two races. Being perceived as black while simultaneously not being considered black
enough to do real black comedy, or alternatively being accused of co-opting a culture that is not truly one’s own, shaped their upbringing and contributed to Peele’s reported angst over the fact that, “The world has wanted me to speak differently than I speak” (Kumar 2013).

Key and Peele’s lived experience of seeking to find the right voice and dealing with the accusations of endeavoring to be something they are not, mirrors the charges Dunbar faced by those like Brown who read his poetry written in Standard English as imitative, “lacking the freshness, humor, and life of his dialect,” but at the same time finding his dialect work as having “undoubted limitations” in its portrayal of Negro life (S. Brown, Negro Poetry and Drama). For Key, the accusations manifested themselves in “always feeling like I was on the fringe of the African-American experience,” despite being visibly identified as black (Berkowitz). Dunbar, on the other hand, solely based on his visibility, was expected to speak for the African-American experience as if it were a singularity and in a manner that defied neither black nor white expectations regarding linguistic and aesthetic representation among African-American literary artists. It was a different type of tightrope from Key and Peele’s, but required a balancing act just the same.

As it turns out, epistemic authority was a critical factor for Dunbar in his reception by white and black audiences from the time he was introduced to the literary
world by Howells as “the only man of pure African blood and of American civilization to feel the Negro life aesthetically and express it lyrically” (Howells xvi). My focus is on how this type of epistemic authority enabled Dunbar to engage in sophisticated vernacular masking in the comedic lyrics he wrote, which emerged from his partnership with the two most famous black minstrel performers of the day, George Walker and Bert Williams.

Dunbar, Walker, and Williams collaborated with Will Marion Cook and brothers J. Rosamond and James Weldon Johnson to develop In Dahomey, an all-black musical comedy. Dunbar was commissioned to write the lyrics for the play’s “coon songs” at a time when the “coon” figure served as a bridge between the minstrel characters of the antebellum past and the trope of the violent, degenerate black rapist, aligned with urban black spaces of the 1910s. The feminized black man of the minstrel stage was undergoing a transformation, and performing blackness took on new meaning as “coon songs” sung by black minstrels were often viewed not only as a way to promote a genuine black aesthetic by artists like Dunbar, Cook, and Johnson, but also as a vibrant vector for a political and social critique of Jim Crow (Smethurst, The African American Roots of Modernism 17-18). My attention to the black dialect in Dunbar’s musical comedies arises from a recognition that these writings offered the most expansive opportunity for Dunbar to experiment with more the radical possibilities of parodic inversion, irony and
vernacular masking before white audiences, employing humor as a means to foster human identification.

Thus, just as Key and Peele can be viewed as contesting racial stereotypes through parody and satire, even as they enact them, the cultural hegemony associated with the black dialect in Dunbar’s comedic body of work can be considered defeated by the greater whole of which it is a part. Contrary to Brown’s assessment, Elizabeth Young argues in *Black Frankenstein: The Making of an American Metaphor* that within Dunbar’s individual work,

The happy slaves, grinning dandies, and symbolic lapdogs of his writing are ironic inversions of these roles—inversions that do not expand to the capacious world of the carnivalesque but that nonetheless do not leave their confined spaces unchanged. (Young 129)

Beyond Dunbar’s engagement in parody through ironic inversion in works that appear to reflect racist nostalgia, collectively, Dunbar’s poetry, prose, and lyrics serve as a treatise on the failures of white society to protect the rights of African Americans by refusing to grant them full citizenship. In other words, it is Dunbar’s polemical stance throughout his career, rather than the peculiarities associated with any specific piece of dialect poetry or song, that should inform assessments of his dialect work. Thus, this serves as my starting point.

Chapter I, “Dunbar as Specular Border Intellectual and Ruptured Subject,”
outlines the political and social forces informing Dunbar’s work and the controversy surrounding his use of exaggerated black dialect as a representational technique and cultural theme. It does so in relation to Abdul R. JanMohamed’s notion of the specular intellectual—at the border of two groups, but at home in neither. I use this positioning of Dunbar’s liminality as a border intellectual to provide a backdrop for understanding the poet’s struggle with his appointment as the representative of an authentic black voice, who nevertheless sought to counter the visual fetishization of race as epidermal difference. In the process, I build upon Michelle Stephens’s claim that the rhetorical differences of black speech can be viewed as resistive elements designed to redress the silencing of the “lost black body.” The disappearance of the black body as subject, Stephens maintains, emerged with the advent of portrait photography at the turn of the nineteenth century, when black corporeality was facialized and reduced to the blackface minstrel mask.

In addition, I explore the proliferation of dialect as a medium for political satire following the American Revolution in relation to Dunbar’s strategic use of dialect as a form of satirical humor that functioned as a tool for both cultural assimilation and protest. Drawing on Caroline Gebhard’s assertion of dialect as cultural capital in a society that denied blacks a culture of their own, I elucidate the unifying aspects of AAVE and the subversive nature of this shared oral tradition. This analysis serves as a framework for
evaluating James Weldon Johnson’s critique of Dunbar’s dialect comedy alongside Johnson’s praise for Sterling Brown’s dialect poetry and Brown’s own assessment of Dunbar.

In Chapter II, “Jes Lak White Fo’ks: Double Parody and Vernacular Masking in Dunbar’s ‘Coon Songs’,” I demonstrate how Dunbar’s “coon songs” differed from those developed for the minstrel stage by both black and white writers, in virtue of their syncopation and lyrics as a form of political satire. In particular, I concentrate on the rules of interaction, accent, intonation and signifying, along with other speech events characterizing AAVE, as markers for a rejection of the minstrel tradition and the introduction of a resistive black voice.

That voice is one that positions Dunbar as a trickster who employs the theme of passing and engages in vernacular masking to create a cultural privacy and adopt an anti-essentialist stance in favor of a shared national culture. Dunbar’s musical comedy, with its lyrics and long finales showcasing the cakewalk, parodies both whites who adhere to racial determinism and Social Darwinism and blacks who strive to emulate white aristocracy. But it also functions as a self-parody of the author, who capitulates to white audience desires while inserting deeper political issues, including black citizenship, fears of the sexually aggressive black dandy, and lynching as a mechanism of social control. In this way, Dunbar signifies on emerging class tensions between poor whites and
aspiring blacks, along with divisions within the black community itself.

Chapter III, “Linguistic Minstrelsy in Relation to Epistemic Authority and the Ontology of the Black Body” explores the Amos ‘n’ Andy phenomenon, in which two white voice actors used Southern, black dialect to portray the adventures of two African Americans who were swept up in the Great Migration north. From the inception of American radio through the 1960s, these actors performed blackness, sparking dissent within the African-American community. I pay particular attention to how the debates over Amos ‘n’ Andy shifted when the radio sensation became a television show and the black characters were being performed by African-American actors who were expected to conform to white performances of blackness.

The decades during which Amos ‘n’ Andy was on the air recorded significant political and social change. By the mid-60s, the Blacks Arts Movement emerged, designed to establish a distinctive black aesthetic. This was followed by the post-soul era of the 80s, which persists today, in which race as a social construct has superseded the concepts of racial essentialism and authentic blackness upon which the Blacks Arts Movement was built.

Insofar as black vernacular has been posited as the site of black subjectivity and the “authentic” black experience in both neominstrel linguistic performances and others, I set out to contrast instances of AAVE and Mock AAVE that mark black characters and
stereotypes without lapsing into neominstrelsy with those that reinforce racial hegemony, paralleling the distinction between Dunbar’s use of black dialect and that which reinforced minstrel caricatures. In the process, I evaluate mediatized performances of AAVE by the white middle-class male “wigger,” who stereotypically performs the young working-class African American utilizing language, dress, and the hypermasculine traits of “coolness, physical toughness, and sexual self-confidence” (Bucholtz and Lopez 682).

Focusing on the white characters Ed Wuncler III and Gin Rummy, voiced by black artists Charlie Murphy and Samuel L. Jackson in the animated series *The Boondocks*, my interrogation reveals broader questions regarding the role of the body in conferring epistemic and linguistic authority when engaging in double masking, including “reverse passing,” in which whites adopt black identities. By considering the legitimacy of what Baz Dreisinger describes as “assimilating and internalizing the degraded and devalorized signifiers of racial Otherness” (Dreisinger 13), my goal is to set the stage for determining whether it is possible for Dunbar to engage in the meta-parodic performance of AAVE culture without lapsing into linguistic neominstrelsy. I contend that Dunbar is capable of accomplishing this feat through songs like “Evah Dahkey is a King,” “On Emancipation Day,” “Swing Along,” “Hottest Coon in Dixie,” and “Who Dat Say Chicken in dis Crowd,” which function as “ragging uplift” rather than racial malpractice.
Chapter IV, “You Know I Know What You Talkin’ ’Bout,” turns to the concept of a post-soul aesthetic as offering a context for analyzing a variety of Key and Peele skits centering on the notion of “adjusting one’s blackness” through the meta-parodic employment of African American Vernacular English, including “The Obama Translator” and “The Obama Meet and Greet.” Both of these skits demonstrate the extent to which African Americans in contemporary society continue to wear Dunbar’s mask and the manner in which spoken and unspoken language is implicated. In fact, each of the skits analyzed involves code-switching or vernacular masking as a means of ideologically linking language to categories of race through linguistic representation.

Considered within the broader landscape of African-American sketch comedy, beginning with George C. Wolfe’s *The Colored Museum*, this chapter foregrounds how social categories are constructed via linguistic practices. These practices include verbal strategies, such as prosodic features of stress and intonation, marking, and playing the dozens, alongside nonverbal forms of communication, including eye, head and neck movements, and other gestures like “giving dap” that, like Dunbar’s linguistic caricatures, recreate stereotypes in order to deconstruct them.

Chapter V, “Negrotown: Where Evah Dahkey is a King,” uses the political satire of Key and Peele as a lens for understanding the subversive nature of Dunbar’s dialect and how Dunbar’s works served as the foundation for a new black modernism.
Contrasting Key and Peele’s “Negrotown,” a satirical critique of police violence against African Americans in the form of a “coon-style” musical set in a black utopia, with dead prez’s resistive message to police violence targeting blacks, I demonstrate that Key and Peele have a commonality with Dunbar through their dual embodiment of Jonathan Rossing’s concept of emancipatory racial humor and its interconnectedness with “looking black,” epistemic authority, and linguistic authenticity. The emancipatory nature of Dunbar’s writings is seen most clearly in the lyrics he created for musical comedies, such as Clorindy, or The Origin of the Cakewalk and In Dahomey, which will be analyzed in relation to their capacity to serve as a critical public pedagogy of disruption.
CHAPTER I

DUNBAR AS SPECULAR BORDER INTELLECTUAL AND RUPTURED SUBJECT

Tricksters and Tradition: Conflicting Social Forces in Dunbar’s World

I am sorry to find among intelligent people those who are unable to differentiate dialect as a philological branch from the burlesque of Negro minstrelsy—Paul Laurence Dunbar, from a letter to Helen Douglass, 1896.

At the turn of the nineteenth century, Paul Laurence Dunbar was engaged in a personal and public struggle to preserve African-American folk traditions, including those captured using black dialect, while promoting racial equity by challenging dominant notions of black intellectual and moral inferiority. Because the prevailing image of African Americans during this period emerged from the fetishized desire of white consumers for black bodies on the minstrel stage, Dunbar was forced to portray black genius in a manner that alienated neither whites, with their affinity for comedy steeped in stereotypes of black inferiority, nor blacks, who were seeking images that inspired racial progress.

The impact of these conflicting social forces on African-American authors and
performers of the day is showcased by David Krasner in his book *Resistance, Parody, and Double Consciousness in African American Theater, 1895-1910*. What was required, according to Krasner, was a form of contestation that avoided drawing attention to itself in order to avoid alienating the audience—especially white audiences (Krasner 5).

Highlighting the development of strategies by black authors and performers who employed hidden transcripts of parody and double consciousness, Krasner illustrates how these tactics functioned both to resist minstrel portrayals of African-Americans and, more importantly, to signal the emergence of a collective consciousness, or a black social identity (Krasner 1).

Applied to works such as Charles Chesnutt’s *The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Tales*, Krasner’s analysis sheds light on how the ostensibly accommodationist trope of “the black vernacular trickster hero,” embodied by Chesnutt’s character Uncle Julius, should be read as destabilizing the very minstrel and plantation traditions it appears to reinforce, rather than as conforming to the racialist requirement for social integration by African Americans into mainstream culture. Black vernacular in Chesnutt’s, as in Dunbar’s writing, provided the perfect guise for undertaking a type of cultural subversion in the shadows. For as Gavin Jones notes in *Strange Talk: The Politics of Dialect Literature in Gilded Age America*, late-nineteenth-century Americans could not get enough of dialect literature, and the urge to depict an authentic black voice
became an important part of African-American literature and its criticism through much of the 20th century (G. Jones 3).

Dialect poets at the turn of the century were attempting to represent nonstandard speech in a manner that would convincingly mimic that of their speaking subjects and would be captured when the poems were read aloud. Thus, good dialect writing was seen as reflecting the essential elements of a particular type of speech. Following the 1897 publication of *Lyrics of Lowly Life*, Dunbar’s positioning by Howells as producing an orthography of dialect of “a pure African type,” together with the nearly dozen reviews of Dunbar’s dialect poetry as “an accurate and authentic recreation of black vernacular,” served to pigeonhole him as a dialect poet (Jarrett 48). Complaining to his friend James Weldon Johnson, Dunbar confessed, “I simply came to the conclusion that I could write [dialectic poetry] as well, if not better, than anybody else I knew of and that by doing so I should gain a hearing. I gained the hearing, and now they don’t want me to write anything but dialect” (J.W. Johnson 160).

Yet, it was precisely because of this expectation by readers that black vernacular held the possibility and power for Dunbar to provide a counter-discourse using convention, while masking any overt threat through signifying, indirection and an ambiguity “emphasizing the artificiality of plantation nostalgia” (G. Jones 194). In fact, citing written dialects as gestures toward a spoken reality, Jones eschews James Weldon
Johnson’s indictment of black dialect “as an instrument with but two full stops, humor and pathos” and instead situates Dunbar as “a wily manipulator of literary conventions, a subtle overturner of racist stereotypes and a sensitive recorder of the multiple facets of black consciousness at the turn of the twentieth century” (G. Jones 184).

The opportunity for Dunbar to engage in a new type of rhetorical subversive technique arose in the same year *Lyrics of Lowly Life* was published, during a time when the comedic dialect and caricatures of “coon song” minstrelsy were increasingly becoming infused with ragtime’s syncopated rhythms. Coinciding with white audience demands for black authenticity in the form of music, dance, and poetry, black vernacular musical comedy was regarded by African Americans as a venue for exploring the black aesthetic (Abbott and Seroff 4). This type of comedy appealed to whites, perhaps because it appeared to reinscribe racial stereotypes, but also because ethnic humor in burlesque and vaudeville was at its height. However, given that “racial uplift” was widely regarded as obligatory within the African-American community by anyone who gained an audience, the “low comedy” of burlesque and buffoonery represented in black minstrel performances was frequently co-mingled with a social commentary centering on issues of race and class that often remained inaccessible to these same white spectators.

The coded messages contained within minstrelsy are highlighted by W.T. Lhamon, Jr. in his book *Raising Cain: Blackface Performance from Hip Hop to Jim*
Crow. Lhamon contends that blackface comprised a ritual of the underclass in which whites often aligned themselves with African Americans and the cause of black civil rights without this being fully comprehended by audiences. He goes so far as to argue that even early minstrelsy contained anti-racist dimensions, and overall, “minstrelsy was a much more complex attempt to understand racial mixing and accommodate audiences to it than either abolitionist propaganda or the counter-riots of the artisanry” (Lhamon 42). According to Lhamon, both the performances and the conscious denial of their meaning functioned to maintain and protect the politics they were advancing. On this view, blackface is transformed into a radical, rather than a demeaning act, especially for black performers of blackface who gained the psychological benefits of resistance (Lhamon 79).

Yet, to the unsophisticated audience referenced by Dunbar in his letter to Frederick Douglass’s widow, performances of “black authenticity” by African Americans often appeared indistinguishable from blackface minstrel performances by whites. There were subversive elements that emerged via hidden transcripts, nevertheless. These were shaped by the lived experience of a double consciousness and constituted expressions of contestation when playing to white and black audiences alike. This double consciousness was a distinctive element introduced by the black performers who broke into white minstrel theater by themselves performing coon songs in burnt cork blackface. The result,
oftentimes, was a dislocation from both the indigenous black community and the aspirant white community.

The Black Authorial Subject on the Border

David Krasner explores this phenomenon of alienation from both black and white society through an appeal to Abdul JanMohamed’s concept of the “specular border intellectual,” contained in his essay “Worldliness-Without-World, Homelessness-As-Home: Toward a Definition of the Specular Border Intellectual.” The notion of the “specular border intellectual” encompasses those individuals who are equally familiar with two groups or cultures, yet are at home in neither. In expounding upon the notion of the border intellectual, JanMohamed outlines the extent to which groups organized around race, class, gender, culture, or nation have a predilection toward arriving at an identity by means of distinguishing themselves from others through their homogeneity.

JanMohamed’s specular border intellectual calls to mind the concept of “the marginal man” developed by Robert Ezra Park in establishing the Chicago School of Sociology. Park’s marginal man was “one whom fate has condemned to live in two societies and in two, not merely different but antagonistic cultures” (Park, The Marginal Man 892). Appealing to both the Jewish immigrant experience at the beginning of the twentieth century and that of African Americans during the same period, Park described
the “conflict of the divided self” resulting from external and internal forces brought to bear on one who is a:

[Cultural] hybrid, a man living and sharing intimately in the cultural life and traditions of two distinct peoples; never quite willing to break, even if he were permitted to do so, with his past and his traditions, and not quite accepted, because of racial prejudice, in the new society in which he now sought to find a place. He was a man on the margin of two cultures and two societies, which never completely interpenetrated and fused. (Park, *The Marginal Man* 892)

Park, who had read W.E.B. Du Bois’s writings, considered him a paradigmatic example of the marginal man. Yet, he also appeared to recognize Dunbar as falling into this category, noting:

It is a significant fact that a certain number of educated—or rather the so-called educated—Negroes were not at first disposed to accept at their full value either Dunbar’s dialect verse or the familiar picture of Negro life which are the symbols in which his poetry usually found expression. The explanation sometimes offered for the dialect poems was that ‘they were made to please white folk.’ The assumption seems to have been that if they had been written for Negroes it would have been impossible in his poetry to distinguish black people from white. (Park, “Racial Assimilation in Secondary Groups” 619)

JanMohamed also included Du Bois, along with Richard Wright, in his category of specular border intellectuals and pointed to the consequences of the marginalization they experienced. He states that “the inscription of difference tends to be valorized in a more or less Manichaean fashion;” hence, “border intellectuals who are caught between various
group formations, are often forced to internalize the Manichaean dichotomies” (JanMohamed 236). And though JanMohamed never mentions Paul Laurence Dunbar in this context, he stands as an embodiment of the image of the specular border intellectual. Such an individual is exiled from dominant culture because of his or her race, while being situated at the border, “torn between...aspirations for ‘humanity’ and the actual socio-historical experience of being treated as sub-human” (JanMohamed 236).

The degree to which Dunbar wrestled with these Manichaean dichotomies can be fully appreciated only by reflecting on the sensitivity he had to critiques of his dialect work by colleagues like James Weldon Johnson as coinciding with his overriding desire to preserve the spirit of black oral traditions and “to be able to interpret my own people through song and story, and to prove to the many that after all, we are more human than African” (Braxton x). As early as 1895, Dunbar turned to his future wife, Alice Ruth Moore, for advice concerning how to resolve these dichotomies, writing,

I want to know whether or not you believe in preserving by Afro-American...writers those quaint old tales and songs of our fathers which have made the fame of Joel Chandler Harris, Thomas Nelson Page...and others! Or whether you like so many others think we should ignore the past and all its capital literary materials. (Harrell ix)

Moore’s response, which focused on the use of dialect, was, “I frankly believe in everyone following his bent. If it be so that one has a special aptitude for dialect work,
why it is only right that dialect work should be made a specialty” (Moore). She added, “But if one should be like me—absolutely devoid of the ability to manage dialect—I don’t see the necessity of cramming and forcing oneself into that plane because one is a Negro or a Southerner” (Moore).

Applying JanMohamed’s concept to Dunbar as authorial subject, it should be recognized that neither group—that of full American white citizens, nor members of the black sub-class—was sufficiently “enabling or productive” in providing Dunbar with a community. Consequently, there was a “rupture between aspiration or ego-ideal valorized by the dominant culture and the experience of actual social devaluation” (JanMohamed 237). This phenomenon is captured in a letter written by Dunbar to his mother in 1893, following an invitation he received from Frederick Douglass at the World’s Columbian Exposition:

I am invited to attend a reception at this Mrs. Jones’ house, given to five distinguished Englishmen who want to see some of the representative colored people in this country and think mamma, your poor little ugly black boy has been chosen as one of the representative colored people after being in Chicago only 5 weeks. (Dunbar, Letter to Matilda Dunbar, 1893)

The type of rupture Dunbar experienced, according to JanMohamed, is involved in the formation process of the subject on the border—the self and its intentions—which also becomes the site for group identity formation. The resulting group of black writers,
performers, and artists who occupied this in-between world, “unable or unwilling to be ‘at home’ in one or another society,” inhabited an interstitial cultural space (Krasner 53-54). This position, JanMohamed contends, enabled black performers to interrogate the borders and spaces between black and white cultures. It was this positioning that allowed Dunbar to create production material open to radically different interpretations by white and black audiences. For instance, whites, who expected to be entertained by blacks through low humor, had their racialist notions of black intellectual and moral inferiority satisfied. At the same time, in response to blacks who called into question the loyalty of these African-American performers to their race, a new level of satire and parody was introduced on the black stage.

**Dunbar’s Dialect as a Medium for Satirical Humor**

The emerging paradox of intricacy of black performance and representation intersected with the modernist agenda, which sought to represent the picture of the modern world through racial categories as inextricably linked to authenticity. Since black authenticity was steeped in mythology around Social Darwinism and portrayals of blacks in the sentimentalist plantation tradition, it is not unexpected that *In Dahomey*, the first all-black musical production performed in a theater, and to which Dunbar contributed lyrics, underwent frequent and substantial script changes based on the geographical
According to Krasner, black performers like *In Dahomey*’s Bert Williams and George Walker, along with Bob Cole and Billy Johnson, sought to resolve the paradox of black performance and representation by undermining racist concepts of authenticity through parody and double meaning, deliberately imitating the misrepresentations of blackness constructed by whites. For instance, in contrast to the minstrel tradition, Cole and Johnson’s musical *A Trip to Coontown: A Musical [Farce] Comedy in Two Acts*, not only presents a black cast of characters working out a plot, but also has Cole’s tramp character, Willie Wayside, performed through whiteface. Marvin McAllister has argued that “By whiting up black artists like Bob Cole…have transformed ‘white’ forms into resistant acts, humanized white America and proven that cross-racial theatrics do not have to denigrate or exclude” (McAllister 4).

Not all agree, however, with Krasner and McAllister’s attributions to Cole of engaging in parody to foster a “revolutionary trope” through his performance of a white, red-bearded hobo. For Mel Watkins and Henry D. Miller, Cole’s whiteface is not so much a parodic role reversal of blackface minstrelsy as it is a commentary on the human condition. According to Miller in *Theorizing Black Theater: Art Versus Protest in Critical Writings, 1898-1965*, “Cole created a character that captured what could be termed performance aspects of the Blues” (H.D. Miller 24). An honest and sympathetic
figure, Cole’s reversed minstrel mask reminded audience members that they shared a common humanity, while demonstrating that a black actor could move beyond roles in which only other blacks were being portrayed.

Whether intentionally parodic or decidedly humanistic, black theatrical performances like Cole’s, leading into the twentieth century, challenged racist stereotypes of blacks, while inspiring black solidarity and racial pride. And like Cole’s work, the type of “Negro music” to which Dunbar contributed during this period functioned both as a form of cultural assimilation and protest, reflecting social integration and cooperation among African Americans. These features became constitutive elements of black modernity, and Krasner sides with Houston Baker, contending that identifying racist stereotypes within a work is insufficient for understanding its complexities, which may involve dual elements of “blues inscriptions and liberating rhythms” (Krasner 13).

Dunbar’s brand of satirical humor, with its ability to create alternative meanings, certainly harbored potential liberating rhythms. For as the notorious political satirist Jonathan Swift reminds us, “Satire is a sort of glass, wherein beholders do generally discover everybody’s face but their own; which is the chief reason for that kind of reception it meets in the world, and that so very few are offended with it” (Swift). The elusiveness of the capacity for self-identification within satirical performances was critical to the success of Dunbar and his colleagues who appropriated white stereotypes
of blacks in order to satirize and mock white attitudes.

Dunbar’s use of dialect as the medium for satirical humor was a tool to convey hidden transcripts and empower black audiences without offending white audiences. However, beyond satirizing themselves and white audiences’ perceptions of blacks, the dialect also provided a mechanism for drawing black people together around speech events. The significance of community building among African Americans through speech is detailed in Lisa Green’s influential *African American English: A Linguistic Introduction*, in which she provides a comprehensive review of the lexicon of African American English, including a consideration of the relationship of lexical terms and African-American community life.

Among the works Green foregrounds in this context are Clarence Major’s *Juba to Jive: A Dictionary of African-American Slang* and Geneva Smitherman’s *Black Talk: Words and Phrases from the Hood to the Amen Corner*. Both authors draw attention to the unifying effects of AAVE, with Major’s work focusing on the ways in which the semantics and vocabulary of AAVE are grounded in the African tradition and its roots in the coastal tribes of central west Africa, and Smitherman emphasizing the ways in which the use of AAVE is inter-generational and traverses across social groups.

Quoting Smitherman, Green writes, “Regardless of job or social position, most African Americans experience some degree of participation in the life of the
COMMUNITY—.... This creates in-group crossover lingo that is understood and shared by various social groups within the race...” (Green 14). Dunbar recognized the significance of “in-group crossover lingo” and that the dialect itself contains markers of affect that have the capacity to elicit empowering emotions or create community through the signaling of a shared oral tradition.

In fact, he took advantage of the capacity of dialect as a literary technique and cultural force to foster collective black resistance by setting his sights on the most prominent magazine of culture, *The Century*, as a platform for his poetry. Dunbar succeeded, having more of his poems published in this magazine than in any other periodical. Yet, as Reynolds J. Scott-Childress reveals, none of the 13 poems Dunbar published in magazines prior to his first poem in *The Century* was in Negro dialect. Though three were dialect poems—two in Hoosier dialect and one in German dialect—the other 10 were in Standard English and were devoid of racial themes. In the three years following the appearance of his work in *The Century*, however, the majority of Dunbar’s poems published in magazines were in black dialect and 80% contained African-American themes (Scott-Childress 371).

While Dunbar’s poetry was meant to be read out loud or recited, encouraging a shared oral tradition, in her book *Rhetorics of Literacy: The Cultivation of American Dialect Poetry*, Nadia Nurhussein emphasizes not only the orality, but the visual
representation of the words in Dunbar’s dialect poems and songs. Despite the fact that
Dunbar used eye dialects almost exclusively in his song lyrics and almost never in his
dialect poetry, Nurhussein argues that the use of apostrophes to mark the omission of
letter and syllables, together with misspellings, has relevance and import that extends
beyond the way the poetry sounds when recited (Nurhussein 4).

For this reason, she is puzzled by the fact that even at the height of its popularity,
the visual effects of dialect poetry and its ability to contain complex rhetorical and
pedagogical messages was largely overlooked. A case in point is James Weldon
Johnson’s description of dialect poetry as “mere mutilation of English spelling and
pronunciation,” which patently ignores the visual and textual aspects of the genre as a
rhetorical device (Nurhussein 7). Johnson’s critique of dialect is perhaps not surprising
given cultural forces that included burgeoning literacy rates, prompting calls for
standardization of grammar and spelling. Yet, these existed alongside an American
obsession with dialect writing, and a sentimental longing for orality, reflected in the
proliferation of public readings, recitations, and elocution contests.

And while Dunbar was the consummate public intellectual, reciting his poetry in
venues that ranged from grammar schools and town halls to New York’s Waldorf
Astoria, his dialect writings went beyond an attempt to textually represent the aural
experience of vernacular speech. Instead, he altered orthography to encourage visual

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reading and performances in order to communicate meaning hidden in the texts themselves. In fact, because Dunbar’s dialect poems were driven and enriched by their visual effects, Nurhussein considers Dunbar’s attempts to publish his dialect poetry in elite magazines as “a deliberately political move, forcing these readers to labor while cloaking his poetry with an air of effortlessness and ease” (Nurhussein 15).

For instance, “A Negro Love Song” and “Discovered” both contain subversive, interrelated messages regarding the possibility of genuineness in romantic love between blacks in the first poem and, in the second, the hypocrisy of whites, who claim moral superiority over blacks, being entangled in illicit love affairs. Though they are light-hearted and contain dialect that would ordinarily be viewed as uncultured by readers of elite magazines, the requirement of white readers struggling through the translation of unfamiliar words written in black dialect itself holds meaning.

This tactic carried particular significance given that literary dialect at the end of the nineteenth century functioned both psychologically and culturally to reify a romantic racialism that privileged notions of authenticity (Nurhussein 21). Thus, readers who were eager to embrace “authentically black” literary works viewed Dunbar’s dialect poems as aesthetic representations of black life—itself presenting an enhanced opportunity for coded messaging.

The same romantic racialism that celebrated black dialect reinforced visual
perceptions of blackness as signified by the body’s physiognomy and faciality. As Michelle Stephens reveals in *Skin Acts: Race, Psychoanalysis, and the Black Male Performer*, it was necessary for African-American writers and performers to counter the visual fetishization of race as epidermal difference “at a time when the New Negro movement privileged a visual politics of portraiture as a positive meaning for representing race” (Stephens ix).

This complicated matters for Dunbar, whose dialect poetry often adopted the folk speech of Southern blacks. Unlike his contemporary and mentor James Whitcomb Riley, who could recite Hoosier dialect poetry without being reduced to the character being performed, Dunbar became identified with the black Southerner. Whereas Riley could walk away from his verse and shed his character, Dunbar was unable to do so because he was presented by Howells at the outset of his career as linguistically representing, as well as physically embodying, authentic blackness “with the race traits strangely accented: the black skin, the woolly hair, the thick, out-rolling lips and the mild soft eyes...” (Howells x).

The romantic racialism of the day resulted in a constraining conflation of Dunbar’s characters in his black Southern dialect poems with the poet himself. Any deviation from this character was deemed inauthentic, to the point where he was accused of forgetting his race when he wrote and spoke using Standard English (Nurhussein 93).
While he could inhabit the character of a cultured, sophisticated intellectual, he could never leave behind his underlying blackness beneath the mask—a blackness which defined him. This was true despite the fact that, in addition to black dialect, Dunbar wrote a three-act British comedy, *Herrick*, using English dialect and experimented with a wide range of dialects, including Irish, German, Scottish and rural Midwestern.

In an attempt to undermine the reification of race, during the same interview in which he responded to a reporter “We must write like white men…our life is now the same,” Dunbar brings to the fore the extent to which “the races have acted and reacted on each other” (Dunbar, *In His Own Voice* 206-207). Citing white writers Joel Chandler Harris, along with Ruth McEnery Stuart, as those whose stories best represent the Negro race, Dunbar again takes an anti-essentialist stance regarding authentic representation, asserting, “Why, the white people of the south talk like us—they have imported many of our words into the language—and you know they act like us” (Dunbar, *In His Own Voice* 207).

Nevertheless, just as the parodic nature of Dunbar’s reference to Southern whites imitating blacks likely went unnoticed by the reporter, until recently, insufficient attention has been paid to Elizabeth Young’s observation that “Rather than expressing an authentic voice, Dunbar’s dialect poems are, aesthetically, a black writer’s mimicry of a white mimicry of black speech—a parody that destabilizes an already unstable original”
(Young 127). This interpretation stands in direct opposition to the assessment of J. Saunders Redding in *To Make a Poet Black* that Dunbar’s dialect was an artificial “bastard medium” constructed for “Northern whites to whom dialect meant only an amusing burlesque of Yankee English” (Nettels 84). In addition to failing to acknowledge the subversive elements in Dunbar’s work, critics such as Redding discount the affirmation Dunbar received by many of his black contemporaries who praised him for accurately representing antebellum plantation life.

Further, the same critics who chastise Dunbar for his alleged unfamiliarity with the varieties of Southern black speech, leading to a contrived black dialect that is inextricably linked to minstrelsy, ignore the historical facts of Dunbar being raised by parents who were enslaved on a Kentucky plantation and passed down to their son Southern folklore and speech, that he was familiar with black communities in Ohio, Kentucky, the Eastern Shore of Maryland and Washington, D.C., and that he had lived for a sustained period of time with James Weldon Johnson in Jacksonville, Florida (S. Brown, *Negro Poetry and Drama*).

Moreover, the linguistic minstrelsy ascribed to Dunbar was seen as represented most glaringly in his musical lyrics. However, Stephens notes the degree to which “coon songs,” as they began being performed by African Americans, took on a life of their own and a higher level of musical complexity, gaining independence from the framework of
the minstrel routine. She joins Thomas Riis in distinguishing the songs of *In Dahomey* and other songs of the 1890s from the “coon songs” of the minstrel stage based on their exhibiting a previously-absent level of social commentary. The vectors for contestation included both the “rhetorical differences of black speech, its excesses in sound and pronunciation, its puns on meaning,” and the eye dialects of black speech, written into song lyrics, which captured the rhythmic aspects that represent “resistant black consciousness inhabiting modernity from a different historical location from that of the colonizers” (Stephens, *Skin Acts* 48).

Indeed, Stephens credits the script of *In Dahomey* with “rhetorical wordplay and the sounds of the black letter to recapture the black subject lost to racist stereotypes and imagery” (Stephens, *Skin Acts* 46). Drawing attention to syncopation in the play—the silences and visceral breaks in the rhythm of speech, Stephens conceives of the signifying and syncopated features of these “coon songs” as a liberatory narrative of black music and orality. She regards both the noise and the silence as adding another dimension of understanding to the resistant elements of the performance of black dialect and attributes to Riis the recognition that Walker and Williams’s contemporaries, like Dunbar, realized that “more radical text departures were possible within the new upbeat, frequently syncopated, musical idiom...which [they] recognized as a genuine product of black culture” (Stephens, *Skin Acts* 48, 52).
James Smethurst offers an even more comprehensive backdrop for assessing Dunbar’s dialect in this context in *The African American Roots of Modernism*. Smethurst illustrates the ways in which, at a time when a new racial regime was emerging, the black voice, the black body, and the black subject saturated popular culture on the minstrel stage, serving as a rationale for the continued disenfranchisement of blacks, while concomitantly presenting a new outlet for black artistry and social critique. Transforming what it meant to act black, the hypermasculine urban black man replaced the demasculinized “coon” of the minstrel stage (Smethurst 17).

Smethurst unpacks the notion that the path to full cultural and political citizenship for blacks would involve African-American poetry becoming truly modern, as opposed to the perceived “backward” or weak imitations of Euro-American verse. He places Dunbar in a group of African-American writers who shaped a new American bohemia while grappling with how one responds to having to wear the mask and, at the same time, represent black subjectivity and folk culture.

Because the black authors and performers of *In Dahomey* realized that the minstrel song was the only place the audience was willing to look for them, they stepped outside of the coon role to make interjections. Nevertheless, they had to find their own way to use words to mark their presence, and in failing to fully transcend the racism of the play, lay bare the conditions of the show’s production.
Smethurst argues that the metaphor of the mask simultaneously invites and challenges readers to change the way Dunbar’s “coon song” lyrics and dialect poems are read. Appealing to the ironies of double masking—the white minstrel performers donning blackface to imitate blacks mimicking whites—he suggests that the concept of double masking provides possibilities for Dunbar using the “coon song” as a double parody to claim both human equality and moral superiority (Smethurst, *The African American Roots of Modernism* 34). Smethurst also notes the ways in which the lens of masking creates a space where the black individual might be him or herself, or something other than what the mask suggests, given that the transcript is hidden to white people.

Pointedly, he asks,

What happens to Dunbar the ‘high’ poet if we eliminate Dunbar the ‘dialect’ or ‘popular’ poet? Would one genre of his work succeed as well without the other? And without the ‘high’ poetry and the split proposed between “real” and “mask,” ...between representation and re-creation of the African American voice, wouldn’t the dialect poetry seem far shallower and much more easily conflated with the plantation tradition and the minstrel tradition in some uncomplicated way? (Smethurst, *The African American Roots of Modernism* 36)

His response is that for Dunbar, high and low, standard and dialect poetry are inextricably linked.

Of course, the same could be said about the use of dialect in works such as
Herman Melville’s *The Confidence Man: His Masquerade* or Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, where the masking tradition takes the form of the confidence man and protagonist as archetypal trickster. Yet, while Twain lays claim in the author’s notes to the authenticity of his use of dialect, neither Twain nor Melville is reduced to their trickster characters. By virtue of their physical characteristics and social status, they escape the way in which Dunbar and other black authors, such as Chesnutt and Frances Harper, have been conflated with their characters.

Viewing Dunbar’s work as “a potent paradigm for a new Negro era with its concern for representing ‘authentically’ the racial (or national) self without being imprisoned by the implicitly or explicitly racist expectations of white readers, or of variously accommodationist black readers,” Smethurst emphasizes Dunbar’s “split between ‘real’ and ‘mask’” (Smethurst, *The African American Roots of Modernism* 37). In doing so, he attributes the following to Dunbar:

…a vision of a consciousness that is doubled and redoubled practically ad infinitum in the sort of appropriations, reappropriations, re-reappropriations, and so on, of African American culture and the black subject that lie at the heart of American popular [and ‘high’] culture, all under the sign of ‘authenticity’. (Smethurst, *The African American Roots of Modernism* 37)

Dunbar is portrayed as a catalyst for black poets imagining a more authentic vernacular Negro literature aimed at the black audience—an appeal to black insider authenticity that started with the black minstrel tradition of Walker and Williams as “two
real coons.” Within Dunbar, Smethurst argues, there is a dualist opposition between the authentic black core and a popular cultural mask that builds upon the tradition of Chesnutt and Harper in offering an interpretative guide for understanding African-American culture.

Nevertheless, navigating these dualist contradictions while connecting with black audiences became a constant challenge, and Dunbar turned to the trope of the black veteran to signal dissatisfaction with a modernity infiltrated by Jim Crow values. This trope served as a nod toward a separate black modernist tradition that critiqued white modernism—a critique captured in the words of Dunbar’s character Sadness Williams from *The Sport of the Gods*. Modeled after George Walker, Sadness admits “Being respectable is a very nice diversion, but it’s tedious if done steadily,” and when told that “dancing is the poetry of motion,” he retorts that “dancing in rag-time is the dialect poetry” (Smethurst, *The African American Roots of Modernism* 169).

Within this framework, Dunbar’s purportedly “contrived” Southern black dialect can be viewed as more than an appropriation of Riley’s performative style or an effort to perceive the orality of dialect through the lens of literacy, as suggested by Nurhussein. Instead, Dunbar’s dialect is an attempt to create a new vision of blackness by caricaturing white endeavors to essentialize it. After all, there is a long history of using dialect in America as a literary technique designed as a vehicle for political and social commentary.
Gavin Jones, for instance, highlights the “Humphrey Ploughjogger” letters of John Adams that were published in Boston newspapers in the 1760s. Adams adopted the dialect of the plain-spoken New England farmer in drawing the public’s attention to the impact of increased commercialization on those in rural America (G. Jones 37). Following the American Revolution, dialect continued to serve as a medium for political satire, and by the 1830s, its use reflected a burgeoning populist sentiment. The utilization of dialect to engage in literary warfare increased with the actual battles fought in the Civil War and throughout the Reconstruction era.

Most notably, humorist George Washington Harris’s *Sut Lovingood: Yarns Spun By a Nat’ral Born Durn’d Fool* and political satirist David Ross Locke’s “Nasby Letters” employ the familiar instruments of minstrelsy to launch their attacks on the South. These tools included misspellings, malapropisms, and buffoonery, signaling a level of ignorance and crudeness that could be invoked as pure fiction if the author were accused of slander (G. Jones 38).

Yet, Jones draws a sharp distinction between the “cult of the vernacular” that arose in the post-bellum period and the antebellum dialect intended primarily as a delivery mode for political dissent. Citing James Russell Lowell’s *The Biglow Papers* as transitional, Jones expounds upon the shift to dialect as a realistic representation of
regional differences that carried moral significance. The Yankee dialect of protagonist Hosea Biglow was adopted to linguistically and morally condemn:

…the supposedly ‘high’ discourses that surround it: namely, the over-redundant rhetoric of the press, the empty, corrupt language of politics, and—a lesser extent—the weak, unsubtle poetry of the pretentious Homer Wilbur who degrades speech through inflated sophistication. (G. Jones 40)

Vernacular was considered by Lowell to be an antidote to the convention of the classroom and the press that was steeped in artificiality and redundancy. Its use by Lowell was intended as “the tongue of the people in the mouth of the scholar”—a representation of common sense and satire that avoided devolving into buffoonery (G. Jones 41).

Writers during this period sought to portray dialect authentically. Thus, Joel Chandler Harris, imitated by Dunbar, disavowed his inclusion in a catalogue of humorous publications comprised of dialect writing from the previous generation because he viewed his work as a phonetically genuine departure from “the intolerable misrepresentations of the minstrel stage” (G. Jones 44). At a time when the nation was struggling to restore its unity by dismantling sectionalism, dialect writers endeavored to define America’s character through the capturing of diverse voices of the melting pot that had been silenced or distorted. For instance, Hoosiers regarded Riley as speaking in their voices and engaging their sensibilities. However, these ideological underpinnings were
often infused with notions of racial and class hierarchies, and attempts at solidifying unity by speaking the common language of the people often situated the speaker as “the other.”

**Dialect as Cultural Capital: James Weldon Johnson on Dunbar and Sterling Brown**

In spite of these pitfalls, Caroline Gebhard has noted the ways in which dialect provided a type of cultural capital to the black writer by representing the “value of a cultural heritage in a society that denied blacks had any culture of their own” (Gebhard 165). In the 1922 preface to his *Book of American Negro Poetry*, James Weldon Johnson speaks to the denial and erasure of black culture, noting that many Americans remained unaware that there were black poets or that ragtime, once exclusively written in Negro dialect, originated with African Americans. Johnson proposed that “The final measure of greatness of all peoples is the amount and standard of the literature and art they have produced” (J.W. Johnson vii).

Although Johnson praised his friend, asserting that “Dunbar took the humble speech of his people and in it wrought music,” he takes pains to detail the reasons why he believes Negro poets moved away from this medium of expression (J.W. Johnson xxxv). He insists:

Negro dialect is at present a medium that is not capable of giving expression to the varied conditions of Negro life in America, and much less is it capable of
giving the fullest interpretation of Negro character and psychology. This is no indictment against the dialect as dialect, but against the mold of convention in which Negro dialect in the United States has been set. In time, these conventions may become lost, and the colored poet in the United States may sit down to write in dialect without feeling that his first line will put the general reader in a frame of mind which demands that the poem be humorous or pathetic. (J.W. Johnson xli)

Maintaining that even Dunbar was unable to “break the mold in which dialect poetry had, long before him, been set by representations made of the Negro on the minstrel stage,” Johnson nevertheless affirmed the cultural force of Negro dialect in his assessments of Sterling Brown’s poetry (J.W. Johnson, Along This Way: The Autobiography of James Weldon Johnson 159). In fact, in the preface to Brown’s Southern Road, Johnson distinguishes between “traditional” or “conventional” Negro dialect based on the minstrel tradition, with its “artificial and false sentiment, its exaggerated geniality and optimism,” and the “common, racy, living, authentic speech of the Negro in certain phases of ‘real life,’” which he attributes to Brown and Richard Wright (J.W. Johnson, “Introduction to Southern Road” xxxvi). It is worth exploring how Johnson drew that distinction by examining Brown’s dialect poetry in relation to Dunbar’s.

Brown’s poetry was informed by his work as editor of The Federal Writers Project (FWP), established in 1935 as a component of the United States Work Progress Administration, to provide employment for historians, teachers, writers, librarians and other scholars following the onset of the Great Depression. Hired by FWP director Henry
Alsberg in 1936 to edit a special guide on “Negro affairs,” Brown was already an accomplished scholar and professor of English at Howard University when he assumed his new role. Throughout his career, Brown was dedicated to engaging in an unbiased study of African-American life and culture and to correcting the distortions of black character and customs that were perpetuated by the mainstream culture. His goal was to identify markers of black culture and folklore without presenting a racist caricature of black vernacular though erroneous transcription or excessive editorializing within the government-sponsored oral history project chronicling the lives of former slaves (Gabbin 72).

In his 1933 essay, “Negro Character as Seen by White Authors,” Brown attempted to illustrate how these exaggerations and omissions reinscribe racist stereotypes prevalent in American literature. He showcased the ways in which white portrayals of blacks perpetuated a racially-based hierarchy in which whites are at the top and blacks are, by nature, lower. The categories he outlined in this piece included: (1) The Contented Slave, (2) The Wretched Freeman, (3) The Comic Negro, (4) The Brute Negro, (5) The Tragic Mulatto, (6) The Local Color Negro, and (7) The Exotic Primitive (S. Brown, “Negro Character”). Brown argued that the exploration, rather than exploitation of Negro lives, must come from black authors themselves. He insisted that whether black or white, the one who captures the black voice will be a person willing:
...to go beneath the cliches of popular belief to get at an underlying reality, will be wary of confining a race’s entire character to a half-dozen narrow grooves. He will hardly have the temerity to say that his necessarily limited observation of a few Negroes in a restricted environment can be taken as the last word about some mythical the Negro. He will hesitate to do this, even though he had a Negro mammy, or spent a night in Harlem, or has been a Negro all his life. (S. Brown “Negro Character”)

If expressions of black culture were to avoid reducing blacks to the images of the contented slave, comic buffoon, and wretched freeman, it was necessary, Brown contended, to move beyond the black author writing under the sponsorship of Northern abolitionists toward the spirituals and blues of the Southern, folk Negro.

In these modes of expression, Brown finds the true character of Negro life—what Alain Locke refers to as “the deeper idiom of feeling or the particular paradox of the racial situation” that he claimed Brown uniquely captured in his poetic dialect (Locke 25). Though Brown’s leadership in the FWP enabled him to bring together a group of black writers who would shape America’s literary traditions, including Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, Margaret Walker, Zora Neale Hurston, Claude McKay, and Arna Bontemps, he was unable to achieve his goal of destabilizing stereotypes against African Americans through this project (Gabbin 72, 82). Brown subsequently turned to poetry in advancing his mission of articulating the underlying reality of black folk life by avoiding the narrow grooves.
Wanting to capture the expression of people “living a life close to the earth,” Brown’s *Southern Road*, which appeared in 1932, can be read as a testament to an African-American culture that resists the oppression of the racist South while embracing the rural cultural traditions tied to the land. For Brown, it is not Harlem that was the site of aesthetic development, but instead the rural South, filled with the culture and narratives of farmers, factory workers, and other laborers (Smethurst, *The African American Roots of Modernism* 69).

He saw Southern life as a catalyst for African-American modernism, itself a source of national identity, and viewed the racial oppression experienced by blacks in the South as giving rise to cultural forms of expression and resistance that, if retained, could work against the sickness of the spirit caused by embracing the modern urban life and its capitalist mass-consumer culture. His goal was to offer a new consciousness to the African-American community in the South—one allowing them to realize the power they hold through cultural expression. For Brown, Southern black dialect was a symbol of racial pride, of black authenticity, and of the real people whose voices were muted in the WPA narratives and by literary convention.

Brown’s use of dialect is strategic, allowing black characters in his poems, such as “Ma Rainey” and “Slim Greer in Hell,” to speak for themselves and become their own oral historians. Given his experience with the FWP, it is understandable that Brown
would want to present the true African-American character as reflected in authentic language, and he managed to depict the real language of Southern blacks without signaling inferiority. Brown accomplished this by appropriating dialect in such a way that upended its association with the minstrel past, positioning it instead as a source of creative inspiration that communicated black resistance to the erosion of African-American culture.

Brown was unapologetic in suggesting:

Dialect, or the speech of the people, is capable of reflecting whatever the people are. And the folk Negro is a great deal more than a buffoon or a plaintiff minstrel. Poets more intent upon learning the ways of the folk, their speech, and their character, that is to say, better poets, could have smashed the mold. But first they would have to believe in what they were doing. And this was difficult in a period of conciliation and striving for middle class recognition and respectability. (Furlonge 973)

Thus, Brown recognized that the appropriation of language by stigmatized groups can be used ironically to destabilize socially constructed norms and promote self-agency. And although he challenged the sentimentalist portrayals of Southern plantation life in some of Dunbar’s work, Brown simultaneously recasts Dunbar’s dialect poems as the basis for modern practice. Viewing Dunbar’s poems as offering insights into black folk culture and the conditions under which it was produced, in his Outline for the Study of Poetry of American Negroes, Brown not only notes Dunbar’s “fidelity of dialect” and “the faithful
bits of description and folk speech,” he also invites readers to speculate concerning why Dunbar does not use dialect when focusing on the tragic aspects of life in the South (Posmentier 124).

From this perspective, there is good reason to countenance Dunbar’s insistence that there was a marked difference between the minstrel dialect created by whites and the dialect reflected in his comedic dialect work. Dunbar refused to capitulate to the rubrics that positioned formal English as superior to dialect and, in fact, demonstrated the ways in which dialect captured complex emotions, cultural norms, and political sentiments that eluded Standard English.

Despite the persistence of many of the same comic elements utilized in minstrelsy, the fact that blacks and whites laughed at different times during performances of In Dahomey lends credence to the assertion that Dunbar and the plays of other black writers and producers transcended the racist humor of the minstrel stage by working through it. Highlighting the way in which an ironic joke was being played on white audiences, Karen Sotiropoulos notes that “In moments when black audiences in the balcony laughed…whites remained silent. These moments made it all too clear that black performers had told jokes that went literally and figuratively over the heads of their white audiences” (Sotiropoulos 6). The next chapter demonstrates how this transcendence is revealed in Dunbar’s musical comedy.
CHAPTER II

“JES LAK WHITE FO’KS”: DOUBLE PARODY AND VERNACULAR MASKING IN DUNBAR’S COON SONGS

Introducing a Resistive Black Voice with “Uncle Eph’s Christmas”

Though literary critics ranging from Gayl Jones to Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Houston Baker have characterized Dunbar as trapped by the white social norms of the late nineteenth century, whereby the politics of masking and the authentic black voice are ultimately subsumed by conflation with the minstrel tradition, a new brand of literary scholars has increasingly argued against judging Dunbar’s dialect poetry in this way. For instance, rather than equating Dunbar’s black dialect writing with minstrelsy, Gavin Jones views its use as a combination of political accommodation and resistance, transforming the expression of the conventional stereotype into “African-American rhetorical codes which in turn criticize the political abuses of his time” (Jones 190).

Dunbar remained extremely popular among generations of black readers, and his use of signifying, which is at the heart of black vernacular, is regarded as creating a level of exclusively black, deeply figurative meaning, allowing for intertextual communication. In fact, it is his extensive use of this technique that leads Jones to insist, “Dunbar was no
unselfconscious, naive mocker of literary conventions, he was highly aware of the racial ramifications of any repetition of white cultural forms” (Jones 191). Nowhere was this more evident than in Dunbar’s musical comedies.

While it is widely rumored that Dunbar was encouraged by his wife to disavow any association with the lyrics he wrote for Will Marion Cook’s *In Dahomey* and *Clorindy, or The Origin of the Cakewalk* and asserted by scholars such as Addison Gayle that Dunbar was often embarrassed by even his own *Uncle Eph’s Christmas*, and *Jes Lak White Fo’ks*, the evidence remains suspect (Carr 639). Whether or not he came to regret these works, Dunbar’s musical comedies provide some of the most vibrant examples of his use of irony, parody and satire. Indeed, each contains material that serves as markers for a rejection of the minstrel tradition and the introduction of a resistive black voice. In what follows, I magnify this voice by exploring rules of interaction, accent, intonation and signifying, along with other speech events characterizing Dunbar’s use of AAVE.

Published on December 20, 1899, Dunbar’s one act “Negro musical sketch,” *Uncle Eph’s Christmas*, offers a comedic portrait of the political, social, and economic constraints imposed on African Americans following Reconstruction. The plot is seemingly simple, portraying a family, headed by Uncle Eph and Aunt Chloe, welcoming guests to their home for a Christmas celebration. Undoubtedly, the comedic components of the opening scene initially suggest an embracing of the minstrel tradition, with even
the stage direction showcasing “pickanninnies fussing about the tree” (Dunbar, *In His Own Voice* 115). This, and other relics of the sentimentalist past, including the conventional reference to adult blacks as “Aunt” and “Uncle” rather than the corresponding “Mr.” or “Mrs.” afforded to adult whites, inevitably perpetuate, if only through acknowledgment, a persistent diminished social status of black adults following Emancipation, conforming to minstrel ideals of the Mammy and Sambo characters.

From the play’s opening scene, stereotypes at the basis of neominstrelsy are further reinforced by the use of African American Vernacular English, when Aunt Chloe orders one of her children to wake up their father, musing, “I don’t know what’s the matter with de old man, dis time o’ evenin’ sleeping mention names and reason why” (Dunbar, *In His Own Voice* 115). This reinscription continues through the decoupling of blackness and intellect when Aunt Chloe’s appeal to folk traditions and remedies positions African Americans as inextricably bound to their appetitive natures.

Moreover, Uncle Eph immediately takes on the appearance of the minstrel buffoon, striding onto the stage in his wife’s waistcoat, engaged in a futile attempt to establish himself as the king of his castle. Eph’s assertion of power within his domain takes the form of chastising Chloe for greasing Eph Jr.’s face with “mutton taller” instead of bone marrow. When his wife admits that she does not have the proper recipe for the grease, Eph scolds her:
You take de bone of de hog jole and you bile it down twell you git marrer from de bone, den you mix dat with dis here contemplanous oil and bile dat clar down to a salve. Den you comply dat to de face. Why, dat little darkey’s face will be so cracked dat it will look lak an earthquake (Dunbar, *In His Own Voice* 117).

Here, and throughout the play’s dialogue, malapropisms are used as a comedic technique.

Much like the sketches of Key and Peele, the comedic force of these linguistic manipulations among black audiences is due, in part, to the self-effacing humor and subversive messages contained within them. Hence, in welcoming guests for a Christmas celebration, Eph bellows, “Just tear up de house if you want to, case in de old times, I allus hyeahed it said dat the immoral Shakespoke writ ‘Christmas comes but once a year. Let us have our gin and beer.’ White folks pour your whiskey in, give us colored folks our gin” (Dunbar, *In His Own Voice* 120). By referring to the “immortal Shakespeare” as the “immoral Shakespoke,” Dunbar is poking fun at the white literary and social standards by which black writers and traditions are judged.

Yet, Dunbar’s subversion extends beyond the mocking of norms established by white hegemony, inviting readers to consider the ways in which we are all required to make continuous use of contextual information in order to interpret meaning. There is a level of sophistication exercised by each of the African-American characters in the play that eludes even the most educated white audience members, together with many black critics who, in interpreting Dunbar as lapsing into minstrelsy, are unable to ascertain
alternative meanings encoded in nonstandard utterances. For instance, positioning Uncle Eph as never quite able to achieve his desire of being king of his own castle acquires broader meaning when considered in relation to the tradition of abolitionist poetry included in the works of “fireside poets” Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and John Greenleaf Whittier. Longfellow’s “A Slave’s Dream” and Whittier’s “Toussaint L’Ouverture” portray African Kings degraded by slavery and contain a moral message Dunbar can reiterate covertly by using humor.

Dunbar, the author, becomes the trickster, and his life, as such, is played out through his characters. Indeed, the trickster theme takes center stage in *Uncle Eph’s Christmas* as one of Uncle Eph and Aunt Chloe’s guests, a young African-American woman named Parthenia Jenkins, is revealed as a recent graduate of Vassar College. In introducing Parthenia to the other guests, Eph details her entrance into the prestigious Seven Sisters institution: “She made up her mind to make her exit into skollege and git an ejimuncation, well she gits up and makes her debut into dis here vaseline skollege.” (Dunbar, *In His Own Voice* 121). Though repeatedly corrected regarding the college’s name, Eph continues to commit malapropisms. These deliberate imitations of misrepresentations of blackness by whites can be read as paralleling the subversive nature of Parthenia’s covert infiltration into the elite white institution of higher education for women.
Eph takes great pride in that fact:

White folks don’t ax her whether she black or ha, ha, ha. She gits to dis her gasoline skollege....and gits an ejimuncation herself an de final cousemquences is dat she gradumungates at de head of her class and de white folk dey don’t know she’s a brudenette case she looks jest like dem ....” (Dunbar, In His Own Voice 121)

Reluctant to draw attention to herself, Parthenia nevertheless follows by singing a verse of “I’m the Colored Girl from Vassar”:

There once was a school that was so very rare.  
That a poor dusky maid couldn’t breathe its very air.  
You couldn’t enter unless you were a millionaire.  
To be ought but a blue blood or swell you didn’t dare.  
I am the first dark belle who ever went to Vassar.  
I played my part so well, I came from Madagascar.  
They thought I was a swell and the boys they did adore  
And if I gave a smile, they quickly asked for more.  
They sent bouquets galore to the elegant brunette.  
I’ve got a stocking store of their billet deu.  
They did not know sufficient to come in from out the wet.  
And now they’re sore, they’re sore you bet. (Dunbar, In His Own Voice 137-138)

Based on the personal narrative of Anita Florence Hemmings, who graduated from Vassar at the top of her class in 1897, the “Colored Girl from Vassar” is a theme to which Dunbar returns in subsequent productions.
Double Parody and Dunbar’s Recurring Anti-Essentialist Themes

Dunbar’s one-act “Negro operetta,” *Jus Lak White Fo’ks*, published a year after *Uncle Eph’s Christmas*, centers around Pompous Johnson, who has discovered a Spanish chest filled with gold. Pompous instructs his neighbors not to tell the white folks about his find since they would not tolerate a rich black man. His plan is to send his daughter, Mandy, to marry a prince in Europe so she will have a family tree—just like white folks. Like Uncle Eph and Parthenia, while Pompous is the trickster protagonist, his daughter is also positioned as a trickster when the song discloses that the officials at Vassar did not know that she was black until she graduated.

To be truly appreciated, the vernacular masking in which Dunbar engages through this song must be viewed alongside his overtly political commentary, “The Treatment of the Negro,” which foregrounds the media attention Hemmings received upon her graduation. Dunbar marvels,

What a theme to raise a tempest about! What a reason for dragging a refined woman into unpleasant notoriety! Had she hurt Vassar or her schoolmates? Did her dark blood have any virus in it which could inoculate those who came into contact with her? Would anyone but an American teeming with narrowness and prejudice have thought twice about the matter? Would a Frenchman, or Englishman or a German have said, as has been said in this case, that ‘she was graciously permitted as a favor to take equal rank with the members of her class’? Graciously permitted to do what was her right! Graciously fiddlesticks! Any other action would have been an outrage. (Dunbar, “Treatment of the Negro” 6)
Dunbar’s incredulity in this essay, captured in the lyrics of the second verse, conveys a distinctly anti-essentialist message which disrupts societal claims of white intellectual and moral superiority. Mandy sings:

Oh the papers howled and said it was a shame...
And they really thought that I was to blame...
Thought that I had played an awful game...
Tho’ they had to own that I got there just the same...
And now they’re sore. They’re sore you bet. (Dunbar, *In His Own Voice* 139)

“And now they’re sore,” she repeats.

In both plays, Dunbar uses his literary characters, Parthenia and Mandy respectively, to promote racial uplift through displays of black genius that threaten ideas of white supremacy. For all of their alleged intellectual superiority, the white men from Harvard and Yale, who are courting the “colored girl from Vassar,” are incapable of identifying her as black when she is right before their eyes. The white majority is blind to the reality that their common humanity unites blacks and whites in ways that override differences grounded in visibility. The recurrence of the theme of passing in Dunbar’s plays signals the employment of a more complex level of vernacular masking utilized by Dunbar through his use of dialect to create a cultural privacy, whereby language masks meaning from whites.

The contextual meanings that serve as a backdrop for the parody culminate in a
pointed critique of a society that blames the victim of racial discrimination, while disavowing any responsibility for moral wrongdoing. In this way, the parody of black life in *Uncle Eph’s Christmas* parallels white audiences’ perceptions of Dunbar himself. Dunbar, the author, is reduced to and expected to conform to white expectations based on their racist stereotypes, and he uses this vantage point to parody his own black subservience to white desires and the white audience itself (Young 125).

**Dunbar’s Code Switching and Signifying: “But fu’ feah someone mistakes me”**

Dunbar’s double parodies mock whites’ comedic portrayals of blacks as ignorant, superstitious, and subservient on the minstrel stage, flipping the script on the Southern black dialect and exaggerated malapropisms that seem to celebrate the nostalgia fueling Jim Crow racism. Dunbar was eager to both contest and break free from the constraints placed on him by William Dean Howells in his 1896 *Harper’s Weekly Review of Majors and Minors* in which the poet is situated as the voice of “a lowly people” whose race ranges “between appetite and emotion” (Howells “Introduction to *Lyrics of Lowly Life*” 16). The unfortunate result, as Young reveals, was that Dunbar’s efforts to break away from black dialect and write using Standard English were met by false accusations that he was simply embarking on a grotesque imitation of white norms (Young 125).

It is clear that the subtler and multifaceted manner in which Dunbar responded to
these charges, by routinely employing the strategy of the trickster, has at times gone unnoticed. This is particularly true in analyses of Dunbar’s standard poetry. For instance, the context of contestation against white standards of critique is absent in Henry Louis Gates’s interpretation of Dunbar’s poem, “Prometheus,” in which Dunbar writes:

   We have no singers like the ones whose note
   Gave challenge to the noblest warbler’s song.
   We have no voice so mellow, sweet, and strong
   As that which broke from Shelley’s golden throat.

   The measure of our songs is our desires:
   We tinkle where old poets used to storm.
   We lack their substance tho’ we keep their form:
   We strum our banjo-strings and call them lyres. (Dunbar, *Lyrics of the Hearthside* 91)

In his book *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*, Gates considers the complexities embedded in signifying revisions by black authors seeking to redress dominant notions of their work as purely imitative, leading to the metaphors of the “black parrot” and “mockingbird poet” (Gates 123). Describing Dunbar’s challenge of garnering respect as a representative of the black voice, Gates concludes, “Dunbar clearly admits defeat here by ‘Shelley’s golden throat’ and by the entire poetic tradition of which Shelley is so central a part” (Gates 125). Gates goes even further down the road of attributing resignation and reconciliation to Dunbar by suggesting “Not only does he seem to be giving up the quest, but he also eventually gives
up his black identity” (Gates 125). Offering as evidence a letter from Dunbar to his mother in which he characterizes himself as the most interviewed man in London, noting “The French waiter took off his cap to me...I am entirely white,” Gates contends that Dunbar was transformed from black to white as the sheer weight of the Western tradition demanded that he “write white” (Gates 125).

Yet, as we have seen from the famous incident at the Waldorf Astoria in New York City in 1899, in which Dunbar is challenged by a reporter to respond to whether there is something distinctive in the writing of black poets that differentiates them from Anglo-Saxons, he is clear in eschewing the simultaneous reduction of black authors to race traits and the positing of white authors as raceless and universal (Jarrett 306). When Dunbar retorts, “We must write like white men. I do not mean imitate them; but our life is now the same,” he is not relinquishing his blackness any more than he does so when he reports to his mother that his race does not define him in the eyes of the French waiter. The astonishment he expresses is not that he is treated the same as whites when he is in England, but that in the U.S., his racial identity trumps his humanity.

Dunbar’s narratives reaffirm his anti-essentialist stance, framed in the contemporary discourse of race as socially constructed. The black voice with which he speaks is shaped by his lived experience as someone who is “otherized” based on his visibility. But for Dunbar, it was his shared national culture that was more significant
than his race in determining the impact of his work in propelling the future of American literature. His emphasis on a shared cultural experience implicitly denies racelessness as the exclusive purview of white authors.

Thus, whereas Gates has interpreted “Prometheus” as signaling Dunbar’s resignation to defeat and his concomitant desire to master white forms in order to become white, I read this poem, instead, as a rejection by Dunbar of the white audiences’ and critics’ expectations that he confine himself exclusively to black dialect and racial themes. Because Dunbar transgresses these expectations, some readers are unable to discern the substance within his form or to recognize a new aesthetic that pushes beyond the boundaries of white canonical standards. Dunbar is mocking the assessment by whites of his work as failed mimicry, not falling prey to it. He does not become white by remarking on the fact that in England he was not treated with the same narrowmindedness to which Hemmings was subjected in the U.S.

After all, Prometheus was a common figure symbolizing rebellion and protest during the nineteenth century, and through self-deprecation in his poem, Dunbar becomes Prometheus, lashing out against social norms that assert High British Romanticism and High British Idealism as the sole metric by which to judge literary greatness. Resorting to the “banjo-strings” of dialect poetry to gain a hearing, Dunbar masters signifying with his phrase, “We strum our banjo-strings and call them lyres,” which functions as a form of
tricksterism rather than self-deception, indicting those who insist on white literary figures as the gold standard, ironically, by seemingly indulging them. In the process, he cleverly “places both his so-called ‘standard’ and ‘literary’ poems” in tandem “as part of an internationalist post-Romantic poetry” (Smethurst, personal communication, May 28, 2016).

Commenting on the deeper-level, racially motivated meaning underneath the veneer of Dunbar’s conventional lyricism in relation to “Prometheus,” Gavin Jones writes:

And remarkably, the last line of the poem gives an example of the very technique of indirect allusion. The homophonic pun on lyres/liars creates powerful ambiguity…. Banjo songs are liars because they make alternative substance beneath conventional form. What begins as a confession of mediocrity ends as a subtle lesson on how to read the double meaning of black expression. (G. Jones 200)

These challenges to minstrel realism and aspirations of national acceptance were pivotal components of the racial uplift agenda to which Dunbar was deeply committed. In Uncle Eph’s Christmas, Parthenia embodies a rejection of the racial determinism and Social Darwinism underlying minstrelsy. A contestation of the racial realism inherent in the minstrel tradition continues as the play unfolds. When Eph leaves the house to gather provisions for the celebration, the chorus begins singing “Czar of Dixie Land,” heralding Darky Dan, one of Parthenia’s two suitors. Here, too, Dunbar uses irony and satire in his
lyrics to mock white society’s efforts to deny blacks full citizenship:

You white folks don’t ’lect no man
Les’ he’s of yo’ nation.
What you want to do’s to keep
Black folks in dey statien.
But dese black folks boun’ to have
Someone go a starrin’,
So in Dixie Land I spend
All my time a Czarrin’. (Dunbar, In His Own Voice 122)

Black citizenship is a subject about which Dunbar was passionate, and this trope featured prominently in many of his poems on the sable arms. For instance, his questioning the government’s failure to protect the rights of African Americans, despite the sacrifices made by black soldiers, is the basis of his 1894 poem “The Colored Soldiers,” which appeared in Lyrics of Lowly Life.

In this ten-stanza poem, Dunbar writes:

Yes, the Blacks enjoy their freedom,
    And they won it dearly, too;
For the life blood of their thousands
    Did the southern fields bedew.
In the darkness of their bondage,
    In the depths of slavery’s night,
Their muskets flashed the dawning,
    And they fought their way to light.

They were comrades then and brothers,
    Are they more or less to-day?
They were good to stop a bullet.
    And to front the fearful fray.
They were citizens and soldiers,
   When rebellion raised its head;
And the traits that made them worthy, --
   Ah! Those virtues are not dead. (Dunbar, *Lyrics of Lowly Life* 114)

While the poem ends with the claim that “these noble sons of Ham” have cleansed the
nation’s shame of slavery with their blood, it is clear that Dunbar’s message is intended
to evoke a sense of shame regarding the manner in which black soldiers have been
dishonored. Freedom and citizenship are not merely debts owed, but natural rights that
have been denied, and Dunbar is seeking redress through government action.

However, in *Uncle Ep’s Christmas*, Dunbar is also parodying white fears of the
black dandy, the wealthier, even more dapper, sexually aggressive black man, which first
appeared on the minstrel stage as a mocking display of blackface by whites who were
threatened by elaborately dressed and fancy-speaking African Americans. Dunbar’s
character Darky Dan sings:

   I am de finest thing
   From near or far;
   Black folks in Dixie sing
   Dis is de Czar,
   You see my makeup fine
   Lawd folks but I’m line.
   Go way de world is mine,
   I am de Czar.
   All you people note my dress
   And my royal manners,
   Try me any way you please
I take off de banners.
No white man can pace wid me
When I’m fixed hobby,
Playin’ high society
Is my only hobby. (Dunbar, *In His Own Voice* 122)

In *Songsters and Saints: Vocal Traditions of Race Records*, Paul Oliver discusses the emerging ragtime image of the African-American minstrel as a con-man and dandy, illustrating that “coon songs” are often used as ironic and parodic tools to challenge the status quo through political activism. Dunbar does this by using Darky Dan to signifying on the ways in which, following Emancipation, blacks who “appeared above their station” challenged notions of white superiority—an outcome especially menacing to the white working class.

According to Monica Miller in *Slaves to Fashion: Black Dandyism and the Styling of Black Diasporic Identity*, “Attempts to control the perceived impertinency of these newly emboldened, newly fashionable blacks ranged from the subtle to the outrageous. Excess responses included ripping the new clothes off the backs of those blacks dressed beyond what whites could bear” (M. Miller 101). Thus, the black dandy became a caricature on the minstrel stage as a means of undermining efforts by blacks to attain social equality. At the same time, the presence of dandies on the stage, conjuring notions of black sexuality and urban violence, held the potential to serve as a reminder of the resistive power of blacks to existing nineteenth-century norms.
Francis Davis comments on this ploy in *The History of the Blues*, suggesting:

The joke might have been on those laughing the loudest. Did it occur to whites of the day that the so-called Negro dandy might be spoofing them? Nineteenth-century [African-American] minstrelsy can be seen as both a perpetuation of a cruel status quo and the first sign of change, a form of theater and a form of drag, an entry into a world in which black could be white, white could be black, anything could be itself and simultaneously opposite. (F. Davis 37)

Indeed, Dunbar uses the language of dominant racist discourse to engage in a double parody by having the character of Darky Dan parodying white minstrel performances of blacks, as well as parodying blacks who strive to emulate white aristocratic ideals and values. The force of Dunbar’s use of the dandy can be discerned by considering an analysis of methodological shifts in minstrel studies offered by Benjamin Miller in his article “Twisting the Dandy: The Transformation of the Blackface Dandy in Early American Theater.” Miller exposes a reorientation toward prioritizing black experiences in examining white performances of blackness, invoking Monica Miller’s notion that:

In his adaptability, the dandy figure is firmly ensconced within the flow of African American history, linking African traditions and black recognition and subversive play with white power in the colonial period to statements of respectability and individuality in freedom. Blackface minstrelsy and its other caricatures fought against this mobility even as they acknowledged the ability of the figure and its real-life counterparts to reinvent themselves. (B. Miller)

Such comedy arises from what Henry James referred to in *Hawthorne* as “the Great American Joke,” revealed in the clash of dialect and Standard language, and
referring to the vast expanse between the cultural ideals of American democracy and the reality of individual lives. The conclusion of “Twisting the Dandy” is that the blackface dandy can be read not only as an attempt by white performers to squelch resistance among upwardly mobile blacks, but also as an “acknowledgment of the power and rebellious force of real black dandies (B. Miller).

Continued sentiments about the dangers of allowing whites to dictate cultural norms are heightened when Dunbar’s play ends with a performance of the cakewalk to the song “Possum is De Best Meat After All,” for the cakewalk, itself, was subversive. However, the extent to which it was used as a form of resistance often went unacknowledged. According to a number of interviews conducted during the Federal Writers’ Project, the cakewalk was a common feature in the slave quarters on Southern plantations before it became a staple of popular culture in the late nineteenth century.

In her article “The Cakewalk: A Study in Stereotype and Reality,” Brooke Baldwin cites former slave Estella Jones, who recalls:

Cakewalkin’ wuz a lot of fun durin’ slavery time. Dey swept de yards real clean and set benches for de party. Banjos was used for music makin’. De womens wor long, ruffled dresses wid hoops in ’em and de mens had on high hats, long split-tailed coats, and some of em used walkin’ sticks. De couple dat danced best got a prize. Sometimes de slave owners come to dese parties’ cause de enjoyed watchin’ de dance, and dey ’cided who danced de best. Most parties durin’ slavery time wuz give on Saturday night durin’ work seasons, but durin’ winter dey was give on most any night. (B. Baldwin 208)
Though she uses eye dialects to exoticize her informants, highlighting Sterling Brown’s concern regarding racist reinscription in the FWP transcripts, Baldwin nevertheless illustrates the oral tradition carried out by Jones in which stories of the origins of the cakewalk were passed down from one generation to the next. The significance of the storytelling was not only in its description of the dance as a form of entertainment, but also as a form of resistance.

Shephard Edmonds confirms the notion of the cakewalk as resistance, reporting the following lessons that his parents imparted to him:

...the cakewalk was originally a plantation dance, just a happy movement they did to the banjo music because they couldn’t stand still. It was generally on Sundays, when there was little work that the slaves both young and old would dress up in hand-me-down finery to do a high-kicking, prancing walk-around. They did a take-off on the high manners of the white folks in the ‘big house,’ but their masters, who gathered around to watch the fun, missed the point. It’s supposed to be that the custom of a prize started with the master giving a cake to the couple that did the proudest movement. (B. Baldwin 208)

Black folk lore’s portrayal of the cakewalk as satirical was also reinforced by Leigh Whipple, whose childhood nurse recounted:

Us slaves watched white folks’ parties where the guests danced a minuet and then paraded in a grand march, with the ladies and gentlemen going different ways and then meeting again, arm in arm, and marching down
the center together. Then we’d do it, too, *but we used to mock em*, every step. Sometimes the white folks noticed it, but they seemed to like it. I guess they thought we couldn’t dance any better. (B. Baldwin 208)

These narratives point to the subversive nature of the cakewalk and the particular pleasure which arose among the dancers from the fact that the white observers being mocked failed to recognize themselves as the objects of humor. Instead, they clamored for the dance to be performed as a means of delivering assurances of white racial superiority.

A case in point, according to Baldwin, is an 1863 woodcut pictured in *Harper’s Weekly*, with a caption asserting:

*There is in these balls one thing which cannot fail to impress any observer. Coming as they do from a degraded and oppressed class, the negroes assume nevertheless, in their intercourse with each other, as far as they can, the manners and language of the best classes in society. There is often a grotesque exaggeration, indeed; but there is an appreciation of refinement and an endeavor to attain it which we seldom see in the same class of whites.* (B. Baldwin 209)

This commentary positions blacks as missing the mark in their earnest attempts to emulate high society, while failing to recognize that whites themselves miss the mark with their incapacity to detect the dance as a satirical enactment.
At the same, the woodcut Baldwin references attributes an aesthetic and moral sensibility to African Americans that is regarded by the author of the inscription as less prevalent among lower-class whites. Indeed, the emerging class tensions that arose between poor whites and aspiring blacks was one contributor to the proliferation of symbols of black inferiority, which included activities such as cakewalking, hunting possums and eating watermelons. Perpetuated by whites, images of child-like blacks singing and dancing implied that African Americans were content with the bonds of slavery’s paternalism.

Just like the commentary on the wood cut fails to recognize that whites themselves miss the mark with their incapacity to detect the cakewalk as a satirical enactment, there was much more to these rituals of singing and dancing than discerned by whites. Elucidating the links between the cakewalk and the African Circle Dance and Southern Ring Shout, Baldwin draws special attention to satire and signifying as a cultural characteristic of black music, and particularly ragtime cakewalk music. Like African music, there are elements of audience participation, call and response, and improvisation in cakewalking contests as the dancers respond to the shouts of audience members directed at their favorite moves in the process of voting for the prize-winner of the cake.

While originally confined to plantations, the cakewalk became a prominent
feature of minstrel shows in the form of the walk-around finale. Moreover, the syncopated rhythms of ragtime began to dominate American culture through the popularity of coon songs (B. Baldwin 211). Though white society attempted to co-opt the cakewalk, and ragtime for that matter, they remained black cultural forms that continued to contest white standards of gentility and civility. Dunbar’s reliance on a lengthy performance of the dance to end his play constitutes a parting shot to whites and a warning to seddity blacks regarding intraracial class strife.

As we have seen, the satirical nature of the work and the very fact of a plot distinguishes Dunbar’s *Uncle Eph’s Christmas* and *Jes Lak White Fo’ks* from previous minstrel performances, which were disconnected vignettes. But beyond the subversive challenge to white standards of respectability posed by the story of a black female valedictorian of an elite college and her persistence in the face of attempts to challenge her honor, it is possible to ascribe an even more politically charged message as central to, and hidden within, Dunbar’s tales. The message is hinted at with the appearance of Slob Coon, Darky Dan’s rival for Parthenia’s affections in *Uncle Eph’s Christmas*.

When the confrontation between Darky Dan and Slob Coon over who will escort Parthenia becomes heated, Slob Coon pulls out a razor. After he is ordered to leave the house by Aunt Chloe, Slob Coon returns with a basket of tools, including a saw, which he proceeds to sharpen on stage. The image of the dangerous black man was emerging in the
white American consciousness, even before the widely publicized race riots in Wilmington, Hogansville, and Urbana. Dunbar’s fervent response to these incidents and to widespread claims that the North was safer for African Americans than the South appeared in a December 1898 essay entitled “Recession Never.”

The article is an urgent call to action for blacks to assert their rights as full citizens in a nation that celebrates them as soldiers, while lynching them in the public square. According to Dunbar, this national attitude is “incongruous to the point of ghastly humor” and should be interpreted as saying, “‘Negros, you may fight for us, but you may not vote for us. You may prove a strong bulwark when the bullets are flying, but you must stand from the line when the ballots are in the air. You may be heroes in war, but you must be cravens in peace’” (Dunbar, *The Paul Laurence Dunbar Reader* 36-37).

The entrenched political and social landscape during this period added a layer of intricacy to the politics of representation under which Dunbar was operating. Given his overt plea in “Recession Never” for blacks to take a bolder stance against systemic racism, what message is Slob Coon sending with his presence? As Jonathan Daigle establishes in “Paul Laurence Dunbar and the Marshall Circle: Racial Representation from Blackface to Black Naturalism,” the reality that Dunbar inherited racist forms of cultural expression did not prevent him from producing new modes of cultural expression. Slob Coon is ultimately driven off stage, but the introduction of the
dangerous black man signals a new Negro narrative that warns of rising up against continued oppression.

Though Dunbar and his contemporaries viewed “coon” performances as artistically confining, they also acknowledged them as providing an opportunity to step outside of the role of the “coon” and use the venue most readily available to them. As Thomas Riis observes in his introduction to the script and music of *In Dahomey*, Dunbar, Walker, Johnson and Cook realized that “more radical text departures were possible within the new upbeat, frequently syncopated, musical idiom...which [they] recognized as a genuine product of black culture” (Riis xxxii). Rejecting vocabulary that reinforced racial negativity, self-pity, and violence, they found a way to use words to mark their presence. In fact, Dunbar’s use of dialect allowed him to gain the popularity necessary to draw a broad audience and challenge their attitudes with his assertions that not all blacks seek to emulate whites and that a black aesthetic is actually superior.

Thus, Dunbar’s dialect reflects not merely a black vernacular difference, but also functions as a form of contestation that involves signifying and indirection, providing a mechanism for formal revision or inter-textuality that builds upon and revises texts, appealing to a “black difference.” In all cases, signifying presupposes an “encoded” intention to say one thing and mean something different, and this tradition of coded dialect was commonplace during slavery, when the words of spirituals were used to
provide assistance to those fleeing north on the Underground Railroad.

It is a tradition that Dunbar acknowledges and celebrates in his dialect poem “An Ante-Bellum Sermon,” in which a preacher provides words of encouragement to his parishioners regarding their prayers for freedom by referring to the story of Moses leading the Hebrews out of Egypt. However, while offering hope that the Lord is not finished freeing people, he quickly adds, “But fu’ feah someone mistakes me, / I will pause right hyeah to say, /Dat I’m still a preachin’ ancient, / I ain’t talkin’ ‘bout today” (Dunbar, Majors and Minors 102-105). Later, when the preacher asserts it is God’s intention that everyone be free, he pauses again to remind his audience “Dat I’m talkin’ ‘bout ouah freedom in a Biblistic way” (Dunbar, Majors and Minors 102-105).

The preacher’s use of metaphor allows him to engage in a type of double masking, signifying on his white audience while demonstrating a superiority of understanding within the context of the denial of signifying. Moreover, the poem draws attention to the rhetorical differences of black speech, with its use of puns and excesses in sound and pronunciation as a primary means of creating community.

The dialect Dunbar relies on in his comedic poem “An Ante-Bellum Sermon” is repeated in his poem “Accountability” from Lyrics of Lowly Life. Richly ironic and humorous, the poem begins by pointing out that no one ever questions why God has given a bushy tail to the squirrel or a bobbed tail to a rabbit. Everything is intended in in
the universe, and people should not be blamed or praised for being born with deficient or virtuous natures:

We is all constructed diff’ent, d’ain’t no two of us de same;  
We cain’t he’p ouah likes an’ dislikes, ef we’se bad we ain’t to blame.  
Ef we ‘se good, we need n’t show off, case you bet it ain’t ouah doin’  
We gits into su’ttain channels dat we jes’ cain’t he’p pu’suin’. (Dunbar, Lyrics of Lowly Life 6)

Anticipating John Steinbeck’s preacher in The Grapes of Wrath who, four decades later declares, “There ain’t no sin and there ain’t no virtue, there’s just stuff people do. It’s all the same,” Dunbar poses the metaphysical dilemma of determinism. In the process, he appeals to racialist stereotypes to deliver a radical message about the religious tenets used to justify slavery:

When you come to think about it, how it’s all planned out it’s splendid.  
Nuthin’s done er evah happens, ‘dout hit’s somefin’ dat’s intended;  
Don’t keer whut you does, you has to, an’ hit sho’ly beats de dickens,—  
Viney, go put on de kittle, I got one o’ mastah’s chickens. (Dunbar, Lyrics of Lowly Life 6)

Dunbar’s dialect poems and his musical comedies serve as a Siren, drawing in whites only to dash their claims of racial and moral superiority against the rocks, and in breaking open, revealing them as hypocritical, shallow, and demeaning. Whites are called upon to modify both their thinking and their behavior toward blacks—something patently missing
from works grounded in the minstrel tradition of the past.

Instead, the racial realism that Dunbar offers through his comedic songs critiques minstrel representations of blacks, not just by positioning them at eye level, but instead as looking down at whites within a racial hierarchy. Dunbar accomplishes this, in part, due to his ability to code switch between the genteel tradition of high Standard English and black vernacular that serves simultaneously to decouple dialect from the black poet in an anti-essentialist move and to remake white culture.

Not quite a year after Dunbar’s death in 1906, Alain Locke, often referred to as “the father” of the New Negro Renaissance, paid tribute to the poet for being “an exponent of the race tradition” at a time when he saw the younger generation as wanting to forget the suffering and experience of slavery at the expense of the lessons of their ancestors (Locke, “On Paul Laurence Dunbar (1905)” 8). The role of black vernacular culture, including the use of dialect, was contested within a group of emerging writers, artists, and intellectuals, with some focused on the constraints of dialect given its ties to minstrelsy and its appropriation by white modernists.

For instance, in his 1927 forward to Caroling Dusk: An Anthology of Verse by Negro Poets, Countee Cullen maintains that “the day of dialect as far as Negro poets are concerned is in the decline…. In a day when artificiality is so vigorously condemned, the Negro poet would be foolish indeed to turn to dialect. The majority of present-day poems
in dialect are the efforts of white poets” (Cullen xiv). Expounding on Cullen’s contention, in The Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language, and Twentieth-Century Literature (Race and American Culture), Michael North details the extent to which dialect, which was a limiting force for black writers, became a liberating force for white modernist poets and writers, such as Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, William Carlos Williams and Gertrude Stein who reimagined themselves as black people, spoke in black voice, and used that voice to transform the literature of their time (North 8-9).

For North, dialect as a form of linguistic mimicry and racial masquerading functioned as a radical representational strategy within modernism, disrupting the privileging of Standard English. This cross-racial mimicry is also featured in Thadious M. Davis’s study of William Faulkner in “Lingering in the Black: Faulkner’s Illegible Modernist Sound Melding,” where Faulkner is positioned as adopting and adapting black expressive culture as a means of breaking free from the constraints of American civilization and asserting an American vanguard identity (T. Davis).

There were a number of political and social factors brought to bear on the struggle over self-definition for African Americans during this period, including the situating of “Negro liberation” at the center of the work of the Communist Party USA. Addressing the question of what constituted modernism with respect to African-American writing during the 1930s and 1940s, James Smethurst’s The New Red Negro outlines the degree
to which CPUSA’s rise as a dominant force on the Left influenced the ways in which a redefinition of the role race in America was seen as necessary to a radical reorganization of American society in the shadow of the Great Depression (Smethurst, *The New Red Negro* 22-23).

The Negro liberation movement that was central to CPUSA’s platform reified an African-American national culture that was rooted in black farmers, sharecroppers, and farm laborers in the South, without essentializing race. CPUA defended and encouraged the development of this culture within the struggle by blacks for economic and political power, in opposition to the national oppression and capitalist exploitation inherent in the legacies of slavery (Smethurst, *The New Red Negro* 23). While Smethurst points to the flaws in the CPUSA’s conflation of black “peasant culture” with the African-American experience, at the expense of the African-American urban culture, he emphasizes the scope of influence this identification had over the use of vernacular language, forms and subjects during the 1930s and 1940s as a means of creating an authentic construction of the folk as distinct from minstrelsy.

Such representations could be found in the works of Sterling Brown, Langston Hughes and Waring Cuney (Smethurst, *The New Red Negro* 27), but they were also found in a range of white modernist writers cited by North who participated in racial cross-identification as a means of rebellion rather than reinscription of racial stereotypes.
In this case, the performance of black dialect constituted an intentionally subversive form of masking designed to signal race as socially constructed, yet enacted within the security of their visible (and legal) whiteness.

Within the context of the “Negrophilia” of the 1920s, North emphasizes the degree and extent of racial cross identification by white writers with the black voice. He maintains that for writers such as Eliot and Stein, who mimicked the strategies of dialect in an effort to render modernism a dialect in and of itself, the real attraction was “its technical distinction, its insurrectionary opposition to the known and familiar in language” (North v). North’s study was guided by a Michael Harper poem, “Tongue-Tied in Black and White,” about poet John Berryman’s appropriation of black dialect in a manner that reduces it to minstrelsy without countenancing race rituals as encoded race relations, and in particular, racial divisions.

North’s reading of Harper’s indictment against Berryman is that the white poet is incapable of hearing black dialect, which is a precursor to its authentic representation. In fact, North suggests a paradoxical phenomenon of blacks and whites unable to communicate as a result of being struck deaf and dumb by racial division, while being inextricably linked together—tongue-tied. Black dialect is positioned “not as really black at all but the language of white fear and incomprenhension” (North vi).

The question of whether performances of black vernacular by whites could ever
truly escape from minstrelsy gained national prominence with the new medium of radio and the debut of two white voice actors who began their careers on the minstrel stage and took the country by storm in 1926 with their portrayals of two Southern blacks during the Great Migration. In what follows, I compare the use of black vernacular and comedic techniques in Dunbar’s satirical comedy to that used in *Amos ‘n’ Andy*. I then explore a variety of cross-racial linguistic performances, with particular attention paid to the ontology of the body as conferring epistemic authority, and a framework for determining the circumstances, if any, under which performances of black dialect by both blacks and whites might be regarded as “authentic.” The goal is to support Dunbar’s contention that his dialect should not be confused with that used on the minstrel stage.
CHAPTER III

LINGUISTIC MINSTRELSY IN RELATION TO EPISTEMIC AUTHORITY
AND THE ONTOLOGY OF THE BLACK BODY

The Amos ‘n’ Andy Phenomenon

The dilemma Dunbar faced over which aspects of African-American life should be played out in the public sphere, and which of those formative experiences of black culture should be abandoned, took on new currency two decades after his death. White voice actors Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll appeared on the radio for fifteen minutes, five days a week, portraying a pair of black men on the wildly popular show Amos ‘n’ Andy. Debuted as Sam ‘n’ Henry in 1926, the program moved to television in 1951, this time with two black actors, Alvin Childress and Spencer Williams, Jr., playing Amos and Andy respectively. Although the television show lasted for only two years, the radio show aired in one form or another through 1960.

In his book The Adventures of Amos and Andy, Melvin Patrick Ely examines responses to the show by both blacks and whites, arguing that despite concerns regarding the perpetuation of racial stereotypes, Amos ‘n’ Andy offered an opportunity for white audiences to identify with black life in a way that ultimately made them more receptive to the Civil Rights Movement (Watkins). Ten years after the publication of his book, Ely
also engages in a retrospective analysis of why there was resistance on the part of some members of the American public to even broach the topic publicly. He suggests that their unwillingness may be due to “the unconscious habit of assuming that black social thought and behavior are somehow less complex and interesting than those of whites” (Ely 92). This same assumption was undoubtedly a factor in many assessments by black as well as white critics that only touched the surface of Dunbar’s work, reflecting what Ely regards in the context of Amos ‘n’ Andy as “a much larger debate over black ‘self-definition’…in a society where whites wrote—and rigged—the rules” (Ely 129).

Exploring how a single radio and television series could evoke such radically different perspectives among African Americans, Ely demonstrates how the racial thinking of Americans shifted during the decades of the first half of the twentieth century. When Sam ‘n’ Henry was first broadcast on January 12, 1926 on Chicago station WGN, listeners heard ten minutes of dialogue spoken in the Southern Negro dialect familiar to many of them from the minstrel stage. The first episode introduced Sam and Henry as Alabamans preparing to move to Chicago as part of the Great Migration, in which thousands of rural blacks traveled north to settle in urban areas following World War I (Ely 275).

The characters were polar opposites. Henry, played by Charles Correll, was brash, confident and bossy, while Sam, voiced by Freeman Gosden, was quiet, sentimental, and insecure. When writers Gosden and Correll moved their regional hit to another Chicago
radio station in 1928, they also changed the program’s name to *Amos ‘n’ Andy*. By the time the series was syndicated by the National Broadcast Company in 1929 after being picked up by dozens of stations, the script incorporated several characters, each of whom was voiced by Gosden and Correll (Ely 284).

Amos and Andy hailed from Georgia, and the storyline focused on the human drama of two black men trying to make a better life for themselves in Chicago. Starting off in a rooming house on State Street, the two struggled to negotiate northern, urban life. Finally, they managed to start their own business, the Fresh Air Taxi Company, named opportunistically for the fact that their first car had no roof. Andy’s over-confidence and unrealistic dreams, combined with his laziness and gullibility, served as a continual source of entertainment. So did his scheming, which was often at the expense of Amos, who was humble, earnest, and did most of the work.

In 1929 when the show moved to NBC, the location of the action also moved—to Harlem. Following the same path as their predecessors Sam and Henry, who joined the Jewels of the Crown fraternity upon their arrival and became the subjects of the misdeeds of its conniving leader, the Most Precious Diamond, it was common for plots on *Amos ‘n’ Andy* to center around interactions based on their membership in the Mystic Knights of the Sea Lodge and the maneuverings of their leader, George Stevens, known as “the Kingfish.” The Kingfish routinely ensnared Andy in his get-rich-quick schemes. The other main characters, all of whom were black, included a hardworking family man, a
real-estate broker and insurance salesman, an ethically-challenged lawyer, and a man nicknamed “Lightning” Jefferson, who was shuffling and dim-witted.

Though Gosden and Correll both had their starts on the minstrel stage, imitating blacks while touring together with the Bren Company after World War I, their stated intention with *Amos ’n’ Andy* was to realistically portray the life of African Americans who were impacted by the Great Migration in manner that deviated from traditional blackface performance. The performers’ objective of depicting northern urban life for African Americans transplanted from the rural South in the post-World War I period was novel. Further, a sustained plot line that persisted from one episode to the next distinguished the show from performances of blackness on the minstrel stage.

Nevertheless, from the time of its debut as *Sam ’n’ Henry*, much of the publicity surrounding the show relied on minstrel depictions of the pair in burnt cork, enormous white lips, buffoonish poses and old, worn-out clothes. This distortion of the characters extended to advertisements for publicity appearances that grossly misrepresented the personalities presented by Gosden and Correll in their scripts. For instance, one advertisement for the duo invited fans to be sure to ask Henry for his autograph but to refrain from asking Sam because “he can’t write and it would hurt his feelings” (Ely 2847). There was nothing in the show, however, suggesting that Sam was illiterate and, indeed, there was much that contravened this notion.

Yet, this contrived portraiture both confirmed the minstrel stereotypes of racist
adults and introduced young audience members to these caricatures for the first time. Ely references this reality in his postscript, where he confesses that one of the lessons he took away from *Amos ’n’ Andy* as a child is “not merely that African Americans could be funny, but that being funny was one of their chief functions in life” (Ely 5501). Such sentiments were not confined to children, who were unaware of the context of white producers using blacks as a means for primarily white entertainment. Thus, one fan wrote a poem for the shows’ creators, encouraging them in the last line to “Make poor Sambo’s empty noodle/ Bring you profits every day” (Ely 2908).

Like Dunbar’s musical comedy, nevertheless, there were both subtle and more overt ways in which these caricatures were contested. The dialogue in *Amos ’n’ Andy* included discussions of African Americans voting, politics related to tariffs and farm bills, and a demonstrated concern for those less fortunate, though the main characters themselves had next to nothing at the outset. While Amos was innocent and easily manipulated, he was also hard-working, conscientious, kind, loyal and devoted to his romantic love interest, the beautiful, intelligent Ruby, whose father was a college-educated entrepreneur.

Along with their predecessors Sam and Henry, Amos and Andy abstained from drinking, swearing and smoking, with the exception of Andy’s “big seegar.” Though glossing over racial strife and deemphasizing the barriers to northern assimilation created by the color line, the depictions of blacks as main characters in a northern black
community filled with residents from all social classes and educational backgrounds was groundbreaking. Black and white audiences identified deeply with the trials and tribulations of Amos and Andy, illustrating the universal appeal of the show’s characters.

In fact, due to its unprecedented popularity, *Amos ‘n’ Andy* shaped American culture, spawning widespread use of the expressions “Holy mackerel,” “I’se regusted,” and “Sho, Sho,” based on caricatured black dialect, and the marketing of everything from ice cream sundaes and Campbell’s soups to toothpaste. While many whites adopted the moniker “Amos ‘n’ Andy” as a stereotypic appellation for all blacks, Ely contends that one of Gosden and Correll’s most extraordinary accomplishments was the production of a show “so rich and complex that it won admirers ranging from ultra-racists to outspoken racial egalitarians” (Ely 3070).

At the height of the radio show’s popularity in the 1930s, *Amos ‘n’ Andy* had over 40 million listeners. The racial egalitarians could perhaps recognize the ways in which Gosden and Correll infused their material with politically subversive humor through indirection without ever straightforwardly addressing the issue of race. Ely observes, “This prim silence in a series that implicitly raised issues of race in every sentence was part of a more complicated balancing act than that between political parties—a quest for balance that the shifting racial terrain of the times demanded” (Ely 2748). Amos and Andy’s malleability, naïveté, and use of stereotyped black dialect enabled their creators to put words in their characters’ mouths, including satirical attacks on the white Southern
Democratic party and corruption within Chicago’s political machine, that avoided riling those who were fearful of the political and economic impact of black enfranchisement.

Yet, just as Dunbar was forced to engage in a balancing act requiring the delivery of coded messages within a context of black dialect and dialogue that was not overtly political, the appeal of Gosden and Correll’s characters to ultra-racists stemmed in part from frequent reversions to racial stereotypes such as the lazy, conniving, cowardly, superstitious black man of the plantation tradition. And while Ely reminds readers that the characteristics and interpersonal dynamics between Amos and Andy were shared by white comedians such as Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy, Bud Abbot and Lou Costello, and Jackie Gleason and Art Carney, it was precisely because this type of humor had also been central to minstrelsy that it was subject to this particular critique (Ely 1891).

Although the program depicted a wide variety of hardworking professional and blue-collar black characters, and crowds of African Americans attended public appearances by the white actors, a national protest against the show was spurred when William Jacob Walls, a bishop in the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, wrote a letter in 1929 to the Pittsburgh Courier calling for a petition and warning that the popularity of *Amos ‘n’ Andy* among blacks sent a signal to whites that they lacked self-respect and pride.

Walls was joined by others, including Theresa Smith Kennedy, whose letter to the *St. Louis Post Dispatch* was reprinted in the *Baltimore Sun*. Kennedy complained that
Amos ‘n’ Andy taught the world at large...that the Negro in every walk of life is a failure, a dead beat and above all shiftless and ignorant” (Ely 3523). Clarence LeRoy Mitchell, writing for the Baltimore Afro-American, expressed similar concerns over how the show shaped whites’ perceptions of blacks and how black patronage of Amos ‘n’ Andy might lead whites to conclude that the program’s portrayals of African Americans were authentic and accurate. And in 1931, Robert Vann, the editor of Pittsburgh’s Courier, started a campaign to obtain a million signatures to ban the radio production on the grounds that two white men were exploiting racist stereotypes of blacks for commercial gain, and in the process, undermining progress for blacks (Ely 3741).

Among the show’s critics were those who objected to the activities of secret societies like the Mystic Knights of the Sea, the depiction of a corrupt black lawyer, and the revelation that Andy’s one-time love interest was already married when she was suing him for breaking their engagement. Others focused on the use of black dialect and exclamations such as “Ain’t dat sumpin’” and “I don’t know nuthin’ ’bout no ’lection” as having a deleterious effect on efforts to promote black literacy (Ely 3966).

In fact, the dialect used by Amos and Andy was often the most politically charged aspect of the program. Yet, as Elizabeth McLeod reveals in The Original Amos ‘n’ Andy: Freeman Gosden, Charles Correll and the 1928-1943 Radio Serial, the language used by Gosden and Correll reflected an acknowledgement of the specific and clearly defined rules of AAVE, rather than serving as a crude distortion of grammar for comedic effect.
(McLeod 88). Controversies over whether the Southern black dialect adopted by Gosden and Correll was authentic paralleled the criticism Dunbar received over whether his dialect accurately represented the genuine Southern African-American folk voice. McLeod defends the authenticity of the AAVE used by these white voice actors as an amalgamation of many regional forms of speech, resting on Freeman Gosden’s bidialectism. Gosden’s closest friend as a child in Richmond, Virginia was Garrett Brown, an African American who spoke AAVE and Standard English. Gosden grew up listening to both forms of speech and frequently used AAVE in performances with his friend to cheer Gosden’s ailing father (Ely 704).

McLeod takes great pains to distinguish Gosden as a native speaker of AAVE from the pseudo-dialect of minstrelsy with its simplistic overlays of AAVE phonology and malapropisms. In particular, she focuses on the markers of AAVE commonly contained in the scripts of *Amos ’n’ Andy*, including stopped initial fricatives, as in *d*- for *th*--; nasal replacement, in which “going” becomes “goin’”; the absence of the postvocalic “r” as when “here” become “heah”; the absence of postvocalic “l” when “help” become “he’p”; the substitution of labiodental fricatives for interdental fricatives, as in “mouf” being substituted for “mouth”; the elision of unstressed syllables, such as “‘bout” for “about”; consonant cluster reductions of “mos’” for “most”; and hypercorrection resulting in fanciful forms, reflected in the use of “regusted” for “disgusted” (McLeod 89).
She also highlights the presence of AAVE’s rules of grammar in Gosden and Correll’s scripts, which contain the following: present-tense zero copula whereby, “He is going” becomes “He goin’”; Auxiliary “Is” in phrases like “Is you got it?”; Existential “It” in “It’s two dollars in my pocket”; the absence of a third-person present-tense marker, as in “He go”; pronomial cross-reference markers; perfective “done” in the pre-verb position in “He done gone”; “come” used in a semiauxiliary position; adverbial “like to,” indicating “almost” as in “I like to died laughing”; multiple negation; habitual “be”; stressed durative “been” signifying a long time, as in “He been out o’ work”; and semantic inversion (McLeod 89).

African-American idiom cited by McLeod, including “check and double check,” “that’s a dog,” “cold turkey,” “sounds kind-a-jailie” and Andy’s “n.g.” for “no good,” together with his common use of “brother,” are used to bolster her claim that Amos and Andy’s black dialect deviated from minstrelsy. She even defends the malapropisms and hypercorrection that were associated with minstrelsy, appealing to Walter Brasch’s discussion of *Amos ‘n’ Andy*:

The extensive use of malapropism by the star characters…may have been humorous to a white American audience which, through ignorance, may have believed that the English spoken by Blacks was substandard or inferior language. But it was still a part of the Black’s Afro-American heritage. It was a pidginization of language; it was taking the rules of an African language experience, an experience passed by oral tradition from generation to generation, and trying to adapt them to an American language. Soon, there was even a ‘backwash’ effect on Americans, fascinated by hypercorrection, by the ‘sweet talk,’ by the distinctly African syntactic and phonological language characteristics, began to imitate, then adopt the language of the characters in the
Despite the wide range of language use by the characters in the show, often tied to class, and the fact that Gosden and Correll assiduously avoided mocking caricatures, the public debate continued regarding whether *Amos ‘n’ Andy* had a negative impact on the racial progress of African Americans. Roy Wilkins, the editor of the Kansas City *Call* and the future leader of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, defended the program and accused Mitchell of representing the black elite, whose pretentiousness “earned the race more scorn than anything a black-faced comedy team could ever broadcast” (Ely 3717). Wilkins attributed the show’s universal appeal to its having “all the pathos, humor, vanity, glory, problems and solutions that beset ordinary mortals” (Ely 3741) and argued that rather than attack *Amos ‘n’ Andy* for the portrait it paints of black life, African Americans should be more aggressive in publicizing their own accomplishments.

When the Columbia Broadcasting System began broadcasting the *Amos ‘n’ Andy* television show in 1951, it premiered with an all-black cast. By then, the writing of both the radio and television scripts had been taken over by new writers, but the struggle over self-definition within the black community as reflected in varying perspectives on the show persisted (Ely 356). In addition to the transition from a fifteen-minute serial that aired daily to a half-hour weekly situation comedy, the television program was being aired in a different era for black civil rights. The broadcasting of the first episode
happened to coincide with a national meetings of the NAACP, and there was a special screening held to discuss the impact of *Amos ‘n’ Andy* on the image of blacks in America.

Roy Wilkins, who had once praised and defended the radio show, joined the protests against the television production, maintaining that it lacked appeal beyond burlesque. Moreover, he argued that the visibility of black bodies, replacing disembodied black voices, had an enhanced negative influence on perceptions of whites whose only exposure to African Americans was on television.

As was the case with Dunbar’s productions, however, many African Americans pointed with pride to employment opportunities for an all-black cast and the thrill of seeing themselves represented on stage. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. remembers his mother’s excitement at seeing blacks on television as main characters, and contrasts his experience watching *Amos ‘n’ Andy* with that of watching programs such as *The Life of Riley* or *Ozzie and Harriet*. Gates recalls, “These shows for us were about property, the property that white people could own and that we couldn’t. About a level of comfort and ease at which we could only wonder,” and “What was special to us about *Amos ‘n’ Andy* was that their world was all colored, just like ours. Of course, they had their colored judges and lawyers and doctors and nurses, which we could only dream about having, or becoming—and we did dream about those things” (Kjelle 24-25).

Rather than regarding the show as perpetuating racist stereotypes, Gates credits *Amos ‘n’ Andy* with taking the motifs of Brer Rabbit and Brer Bear and transforming
them into art “through the masterful performances of Spencer Williams (the Spike Lee of his time) and Tim Moore, the real Father of Black TV Comedy” (M. Gilbert). Black vernacular and the inclusion of characters that overlapped with minstrel stereotypes were signifying tools that did not invalidate the subversive and empowering messages embedded within the satire. The same is true for Dunbar’s use of black dialect and malapropisms within the context of stories that are meant to contest notions of white racial superiority.

In the end, the black and white audience members who attended Dunbar’s theatrical musical comedies, and listened to and watched *Amos ’n’ Andy*, brought their own perspectives to the material and were left with varying interpretations. What some viewed as an unrealistically rosy portrait of race relations, due in large part to the omission of white characters and any mention of racial oppression, others regarded as a necessary means of promoting a message that broke sharply with minstrelsy. In both instances, the identity politics of the day and the striving for self-definition within the African American community were dominant forces shaping the narratives. These forces continued to be a factor when *Amos ’n’ Andy* finally went off the air in 1960—the beginning of a decade in which notions of black authenticity took a decidedly different turn.
The Black Arts Movement

Indeed, by 1965 Amiri Baraka’s “Black Arts Manifesto” enjoined African-American artists to engage in forms of revolutionary theater that would “Accuse and Attack anything that can be accused and attacked” (Baraka 4). The Black Arts Movement, which emerged at the crossroads of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, sought to create a new aesthetic of blackness. The objective was to appropriate notions of what it means to be black by going beyond the rejection of stereotypes embedded in and perpetuated by white mainstream culture and actively establishing a concept of authentic blackness that functioned as a cornerstone of counterculture.

The notion of authentic blackness advocated by the Black Arts Movement required radically reordering a prevailing cultural aesthetic that was built upon racial performances informed by oppression. In the decades since the founding of the Black Arts Movement, African-American artists, comedians, and performers of hip hop and spoken word have used a variety of tactics, including parody, humor, irony, shock, signifying, and other forms of transgression, in confronting the role of race in representation. At its core, the notion of authentic blackness advocated by the Black Arts Movement required “separate symbolism, mythology, critique, and iconology” that radically reconfigured “the western cultural aesthetic” (L. Neal 29).

As an important social and cultural marker of identity for both individuals and
communities, language has played a critical role in the development of a black aesthetic. Yet, as we have seen with the controversy surrounding both Dunbar’s comedic use of dialect and that employed by white voice actors and black television performers in *Amos ’n’ Andy*, black vernacular is posited as the site of black subjectivity and the black experience in both neominstrel linguistic performances and others. For this reason, I set out to contrast instances of AAVE and mock AAVE that mark black characters and stereotypes without lapsing into neominstrelsy with those that reinforce racial hegemony.

I focus on a comparison of subversive and satirical performances of blackness using AAVE and mock AAVE, some of which involve “whiting up” (a deliberate performance strategy of assuming a white identity to challenge racial essentialism by transferring alleged markers of whiteness to black bodies), to mediatized performances of AAVE by the white middle-class male “wigger,” who stereotypically performs the young working-class African American utilizing language, dress, and the hypermasculine traits of “coolness, physical toughness, and sexual self-confidence” (Bucholtz and Lopez 682). In a reversal of the cross-racial performances enacted by Gosden and Correll, I interrogate the use of black artists to voice white characters who are performing blackness in the animated series *The Boondocks*, revealing broader questions regarding the role of the body in conferring epistemic and linguistic authority around black dialect.
The Language of Black Humor and the Threat of Racial Malpractice

The use of mediatized comedic performances of AAVE became a component of mainstream popular culture with the advent of the blaxploitation films of the 1970s and the rise of comedian Richard Pryor, whose humor was grounded in the realities of American racism. Pryor’s brand of humor, which can be subsumed under modes of social and political critique, has a long-standing tradition within the black community. From the time of Frederick Douglass who engaged in satire and burlesque as a means of exploiting audiences’ prejudices to support his abolitionist cause, “black humor” was used as a survival strategy. In the midst of continued political oppression, this type of humor provided “freedom to laugh at that which was unjust and cruel in order to create distance from what would otherwise obliterate a sense of self and community” (Carpio 4).

For instance, regarding the over-surveillance of black communities by the police, Pryor jokes to a white audience:

Police in y’all’s neighborhood ‘Hello officer Timson, going bowling tonight?’...Niggers don’t know ‘em like that...See, white folks get a ticket, they pull over, ‘Hey, officer, yes glad to be of help...cherrio! Niggers be talkin’ bout, I am reaching into my pocket now cuz I don’t want there to be no motherfuckin’ accident. (Haggins 55)

According to fellow comedian Dick Gregory, Pryor “articulated the black experience in a way we hear each other do it” (Haggins 55). In this regard, Pryor uses language not only
to differentiate the black experience, but also to connect to the larger black community.

One of those points of connection was his frequent use of the “N word” in his routines. Like Douglass, Pryor made his audiences laugh by bringing racial taboos into the public sphere. Nevertheless, his tactics raise the controversial question of whether the appropriation of racist terms, intended to subvert stereotypes, can ever be successful in destabilizing racist norms, whether or not they understand the irony, when not everyone is in on the joke. Confronted by this conundrum, Pryor, himself, abandoned the use of term later in his career, and his successor, Dave Chappelle, walked away from a $50 million contract when he became convinced that his white audience was laughing at him, rather than with him, during a satirical portrayal of a black minstrel character, “The Nigger Pixie” (Carpio 73).

The decisions by Pryor and Chappelle point to Herman Gray’s reminder to readers in his book Cultural Moves that attempts by black performers to empower individuals through the appropriation of racial stereotypes and the subversion of racist discourse are successful only if the spectator understands the satirical nature of the work and shares the performers’ perspective. Without this commonality, there is the danger of what Tommy Lott refers to as “racial malpractice,” which occurs when viewing, laughing at, or consuming images of African Americans reinforces, rather than subverts, racist stereotypes (Gray 122).

The controversy and complexity around the legitimacy and value of language
appropriation shifted during the 1980s and 90s as plots involving AAVE expanded to include white characters engaged in language crossing through the use of black English. Films such as *Malibu’s Most Wanted* and *Bringing Down the House* were built around the trope of the white middle-class male “wigger” (Bucholtz and Lopez 682). While ostensibly transgressing ideologies of racial essentialism, Mary Bucholtz and Qiuana Lopez have argued that in these instances, mock language functions as a form of linguistic minstrelsy which actually perpetuates white masculinist norms.

White men masquerading as black caricatures at once foreground race as a contingent and mutable social construct and restabilize white middle-class masculinity in an ontological hierarchy based on race, class, and gender. Ultimately, however, it is the inability of the white actors to successfully perform blackness that highlights their inauthentic use of African American Vernacular English in a metaparodic fashion—a phenomenon to which we turn next.

**Linguistic Minstrelsy**

Outlining the process by which linguistic representation becomes linguistic minstrelsy in Hollywood films, Bucholtz and Lopez cite deauthentication, maximizing of intertextual gaps, and indexical regimentation as the bases for the transition by which linguistic crossing devolves into linguistic minstrelsy. Deauthentication involves a
deliberate strategy to position the performance of a white actor using AAVE as false. The authors note that the process of deauthentication often entails status differences.

Thus, when a middle or upper-class, self-identified white male uses language that is viewed by the dominant white culture as lower in prestige, the ideological assumption by both black and white viewers is that it is inauthentic, and thereby a form of Mock AAVE. This is true regardless of whether the white performers themselves regard it as lower in prestige, given white hegemonic forces that establish Standard American English as the norm and AAVE as anti-intellectual (Bucholtz and Lopez 689). The deliberate inability to achieve the linguistic target in white actors’ performances of AAVE is viewed as widening the gap between a performance and its source with respect to intertextual connections. This fissure, then, reinforces the performance as deauthenticated and parodic, semiotically distancing the performer from black culture. Moreover, there is an ideological reduction of the indexical field in neominstrel linguistic performances that essentializes the characteristics of the black thug, wigger, and honky, while providing a screen through which it is safe to laugh at AAVE.

The result is an indexical regimentation whereby authentic blackness is no longer represented through the rich indexical field embodied within AAVE and, instead, is reduced to one that is limited to stereotypical indexical meanings (Bucholtz and Lopez 685). As Lisa Green demonstrates in her book *African American English: A Linguistic Introduction*, “when speakers know AAE, they know a system of sounds, word and
sentence structure, meaning and structural organization of vocabulary items and other information” (Green 1). Yet, neominstrel linguistic performances of Mock AAVE portray AAVE such that it becomes identified with the use of limited phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic and lexical structures. At its worst, it is equated with the repeated use of the terms “nigger” or “nigga,” without a consideration of the resistive and subversive nature of the appropriation of racist terms or how clothing such as low-slung pants might signify on the prison industrial complex as what Michelle Alexander has termed “the new Jim Crow.”

Bucholtz and Lopez note that the most frequent phonological features in Mock AAVE are the stereotypical deletion or vocalization of postvocalic (r), and at times, (l), and “fortition of the voiced interdental fricative in word-initial position, and monophthongal (ay)” (Bucholtz and Lopez 686). They also cite the alveolar variant of the (ing) variable. Likewise, the grammatical characteristics of Mock AAVE in films are based on stereotypes regarding the structure of AAVE. Mock AAVE relies on stereotypes of what it is to sound black, and according to Bucholtz, this is identified with general vernacular structures rather than distinctive elements of AAVE (Bucholtz and Lopez 688).

As a result, the richness and complexity of AAVE are replaced by an emphasis on the zero copula, multiple negation, morphological regularization, and invariant be, along with the lexical use of yo. Further, there is a reinscription of racial stereotypes by
associating hip hop, as a subset of African-American culture, primarily or solely with sex, violence, and profanity, as well as certain clothing, bodily movements, and physical presentation (Bucholtz and Lopez 691). The identification of hip hop with elements that were shaped by “survival capitalism” ignore hip hop as an accessible medium for incorporating the narratives of those most marginalized in society and as a catalyst for social change, issuing a call to action in redressing urban black poverty.

Bucholtz and Lopez’s analysis presents the performances of Steve Martin, who plays opposite Queen Latifah in Bringing Down the House, and Warren Beatty, paired with Halle Barry in Bulworth, as paradigms, though these are just two of the 59 films Bucholtz and Lopez analyzed from 1976 to 2008. Both films feature middle-aged, middle-class white men who find their true selves through the comic, inept appropriation of black culture. The linguistic-crossing performed in the films reflects an ideological association of “authentic blackness” with non-standard English, simultaneously casting Standard American English as the language of intellectual discourse and social sophistication (Bucholtz and Lopez 694).

Hence, while the cross-racial appropriation of blackness by white characters who seek to bolster their masculinity may seem to challenge white norms as inadequate, the temporary and inauthentic nature of these transgressions reinforces racial stereotypes of black males as hypersexualized and hypermasculine. Apart from the risk of reverting to the metaphor of the black rapist that has persisted in film since the 1915 release of The
Birth of a Nation, these movies juxtapose “rational middle-class whiteness with physical working-class blackness” in a way that perpetuates monolithic constructions of race, with whiteness as the standard (Bucholtz and Lopez 698, 702).

Bucholtz and Lopez conclude that,

This modern-day minstrelsy may in fact be even more damaging than its earlier counterpart because racial stereotypes are hidden behind the parody of white male characters whose acts of crossing in turn function as parodies of black language and culture; the reflexive irony that has been said to characterize the postmodern era (Coupland 2007; Rampton 2006) allows filmmakers to disavow any racist interpretation of their work. (Bucholtz and Lopez 702)

The concept of linguistic authenticity to which Bucholtz and Lopez are appealing aligns with sociolinguistic theories that regard authenticity in language as a process rather than a fixed state. In other words, vernacular authenticity is not to be judged based upon how closely it mirrors the language of natural speakers in the community, but rather as a performative process in which authenticity is earned and ascribed, usually by those in the community. One of the challenges with such a theory is that communities often lack consensus on the matter of whether authenticity is deserved and should therefore be ascribed. Further, judgments can change over time.

As we have seen, the linguistic crossing undertaken by Gosden and Correll was deemed authentic by many within the African-American community and regarded as neominstrely by others, despite that fact that they were not seeking to parody black
language and culture and many of their characters defied minstrel stereotypes. Unlike the contemporary performances pointed to by Lopez of white performers of blackness who use their performances to enhance their white identity without concern for authenticity, Gosden and Correll went to extremes to validate their interactions with black life.

When they first made public appearances, the white actors stunned their audiences by performing their comedy routines in blackface, then removing their wigs, make-up and rag-tag clothes to reveal white men dressed in suits. The actors proceeded to perform songs as Gosden and Correll before returning to reciting scenes from *Amos ‘n’ Andy* — this time without blackface. Their performance showcased their skills as voice actors by making their identity as white performers visible, while simultaneously lending credence to the notion that they deserve inclusion in the community of authentic speakers of AAVE.

In an interesting twist, the authenticity of the performances was challenged to an even greater degree when the show moved to television and the lead black actors were hired to play the roles of Amos and Andy as they had been played by Gosden and Correll. Whites performing blackness now became blacks performing whites performing blackness—a phenomenon which occurred when African Americans took over the minstrel stage and embarked on vaudeville. The public criticism the television network received prevented Williams and Childress from riding in the same Chicago parade that celebrated Gosden and Correll because their performances were deemed too
controversial.

The challenges associated with assessing whether black characters performing white characters appropriating black language and customs in a comic fashion can be used to subvert rather than reinforce racial stereotypes are unveiled when considering the white characters Gin Rummy and Ed Wuncler III in Aaron McGuder’s series *The Boondocks*. In transcribing the dialogue within the scripts, I use diacritics to approximate language.

*The Boondocks: Blacks Performing White Performances of Blackness*

*The Boondocks* began as a comic strip in 1996 while McGruder was a college student at the University of Maryland–College Park. Within a year, it was picked up by the hip-hop magazine *The Source* for monthly publication. By 1999, the series had become nationally syndicated, after Universal Press Syndicate agreed to run it, and lasted through 2006. In 2005, *The Boondocks* was turned into an animated television series for Cartoon Network’s Adult Swim and contained 55 episodes that aired through June 2014.

The show was based on the story of an African-American family, the Freemans, who move from the South Side of Chicago to the suburb of Woodcrest, Maryland. Ten-year old Huey Freeman and his eight-year old brother Riley live with their grandfather and legal guardian, Robert Jebediah Freeman. Huey, an intelligent, morally-grounded
proponent of racial and social justice, eschews African-American pop culture as perpetuating racial stereotypes and white hegemony. A satirical representation of Black Panther activist Huey Newton, his worldview is the antithesis of his brother Riley’s, who embraces the violent, self-destructive thugism of gangsta rap, which he identifies as central to his culture (Whaley 191).

While each of the African-American characters uses AAVE, they do so to varying degrees. Huey relies predominantly on Standard American English. In the first episode, “The Garden Party,” Huey walks up to a microphone and announces to the almost exclusively white guests at a party hosted by the white, wealthy tycoon, Ed Wuncler, “Jesus was black, Ronald Reagan was the devil, and the government is lying about 9/11. Thank you and goodnight.” The response by an unidentified man to Huey’s use of standard grammar and the sophistication of his political commentary is, “You are such an articulate young man” (The Boondocks, “The Garden Party” Season 1/Episode 1).

This comment reinforces Standard American English as the language of intellect and the norm by which speakers should be judged. The response to Huey’s character promotes an ideology of black exceptionalism reflected in Vice-president Joe Biden’s comment made a year and a half after the premiere of The Boondocks, during Obama’s first presidential campaign when Biden remarked, “I mean, you got the first mainstream African-American who is articulate and bright and clean and a nice-looking guy.... I mean, that’s a storybook, man” (Thai and Barrett). There is irony in the fact that at the
same time black males such as President Obama and the fictional Huey Freeman are viewed as defying expectations, they are used to support rhetoric around living in a new post-racial era.

Riley, in contrast, is presented as the embodiment of black youth culture. He speaks AAVE, and mocks Standard American English, saying, “I know about white people, too. When they talk, they say the whooolllleeееее woоooooоrrrrdddd, lllliiiikkkkee thisss”1 (The Boondocks, “The Garden Party” Season 1/Episode 1). Riley becomes enthralled with Ed Wuncler’s grandson, Ed Wuncler III, who has just returned from Iraq. From the very first time he is introduced to Riley and his grandfather at the party, Wuncler III is positioned as a “wigger”—one who performs blackness in a way that not only mimics, but romanticizes representations of inner-city black males. A focus on engaging in criminal acts, playing the dozens, wearing gold chains, grillz and tilted baseball caps, acting “thugged out”, and using the intonation and rhythm patterns associated with AAVE is a fetishizing of black masculinity as deviant and violent. Yet, it is sought after by white males like Wuncler III (White 107, 113).

The first exchange between Riley and Wuncler III relies heavily on Mock AAVE and stereotypical notions of blackness:

Granddad: So I understand you just got back from Iraq?

Riley: Fo’ real? Yo, what was it like?
Ed III: What was it like? What I'm 'posed to say to that–it was cool? There was bitches? Okay, there was bitches, but a lot of them was covered up in them curtains and sh*t. But I digress. It was war. It was war basically. It was war. You know what that's like? Mu' f*cka, it’s like shootin' ka-ka-ka-ka-ka-ka-ka! Bombs blowin' up. And you know that sh*t scary. It scared the sh*t out of me. Matta fact, I sh*tted on myself over a dozen times, and ran out of toilet paper after the second time. So you know what that meant, right? I had to use the thumb. It was kinda nasty. But the good thing was that they stopped taking me out on missions because my name became “Stink-Bomb.” You know, they said I was giving away our position 'cause of the sh*t smell. That was fine with me. Th-they wanted to leave me back, and I was like f*ck ya'll! I don't need ya'll anyway! I'm rich, bitch! 'The f*ck ya'll lookin' at?! (The Boondocks, “The Garden Party” Season 1/Episode 1).

The deletion of the unstressed initial syllable in the use of “posed” instead of “supposed,” “Mu” for “mother;” the zero auxiliary be in “And you know that sh*t scary;” deletion of vocalization of the ‘r’ sound after a vowel and deletion of “of” in “matta fact;” realization of final ‘ng’ as ‘n’ in the gerunds “shooting,” “blowing” and “looking;” the use of the second person plural “y’all; and the deletion of “what” in “‘The f*ck y’ll lookin’ at?!” are each markers of AAVE. In addition, the use of the contraction “I’m” for “am I” in “What I’m ’posed to say?” can be viewed as a Mock AAVE attempt to mimic features of negative inversion in phrases such as “Can’t nobody beat him.”

Finally, the phrase “I’m rich, bitch,” voiced by actor Charlie Murphy, is used to signify on this line as it is heard at the end of every episode of Chappelle’s Show. Murphy was a regular on the show, and the line originated from a skit in which Chappelle
wonders out loud what would happen if African Americans received reparations for slavery. What follows is the portrayal of a fantasy world in which blacks living in ghettos quit their jobs and spend their reparations money on expensive jewelry, clothing, cars, and music. When one African-American truck driver is interviewed by a white reporter, he yells, “I’m rich bitch,” while honking the truck’s horn. The image of Chappelle in handcuffs, holding fistfuls of money and repeating this line as a horn honks in the background becomes the signature sign off.

Similar to Wuncler III’s appropriation of blackness, the stereotypical images of blacks represented by Chappelle—that of the welfare queen, pimp, prostitute, drug dealer, and thug—might be seen as reinforcing racism. However, in both instances, these parodies are attempts at subverting racist notions about African-American life through their exaggerated performances based on white stereotypes (Carpio 111-112). Indeed, like the white, male main characters cited by Bucholtz and Lopez in the movies Bulworth and Bringing Down the House, Wuncler III and his counterpart Gin Rummy are intended as parodic, with Wuncler III’s character based on George W. Bush. To make the connection between the two undeniable, Wuncler III even wears a giant chain with a “W” on it—the former president’s nickname. Despite his dim-witted intellect, Wuncler III’s grandfather sees the young man as bound for the White House, especially given the family’s wealth and influence.

Wuncler III’s sidekick, Gin Rummy, is a character based on former U.S.
Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld. Rummy is introduced in the episode “A Date with the Health Inspector” when Riley asks, “So ya’ll was in Iraq together?” and the following exchange ensues:

Gin Rummy: Yeah, we was in Iraq.

Riley: What did you do?

Gin Rummy: We was lookin’ for weapons of mass destruction.

Riley: Did you ever find ’em?

Gin Rummy: You know goddamn well we ain’t find them! What are you? Some kind of political humorist? You Garry Trudeau up in this bitch? (The Boondocks, “A Date with the Health Inspector” Season I/ Episode 5)

Rummy uses the same AAVE and mock AAVE markers as Wuncler III in a comic appropriation of blackness.

Nevertheless, as Lopez maintains, not every white performance of black language in film is minstrelsy. Her research serves as a foundation for distinguishing semiotically crossing as a marked, stylized performance from crossing as part of ordinary stylistic practice (Bucholtz and Lopez 684). Lopez considers white Detroit rapper Eminem’s appropriation of African-American language and culture in 8 Mile as an example of the latter, since the language patterns and behavior persist beyond the bounds
of the film. Rummy’s background and lifestyle, in contrast, make him ineligible for inclusion in the category of crossing as stylistic practice. He is not in the hip-hop world, nor is he engaging in crime within the context of someone who has been denied the benefits of society due to racialist or classist structures. Despite all of his posing and posturing, Rummy represents the commodification of black bodies in the capitalist system Huey seeks to upend.

Another framework for analyzing the possibility of successful crossing of whites into African-American culture is offered by philosopher Marilyn Frye who argues that just as African Americans might choose to disaffiliate by passing, “whiteness” is a social and political classification from which one might choose to disaffiliate. She states that being white is not finally a matter of skin color, which is beyond our power to change, but of politics and power (Mills 40). As such, membership in the group of whites may be resisted through acts of radical imagination, along the lines of Rachel Dolezal, former president of the Spokane, Washington division of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and Africana studies professor, who identifies as black despite being born to white parents. The question at hand is whether Wuncler III and Rummy successfully exercise such acts of radical imagination.

The attention Dolezal’s case attracted and the response to her attempts to engage in reverse passing are informative. If race is a social construct rather than a biologically determined essential characteristic, how should society determine who counts as African
American? Is self-identity enough, and if not, why not? Many of those who expressed outrage at what they considered Dolezal’s appropriation of a black identity countenanced the broad range of appearances that fall within what they consider black identity.

Their objection was to her not belonging to the lineage or tradition of the historical experience that created the black community. This is what it means for race to be socially, as opposed to individually, constructed. There is social agreement regarding what is sufficient for membership in the group, and she is lacking the necessary characteristics around a shared experience.

Dolezal’s critics cite the painful legacy of the institutionalized rape of black women by white men under slavery as a backdrop for understanding that one can be a part of the black community and look white. Given the commonality of different skin tones within families, one does not raise questions about another’s visibility as a marker of membership in the black community. Those who object to Dolezal’s actions view her as taking advantage of this fact and using it as a means to further her own interests.

More importantly, the political and historical circumstances under which categories of race have been constructed matter. In the U.S., lineage, in contrast to appearance and cultural assimilation, has long been used to define group identity. Whether one looks or talks in a particular way and adopts a set of belief systems has not been sufficient to override the appeal to lineage that is regarded as the basis for a shared identity.
Nevertheless, Dolezal is not alone. A unique and provocative perspective on the impetus for acts of reverse passing is outlined by Baz Dreisinger in *Near Black: White to Black Passing in America*. Dreisinger approaches the legitimacy of performing blackness in relation to the little-known history of whites passing for black in America. Her account begins with the post-Reconstruction era when whites passed as blacks in order to escape prosecution under anti-miscegenation laws. Dreisinger’s analysis moves forward from that time period to describe efforts made by whites in music, theater and other performance arts to engage in experiments in racial performance. Pointing to Ralph Ellison’s quote that “The melting pot did indeed melt, creating such a deceptive metamorphoses and blending of identities, values, and lifestyles that most American whites are culturally part Negro American without even realizing it,” Dreisinger considers these experiments intrinsic to American culture (Dreisinger 4).

Even if Ellison is mistaken and white people do realize the extent to which their lives have been shaped by black culture, his quote provides an anti-essentialist deconstruction of racial identity. The blending of lifestyles to which he refers occurred through the sharing of music, dance, food, fashion and other elements of daily life and is perhaps most obvious today in relation to the hip-hop culture. Yet, this blending has also led to charges of identity theft, akin to those leveled against Dolezal, by those who regard the appropriation of African-American cultural identity as illegitimate. This raises the further question of whether the racial identity of the person appropriating African-
American culture matters.

For instance, Dreisinger asks the reader to reflect on the following cases: Lena Horne, who was coerced into darkening her skin to become a “blacker entertainer”; Arnold Johnson, the actor who played Putney Swope in a 1969 film with the same name, having his voice dubbed because he wasn’t “black enough”; and rappers who, despite charges by critics of engaging in neominstrelsy, deliver exaggerated performances in order to reflect the accepted standards of “authentic blackness” (Dreisinger 13). Due to the dominant narrative of passing from black to white, Dreisinger’s equally compelling question is whether appropriating black identity and culture by “assimilat[ing] and internaliz[ing] the degraded and devalorized signifiers of racial Otherness into the cultural construction of their own identity” is a “progressive or regressive act” (Dreisinger 13).

The questions of whether the racial identity of the individual appropriating the African-American cultural identity is relevant, and whether these acts are progressive signifiers of race and class consciousness or regressive is central to a socio-linguistic analysis of the characters of Wuncler III and Rummy. As James Baldwin contends, “Language, incontestably, reveals the speaker” and “far more dubiously, is meant to define the other....” (J. Baldwin 649).
The New Racial Politics

Conundrums concerning the legitimacy of appropriating black identity seem to have an added layer when the individual “performing blackness” is engaged in reverse passing. By reverse passing, Dreisinger means one who is “legally” white but who identifies as either black or as a member of the black culture, of which hip-hop culture is viewed as a subset. For instance, the case of Eminem is qualitatively different from the previous examples in that there is no visual ambiguity with respect to this performer. Further, as one of the most recent, highly-visible symbols of cultural appropriation, he was vilified as “part of a dangerous, corrupt cycle that promotes the blatant theft of a culture from the community that created it” (Dreisinger 13-14).

However, Bakari Kitwana, in Why White Kids Love Hip-Hop, presents a counter-narrative of hip-hop’s appropriation by white mainstream youth culture. Instead of regarding Eminem as engaging in a misappropriation of black identity and cultural theft, Kitwana sees the rapper as helping to “usher in a new racial politics that has come into its own with the post-baby boom generation” (Kitwana 19). He attributes this new racial politics to five primary factors: the rise of the global economy and the alienation of white youth; ruptures in the popular music scene; a shifting economy and subsequent undermining of white privilege; the institutionalization of the policies and practices emerging from the civil rights movement; and “the sociopolitical range of post-1960s
black popular culture” (Kitwana 63).

A foundational chapter in Kitwana’s book focuses on the attack of Eminem as racist by Dave Mays (white and Harvard-educated) and Ray Benzino, co-owners of The Source, a site devoted to breaking news in hip-hop. For Kitwana, the public battle over Eminem’s legitimacy as a rapper showcases “the collision between America’s old and new racial politics” (Kitwana 136). The charge by Mays and Benzino that Eminem is stealing record sales from black rappers is based, according to Kitwana, on an old racial politics—one in which no matter how marginalized and disenfranchised Eminem was as a result of his troubled childhood, his whiteness provides a level of privilege that precludes legitimacy in a world of hip hop that for thirty-five years has been dominated by African Americans (Kitwana 140).

The charges of racism launched by Mays and Benzino centered on derogatory lyrics that Eminem maintains were a rash reaction to a break up with an African-American girlfriend as a sixteen-year old. Kitwana notes that in accepting Eminem’s public apology, Russell Simmons, representing the Hip-Hop Summit Action Network stated:

These lyrics are disgusting, but the oneness of hip-hop culture has transformed many people in trailer parks around the country away from their parents’ old mindset of white supremacy. We believe Eminem’s apology is sincere and forthright. He continues not only to be an icon of hip-hop, but also has evolved into a good soldier who gives back money, time and energy to the community, encouraging this generation of youth to reach their highest aspirations. (Kitwana 141-142)
These comments suggest that insofar as hip-hop is identified with blackness, even those on the extreme margins of white culture can legitimately perform blackness under the right circumstances—circumstances that are defined by the hip-hop community itself.

Kitwana agrees that the origins of hip hop as rooted in the African-American experience do not undermine Eminem’s credibility as a rapper. In Kitwana’s mind, the way race is lived in America has changed, and Eminem’s white privilege is not sufficient to completely override his shared experience with the many blacks who have suffered socioeconomic oppression. Moreover, Kitwana regards fears that paint Eminem as a cultural bandit as unfounded given that the “visual black stamp” of hip hop in an age of technology and social media will guard against its being culturally appropriated along the same lines as rock and roll and jazz (Kitwana 156).

Nevertheless, the characters of Wunci III and Rummy cannot be subsumed under the same category as Eminem and others at the margins of white culture. On the contrary, they have always lived lives of privilege and continue to benefit at the expense of those in society who are the most marginalized. For instance, whereas the blacks they are imitating would be in prison for the drug use and criminal behavior they engage in, their wealth offers immunity from prosecution through family connections with the police and government officials.
McGruder’s creation of white characters who perform blackness through language, dress, and behavior is consistent with the notion of race as a construct, grounded in political and social conventions. This is a progressive act. Nevertheless, the exaggerated performance of blackness as equivalent to hip-hop culture threatens to undermine this progressive stance insofar as their words and deeds reinscribe the link between blackness and crime, aggressiveness, vulgarity and hypersexualism.

Still, _The Boondocks_ is a comedy that relies heavily on satire and parody. The parodying of George W. Bush and Donald Rumsfeld through characters that engage in this type of theft is a straightforward condemnation of the racial politics at play in Republican policies that had a disparately negative impact on African-American communities. The audience is presumed to know that McGruder is indicting both the concept of authentic blackness and whites who view blacks monolithically. Further, by having Charlie Murphy and Samuel Jackson be the voices behind these white characters, McGruder is parodically inverting and subverting the phenomenon of black identity theft by whites.

**Whiting Up**

In essence, Murphy and Jackson are engaged in “whiting up.” Performances of whiteface by black comedic actors extends back to Dunbar’s day when Bob Cole and
Billy Johnson produced *A Trip to Coontown*, featuring an all-black cast, writers and production team. Bob Cole donned whiteface to play his white hobo character Willie Wayside. The plot unfolds in the middle-class community of Coontown, where Silas Green, a black retiree with a hefty pension, is saved from con-artist Jim Flimflammer by Cole’s character. Cultured black men and women, wearing tailored clothing and living in a prosperous community challenged racial stereotypes. Moreover, the fact that the white interlocutor of minstrel shows was replaced by a buffoonish white drifter, while the black character served as the straight men, further upended white audience expectations (McAllister 85).

However, in his book on whiteface minstrelsy, *Whiting Up: Whiteface Minstrels and Stage Europeans in African American Performance*, Marvin McAllister argues that “Cole’s true revolution was in creating a whiteface character that could be read as simultaneous black and white, thus potentially altering how we interpret the relationship between race and class onstage” (McAllister 98). This reordering takes place when the signifiers attached to the “coon” and dandy figures are now affiliated with a white character and those associated with high-society whites accrue to the black townspeople. Ultimately, however, Willie Wayside’s appeal left audiences rooting for this Jim Crow-defending underdog rather than viewing his deficiencies as representative of his race.

More recent attempts at comedic performances of whiteface by blacks include Dave Chappelle’s parody of white reporter Chuck Taylor, which began with the skit
“Black Money.” Commenting on the news that the government has just agreed to pay reparations for slavery to African Americans, Taylor cuts to interviews with blacks lined up outside a liquor store, and to Wall Street, which has been turned upside down. Viewers are told that Sprint’s stock has skyrocketed due to two million delinquent phone bills being paid that morning; demand for gold and diamonds is surging, with the new phrase on Wall Street being “bling, bling”; Cadillac has reported the sale of three mission Escalades within one afternoon; and while watermelon sales remained “surprisingly flat,” the price of chicken has soared to $600 a bucket. The Recession is reportedly over, to which Taylor responds, “What, did the Mexicans get reparations check, too?” Realizing that he still on the air, he catches himself, and says, “That’s okay, the Mexicans don’t watch the news anyway” (Chappelle’s Show, “Black Money” Season 1, Episode 4).

Though stereotypes regarding blacks are embedded in this skit, Chappelle’s whiteface performance undermines any notions of white supremacy by shining a light on the persistence of structural racism in the U.S. In addition, his use of whiteface communicates a double consciousness, sending a parodic message regarding his awareness of the hegemonic forces that shape the ways in which the lives of black people are viewed by whites.
The Power of Visibility: Race and Representation

Given the potential of the enhanced power of racial inversion, what can be said concerning the legitimacy of Wuncler III and Rummy’s use of AAVE and whether their inclusion in the African-American culture is influenced by their being voiced by black actors? Here, it should be noted that even within the world of new racial politics, where racial identity as biological property has been replaced by race as a social construct, the old racial politics intervenes. The power of visibility in determining racial identity may be rejected on a theoretical level, but it continues to be integral to the lives of both blacks and whites. This reality is one of the major themes in Spike Lee’s film *Bamboozled.* Lee’s brilliant satire lays bare the disconnect between contemporary rhetoric surrounding the social construction of racial identity and the reality of race as determined by visibility—a contrast which becomes increasingly evident as the plot of Lee’s film unfolds.

The Mau Maus, a take-off on the members of Black Power Movement, are gunned down in a hail of bullets at the hands of white police officers. Only one of the Mau Maus survives the massacre that is designed to crush black power and pride. The lone survivor appears white, though he performs blackness through his dress, speech, and gestures. Even his name, One-sixteenth Black, is an expression of his attempts to define his racial identity in terms of blackness (Elam 184).

It becomes clear that One-sixteenth Black believes his biology entitles him to
perform blackness and legitimates his appropriation of “authentic black” behavior. As he is being carried off in handcuffs to the police cruiser, One-sixteenth Black yells in protest to the officers who failed to kill him along with his black brothers. He cries, “I’m black: one-sixteenth: one-drop of black blood is all that’s required. Why didn’t you kill me?” (Elam 186). His confusion is enhanced by the fact that no one within the Mau Maus ever questioned his authenticity as black. He is accepted as one of them and identifies himself as black in the way he performs his life.

To One-sixteenth, his appearance is irrelevant. Yet, to the white police officers, it is the crucial factor. As critical race theorist Harry Elam points out, “his declaration of blackness must be seen within a different representational context and history in which the politics of visibility, the fact he looks white, holds real meaning for the charging police” (Elam 186). Elam notes that the police “racialize him through their actions as white, but One-sixteenth Black in this violent reality check attempts to perform blackness all the more” (Elam 186).

The experience of One-sixteenth Black reflects the reality that his identity for those within the white power structure is constructed solely through his visibility. Thus, Elam writes:

Through this reality check the film suggests that in the lived world “blackness” is often simply how one looks; it’s straightforwardly physical, not theoretical or “constructed”; its meanings are contextual and not negotiable at the moment the cops decide whom to shoot. In that moment, the question of “who is really black” is not a question of semantics at all.
Blackness is not negotiable in all places at all times. (Elam 182)

Blackness, even as defined under the law, is seen as performance, whereas the perception by others is seen as real. This reality, in One-sixteenth Black’s case, makes it impossible for him to perform blackness in the way that would be most meaningful, namely by giving his life for the cause of Black Power. The fact that what is visible regarding race shapes reality in profound ways is why a black person who is sitting quietly or walking down the street can be viewed as a threat while someone who appears white can be in a crowd of black revolutionaries and not be seen as menacing.

In Elam’s words, One-sixteenth Black’s “declaration of blackness interrogates the relationship of the racial and the representational” (Elam 187). He is able to perform blackness and is accepted as one of the Mau Maus because “he speaks with them and to them in the ways in which white hegemonic culture has distorted the meaning of blackness” (Elam 187). The same is true of Wuncler III and Rummy, and while the distorted meaning these characters perpetuate is at times confounded by the fact that their characters are voiced by black actors, the metaparody functions to destabilize racist attitudes only if the audience is in on the joke.
A similar issue of authenticity in relation to the use of AAVE by whites is raised by Celia Cutler in her article, “‘Keepin’ It Real’: White Hip-Hoppers’ Discourses of Language, Race, and Authenticity.” Cutler foregrounds the fact that despite hip-hop’s multiracial character, the powerful discourse within hip-hop culture privileges both black bodies and the urban street experience (Cutler 212). With this as a foundation, Cutler explores the motivation behind white hip-hop artists adopting linguistic patterns of AAVE by engaging in a study of 35 white middle-class and upper-middle-class teenagers and young adults who both identify with hip-hop culture and have appropriated AAVE.

Her analysis focuses on five features associated with AAVE: /r/-lessness, monophthongal /ay/, t/d deletion, verbal -s absence, and copula absence. She also examines the occasional use of multiple negation, habitual be, and ain’t, which while used in other dialects has a broadened usage in AAVE as a substitute for “don’t,” “doesn’t,” and “didn’t.” Cutler finds that those whites typically involved in hip-hop practices, or what Lopez refers to as stylistic practice, can still be accepted as authentic speakers of AAVE without signaling their appropriated identity in linguistically overt ways.

In contrast, those whites on the periphery of black culture attempt to establish their legitimacy in the hip-hop world by positioning themselves as semiotically closer to the urban ghetto in order to blur racial and class boundaries separating them from the
African-American community (Cutler 215). Cutler determines that these individuals, who engage in crossing through ethnically marked outgroup language, are more likely to use overt speech markers highly associated with AAVE, including *ain’t*, habitual *be*, multiple negation, and copula absence.

These markers are dominant features in the dialogue of Gin Rummy and Ed Wuncler III. Consider, for instance, the following exchange from “Thank You for Not Snitchin’”:

Gin Rummy: Ain’t nobody seen nothin’.

Huey Freeman: I know who did the killing! I’ve known for twenty minutes. Guy’s name is Terrell Jackson; he’s been bragging about it all day. Everybody knows. He lives five minutes away. I’ve got MapQuest directions right here.

Ed Wuncler III: How’d you find all this out?

Huey Freeman: We talked to people!

Riley: [holds up a drawing] I got a picture.

Gin Rummy: Where you get that?

Riley: I drew it from the description of the dude that they gave us while y’all was whuppin’ niggas asses in the street. I almost had time to color it. (*The Boondocks*, “Thank You for Not Snitchin’” Season2/Episode 3)

Here, the use of *ain’t*, multiple negation in “Ain’t nobody seen nothin,’” the deletion of
the auxiliary verb *did* in “Where you get that?” and the realization of final *ng* as *n* by Gin Rummy are consistent with Cutler’s analysis of the use of AAVE by peripheral or outgroup speakers.

The same markers are evident in Wuncler III’s speech, as noted in the following two excerpts:

Ed Wuncler III: [Throws down a game controller] This is some bullshit! The game cheatin’!
Riley: Nigga, the game ain’t cheatin’.

Ed Wuncler III: Start the game over!
Riley: Why you always gotta cheat when you lose, Ed?
Gin Rummy: Let’em have it. Not wise to upset a Wuncler.

Ed Wuncler III: [Pulls out gun and shoots the Playstation 2, then points the gun at Riley] Restart the game, now! (*The Boondocks*, “Let’s Nab Oprah” Season 1/Episode 11)

And,

Huey Freeman: Well, this is the apartment building where it all happened. Maybe someone saw something.
Ed Wuncler III: Oh, somebody saw somethin’ all right.
Huey Freeman: Hey, slow down. We gotta be tactful.
Ed Wuncler III: Tactful? What that mean?

Gin Rummy: He talkin’ about diplomacy.

[cocks gun]

Gin Rummy: I don’t do diplomacy. (*The Boondocks*, “A Date with the Health Inspector” Season 1/Episode 5)

Like Wuncler III, Rummy’s use of AAVE is limited and primarily involves the realization of the final *ng* as *n* and absence of copula/auxiliary *is*.

Their linguistic crossing is broadened through other cultural signifiers, such as the wearing of “gangsta” clothing and chains, and use of the terms “nigga” and “bitch” in a manner that constitutes semantic inversion and the reinforcement of masculinity through misogyny (Bucholtz 449). Thus, in the episode “Let’s Nab Oprah,” both Rummy and Wuncler III employ this rhetoric:

Gin Rummy: Let’s go, Ed.

Wuncler III: Hold up, my nigga. Hold up.

Gin Rummy: Go time, nigga! Let’s go!

Wuncler III: I sent that bitch a smiley face. Bitches love smiley faces

Gin Rummy: Man, I don’t get that.

Wuncler III: What?
Gin Rummy: That “texting” shit.

Wuncler III: What’s wrong with texting?

Gin Rummy: Oh, you mean other than the fact that it’s the stupidest fucking thing in the world? Who in their right mind would spend fifteen minutes trying to type some shit they could have called and said in five seconds? Plus, it involves typing with your thumbs, which I just don’t approve of. I don’t know about you, but I don’t have time to read something that a motherfucker typed with his thumbs. Fun Fact: Nothing typed by somebody’s thumbs has ever been important. It’s all just nigga technology, anyway.

Wuncler III: What’d you call it?

Gin Rummy: Nigga Technology. Technology for niggas, and don’t start trippin’ and shit, calling me a racist, because I don’t mean “nigga” in a disrespectful way. I mean it as a general term for an ignorant motherfucker. Anybody, of any race, can be an ignorant motherfucker.

Wuncler III: Shit, I be texting my ass off. Shit, bitches like texting. I be texting ’em all the time. Matter of fact, I also be texting my weed man, too, cause, you know, he don’t like to be on the phone, so I text him.

Gin Rummy: ...Case in point. (The Boondocks, “Let’s Nab Oprah” Season 1, Episode 11)

In this dialogue, Rummy uses the “N-word” as a positive, without racial implicature, setting himself up as part of the ingroup, as opposed to the outgroup (Bucholtz 452). It is the same type of semantic blackface used by Riley, who tries to emulate them. The semantic inversion comes from the fact that he is “flippin’ the script” by using “nigga” positively as a form of endearment in one case (e.g. “Go time, nigga”) and as applicable
As Lisa Green notes, different linguistic styles are used in the media to mark both the language of black characters and to mark stereotypes (Green 200). The AAVE used by Rummy and Wuncler III indeed marks stereotypes in an attempt at crossing that fails to capture the language’s intricacy. The language of “niggas” and “bitches” associated with hip hop, and therefore blackness, is identified with the ghetto and the “hood.” Yet, the white bodies of Rummy and Wuncler III do not carry the epistemological authority of the bodies from which their character’s voices emanate—an authority necessary to flipping the script in their case.

Still, if in the quest to avoid reifying both blackness and authenticity, these concepts are reduced to tropes that are contingent upon the historical, social, cultural, and political terms of their production, we are left with the pivotal question raised by E. Patrick Johnson’s book, Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity, namely “how to come to terms with the ways in which bodies—black and otherwise—produce, authorize, and authenticate ‘black’ readings and performance strategies...” through appropriation (E.P. Johnson 221). Johnson’s question in the context of the ontological and epistemological complexity of the characters of Wuncler III and Rummy leads to the problem of speaking for others, highlighted by philosopher Linda Alcoff. Alcoff illustrates the extent to which one’s positionality, where one speaks from, affects both the meaning and truth of what one says. According to Alcoff, a
recognition of the epistemically significant impact of a speaker’s social identity on the individual’s claims has served to authorize or delegitimize an individual’s speech. She reminds readers that the speaker’s location is epistemically salient given that the systematic divergences in social location between speakers and those spoken for will have a significant effect on the content of what is said (Alcoff).

Alcoff’s analysis is founded upon two premises: (1) The “ritual of speaking” in which where an utterance is located always bears on meaning and truth such that there is no possibility of rendering positionality, location, or context irrelevant to content; and (2) All contexts and locations are differentially related in complex ways to structures of oppression, which will produce epistemic differences as well (Alcoff). This means that some voices may be de-authorized based on both epistemic and political considerations, and that the very process of producing meaning is necessarily collective.

Alcoff readily admits that group identities and boundaries are both ambiguous and permeable and that the advent of electronic and other forms of communication pose challenges for determining positionality, which bears upon, but does not determine a speaker’s legitimacy. The question the speaker must ask is whether the speech will enable the empowerment of oppressed peoples rather than be constitutive of a desire for mastery and domination (Alcoff).

Wuncler III and Rummy posit black vernacular as the site of black subjectivity or authentic black experience. However, even if we accept E. Patrick Johnson’s view that
culturally sanctioned signifiers of blackness such as AAVE have no more authority than other tropes, there is a historical and ideological association of white bodies as privileged that might not be transcended through the use of black voices. This, in and of itself, leads to the problem of speaking for others. These characters invite us to take into account Saidiya Hartman’s notion of blackness as social relationality, where performing blackness conveys:

…both the cross purposes and the circulation of various modes of performance and performativity that concern the production of racial meaning and subjectivity, the nexus of race, subjection, spectacle, the forms of racial and race(d) pleasure, enactments of white dominance and power, the reiteration and/or rearticulation of the conditions of enslavement. (Hartman)

Viewing the use of AAVE by Wuncler III and Rummy in this way leads us back to the admonition by Bucholt and Lopez, who propose that this new form of minstrelsy dangerously allows for the performance of racial stereotypes, with artists simultaneously disavowing any racist interpretation of their work.

Yet, stylization matters. Lopez describes stylization as the “knowing and strategic inauthenticity in performance, where performers lead audiences to understand that a representation may or may not be as it purports to be, and in a sense invites audiences to make what they wish of it” (Lopez 27). The performance of the black voice actors in The Boondocks is meta-parodic. That is, the performers are in on the joke, drawing attention to and mocking the tradition of blackface by inverting it, understanding that meta-parody,
like parody, runs the risk, as Lopez highlights, of reproducing the “very texts it seeks to destroy” and “reproduces the ideologies and stereotypes it asks the audience to critique” (Lopez 38).

Though Bambi Haggins in Laughing Mad: The Black Comic Persona in Post-Soul America and Glenda Carpio in Laughing Fit to Kill: Black Humor in the Fiction of Slavery consider the issue of satirical appropriation of racist stereotypes by comedians such as Pryor, Chappelle, and Murphy, the question of whether the black body confers an epistemic authority or privilege, making it is possible to engage in the parodic performance of AAVE and culture without lapsing into linguistic minstrelsy remains unanswered.

Nevertheless, these questions have direct applicability to the assessment of Dunbar’s theatrical comedy. Several of Dunbar’s main characters represent parodic portrays of blacks performing white caricatures of blacks, and in this way are contained within Dreisinger’s category of “assimilating and internalizing the degraded and devalorized signifiers of racial otherness” (Dreisinger 13). However, the appropriation of these stereotypes was used as a tool, providing an opportunity for delivering political messages and encouraging white audiences to identify with black life in a way that emphasized their common humanity.

For instance, in his “coon song” “Evah Dahkey is a King” from Jes Lak White Fo’ks and In Dahomey, the lyrics begin:
Dar’s mighty curious circumstance
Dat’s a botherin’ all de nation
All de Yankees is dissatisfied
Wid deir untitled station
Dey is huntin’ after titles
Wid a golden net to snare ’em
And de Democratic people
Dey’s mos’ mighty glad to wear ’em. Ho!” (Dunbar, *In His Own Voice* 155)

Mocking whites who espouse democratic principles while engaging in social climbing in pursuit of an aristocratic lifestyle, his lyrics point to the irony involved in Yankees seeking the lifestyle they fought against in the Revolutionary War, while denying black’s full citizenship in a nation built upon the premise that “All men are created equal.”

And while the Yankees are busy seeking the status of royalty, Dunbar positions each black man as having an ancestral lineage leading straight to an African king. Dunbar’s assertion, “For a kingdom is our station/Am’ we’s each a rightful ruler” is built on the very scripture whites appealed to as the justification for enslaving Africans. Since blacks are all “de sons of Ham,” and Ham was a king, Dunbar warns “White fo’ks what’s got dahkey servants/ Try an’ give dem ev’ryting;/An’ doan nevah speak insulting, /Fu dat coon may be a king” (Dunbar, *In His Own Voice* 155-156).

Again, in the lyrics of “Swing Along” from *In Dahomey* and “On Emancipation Day” from *Clorindy*, Dunbar employs irony and parody in commenting on the racial desires of the white audience to perform blackness. The former carries a coded, yet not so subtle, message regarding black pride:
Come along Mandy,  
Come along Sue,  
White fo’ks a-watchin’  
An’ seein’ what you do.  
White fo’ks jealous when you’se walkin two by two  
So swing along chillum  
Swing along.

Well a swing along…yes a swing along  
An’ a lift a’ yo’ heads up high,  
Wif’ pride and gladness beamin’ from ‘yo eye…

Lift yo’ head and ‘yo heels mighty high…. (Cook, Dunbar and Shipp 29-36)

Similarly, he writes, “On Emancipation Day/All you white folks clear de’ way/Coons dressed up like masqueraders/Porters armed lak rude invaders/When de hear dem ragtime tunes/White folks try to pass fo’ coons on Emancipation Day” (Riis 115). Gavin Jones references Dunbar’s performance of his poem “The Colored Band,” as another commentary on white racial desires, which included Dunbar cakewalking to the words “T’ain’t de music by itself dat meks it fine, / Hit’s de walkin’, step by step, /An’ de keepin’ time wid ‘Hep,’/ Dat it mek a common ditty soun’ divine” (G. Jones 191). Describing Dunbar’s burlesque of the aristocratic manners of whites as a resistive move rather than a collapse into blackface minstrelsy, Gavin Jones interprets Dunbar’s performance as signifying by reappropriating white culture, infusing it with a satirical black difference and African-American parodic rituals (G. Jones 191).

In addition, Dunbar uses the mask of AAVE to showcase the complex social
structures Africans had in place prior to colonization, the impact of slavery on the lives of African Americans, and a rejection of white standards that purport racial and social hierarchies placing whites at the pinnacle. Thus, his lyrics emphasize: “Ev’ry dahkey has a lineage Dat de White fo’ks can’t compete wid/ And a title, such as duke or earl/ Why we wouldn’t wipe our feet wid....” (Dunbar, *In His Own Words* 155-156).

And again, parodying white fears of the black dandy, Dunbar writes:

For a kingdom is our station
Am’ we’s each a rightful ruler
When we’s crown’d we don’t wear satins
Kase de way we dress is cooler. Ho!

But our power’s just as might
Never judge kings by deir clothes
You could never tell a porter
Wid a ring stuck thro’ his nose (Dunbar, *In His Own Words* 156)

The black dandy as a parodic figure is further highlighted in “The Hottest Coon in Dixie” from *Clorindy*:

*Chorus*

Behold the hottest coon,
Your eyes e’er lit on,
Velvet ain’t good enough,
For him to sit on,
When he goes down the street,
Folks yell like sixty,
Behold the hottest coon in Dixie. (Dunbar, *In His Own Words* 160)
While the lyrics of the chorus may seem to align with the minstrel tradition, when the
dandy is viewed as a trickster, new interpretations are possible.

The same is true of songs such as “Who Dat Say Chicken in dis Crowd.” Written
with Will Marion Cook for Clorindy, this song contains two choruses:

Who dat say chicken in dis crowd?
Speak de word agin’ and speak it loud
Blame de lan’ let white folks rule it
I’se a lookin’ for a pullet
Who dat say chicken in dis crowd?

And,

Who dat say chicken in dis crowd
Speak de word agin’ and speak it loud
What’s de use of all dis talkin’
Let me hyeah a hen a-squawkin’
Who day say chicken in dis crowd. (Dunbar, In His Own Words 161)

The phrase “Who dat,” is also used by Dunbar in his poem “When Malindy
Sings” from Lyrics of Lowly Life, which positions the black woman as more talented and
closer to God than the white mistress in the house. In this context, Dunbar writes, “Who
dat says dat humble praises/Wif de Master nevah counts?” (Dunbar 195). Interestingly,
the phrase was itself appropriated by a variety of performers, including Harpo Marx
following its use in Clorindy. More recently, fans of the National Football League’s New
after the coin toss of each game. Members of “Who dat? Nation” found their beloved expression at the center of a legal battle—not over whether it was racist, but whether the phrase could be trademarked by the team and placed only on official Saints’ merchandise.

Rather than affirming the racist sentimentalism of the plantation past in which blacks are content to slave away on land owned by their white masters as long as they are given chicken to eat, Dunbar is again appropriating white stereotypes of African Americans in order to satirize and mock white audiences. He applies a similar tactic in the last stanza of his poem “A Florida Night” from *Lyrics of Love and Laughter*:

Moon’s a-kinder shaddered on de melon patch;
No one ain’t a-watchin’ez I go
Climbin’ of de fence so’s not to click de latch
Meks my gittin’ in a little slow.
Watermelon smilin’ as it say, “I’s free,”
Alligator boomin’, but I let him be
Florida, oh, Florida’s de lan’ fu’ me-
(Lizy Ann a-singin’ sweet an’ low). (Dunbar 82)

Like chicken, watermelon became a racist trope following Emancipation, when many blacks began to grow and sell watermelons. After watermelons became associated with African Americans’ freedom, Southern whites appropriated the symbol, making it a sign of black laziness, childishness and uncleanness. Fear of the emancipated black body was represented in portrayals of blacks with watermelon on postcards, toys, boxes and sheet music covers, as well as in newspapers, magazines, and lithographs. One of the most
popular postcards depicted an elderly black man, with a watermelon in each arm, coming across a loose chicken along the way. He bemoans, “Dis am de wust perdichermunt ob mah life” (Black).

Comic images of blacks were not the only ones infiltrating pop culture, however. The lynching of African Americans reached its peak in the 1890s, and its use as a method of social control was publicized with the depiction of terrorized, tortured and murdered blacks on postcards. Just as Dunbar’s trickster character goes unnoticed when stealing the watermelon, there was good reason for the author Dunbar, as trickster, to remain elusive to readers who interpreted him as reinforcing racist Southern plantation stereotypes rather than as reappropriating a symbol of black freedom.

In his book The Product of Our Souls: Ragtime, Race, and the Birth of the Manhattan Musical Marketplace, David Gilbert sheds further light on the positioning of Dunbar as trickster by categorizing his play Jes Lak White Folks as an example of “ragging uplift”—an attempt to use ragtime as a rejection of Du Bois’s racial uplift ideology of the Talented Tenth.

As we have seen, in Jes Lak White Folks Dunbar parodies both whites who are pursuing aristocratic lifestyle and blacks who are seeking to emulate whites in order to rise above their station. The result is a classist segregation among African Americans that Dunbar and his collaborators resist. Those attempting to claim royal lineage or climb the
ladder of a racial hierarchy based on passing for white were unmasked as reinforcing white supremacist ideologies.

The message of Dunbar’s lyrics is clear—blacks should not seek racial uplift by imitating whites who are trying to climb the social ladder through mimicking Victorian gentility. Dunbar and the other African-American performers who gathered at the blacked-owned Marshall Hotel—Ernest Hogan, Bob Cole, Rosamond Johnson, Abbie Mitchell, James Weldon Johnson, Aida Overton Walker, Bert Williams and George Walker—provided an alternative approach to racial uplift that went beyond the Du Boisian vision of the Talented Tenth’s black performances of classical European literature, music and the arts.

According to Gilbert, Dunbar and his colleagues offered an alternative instantiation of black authenticity and respectability through their performances of ragtime, which the Talented Tenth increasingly denounced as uncivilized and disreputable given its association with “coon songs,” which reduced it to the music of the masses in the eyes of the black elite (D. Gilbert 75). The syncopated rhythms of ragtime were decried as vulgar and excessive by both black and white critics and seen as affirming stereotypes of black criminality and hypersexuality.

Despite this criticism, Gilbert observes:

…the Marshall community remained influenced by its politics of representation and the notion that a few could represent the many. They too saw themselves as
uplifting the race. Yet rather than working to change the behaviors and culture of
the black masses, Marshall musicians aimed to change the public representations
of the culture they already had—it was an uplift agenda aimed at legitimizing
blacks’ culture rather than denying it. (D. Gilbert 76)

By fashioning their own aesthetic and political categories, ragtime artists contested both
white supremacy and conventional black uplift ideology. Thus, even as a number of
players, such as Scott Joplin and Jelly Roll Morton, “classicized the rags” and “ragged
the classics,” ragtime performers often eschewed the formality of classical training and
the moral rectitude of black spirituals. Their embracing dialect, cakewalking, and folk
traditions may have earned them the scorn of black elites who sought to overturn and
eradicate any signs of black minstrelsy, but it also gained them an audience that far
exceeded that of their most ardent critics.

Dunbar, like Walker and Williams, could slip seamlessly from black dialect, coon
songs, and cakewalking into the speech and mannerisms of the aristocratic gentleman. He
countered the notion that he and his fellow artists should be seen as worthy of full
citizenship only if they assimilated by adopting white standards of respectability. Dunbar’s
writing had already signaled that African Americans earned full citizenship when they died
alongside white soldiers, fighting for their liberty in the Revolutionary War and the
preservation in the Union in the Civil War.
Echoing Dunbar’s sentiments, Aida Overton Walker, who performed alongside her husband in vaudeville, criticized blacks who were “ignorant as to what is really being done in their behalf by members of their race on the Stage,” remarking “this age we are all fighting the one problem—that is the color problem!” (D. Gilbert 83). Instead of imitating the white canon, Walker encouraged African Americans to “appreciate the noble and beautiful within” (D. Gilbert 84). In so doing, she joined Dunbar in prompting audiences, and society as a whole, to value black vernacular expression in all of its forms—establishing the foundation for a new black modernism.

Unlike the cross-racial appropriation by white performers, Dunbar’s strategy of employing black dialect is neither deauthenticated nor regressive. Instead, it creates a metanarrative that draws upon the exaggerated black speech of minstrelsy while disrupting subjugation through a coded version of black dialect. Dunbar’s dialect functions as a form of resistance to the erasure of the trauma of slavery. Along with the content of Dunbar’s lyrics, it encourages the interpretation of history from the perspective of the colonized. The memory of slavery is represented through speech—a remembrance grounded in identity formation. Dunbar’s use of black dialect transcends minstrelsy by foregrounding the cultural trauma that comes from the loss of identity and meaning that was inflicted on African Americans. The affirmation of black dialect and other forms of cultural expression in Dunbar constituted an attempt to establish a new, positive collective identity established on his own terms.
This effort to appropriate racist signs and symbols of the past has been replicated by contemporary black artists using AAVE in what has been termed a “post soul era.” In what follows, I present the ways in which these attempts, and especially those of comedians Key and Peele, intersect with Dunbar’s theatrical work.
CHAPTER IV

“YOU KNOW I KNOW WHAT YOU TALKIN’ ’BOUT”

A Post-Soul Aesthetic


In his book *Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post-Soul Aesthetic*, Mark Anthony Neal equates the term “post-soul” with the political, social and cultural experiences of the African-American community following the end of the civil rights and Black Power Movements. For Neal, a post-soul aesthetic “renders many ‘traditional’ tropes of blackness dated and even meaningless,” thus reinforcing the notion that a black aesthetic and black identity cannot be reduced to the contingencies of birth (M.A. Neal 3).

Neal’s assessment is consistent with Paul C. Taylor’s description of a post-soul aesthetic, described in his 2007 essay “Post Black, Old Black” (Taylor 625). According to Taylor, “Where soul culture insisted on the seriousness of authenticity and positive images, post-soul culture revels in the contingency and diversity of blackness, and subjects the canon of positive images to subversion and parody—and appropriation” (Taylor 631).
Both Neal and Taylor draw upon the concept articulated by Trey Ellis in his 1989 essay “A New Black Aesthetic,” in which he argues that African-American writers of the era were steering a course between white envy and the black-identity police by “creating [their] own definitions of blackness no matter how loudly white or black people might complain” (Ellis 241).

From The Colored Museum to Shuffle Along

Among the authors Ellis cites as a catalyst for the new black aesthetic is George C. Wolfe, whose award-winning play The Colored Museum premiered in 1986. Consisting of eleven “exhibits” of African-American life from the inception of slavery in America to the present, Wolfe’s production is a mocking response to his fans’ request for a “black play.” Asking “What’s a ‘black’ play—four walls, a couch and a mama?” Wolfe countered with, “I can’t exist within those definitions” and created the parodic “Last Mamma on the Couch,” based on Loraine Hansberry’s A Raisin in the Sun, as one of the rooms in the museum.

A forerunner of contemporary African-American sketch comedy, in each of the skits, audience members are invited to assess the value, if any, of the stereotypes and icons of black life perpetuated by American culture’s theatrical performances and art. The opening scene takes audience members on an airplane ride through time in which the
passengers, shackled African-Americans, are traveling on a celebrity slave ship. Wolfe progresses from exploring stereotypes of blackness that resulted in enslaved Africans being brought to America to contemporary scenes involving the emergence of black “snap queens” and rappers.

On this journey, Wolfe calls upon passengers and audience members alike to determine which stereotypes should be jettisoned and which should be embraced. Thus, the stewardess, Miss Pat, warns, “Before exiting, check the overhead as any baggage you don’t claim, we trash” (Wolfe 5). This is an invitation for African Americans to reject and discard stereotypical perceptions of black culture, while understanding that they must carry with them the reality that the past necessarily shapes identities and material realities in the present.

Every one of the exhibits in The Colored Museum employs stereotypes as a means of critiquing and challenging perceived African-American cultural traditions and icons. Hence, Wolfe displaces the treasured objects anticipated in museums with scenes that disrupt and disturb the audiences’ expectations. In doing so, the sketches engage in the technique of signifying. Commented on by the playwright in an article co-authored with Harry Elam, Jr., Wolfe suggests that “The Colored Museum, because of its implicit and explicit critique of the African-American theatrical past, provides a striking opportunity to test the value of The Signifying Monkey as a model for African American theatrical critique (Elam 292).
In fact, *The Colored Museum* was pivotal in setting in motion a series of theatrical and cinematic performances challenging African Americans to confront the racist stereotypes used to portray them throughout America’s history. Robert Alexander’s *I Ain’t Yo Uncle—The New Revisionist Uncle Tom’s Cabin*; Matt Robinson’s *Confessions of Stepin Fetchit*; Henry Brown’s *King of Coons*; and Glenda Dickerson’s *Re/Membering Aunt Jemima: A Menstrual Show* individually and collectively showcase the images from theater highlighted in *The Colored Museum* that, historically, have been used to provoke feelings of shame and disgust among African Americans. The effectiveness of each playwright hinges on their appropriation of black stereotypes and icons as a means of uncovering the cross-generational impact of institutionalized racism.

While groundbreaking in its establishment of a new type of theatrical vehicle for delivering the critical message (in both senses) of an emerging black artist, *The Colored Museum* was controversial within the African-American community. Similar to the criticism Dunbar received by his fellow writers for his dialect poetry and “coon songs,” Wolfe was condemned for what was perceived as a perpetuation of racist stereotypes of black culture within his work. Thus, in an interview with bell hooks, Wolfe reports, “When *The Colored Museum* happened, all these mediocre Negroes who regard themselves as the guardians of black culture attacked me because they thought I was attacking black culture, that I was doing things in front of white people that shouldn’t be done” (M. Jones 3). Wolfe maintains that what these critics failed to account for was his
arrogance—his belief that “the culture I come from is so strong it can withstand public scrutiny. I don’t see black culture as a fragile thing” (M. Jones 3).

Once again reminiscent of Dunbar and his query about whether to acquiesce to calls from his fellow writers to “ignore the past and all its capital literary materials,” Wolfe complains,

Because so much of the imagery of the archetype has been co-opted by white culture—and turned into stereotype—...we end up throwing out certain symbols and imagery that have a tremendous amount of power and that have a more ancient cultural context to them simply because they’ve been corrupted by white culture. (M. Jones 5)

His attempt at reclamation and transformation of such symbols as a legitimate aesthetic pursuit was challenged by those the author regards as having a “knee-jerk response to a silhouette” (M. Jones 5).

In fact, the post-soul project undertaken by Wolfe was multi-dimensional. It was premised on his ability to extrapolate human truths that he discerned as an African American from the specifics of “white performances” in shows he watched growing up—shows that ranged from “Leave it to Beaver” and “Gilligan’s Island” to Hamlet. Wolfe wondered whether the same process was possible for whites viewing the individual circumstances of black characters. The separate rooms housing the individual “exhibits” in his play, therefore, serve as a metaphor for the walls between blacks and whites. However, they also represent the walls constructed within the African-American
community that are built upon a foundation of conflict surrounding paradigms of class, language, authenticity and heteronormativity.

The struggle for black self-identity is portrayed in a variety of scenes, yet perhaps none more poignantly than in “Symbiosis.” This vignette’s main character is an African-American businessman, “the Man,” who endeavors to discard all of the remnants of the past that are associated with his black identity. In order to survive within the dominant white culture, he throws each item related to his former self, from his Dashiki to his Afro-pick to his copy of *Soul on Ice*, into a giant dumpster. With every toss, the persona of his youth, “the Kid,” begs him to stop, becoming increasingly distressed. The Man responds by saying to his younger self, “The climate is changing, Kid! And, either you adjust, or you end up, extinct, a sociological dinosaur. Do you understand what I am trying to tell you?” (Wolfe 34).

Similar to Dunbar’s struggle with his use of dialect, the Man’s message is that African Americans need to assimilate into white culture in order to survive. Any retained symbol of black identity is considered a hindrance to social progress. To succeed in his chosen career, the Man is convinced that he must give up his ethnicity. The argument he makes regarding this societal expectation is punctuated by a reminder to the Kid that “King Kong would have made it to the top if only he had taken the elevator. Instead, he brought attention to his struggle and ended up dead” (Wolfe 34). This specific exchange between the younger and older African American signifies on the “Negro-Ape”
metaphor, in which African Americans have been reduced to the status of brute animals, viewed as sub-human and driven by their passions instead of reason.

Blackness and otherness are front and center in this museum display, with the image of trashing a past related to symbols of black pride as signifying on understanding one’s proper place. Black invisibility is regarded as essential to social survival, and African Americans should learn lessons from King Kong by staying out of sight. Thus, the Man appears as a new incarnation—one in which his blackness is suppressed. He cannot afford the disturbing and disruptive remnants of the past being associated with the present.

In a final attempt to explain to his younger, black nationalist self what he is about to do, the Man asserts, “It’s all going. Anything and everything that connects me to you, to who I was, to what we were, is out of my life. My survival depends on it, and whether you know it or not, the ice age is upon us” (Wolfe 34). The Man then strangles the representation of his past, pronouncing “Man kills his own rage.” After throwing all that he perceives as having shaped his African-American identity into the trash bin, the businessman states in a matter-of-fact manner that he will henceforth only be black on weekends and holidays (Wolfe 36).

Instead of describing these tokens of the past as affiliated with justified anger or righteous indignation, the identification of the emotion of rage with blackness plays further into cultural stereotypes. Anger can be constructive because it is a human and
healthy response to tragedy. Rage, on the other hand, is anger that is out of control. It is an emotion that was feared by white society throughout colonial slavery, into the civil rights and the Black Lives Matter movements, because of its power to disrupt dominant structures that reinforce the subservience of African Americans. Indeed, the potential disruptive force of rage is exactly why the clenched fist and other outward expressions of militancy, from clothing and dark glasses to swagger, were embraced as essential symbols of the Black Power Movement.

Personal challenges related to black identity are similarly showcased in “The Hairpiece,” a museum room in which an African-American woman must decide daily whether to wear an Afro wig or one that has been straightened to conform to white American cultural norms. Wolfe challenges viewers to consider not only the ways in which an understanding of African-American history and the legacies of slavery can inform such decisions but how these artifacts are used to portray an image reflective of self-identification.

In addition to black physical appearance, literature, music, art, and fashion as the objects on display in the museum, Wolfe takes up the role of language in black identity. In the opening scene of the play, “Git on Board,” Miss Pat begins her safety instructions to the passengers aboard the all-black celebrity slave ship by warning them to refrain from drumming or call-and-response between cabins, since these could be construed as fomenting rebellion. Then, in preparation for landing in Savannah, George, she announces that African Americans will be expected to sing while working in the
plantation fields. When turbulence strikes, she masks her concern with a minstrel grin, stating calmly:

No, don’t panic. We’re just caught in a little thunder storm. Now the only way you’re going to make it through is if you abandon your God and worship a new one. So, on the count of three, let’s all sing. One, two, three....

NOBODY KNOWS DE TROUBLE I SEEN

Oh, I forgot to mention, when singing, omit the T-H sound. “The” becomes “de.” “They” becomes “dey.” Got it? Good!

NOBODY KNOWS...
NOBODY KNOWS...

Oh, so you don’t like that one? Well then let’s try another–
SUMMER TIME
AND DE LIVIN’ IS EASY

Gershwin. He comes from another oppressed people so he understands.

FISH ARE JUMPIN’...come on.
AND DE COTTON IS HIGH
AND DE COTTON IS... sing, damnit! (Wolfe 4)

In this scene, Wolfe signifies on the stealing of African language as interwoven with the appropriation of black culture and the commodification of black bodies for labor.
and entertainment. Embedded in Wolfe’s play are the ways in which Africans were forced to reassess their identity during every stage of the process of enslavement—a phenomenon detailed by Michael Gomez in his book, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*. Gomez describes how captives from different regions were shackled together, and for the first time, individuals whose African identity revolved around membership in a particular ethnic group found themselves identified by race. They came to realize that the racial heredity serving as basis of identity was deemed a mark of inferiority by their captors (Gomez 155).

In addition, the conditions of confinement were themselves so barbarous that, whether they were kings or servants, their very identity as humans was called into question. Enslaved Africans who were symbolically stripped of their pasts through the process of creolization were required to create a new language, religion, culture, interpersonal relations and social institutions. Ironically, the shared experience of suffering fostered an identification with others that became instrumental in shaping emerging concepts of self-identity and notions of membership in the broader community.

Gomez identifies three contexts in which transformations of identity evolved. The first was in the hold of the slave ships when captives recognized, as they did in the barracoons, that race, as opposed to ethnicity, was used by Europeans as both a principle of unity and a basis for justifying slavery. Second, those who survived the harrowing Middle Passage shared a bond rooted in survival. Enslaved Africans were connected by the suffering they endured together within the confines of a particular slave ship. Thus,
the relationship of shipmate became a principle of identity that superceded identity based on ethnicity (Gomez 165).

Despite the significance of these first two factors in reconditioning the psyches of both slaves and slave runners aboard the transport ships, Gomez cites a third factor, namely the sexual exploitation of women, as having the most profound impact on the reformation of identities. Women’s bodies aboard slave ships were used by slave runners to quell the desires of African men in order to deter revolt and resistance (Gomez 166).

Both on the slave ships and in the slave colonies, the identity transformation of slaves was founded, in part, on new social structures around emerging concepts of community. Yet, for women, there was a further rupture with the identities of their African past, given that they were thrust into a world governed by laws that dislocated women’s reproductive identities.

Gomez points to language as a “co-conspirator in the process of enslavement, a veritable colonization of the mind” (Gomez 171). Still, he emphasizes how language served as a critical tool of resistance for slaves by engaging in acts of contestation though subtleties in communication. These included feigning misunderstanding, using broken English and mimicry, adopting modulations and tonalities to signify messages to other Africans, naming, and engaging in the oral tradition of trickster tales involving anti-heroes. The modifications to English, created in the process of creolization, were passed down to both slave children and white children raised by slave women working in households (Gomez 14, 173).
In response to having their ethnic identities subsumed under race as a singular marker and their identities around kinship replaced by those based on the commodification of women’s reproductive capacities, blacks appropriated everyday words to signify the creation of their own communities based on shared survival. For instance, the term “shipmate” was used to express a special bond exiting among those who endured the Middle Passage together. It was not only used as a term of endearment, but also as a term signifying how enslaved Africans constructed a new social identity to replace biological kinship (Gomez 165).

An additional type of resistance came in the form of coded storytelling, as when Gomez describes a man recounting his grandmother’s tales of a seemingly, and surprisingly, enjoyable voyage to the New World on a slave ship. Gomez points out, however, that while the man reports that the slaves aboard were made comfortable, he follows with the remark that they were draped in red flannel. This comment signifies to those within his community, but remains invisible to white Euro-Americans, that those aboard the ship were cloaked in deceit by the Europeans (Gomez 205).

These techniques, along with trickster tales in which the narrative involves slaves “pulling one over” on slave owners or, alternatively, pointing out the trickery used to enslave them, helped foster a collective identity and bolster the psychological well-being of individuals under extreme stress. Their resistive messages, like those of contemporary rap discourse, use the language of the oppressors to deconstruct and challenge the existing power structure through covert acts of subversion.
Spirituals and traditional songs acted as another medium for preserving language and culture, as well as resisting subjugation. Dunbar commented on the significance of Negro music in an essay describing his encounter with Dahomeyans performing at the World’s Columbian Exhibition in Chicago in 1893, writing:

The Dahomeyan sings the music of his native Africa; the American negro spends this silver heritage of melody, but adds to it the bitter ring of grief for wrongs and adversities which only he has known. The Dahomeyan startles us; the negro American thrills us. The Dahomeyan makes us smile; the negro American makes us weep and smile to weep again….

Many of the old plantation hymns, rude and uncouth as they were, improvised by the negroes themselves under the influence of strong religious zeal, are models of melodic beauty. Underlined almost invariably by a strain of sadness, they sometimes burst out into rays of hope, rising above the commonplace and reaching up to the sublime. (Dunbar, In His Own Voice 184)

Apart from plantation songs and Negro spirituals, slaves also incorporated linguistic traditions such as “call and response” or the ring shout into newly introduced Christian rituals (Gomez 165). Lisa Green expounds upon the significant role that both speech events, such as call and response, and nonverbal communication have played in the African-American culture. Elucidating the complexity of the rules of interaction within AAVE, Green cites Walter Pitts’ characterization of the function of ritualistic frames within African-American church services containing call and response, spirituals and gospel songs:

The variation of vernacular speech and song styles that define the two distinct frames have been crucial in preserving an oral ritual for nearly three hundred years without a written liturgy. By experiencing the
contrasting moods of each frame in sequence and becoming emotionally transformed, ritual participants are restored to a state of ideological stability within a mainstream society hostile to their social, economic, and political needs. (Green 147)

The call and response element of the sermon is a rhetorical strategy central to African-American vernacular culture, signaling community and interdependence that extends into the secular environment. Whether in secular or religious contexts, the rhythmic exchange involved when the audience affirms the speaker’s utterances is a pattern that echoes the tradition of African drumming as a form of communication (Green 148).

Moreover, there is another subversive message contained within Miss Pat’s monologue. Her clear annunciation of the *th* sound when instructing passengers to replace *t* with *d*, reinforces Green’s assertion that speakers of AAVE do not make “lazy substitutions in using *t/f* and *d/v*. Rather, they use these sounds in well-defined environments. The distinction between the two *th* sounds is maintained in AAE when speakers use voiceless sounds in one environment and voiced sounds in the other” (Green 119).

Instead of an inability to produce *th* sounds, Green argues that the use of *d* for *th* follows rules that govern usage of the sounds in words, whether in initial, medial or final positions. Thus, Wolfe’s play draws attention to the manner in which AAVE has continued to serve as a powerful means of subverting institutionalized racism, undermining controlling images arising from a white power structure.
Recognizing that the issues at the center of racial identity which served as the catalyst for the *Colored Museum* are just as relevant today, Wolfe has recently produced another play. After receiving extraordinary acclaim for his productions *Jelly’s Last Jam*, *Angels in America*, and *Bring In Da Noise/Bring In Da Funk*, his latest project is as controversial as his first. It is a 2016 production about the making of the 1920s all-black musical comedy, *Shuffle Along*. Based on a blacks-in-black-face performance that drew integrated audiences, the original *Shuffle Along* featured a thin plot involving a rivalry between two black men vying for a town’s mayorship. The production boldly incorporates an on-stage love story between two African Americans, and the song “I’m Just Wild About Harry” became an immediate sensation. Indeed, the show was widely celebrated by both black and white critics.

Wolfe was motivated to write about the making of the play, in part, by his experience of walking past a monument to a fallen hero in New York. Thinking about those who took the time to raise the money and petition the city to memorialize the man honored by the statue, now unidentifiable to nearly everyone, Wolfe began to ponder the early days of black musical theater as a forgotten landmark. Wondering how something so monumentally significant as *Shuffle Along* could become relegated to a footnote of 1921, he strove to create not a revival, but rather a play about how the musical sensation came together. Three decades following *The Colored Museum*, Wolfe is still unafraid to call upon racist icons and stereotypes, including blackface and minstrel song and dance, to deliver a subversive message about the erasure of African Americans’ contributions to
The fact is that Wolfe’s rejection of the fragility of black culture has had a broad impact and been adopted by a new generation of black satirical comedians, including Key and Peele. Convinced that the purpose of satire is to help people cope with the complexities and trauma of the modern world such that nothing is out of bounds, Key and Peele write,

> When a humorist makes the conscious decision to exclude a group from derision, isn’t he or she implying that the members of that group are not capable of self-reflection? Or don’t possess the mental faculties to recognize the nuances of satire? A group that’s excluded never gets the opportunity to join in the greater human conversation...But ask yourself again what’s worse: making fun of people or assuming that they’re too weak to take it? (Key and Peele, *Time*, March 13, 2014)

Like Wolfe, Key and Peele include the topic of slavery within the scope of their comedic subjects. Their skit “The Slave Block” shows the characters played by Key and Peele become increasingly self-conscious and agitated about the fact that no one is bidding on them during a slave auction.

The scene begins with a satirical commentary on the historical justifications for slavery when the auctioneer, in 1848 Savannah, Georgia, utters “what a beautiful and blessed day for an auction.” As Key and Peele are ushered onto the auction block, they glare menacingly at the auctioneer and exchange expressions of bravado regarding how they will engage in open rebellion no matter who buys them. Peele asserts, “I don’t care
what plantation I end up on, I’m straight staging a revolt in this motherfucker,” to which Key responds, “Hells, yeah! Whoever buys me, they better kill me because I’m gonna go buck wild on the whole operation” (*Key & Peele*, “Slave Block” Season 1, Episode 3).

Nevertheless, after repeatedly being overlooked, the two begin actively competing for the title of most desirable slave. They suck in their guts and strike poses, attempting to portray themselves as the most valuable purchase. While they can console themselves with the sale of the first few men, who have a larger build and appear stronger, they become increasingly distressed when a scrawny black man and a much shorter black man are sold ahead of them. When they contest the sale of the latter because he is too small in stature to even pick cotton, a comment to which the newly sold slave takes offense, the auctioneer suspends the auction, exclaiming “Enough! I will not have my reputation tainted selling superficial, bigoted slaves” (*Key and Peele*, Season 1, Episode 3).

Key and Peele’s characters respond with a full-court press:

Peele: I’m strong y’all. Very strong. I can sleep in a bucket.

Key: I’m fast, I got stamina, and I know magic.

Peele: My worst quality is that I am a perfectionist.

Key: Did I mention this? I am agreeable to a fault. I am docile. (*Key and Peele*, Season 1, Episode 3)
The journey from resistance to accommodation is accompanied by a drastic shift in language from AAVE expressions of rebellion to a quiescent questioning in Standard English by Key, who remarks, “The whole criteria just seems a little inconsistent.”

The subversive nature of the skit is bound to be missed by some members of the audience. Yet, commenting on the sketch, Jordan Peele speaks to the same themes regarding universality with respect to the human experience referenced by Wolfe. In attempting to justify creating a comedy routine about a subject grounded in suffering based on racial discrimination, Peele remarks:

So how do you make this universally funny? How do you prove people wrong that this is not laughing at slavery, this is not about laughing at the victims of slavery and what our ancestors had to go through? The answer to me was to make it about humanity, to make it about people, and make it about something universal, and also to point out the fact that Keegan and I with this cushy life that we’ve grown up with in the late 20th century, we are not equipped for the physical and emotional fortitude to do what our ancestors did. For me, there’s a certain amount of respect that I felt like we were observing by putting ourselves in that situation, by not ‘slaving it up’ with our dialect but just using the way we talk. Really, that was the project. If we were in this situation our vanity would come into play. (“Fresh Air,” National Public Radio, March 13, 2012)

My focus is on how Key and Peele follow Wolfe’s lead, appropriating AAVE as a particular means of challenging ideological boundaries and how representations of blackness in the form of “black speech” within their work can be read as text and performance that constellate race, shame and abjection, while simultaneously expanding a post-soul agenda. The results suggest a commonality between the vernacular masking
within Key and Peele’s comedy routines around sounding black and the double masking of Dunbar’s comedic lyrics.

**Post-Soul Satire in Key and Peele: Sounding Black**

Key and Peele represent a new generation within the post-soul aesthetic, constituting a direct counter-example to Patrice Evans’s 2008 commentary regarding a dearth of satire in mainstream black culture, especially at a time when, according to Evans, racial uplift and cultural self-determination have been more important than ever. The newly emerging scholarship on the comedy of Key and Peele has centered primarily on the risks black performers face in employing satire to engage in social commentary, given historical expectations of black comedy as purely Juvenalian—completely devoid of intellectual content. Despite a substantial body of work on mediatized performances of language crossing by white performers who use African American Vernacular English, the implications of language crossing and code switching by performers who identify as black has not been sufficiently explored as a means of destabilizing the ideology of racial essentialism.

Like Dunbar, Key and Peele provide interesting insights into the notion of “adjusting one’s blackness” through the parodic employment of African American Vernacular English. Each of the skits I analyze involves rhetorical differences, code switching, or vernacular masking as a means of ideologically linking language to
categories of race through linguistic representation. For instance, in Key and Peele’s skits “The Substitute Teacher” and “The East/West Collegiate Bowl,” the pronunciation, excesses in sound, and construction of black names signal a rejection of colonialist practices that robbed blacks of their language. Thus, “J-quellen” replaces “Jacqueline” and “Aaron” becomes “A-A ron”, for an urban teacher who has taken a job in the white suburbs.

And, in the football playoff between east and west, the names of black athletes range from D’Marcus Williams, Hingle McCringleberry, Beezer Twelve Washingbeard and Tyroil Smootchie-Wallace to Torque [Construction Noise] Lewith, EEEEE EEEEEEEE, and [The player formerly known as mousecop] (Key & Peele, Season 2, Episode 2). The only white player on either team is introduced as Dan Smith from Brigham Young University. These skits highlight the ways in which language use extends beyond the communication of individual speakers’ thoughts and feelings to defining their relationships to each other and identifying themselves as part of a social group.

The real and mock African-American names in both skits also reflect the manner in which black signifying speech often mandates the use of sound in a certain way, not only to capture the syllables, but the rhythm of language. The string of names appearing in the skits that involve apostrophes, e.g., D’Marcus, D’Squarus, D’Isiah, D’Jasper, D’Glestser, etc.; the substitution of sounds for names, such as construction noise and a dolphin’s screech; and the disavowal of a name by [The player formerly known as
mousecop] each carry symbolic meaning. Citing Jennifer Devere Brody’s work on punctuation, Michelle Stephens writes in her book *Skin Acts* that:

The syncopated silences of the black letter, and therefore the black subject, are written into the text as brackets or apostrophes marking, and thereby replacing missing sounds. The apostrophe’s very name invokes its homonym, a form of poetic speech that addresses someone who is absent or imaginary, lost or dead—the lost black speaker addressing a white listener who remains unaware. (Stephens 47)

Peele acknowledges these examples of linguistic heightening as a nod to a stolen African-American culture, remarking,

Since we were renamed, and ...it feels like 80 percent of the African-American population...has the name Washington or Jefferson or some...president or slave owners name.... I almost wonder is this...part of a way of taking back the principle of naming your...kids something of your choice?” (“Fresh Air” National Public Radio, March 12, 2013)

Further, in a sequel to “The Substitute Teacher,” Key and Peele signify on the desire to find a group identity. Mr. Garvey, an African-American substitute teacher who is placed in a middle-class, predominantly white suburban school after twenty years of working in the inner city, is convinced that his students are trying to pull one over on him as a substitute:

Aaron: Mr. Garvey?

Mr. Garvey: What is it, A-aron?

Aaron: Some of us need to leave a few minutes early today.
Mr. Garvey: Oh. Oh, is that so? And what, pray tell, is the reason for this premature exodus?

Aaron: Yearbook photos. We have to leave 15 minutes early to meet with our clubs.

Mr. Garvey: All right, you know what? That might work with other substitute teachers, but I taught in the inner city for over 20 years. Now y’all want to leave my class early so y’all can go meet up at the club. Ain’t none of y’all old enough to go to the damn club–ridiculous.

Aaron: Mr. Garvey?

Mr. Garvey: Son of a bitch. Did I stut-t-t-ter?

Aaron: Just then? Yes.

Mr. Garvey: I’m going to throw you out the goddamn window. What, J-quellen?

Jacquelin: Mr. Garvey, we’re telling the truth. We have clubs at this school. We have clubs for special interests.

Mr. Garvey: Okay. What the hell club are you in, J-quellen?

Jacquelin: Future Leaders of America.

Mr. Garvey: Okay, okay. How would you know if you going to be a leader in the future? Is there a “Stargate” in your bedroom? Can you travel through time, J-quellen?

Jacquelin: No.

Mr. Garvey: Then sit the flip down. (“Fresh Air,” National Public Radio, March 12, 2013)

The skit ends with the principal announcing over the intercom that all club students should report for their photos. Mr. Garvey dismisses the call as a fake announcement and
asks whether anyone has a legitimate reason for leaving early. Tim-MO-thee, the sole African-American student in the room is promptly excused when he reports that he needs to be dismissed in order to pick up his daughter.

Beyond pointing to inequities in American secondary education along racial and class lines, the “Substitute Teacher” skits illuminate the ways in which social categories are constructed via linguistic practices. Whiteness is established not only as an identity, but also as an ideologically privileged category. Thus, these performances showcase the extent to which language is used as a marker of one’s social group membership, sense of belonging, self-concept and purpose. In the “Substitute Teacher” sketches, prosodic or suprasegmental features such as stress, which refers to accentuation or the emphasis placed on certain syllables or words, and intonation, referring to modulation or the inflection of the voice, are central.

The relevance of these prosodic or suprasegmental features to meaning and interpretation in both AAVE and Standard American English is the topic of another Key and Peele’s skit, “Text Message Confusion.” It begins with Key’s character texting a friend, “I have been trying to reach out to you all day. Are we on for tonight?” Peele’s character, who is enmeshed in video games, finally gets the message when he reaches for a bong in the couch cushions and notices the buzzing of his phone, on which he has been sitting. Saying to himself, “Oh, shoot, Keegan’s been texting me,” he responds immediately with the message, “Sorry, dude. Missed your texts. I assumed we’d meet at the bar. Whatever, I don’t care” (Key & Peele, Season 4, Episode 10).
While Peele is attempting to be accommodating by signaling that he will defer to Key’s judgment about where to meet, Key reads the text as Peele’s indifference to both the meeting and their friendship. Muttering “What the fuck is his problem” to himself, Key texts back, “Do you even want to hang out?” Yet, Peele reads this text as Key being concerned about his emotional needs and, wanting to make it as convenient as possible for his friend, responds, “Like I said, ‘whatever.’”

Now beside himself with anger, Key writes “You are fucking priceless.” Peele again interprets the message as a sign of Key’s gratitude for his being conciliatory, saying “Aww” to himself upon receiving it. Wanting to return the sentiment of valuing their friendship, Peele responds, “No, you’re the one who’s fucking priceless.”

For Key, Peele’s message constitutes “fighting words.” Utterly furious, Key texts, “You wanna go right now?” Since Peele takes Key to be referring to going to the bar instead of engaging in a battle, he writes, “Okay, first round’s mine.” Hopping mad, Key shouts to himself that there won’t be any rounds since he will finish Peele off before he has a chance to fight back. In fact, when Key walks into the bar, he is carrying a baseball bat with nails in it. Peele acknowledges Key and immediately orders a beer for himself and a vodka gimlet for his friend. He assumes that Key has fashioned the bat as a gift for him—a prop to accompany his post-apocalyptic Halloween costume.

Because the texts being sent back and forth were devoid of prosodic features, their intended meaning eluded both parties in the exchange. However, in addition to emphasizing the role of suprasegmental features in effective communication, both “The
Substitute Teacher” and “Text Message Confusion” contain allusions to interactions among black males in which dominance is based on verbal aggressiveness. Moreover, the former signals the extent to which syllabic stresses, modulation, and intonation have been linked by some to “sounding black” in pronunciations of words such as police as PO-lie rather than po-LICE.

Green confirms that the syllable initial stress pattern has been listed as a common feature of AAVE, referencing studies by Rickford and Labov in which listeners were able to identify ethnicity based on stress patterns, pronunciation, and tone of voice. While it is certainly the case that more research needs to be conducted on the notion of definitive markers of sounding black or white, the theme of sounding white in relation to identity is nevertheless a recurring one for Peele. He admits that the way he speaks is the part of his life about which he feels most insecure and is perhaps the reason it is such a frequent topic of his comedy.

Consider, for instance, the first three skits in Key and Peele’s debut episode. The show opens with a character played by Key talking on his cell phone to his wife about taking her to the theater for her birthday. As soon as another black man walks up beside him, Key’s character begins speaking in AAVE and transitions from apologizing that there are no orchestra seats remaining in the theater to asserting, “I’m gonna pick yo’ ass up at 6:30” for the “THE-A-ter.” Peele’s character, also on a cell phone, glances at Key and begins his conversation, using a “thuggish” intonation, with “What’s up dog?” However, as soon as he is out of range of Key’s character, he says to his friend in a
performatively “gay voice,” “Oh my God, Christian, I almost got totally mugged just now” (Key & Peele, Season 1, Episode 1).

The opening dialogue that follows includes commentary on the challenges Key and Peele face as black men who need to adjust their blackness in order not to sound “too white.” Joking that they sound whiter than “the only black dude in the college a cappella group” and whiter than “Mitt Romney in a snow storm,” they confess to ramping up their AAVE whenever they are around “other brothas and sistahs” (Key & Peele, Season 1, Episode 1). Admitting that “you never want to be the whitest sounding black guy in the room,” they perform blackness in a manner that transitions from exclamations of “You know what I’m talkin’ about” and “You know I know what you talkin’ ‘bout” to “no doubt, not doubt, not doubt...,” with accompanying hand gestures (Key & Peele, Season 1, Episode 1).

The third skit in the opening sequence, “I Said, Bitch,” depicts two African-American couples getting together socially, with the men complaining privately about their wives always making them late and being indecisive about their restaurant choices. The men perform blackness in a manner that underscores the stereotype of African-American men being incapable of separating race pride from anxieties about their masculinity (M.A. Neal 6). Thus, they each claim, “I said, bitch....” in response to perceived indignities suffered in marriage. Yet, before using the word “bitch,” in every instance, they look around to ensure that their wives are not within earshot. The skit, which shows Key and Peele’s characters in a variety of increasing remote locations and
still concerned about being overheard, ends by showing the two men on a space shuttle, with Peele’s character on a space-walk, looking around before the utterance, “I said, bitch” (Key & Peele, Season 1, Episode 1).

“I Said, Bitch” signifies on the ways in which AAVE is both highly metaphorical and imaginistic. While hip-hop and other markers of the black oral tradition may posit the phenomenon of verbal aggressiveness from black males toward black woman as a symbol of black authenticity, Key and Peele challenge black masculinity as entailing misogyny. Terms such as “bitch,” when rooted in the black cultural experience, have semantics which depend not only on the immediate linguistic context, but on the socio-historical context, as well (Smitherman 62). This skit attacks monolithic presentations of the black male, while simultaneously aligning Key and Peele’s characters with the black community through genuine natural language use.

Instead of sounding like “the whitest white dude” or speaking like a “‘Def Comedy Jam’ comedian doing an impression of a white guy,” in “I Said, Bitch,” the male characters engage in a “more casual black dialect,” using crossing in constructed dialogue to create a double-voiced effect. Key and Peele maintain that:

To not make fun of something is, we believe, itself a form of bullying. When a humorist makes the conscious decision to exclude a group from derision, isn’t he or she implying that the members of that group are not capable of self-reflection? Or don’t possess the mental faculties to recognize the nuances of satire? A group that’s excluded never gets the opportunity to join the greater human conversation. (M. Wright)
Nevertheless, Peele admits, “The question that really keeps me up at night the most is what about that one black guy who’s in an all-white town, and he’s at a bar. And what if one of our sketches comes on that pokes fun at part of the African-American culture and he’s already in an environment where he’s the butt of jokes?” (Kumar) Peele adds, “The ultimate mission is to cure that very phenomenon,” with Key chiming in,

My hope would be that the dialogue at the bar would be like, ‘Well Darnell, does that happen?’ I would love for Darnell to go, ‘Well aren’t you afraid of your wife?’ Men are afraid of their wives. That’s a human thing. Black men aren’t afraid of their wives in a different way” (Kumar).

The motif of the universality of certain human experiences and the myth of “sounding black” as linked to masculinity is something to which Key and Peele return in their first full-length feature movie, *Keanu*.

**Key and Peele Get Gangsta**

The parodic adoption of the guise of the gansta through the performance of AAVE is the focus of the film, released in April of 2016. *Keanu* is the story or two cousins who attempt to infiltrate a gang, the Seventeenth Street Blips (formed by gang members who were kicked out of the Bloods and the Crips), in order to recover a kidnapped cat. Peele plays Rell Williams, an African-American man who is struggling to find a reason to live after his girlfriend Maisie leaves him. He finds that reason when a stray cat he names “Keanu” appears on his doorstep. When Keanu is kidnapped by drug
dealers, Rell and his cousin, Clarence Goobril, go undercover as gang members Tectonic and Shark Tank.

The code-switching in the movie strikes many of the same themes as Key and Peele’s television comedy sketches. For instance, on the way to Seventeenth Street, Rell chastises Clarence for listening to a George Michael compact disc in the car, telling him they should be listening to N.W.A. (Niggaz Wit Attitudes). And, when a police car pulls up beside them, Rell says, “Roll on Po-Po.”

When they get to the headquarters of the Blips, a strip club called “Hot Party Vixens” (HPV), they loosen their belts in an attempt to wear their pants low-slung. Yet, inside, Clarence has trouble playing the part of a gangsta and orders a white wine spritzer at the bar. Rell gestures urgently, “Clarence, Clarence, Clarence! You can’t talk like that in here! You sound like Richard Pryor doing an impersonation of a white guy.” Clarence retorts, “Then we really are in trouble because you sound like John Ritter all the time.” Lowering his vocal register, Rell objects, “Well, I beg to differ nigger,” and though Clarence protests, “You went right to the n-word,” when they are challenged by two members of the Seventeenth Street Blips about whether they are in the right place, Clarence barks “Yeah, we in the right place, niggas” (Keanu, Warner Bros.).

In an effort to gain entrance to the Blip’s social circle, Clarence and Rell transform from the “whitest sounding black guys” to caricatures of the urban black gansta thug. However, when they meet Cheddar, the leader of the Seventeenth Street Blips, he calls them out as “a couple of bitch ass niggers” (Keanu). To prove their masculinity,
Clarence and Rell claim to be the killers of the leader and other members of the Allentown Gang. This gains Tectonic and Shark Tank respect, but in exchange for Keanu, they must agree to mentor some members of the Blips in carrying out a drug deal.

The dialogue demonstrates to the audience that Rell and Clarence lack the shared experience that would allow them to be included as authentic members of the gangsta community. While Rell is engaged in the drug deal with Hi-C, the only female member of the gang who is present, Clarence is in the car with two other members of the Blips comparing scars. One of the Blips was stabbed when he was 23 and another was shot by his grandmother after she learned from the television that he robbed a store. Clarence, on the other hand, had to resort to showing his appendix scar, which he claims was the result of the organ being removed during a gang fight.

Like their skit “The Phone Call,” the movie sets up Key’s character as quickly moving from a thuggish “Shit, what you think my idea of fun was,” when his wife learns he is at a strip club, to an apologetic, “I like to talk like that sometimes,” when she confronts him about his stylization. It is a scene that establishes Clarence as one whose daily interactions do not involve AAVE and who is attempting to perform blackness in a manner that meets societal expectations regarding racialist stereotypes.

In a *New York Times* article by Dave Itzkoff on the release of the film, Key contends that they sought to counter the misconception that African-American culture is a monolith, without denying a shared experience. He maintains, “In my life, it has been frustrating when someone says, ‘You’re not black enough.’ And I’m going: I am black
enough not to get that cab you also didn’t get. They didn’t pick me up either” (Itzkoff 14). The rejection of a monolithic black culture and affirmation of blackness as a performance strategy is enhanced with the introduction of a white, low-level pot dealer named Hulka, played by Will Forte, who is obsessed with black hip-hop culture. Like Eminem, Hulka’s performance is not a matter of passing and is consistent with the way in which he authentically lives his life.

When asked whether they were worried about being criticized for having the drug dealers and gang members in the film be clichés, Peele said, “That’s kind of the point of the movie,” as Key chimed in, “You have to be able to set up a stereotype to knock it down” (Itzkoff 14). In fact, though Key and Peele employ dialogue representing a highly performative, over-exaggerated mock language containing well-entrenched stereotypes of blacks, they avoid lapsing into linguistic minstrelsy through their use of parody in a manner that misses their linguistic target on some occasions, while hitting it on others and then immediately discarding the target as a means of upending notions of racial essentialism.

**Appropriating Linguistic Minstrelsy**

The authentic nature of code switching by Key and Peele partially rests on the epistemic authority that comes with their looking black. Nevertheless, it also derives from their contestation of racial stereotypes through irony, parody, and satire. In the opening
skit of their television show, both men feel compelled to perform blackness through linguistic maneuvers that demonstrate masculinist, misogynistic traits. Society’s racist and sexist identification of authentic blackness with thugism is signified on when Peele’s character claims to have almost been mugged simply because he heard another black man using AAVE.

The pressure to sound African American in order to be considered authentically black continues as a focus in the first episode, signifying on the concept of authentic blackness as reducible to an African primitivism in the minds of whites. Their coded message is showcased as the one-upping around the use of black language by Key and Peele reverts to Masai jumping rituals and other African ethnic dances amidst a reference to the African choral group Ladysmith Black Mambazo.

A concomitant message regarding black authenticity as reducible to the language and culture of Southern black life can be found in the skit “Soul Food,” in which Key and Peele play two businessmen having lunch at Mama Sugarback’s Soul Food diner. After talking about how pleased they are to be bringing business to the kind of neighborhood in which they were raised, Key and Peele’s characters begin ordering food that they believe represents their roots as authentic black folk. Their progression from chicken fried steak and baby back ribs with corn bread to collard greens, ham hocks, pig’s feet and grits is accompanied by increasing Southern black dialect that incorporates phrases such as “Ya’ll gotta hook a brotha up with....” The scene ends with their feigning enjoyment as they eat food that includes a human foot, a possum spine, a bucket of mosquitos, fish
heads with rusty wire wrapped around them, a dog face, and an old cellar door with gravy.

The food they proceed to consume is taken to an extreme and is intended as absurd. When they joke, “What’s a cellar door without gravy? It’s not food,” they highlight the fact that racist structures have denied African Americans access to nutritious food, forcing them to make do with whatever is available. Yet, there is another linguistic joke contained in the mix. The phrase “cellar door” is often cited as containing among the most euphonious words. From H.L Mencken to J.R.R. Tolkien, the phrase has been considered pleasing to the ear (Barrett). Perhaps more linguistic folklore than fact, language is once again inserted by Key and Peele as central to claims of black authenticity.

Rooted in black pride, the code switching these characters engage in is intended to communicate that they have not lost their blackness in the move up the corporate ladder into the upper-middle class. The message is reminiscent of Dunbar’s comedic warning to blacks, using the performance of the cakewalk to the song “Possum is De Best Meat After All,” not to eviscerate black culture through the emulation of whites seeking aristocratic status. But, Key and Peele are also pointing to the absurdity of reducing African-American culture to stereotyped depictions of “authentic” black food. Their skit makes clear that just as an attributed affinity for chicken and watermelons can be traced to portrayals of African Americans eating these foods in the racist film *The Birth of a Nation*, the socio-political reasons for identifying blacks with certain cultural norms must
continue to be interrogated.

The comedians report their own engagement with reflection on the association of code-switching with authenticity outside of their sketches. Peele speaks black vernacular in his real-life relationship with Key, who confirms that when together they enter “a more urban space, in a way, yeah” (“Fresh Air,” National Public Radio, March 12, 2013). He says,

When I walk around with, like, a black friend, like you, I start, I start talking a little bit more thug— ‘cause, you know. Because we need the extra power. We need this to make one full black person. We need this. So, you know. It’s gotta be right about— this level right...Yeah, all right.” (“Fresh Air,” National Public Radio, November 12, 2013)

They need the extra power not only to feel at home with other blacks, but because it is this same urban space that symbolizes the over-policing of black bodies. For this reason, Peele tells “Fresh Air” host Terry Gross that his fear of the police prompts him out of his black dialect:

I’m scared of cops. I-I mean, I’m generally afraid of cops.... So... if a cop comes up to me on the street and [asks], ‘Hey, what are you guys doing?’ I-I turn into fucking Ned Flanders. It’s all, ‘Hi-dee-oh. Doing just fine. Just walking down the street on a stroll, my friend. Come on, follow me. We’ll find some criminals together, let’s do it.’” (Key & Peele, Season 2, Episode 9)

In talking about his reaction to police presence, Peele separates himself as far as he can from black masculinity with his appropriation of the persona of Ned Flanders. Flanders is a mild-mannered, white Evangelical Christian character on the animated television series
This rhetorical move indexes AAVE to blackness and masculinity. At the same time, it challenges the link between blackness and violence by drawing attention to racial profiling that extends to “sounding black.” The discursive construction of whiteness is made visible through juxtaposition with stereotyped blackness. In such cases, according to Erving Goffman, quotation is used as a process “of protecting an image of someone not oneself while preventing viewers from forgetting even for a moment that an alien animator is at work” (Goffman 534).

Language as a vehicle for representation and the desire for community is the subject of yet another Key and Peele’s skit, “A Cappella Club.” Troy, played by Peele, is troubled when Key’s character, Mark, another African-American student, arrives for tryouts in the otherwise all-white singing group:

Mark: Hey, is this where the a cappella group meets?

Lyle: Oh, hey, Mark.

Mark: Hey, Lyle.

Lyle: What’s going on, buddy? Mark, get over here.

Mark: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Lyle: Guys, this is my buddy, Mark. He just transferred from Minnesota. I thought he could sit in on a few practices. I don't know, maybe join the group?
Mark: Maybe.

Lyle: (chuckles) All right, guys. Let’s do ‘Always Been My Girl’ again, from the top. (*Key & Peele*, Season 5, Episode 3)

After Mark sings, in response to his improvisation, Lyle exclaims, “Mark, that was out of this world.” Mark uses the same expression of false modesty uttered by Troy when he was praised, “It just came to me, so I went with it,” and when the white members of the club leave, the two black men turn to AAVE in a face off. Removing their metaphorical masks, Troy moves from a Ned Flanders-like farewell, shouting “See you later, alligators,” when the other members of the group are about to leave, to engaging in a caricatured performance of thugism when alone with Mark:

Troy: (ominous music) The fuck you think you doin’, nigga?

Mark: I’m doing my thing, nigga. The fuck you doin’?

Troy: See, this is my seven white boys, nigga.

Mark: (scoffs) You need to back the fuck up. I’m ‘bout to get mine.

Troy: Fuck that, nigga. Do you have any idea how long it took for me to infiltrate this group, nigga? Twenty-five minutes. You think I’m gonna roll over for some falsetto-ass mo’fucka? (scoffs)

Mark: Well, you know what, nigga? White boys is gonna do what white boys is gonna do. And if they want to run with a high-ass-singing falsetto, nigga, then that’s on them.

Troy: Oh, that’s on them, then? Oh, that’s on them, then. Okay, so it’s like that?
Mark: Oh, it’s so like that.

Troy: Well, watch your back, nigga! Okay, watch your back, nigga! ’Cause you fuck with my shit, I’ll fuck with your shit, nigga! (echoing) (*Key & Peele, Season 3, Episode 5*)

The battle ends when Mark is shown performing in an improvisation class, getting laughs with the line “Why the cat have to be black?” in response to the prompt of a black cat crossing the road. Just as Mark takes a stance as if he is holding something over his shoulder, Troy walks in unexpectedly, freezes the action, and steals the show with the line “Man, I guess I got to put my dick away” (*Key & Peele, Season 3, Episode 5*).

The gesture of seemingly placing his penis over his shoulder with a minstrel affect is the death blow to Mark’s attempts to infiltrate the white space of the classroom and the white *a cappella* group. It becomes clear that adding a Motown spin to the music is insufficient. What is necessary is a full-on performance of minstrel stereotypes of black masculinity that reduce African Americans to their caricatured bodies. The final screen shot is a public service message paid for by the “Citizens Against Black-on-Black Crime”—a reminder of the white appropriation of hip-hop culture and the ways in which blacks have been forced to perform thugism for an audience dominated by young, white men.
Playing the Dozens

“The A Cappella Group” employs multiple verbal strategies, including marking, in which the speaker imitates the words and actions of another in a manner that diminishes the other speaker, and woofing or boasting. The black masculinist battle for respect using language and verbal jockeying as an essential component of black culture was also featured in their television sketch “Yo’ Mama Has Health Problems,” in which Key and Peele use another rhetorical strategy—that of playing the dozens.

In The Dozens: A History of Rap’s Mama, Elijah Wald explores the dozens as a linguistic component of African-American culture. Tracing the history of the expression in popular culture to the opening verse of a 1921 song by Chris Smith, “Don’t Slip Me in the Dozen Please,” Wald cites, among others, the definition offered by Charles Johnson in a 1941 American Council on Education publication, Growing Up in the Black Belt:

The ‘Dozens’ is one form of ‘talking’ recreation often engaged in by rural boys. It is usually played by two boys before an appreciative, interested audience. The object of the game is to speak of the opponent’s mother in the most derisive terms possible. Many boys know long series of obscene ditties and verses concerning the immoral behavior of the mother of the one whom they are ‘putting in the dozens,’ and they sometimes recite for hours without interruption. (Wald x)

Like other definitions of the dozens, this one highlights the degree to which the subtexts of language are understood by virtue of a shared experience and body of knowledge.

Lines in the dozens are referred to as “snaps,” and Key and Peele use this type of call and response both to illustrate the importance of this ritualized verbal contest in black culture.
culture and to interrogate its usefulness. The dozens are fought before a crowd that serves
as witness, judge, and mechanism to spread the word about the victor. Thus, “Yo Mama
has Health Problems” opens with Mr. Lewis, played by Peele, and a group of his friends
meeting with the Indian doctor of Lewis’s mother:

Doctor: Mr. Lewis, thank you for coming in, with your associates. I know
this is hard to hear, but we need to make some serious decisions
about your mother’s health. Let’s be honest: she is getting on in
years.

Lewis: Oooh! Slammed. Okay, I see how it is. I see how it is. Well, yo
mama so old, her last name is O’Saurus.

Doctor: No, no, Mr. Lewis. It, it wasn’t an insult. I, I was just saying that
your mother’s condition is deteriorating because she’s getting
older.

Lewis: Oooh! See, that’s cold, Doc. That’s a cold one. Okay, okay. I see
how it is. Hey, ya, yo mama so old, in her history class, they just
wrote down what her was doing.

Doctor: Mr. Lewis, this isn’t about an insult contest. Not only is your
mother elderly, but also her ability to walk is currently being
affected by her weight.

Lewis: Oooh! See-Okay. It just got real.

Doctor: No, I’m not insulting her. I’m trying to tell you—

Lewis: Yo mama is so fat when she go to the movie theater, bitch
sits next to everyone.

Doctor: Listen to me, okay? Your mother needs to manage her
weight, or there can be some real problems.

Lewis: O-o-o-o-o-kay! All right, yeah, yeah! Yo mama is so fat she need a
latitude and longitude number to find her own asshole! Look at his
face! —Give it to me. That’s coordinates. Coordinates. Now,
who’s— the doctor?

Doctor: I am the doctor, Mr. Lewis, I am. And it is my job to make sure that your mother is getting the care that she needs. We are talking about the woman who took care of you your whole life. The least you can do is take care of her in her old age, and take this seriously.

Lewis: I’m sorry. I’m sorry that I lost my temper. No, really, doctor. I guess I was just joking around, because I know her condition is very serious, and I don’t know, I guess humor is the only way I can really deal with it. I just know that she said so many times she doesn’t want anything invasive done.

Doctor: Really? I was not aware of that. That’s interesting because she did not mention that to me in our previous conversation. Of course, it was difficult to hear her with my dick in her mouth. Snap, Mr. Lewis. Oooh, Snap! Now, let’s talk about the procedures. (Key & Peele, Season 1, Episode 2)

In this scene, each of the elements of the dozens is played out, with the final snap silencing the opponent. Wald maintains that “Like blues, jazz, and African American preaching, the dozens mixes immediacy and affection with a deep affection for tradition” (Wald 9). Contending that African-American comedy has been almost as powerful a force as African-American music in shaping the nation’s culture, he suggests that “much of its improvisational speed and biting edge comes out of the verbal dueling [of the dozens]” (Wald 180).

Rather than being reduced to a random exchange of crude and vulgar insults,
Wald portrays the dozens as a complex system of rules, where improvisational rhyming, as Houston Baker asserts, transforms black language into a performing art (Wald 179).

Wald attempts to capture the cultural impact of the creative process of playing the dozens by quoting Amiri Baraka, who writes:

The lesson? The importance of language and invention. The place of innovation. The heaviness of “high speech” and rhythm. And their use. Not in abstract literary intaglios but on the sidewalk (or tar) in the playground, with everything at stake, even your ass. How to rhyme. How to reach in your head to its outermost reaches. How to invent and create. Your mother’s a man—Your father’s a woman. Your mother drink her own bath water—Your mother drink other people’s. Your mother wear combat boots—Your mother don’t wear no shoes at all with her country ass, she just come up here last week playin a goddam harmonica. Or the rhymed variations. I fucked your mama under a tree, she told everybody she wanted to marry me. —I fucked your mama in the corner saloon, people want to know was I fucking a baboon. Or: Your mother got a dick—Your mother got a dick bigger than your father’s! Point and Counterpoint. Shot and Countershot. One and One Up. (Wald 180)

The language innovation and use within AAVE, to which Baraka refers, also relates to the lexicon of words. In addition to the inclusion of verbal markers such as aspectual be, indicating how an event is carried out, there is a variety of terms and phrases originating in black vernacular that gain and lose currency. Recent examples include “bae,” “thot,” “ratchet,” “on fleek,” and “twerk,” all of which have become mainstream, creating controversy regarding continued appropriation of language by dominant groups.

The fact that certain words and phrases, and their misogynistic connotations, have
specialized meaning within AAVE is the topic of Key and Peele’s skit “Pussy on the Chain Wax.” Yet, the scenario also highlights the ways in which introductions into the lexicon of AAVE do not necessarily cross age, class, and regional groups.

Key and Peele’s characters are engaged in a game of pool with two other African Americans. Key is bragging about winning a fight and is challenged by Peele as to whether he truly dominated:

Key: That [bleep got a couple licks in, sure. But pfft, I was like, bip! [laughter] Man, I put the pussy on the chain wax.
(With his two other friends howling) I put the— (in unison) pussy on the chain wax. I put the pussy on the chain wax.

Peele: Pussy on the chain wax? Is that a thing?

After insisting repeatedly that he put the pussy on the chain wax, Peele counters,

Peele: I just, um Googled ‘pussy on the chain wax.’ No results.

Key: Man, um, why are you Googling?

Peele: No, I’m just saying. ‘Pussy on the chain wax,’ it’s not an expression.

Despite Key’s inability to explain what it means, and the admission by his friends that they have never used the expression, he persists, and Peele accuses Key of trying “to start a thing”:
Peele: A thing like ‘off the hook’ or ‘I’m a put you on blast’. You trying to get it in ether, so everybody out there saying ‘pussy on the chain wax.’

When Key refuses to abandon the expression, Peele explodes with anger. In response, Key asks,

Why do you care so much whether I made up ‘pussy on the chain wax’ or not? I lost my job. My girl left me. And all I w— all I wanted to do was have a little bit of fun with my friends today. So why— why do you ha— why do you have to belittle me like that?

Peele: It’s just that I—yeah? I’m just trying to say—I'm trying to say that I want to put the pussy…

All: On the chain wax! (Key & Peele, Season 3, Episode 13)

By having Peele acquiesce to his friend’s empty phrase, the comedians indicate the power of language, and of in-group crossover lingo in particular, to bring groups together in a show of solidarity. This symbolism is undermined when the terms become appropriated by outgroups, making it necessary to continuously revise AAVE.

**Giving Dap and Other Forms of Nonverbal Communication**

Community created through AAVE extends beyond what is vocalized, however, into nonverbal forms of communication. Eye movements, neck and head movements, and
hand gestures are used to express emotions and attitudes that can reinforce or undercut what is being communicated verbally. “Giving dap,” a particular type of nonverbal communication used as a show of solidarity or sign of agreement with an individual, is highlighted in Key and Peele’s skit “Obama Meet and Greet.”

The origins of giving dap can be traced to the 1960s when the “Bloods,” black soldiers stationed in the Pacific during the Vietnam War, used the gestures as a symbol of unity and protest at a time of racial turmoil. African-American men were being drafted in large numbers, and reports of black soldiers being shot by whites during combat, combined with violent suppression of black protestors at home. Since the military had banned the Black Power salute and other signs of black protest, the “dignity and pride” (dap) symbol became a commitment to black solidarity—a promise to protect one another. The gestures conveyed the sentiments “I’m not above you, you’re not above me, we’re side by side, we’re together” (Hamilton). Dap was both banned as a form of insurrection by the military at one point during the war and welcomed as a form of therapy for black soldiers at another. Intergenerational and regional differences resulted in the development of complex and diverse systems of daps associated with each military company.

Fist pumping, chest and back thumping, special handshakes, and other ritual greetings that fall under the category of giving dap are featured when the president, played by Peele, is introduced to members of the audience following a speech. Each white person is greeted with a formal handshake, including an infant whom the president...
addresses as “Miss Ruggie.” In contrast, every black person in the crowd is given either a hug or a “black man’s handshake,” consisting of grabbing the other’s hand, pulling one another into the sides of each other’s chest, and pounding the other on the back:

Obama Staffer: This is John O’Rourke.

President Obama: Nice to meet you, John.

Obama Staffer: Mr. Ian Roberts.

President Obama: Nice to meet you.

Obama Staffer: Peter Atencio.

President Obama: All right. Nice to meet you.

Obama Staffer: Jerome Smith.

President Obama: (giving a black man’s handshake) Come on, bro, what’s up fam? You know this.

Obama Staffer: Keith Williamson.

President Obama: Nice to meet you.

Obama Staffer: Mary Woodbury.

President Obama: Nice to meet you.

Obama Staffer: Jay Martel.

President Obama: Nice to meet you, sir.
Obama Staffer: Tasha Robbins.

President Obama: (gesturing for a hug) Come on, come on, come on. Feel that?

Obama Staffer: Emily George.

President Obama: All right. Nice to meet you.

Obama Staffer: Gerald Stokes.

President Obama: (giving a black man’s handshake and pounding his chest with his fist) Come on. What’s up fam? How you doing? All right. I’ll never forget about that ‘cause that’s all we got!

President Obama: (greeting a white man) Nice to meet you.

President Obama greeting three African Americans: Ahhhh…. bring it in, bring it in. Start from the bottom, now we’re here. Yeah.

President Obama: Nice to meet you. All right.

President Obama: Nice to meet you. All right.

President Obama: Nice to meet you.

Obama Staffer: (looking at Key’s character) He’s 1/8th black.

President Obama: (Hugging and pounding on the back) Good afternoon, my octaroon! Come on, bring it in here. Tuck that.

Key’s character: (Pounding the president on the back with his fist) I’m in it, I’m
in it, I’m in it.

President Obama: (continuing to pat him on the back with his fist) You tucking in there? What you tucked up? What are you tucked up?

Key’s character: (continuing to pat) I’m there, I’m there, I’m there.

President Obama: All right, nice to meet you man.

President Obama: Nice to meet you.

President Obama: (taking an African-American baby from her mother’s arms) Oh, my goodness, look at this. Oh, she is so beautiful. Mmmm…I want another one. There you go, precious, beautiful, beautiful.

President Obama: (approaching a white woman and her baby) What’s her name?

White mother: This is Olivia Ruggie.

President Obama: Okay. Nice to meet you Ms. Ruggie. All right.

President Obama: (greeting a black man with a chest bump) Come on. There he is, boom. All right. Very good to meet you.

President Obama: (nodding to a whites in line) All right, here we go.

Obama Staffer: Right this way, sir.
In this skit, Obama’s code switching involves more than the language he uses and carries over into the ways in which his gestures signal group identity—a tactic also employed in a series of skits known as “The Obama Translator.”

**Translating Obama**

Centering on the use of AAVE in performing blackness, “The Obama Translator” is a recurring sketch in which a character named “Luther” accompanies the President in each of his weekly addresses to the American public, in order to express the anger Obama hides. In the introductory skit, “Meet Luther,” President Obama attempts to disavow the perception that he does not get angry, maintaining rather that he simply expresses his passions differently. Luther serves as Obama’s “angry black man,” translating the president’s enjoinder to the governments of Iran and North Korea “to discontinue your uranium enrichment program,” into “Eighty-six your shit, bitches, or I’m gonna come over there and do it fo’ yo’all. Test me, and see what happens.” When Obama mentions the Tea Party, Luther begins his tirade with, “Don’t even get me started on these motherfuckers right here” (*Key & Peele, Season 1, Episode 1*).

Understanding how dangerous it is for a black man in America to express anger, Obama is forced to mask his true feelings and employ an anger translator. The persona taken on by Obama as played by Peele is redolent of Dunbar’s poem, “We Wear the Mask.” The first two stanzas of the poem comment on the lived experience of African
Americans forced to hide behind a facade created by white expectations:

We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes, —
This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile
And mouth with myriad subtleties,
Why should the world be over-wise,
In counting all our tears and sighs?
Nay, let them only see us, while
We wear the mask (Dunbar, *Lyrics of Lowly Life* 167).

While Obama remains emotionless behind the mask, his translator becomes increasingly angry at the hard white racialist frame adopted by his political opponents and the mainstream media. The coded transcript of black life is hidden as the authentic black core underlying the translation chafes against the mask of popular culture that he must wear.

There are similarities between the mask Obama has been forced to wear and Dunbar’s use of dialect. For as Elston Carr, Jr. argues in “Minstrelsy and the Dialect Poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar,” Dunbar’s dialect poetry reflected an experimentation with the dramatic possibilities of hyperbolic black speech as both a conscious and unconscious projection of “a nation imagining and fantasizing blackness as a means of self-definition” (Carr 51). In asking why Dunbar chose to write using “manufactured dialect that perpetuates the performance of black speech as caricature,” Carr suggests that perhaps there can be no single answer (Carr 56). In the following chapter, I offer one response to Carr’s question by drawing parallels between the psycho-social context of Dunbar’s comedic lyrics and that of the comedic performances of Key and Peele.
centering on AAVE. In particular, Key and Peele’s satirical use of AAVE contributes to a revisionist brand of counter-hegemonic, post-soul black comedy that mirrors how instances of syncopation, rhythmic accents, and eye dialects used by Dunbar in his comedic “coon songs”, can be viewed as creating a separate black modernist tradition in its critique of white modernism.
CHAPTER V

NEGROTOWN: “WHERE EVAH DAHKEY IS A KING”

“Unless we live our lives of protest, and few of us are willing to do that, we are as guilty as the lynchers of the South—we are all tarred with the same stick.”—Paul Laurence Dunbar in a letter to Brand Whitlock, December 26, 1900.

“I’m Talkin’ ‘Bout Negrotown”

Nowhere is the parallel between Key and Peele and Dunbar more evident than when comparing the comedians’ skit, “Negrotown” to Dunbar’s musical comedies. “Negrotown” is a social commentary on police responses to black bodies in public spaces in the U.S. and to the prison industrial complex as the new Jim Crow. In the aftermath of the high-profile police killings of African Americans Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, Walter Scott, Freddie Gray, and others, Key portrays an innocent black man arrested by a white officer in a neighborhood subject to over-surveillance. When the officer smashes Key’s head into the hood of the police cruiser, he is transported to Negrotown, escorted by an indigent black man he passed in an alley, played by Peele, who is now transformed into the black dandy of minstrel performances. Using “coon-song” dialect, Peele sings and dances in an all-black musical cast harkening back to the days of the black musicals, A Trip to Coontown, written by Bob Cole and In
Dahomey and Clorindy, or The Origin of the Cakewalk, for which Dunbar wrote the
lyrics. It also signifies on white country artist Johnny Rebel’s 1969 racist anthem
“Coontown.”

Peele explains to Key, “It’s the place to be if your skin is brown/I’m talking about
Negrotown” (Key & Peele, Season 5, Episode 11). This place is a world in which cabs
stop for black people, there is no sickle cell anemia, where blacks can hang out together
without being considered a gang, no white people ask if they can touch black people’s
hair, blacks can get their loans approved, whites don’t appropriate black culture and
claim it is their own, and where black men of all shades rain down and there are no
“white bitches” trying to steal them away. Unlike the incident at the beginning of the skit,
in Negrotown, a black person can walk down the street without getting “stopped,
harassed or beat.” Peele assures Key, “You won’t get followed when you try to shop/You
can wear your hoodie and not get shot/No trigger-happy cops or scared cashiers” (Key &
Peele, Season 5, Episode 11).

Incredulous, Key interrupts Peele’s singing and dancing with the exclamation, “I
think I get it. It’s like a utopia for black people,” adding “This just sounds too good to be
true.” Using syncopation and AAVE as a signifying technique, Peele interjects, “Can a
nigga finish a song? I mean can...a nigga...finish?” As Key soon discovers, it is too good
to be true. When he awakens from his dream state after being knocked unconscious by
the white police officer, Key asks “What happened to Negrotown?” As he carts Key off
to jail, the officer snidely assures him that he is on his way to Negrotown all right (Key &
An Alternative Black Utopia: “Hell Yeah!”

The type of resistive message to police violence against blacks contained in this skit’s utopian vision can be contrasted with those offered by performers such as dead prez in their 2004 music video “Hell Yeah!” “Hell Yeah!” depicts a group of “gangsta thugs” in Miami who commit a carjacking when a white family gets lost in their neighborhood. Stealing the family’s video camera, the day in their lives they record signifies on the commodification of black bodies by white consumers and the creation of a white voyeuristic gaze which relegates blacks to the status of “the other.” The images that are captured represent white stereotypes of urban black life, which include prostitutes, drugs, welfare fraud, credit card scams, and the theft and brutalization of a pizza delivery man as a warning to all whites who invade their space.

The counternarrative offered by dead prez frames the appropriation of these racist stereotypes as revolutionary—one in which the crimes are justified acts of subversion. Thus, the artist, who speaks of modern day slave wages, no electricity, and no reparations, issues a call to action to fight against a system that perpetuates black oppression, rapping, “It’s a deadly struggle/we all gotta hustle/this is the way to survive” (dead prez, “Hell Yeah!”).

These images of urban black life conform to white stereotypes, and when the men...
are arrested in the end by police officers wearing pig masks, there is a further commentary that the legacies of slavery are reinforced by the prison industrial complex which makes incarcerated black youth political prisoners. The closing scene of the video offers a Garveyesque vision of utopia in which the black narrator awakens frightened from a dream, surrounded by women in an African paradise. The dialogue is in an unidentified African language, translated using English subtitles. One of the women asks, “What’s wrong with my husband?” The man replies, “I was having a very, very bad dream. We were in another country. In a foreign land, and we had nothing. I mean nothing.” His wife then attempts to comfort him by saying, “Look around, my love, we are right here. Are you okay now?” The response, this time in English, is “Hell Yeah!” (dead prez, “Hell Yeah!”).

Dead prez’s black utopian vision is an African nationalist one. It is a world without whites, and one in which women’s autonomy is subordinated to black male desire. In this way, dead prez is rejecting both white and black middle class values and turning morality on its head. It calls into question progress toward a post-racial world by showcasing white supremacist ideologies that are perpetuated and rewarded by the existing power structures. But at the same time, the video promotes equally oppressive hegemonic forces related to patriarchy and the sexual and economic oppression of women.
Emancipatory Racial Humor

Key and Peele equally challenge assertions of progress toward a post-racial world through “Negrotown,” delivering subversive messages about institutionalized racism and the socio-political environment for blacks using a less revolutionary approach. Peele contends, “There’s this narrative that [black people] are victims. And…I think Keegan and I are ready to sort of reject the idea that now, African Americans are still victims….” (Fresh Air, National Public Radio, March 13, 2012). Thus, despite their satirical critique of social norms, there is an avoidance of overt negativity, self-pity, and violence in response to racial oppression that comes with their appeal to humor.

This type of humor has been identified by Jonathan Paul Rossing as an essential element in promoting social activism in support of racial justice. For Rossing, humor possesses a unique capacity to humanize each party in the struggle. This humanistic identification holds the potential to both awaken new perspectives in a manner that challenges the status quo and to inspire the hope and optimism necessary to continue the struggle in the face of daunting obstacles (Rossing, “Dick Gregory” 60).

Rossing illustrates humor’s capacity to create nonthreatening spaces that facilitate the contestation of cultural authority by recounting a routine performed by African-American comedian Dick Gregory in 1961 to an audience of white Southerners. Gregory opens with the story of being turned away at a restaurant by owners who announce, “We don’t serve coloreds here,” to which the comedian responds, “That’s fine ‘cause I don’t eat them! I’ll have the fried chicken.” This polysemic humor encourages the audience to
look for double meanings and adopt new perspectives on social norms without stigmatizing those who may have sided politically with the restauranteurs.

The linguistic ambiguity of which Gregory takes advantage is also the basis for much of comedy built around AAVE in Key and Peele and in Dunbar. The use of double-meaning in reference to “Negrotown,” connoting either a black utopia or the site of continued racist oppression perpetuated by the criminal justice system, draws attention to an urgent social issue in a way that encourages the entire audience to rise to a new level of social understanding. The goal is the establishment of new cultural norms through humor, accomplished without alienating the audience.

Indeed, the brand of comedy that Dunbar engaged in with his “coon songs,” like the comedy of Key and Peele in “Negrotown,” falls into the category of what Rossing considers to be emancipatory racial humor—a type of critical public pedagogy of disruption that confronts and disarms racial hegemony through the introduction of destabilizing counternarratives. The analysis Rossing offers is Gramscian in its emphasis on hegemony, recognizing popular culture as “a contested educational space with significant political force” (Rossing, “Emancipatory Racial Humor” 3).

Public culture’s prevailing messages and discursive practices are constitutive elements of dominant public pedagogy, which are often challenged by artists and performers, including comedians. The emancipatory nature of such contestations results from their capacity, through interrogation and critique, to reveal social injustices and the practices that perpetuate these transgressions within the dominant culture.
Elucidating comedy’s unique potential to redirect how people view the world, Rossing appeals to Joseph Boskin’s notion of humor’s elastic polarity, whereby it can “operate for or against, deny or affirm, oppress or liberate” (Boskin 38). For Rossing, certain comedians’ outsider status, based on race, enhances their ability to use comedy as a cultural corrective, while developing community and cultivating hope. The humor in these instances functions to: (1) expose dominant meaning-making practices that legitimize existing power relations; (2) provide a forum for counternaratives; and (3) question assertions regarding manifestations of whiteness as naturalized racial constructions (Rossing, “Dick Gregory” 63). In the process, marginalized voices gain a hearing, often resulting in the acknowledgment of a shared experience that resists dominant white narratives commonly devoid of the widespread impact of racist oppression.

The subversive power of humor is due to its ability to facilitate a humanizing identification, finding commonality among individuals with radically different perspectives. Without this initial step, according to Rossing, there can be no progress toward social transformation. Quoting Danielle Allen’s Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship since Brown v. Board of Education, Rossing notes that activists are required to “develop practices that support vigorous arguments about political disagreements by sustaining the relationships that make it worthwhile to argue with others in the first place” (Rossing, “Dick Gregory” 63). Key and Peele’s linguistic comedy and Dunbar’s dialect musical comedy exemplify such practices and offer a starting point for collective
social transformation.

**Conclusion**

The success of *Key & Peele* and its cross-racial appeal validate the ways in which humor can offer access for white audiences to the black experience in a manner that promotes sympathetic imagination, fostering empathy and understanding. Michelle Stephens comments on this phenomenon in a *Psychology Today* article on black comedians, where she points out:

Freud suggests that comedic alter egos allow the audience to identify with a comedic character, like that of Bert Williams. His buffoonish, blackface character of the ‘nobody’ offered white audiences the opportunity to find aspects of the stereotype with which they identified, and for which they would possibly develop some increased tolerance. (Stephens 2015)

It is the ability to interact with those different from ourselves as fellow human beings that Stephens highlights. Yet, equally significant is her reminder of Freud’s observation that a good joke involves three people: the audience, the laughed at persona, and the person telling the joke, as separate from the scapegoat. Thus, she maintains that in a good joke, the audience member laughing at a character that may seem to reinscribe racist stereotypes is also both aware of and able to appreciate the cleverness and creativity of the joke’s creator. The connection drawn between the black comedian and the audience can serve as a catalyst for understanding the black experience, while simultaneously
encouraging each of us to laugh at our own stereotypes (Stephens 2015).

Understanding that anger, hostility, and pity each carry the risk of creating barriers to humanistic identification, comedians like Key and Peele utilize linguistic ambiguity to contest entrenched notions and encourage the audience to imagine new realities. This is the force of “Negrotown” and Key and Peele’s other skits involving AAVE, which contain an overt rejection of postracial narratives that ignore the impact of structural racism on the daily lives of African Americans.

In the same way, through the appropriation of dialect to deliver a counterhegemonic message, much of Dunbar’s musical comedy counters the modernism of his day by resisting the racist conditions imposed on black artists. The bold invitation to the audience to read the hidden subversive messages contained within it signaled the dawning of a new black modernism, even as several modernist white writers were beginning to appropriate black dialect in their own acts of rebellion against modernist standards.

Dunbar was most certainly aware of the likelihood that some black and white audiences would misread his use of dialect in the creation of his “coon songs” as reinforcing racist stereotypes. However, the new form of black representation he helped issue forth represented an unprecedented aesthetic freedom for black artists, precisely because of its potential to confront political and social realities and promote full citizenship for blacks in a forum that was nonterrorizing.
Like the post-soul aesthetic embarked upon by Key and Peele, Dunbar subjects the canon of positive images, thought necessary by many of his African-American contemporaries as a foundation for racial uplift, to subversion and parody—and appropriation. It is the emancipatory nature of the humor in Dunbar and in Key and Peele, bolstered by the visibility of the black body, which enables the parodic performance of AAVE as a cultural corrective without lapsing into linguistic neominstrelsy.

Similar to Key and Peele, by choosing to engage with stereotypes rather than images of respectability exclusively, Dunbar affirms that in order to overcome the legacies of slavery, they must be embraced to the extent that they do not permit their erasure from memory. At a time when blacks were pondering exactly how the past should inform their self-conceptions, Dunbar evoked a strong emotional response within the African-American community through shared memory. Nevertheless, his goal was to spur a new, positive collective identity.

The mediatized performances of Key and Peele foreground language as performative and the role of AAVE in creating and preserving community. In so doing, they provide insights into how black vernacular can be leveraged to challenge notions of black authenticity through the use of familiar linguistic patterns that index stereotypes of blacks. Placed side by side, it becomes clear how Key and Peele’s comedy builds upon Dunbar’s legacy of satirizing representations of black vernacular by whites, all the while providing a lens for understanding the pressure Dunbar was under to engage in AAVE in
order to gain social recognition. Perhaps, more importantly, understanding the richness of meaning in code-switching and AAVE in *Key & Peele* as “truth bearing” can lead to an enhanced appreciation of the subversive nature of Dunbar’s musical comedy.

In “Performing “truth”: Black Speech Acts,” political scientist and scholar of African-American studies Antonio Brown unveils the degree to which AAVE is a language that “resonates a ‘truth’” grounded in the sense of community “evoked by and attributed to” this form of expression (A. Brown 1). Black dialect is posited as communicating a truth by formulating and informing cultural identities and communities through the infusion of its messages with a linguistic style. It is a style that signals the double consciousness illuminated by Dunbar’s “We Wear the Mask” and rearticulated by W.E.B. Du Bois. Moreover, it recognizes the complexities of the relationship between African-Americans and a Western culture that has displayed affection for black culture by trying to appropriate it without according that same sentiment to blacks themselves.

On this view, black speech becomes not only a confirmation of the shared identity borne out of trauma, but also a witness to that heritage. In this sense, it becomes epiphenomenal—dependent upon the oratory, but not reducible to it. Brown ascribes the status of meta-discourse to black speech, “encoded by what Gates calls an *authenticated* sign of Blackness as the message is transmitted from the orator to the receiver” (Brown 1).

The shared counter-cultural consciousness to which Brown refers is evident in each of the *Key & Peele* skits centering on AAVE. “The A Capella Group,” “The Obama
Translator,” “The Substitute Teacher” and “The East-West College Bowl” are intended to expose the manner in which black speech functions to convey the truth. Only when black speech is used in the first two of these sketches do we get at the truth behind the façade created to appease whites through assimilation. The latter two skits reveal black naming rituals and rites as an attempt to reclaim stolen identities through the creation of new artifacts within a collective history such that “various identities become recognized and acknowledged based on…language choices” embedded in AAVE (Antonio Brown 3).

Brown makes clear that one of the most powerful aspects of code-switching is its signaling an intent to make a “truth” recognizable, while highlighting the speaker’s facility with the use of multiple linguistic forms. The process of making the truth recognizable requires connecting the speaker to the audience in such a way that the listener is aware of the inversion of hegemonic discourse as a purposeful attempt to deliver the unfettered truth through a rejection of standardized language and culture (Antonio Brown 3). And he adds, “The ‘truth’ that resonates from Black Speak is more readily observable when the ‘bilingualism’ of the interlocutors is most pronounced” (Antonio Brown 5). This is certainly the case with Dunbar, as well as Key and Peele, insofar as they rely on black dialect as a heuristic device to convey meta-meaning.

The performance aspect of black vernacular, so central to Key and Peele’s comedy, is often overlooked when evaluating Dunbar’s comedic dialect. Understanding how Key and Peele use dialect as cultural capital, as a medium for political satire, and as a means of creating unifying effects in a world in which they, too, are on the specular
border, offers insights into the unrecognized potential and influence Dunbar’s dialect had in shaping mainstream culture. This potential is signified on in Key and Peele’s skit “Pussy on the Chainwax,” in which alternative versions of reality are expressed through coded language—the ultimate significance of which is the drawing together of members of a marginalized community and resisting white appropriation and commodification.

Key and Peele have had to contend with what philosopher and sociologist Joe Feagin has termed the “white racial frame” that has hardened since the election of President Obama. According to Feagin, this frame results not only from individual prejudices but from the systemic nature of racism that includes racist ideologies and narratives, images and emotions, together with individual and group inclinations to discriminate (Yancy and Feagin). The white racial frame was even more expansive in Dunbar’s day, as African Americans were searching for self-definition in a country that continued to deny them full citizenship while itself grappling with the place of African-Americans within American society and culture. In both eras, state-sanctioned violence against black Americans has shaped national discourse and led to calls for social reform.

I began contemplating the connections between the linguistic performances of Key and Peele in relation to Paul Laurence Dunbar from the very first episode of Key & Peele, when Key confesses that the comedy duo finds themselves adjusting their blackness through code-switching on a daily basis. The impetus behind Key and Peele’s demonstrated use of code-switching between Standard American English and African American Vernacular English in their comedic routines parallels the pressure Dunbar felt
to engage in linguistic variation within various communities to gain social recognition and meet audience expectations by putting himself in the words of others.

Key and Peele’s skits utilizing AAVE, which are always introduced in Standard American English, showcase the extent to which language is viewed as a proxy for identity and is ideologically linked to categories of race. Dunbar struggled to break free from the constraints imposed upon him by this ideological association, and like Key and Peele challenged notions of black authenticity and essentialism by emphasizing “the absurdity of race” through the parodic employment of both AAVE and Standard American English in his musical comedies. In so doing, Dunbar was living the life of protest he asserted as necessary for avoiding being complicit in white supremacy.

Through a detailed analysis of linguistic crossing, code-switching, gestural and other forms of coded communication, I have attempted to illustrate that what differentiates linguistic minstrelsy from the linguistic maneuvers of Key and Peele, as mixed-race performers who at times deliberately miss the target in their use of AAVE by linking it exclusively to masculinist desires for power, violence, and obscenity, is that Key and Peele engage in meta-parody. That is, they are involved in a knowing and strategic inauthenticity in their performances as a form of stylization that invites audience interpretation of a deeper message. Further, they deliberately showcase the richness and complexity of AAVE as a medium for conveying social commentary in such a way that the audience comes to appreciate the intellect of the persons telling the joke. This is where the comedic use of AAVE in Key and Peele can be viewed best as providing a lens
for broadening an understanding of Dunbar’s dialect in his musical comedies. Dunbar, the author, became a part of the performance, blazing the trail for black modernism.

As with Key and Peele, Dunbar is in on the joke when he takes advantage of dialect to appropriate stereotypes of black inferiority in ways that contest monolithic constructions of African-American identity by engaging with critical political and social issues of the day. Because they share the joke, their comedy serves to bridge the racial divide, not by laughing at blacks, as in minstrelsy, but by laughing with them in the midst of racial strife, continued oppression and considerable uncertainty.
ABBREVIATIONS


Dunbar, Paul Laurence. Letter to Brand Whitlock, December 26, 1900.


Dunbar, Paul Laurence. Letter to Helen Douglass, October 22, 1896.


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Moore, Alice. Letter to Paul Laurence Dunbar, 7 May 1896. Dunbar Archives 37-38, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas-Austin.


