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From Clayton Bigsby to Stuart Hall: Conceptions of Blackness and Authenticity

in *Chappelle's Show*

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Abstract

From the years 2003- 2006, perhaps no one played a bigger a role on the American comedy scene than did Dave Chappelle. From the first episode of his critically acclaimed *Chappelle's Show*, in which he depicted Clayton Bigsby, a black, blind white supremacist, to his controversial exit from the show early into season three, Chappelle served as a lightning rod for attention both positive and negative. In this thesis, I argue that in his comedy portrayed on *Chappelle's Show*, Dave Chappelle portrays an image of essentialized Blackness through the lens of the “urban Black American experience” as being that of authentic blackness. By looking at the history of Black comedians and then deconstructing several of Chappelle's sketches, I look to place Chappelle in the spectrum of academic race theorists, most notably alongside Paul Gilroy, Stuart Hall and Frantz Fanon. I end the essay with a reflection on why this analysis matters, as media portrayals affect our conceptions of what is and is not authentic, and the role of the comedian-as-orator serves as a medium for social change.

Looking back at the years 2003-2006, one could legitimately argue that perhaps no one single comedian played a bigger role on the American comedy scene than did Dave Chappelle. From the first episode of *Chappelle's Show* that featured the contentious sketch depicting Clayton Bigsby, a blind, black white supremacist, to his controversial exit from the show after turning his back on a fifty million dollar deal from Comedy Central, Chappelle served as one of the biggest names and faces in entertainment, providing jokes and characters that have meshed themselves in the vast lexicon of American comedy today.

Undoubtedly, as evidenced by his depiction of Clayton Bigsby in the first episode of the first season, Chappelle's frequent forays into racially sensitive topics made him a lightning rod for attention both positive and negative. Some praised his breaching of the topic, while others accused him of setting back race relations with his brash style of comedic delivery.¹ Upon a more academic analysis of Chappelle's comedy, one quickly realizes that his portrayals of African American individuals and culture, as well his portrayals of various other races throughout the show's duration contains a much deeper element. I argue that his comedy suggests a unique definition of what it means to be authentically black in the academic discourse of the topic. Over his two complete seasons and the three episodes that constituted season three of *Chappelle's Show*, Chappelle's paints a picture of authentic blackness tinged with cultural essentialism. More specifically, this cultural essentialism details a view of the stereotypical "urban black experience" as that of authentic blackness. As I will use the term extensively

¹ *Chappelle's Show Season One*, DVD, Multiple Directors (2004; Los Angeles, CA: Paramount, 2004).

throughout this paper, I feel it necessary to further elaborate on what I mean by the urban black experience. In this biased view, African Americans are seen as impoverished, prone alcoholism and drug use, and often taking part in crime, as portrayed for decades in representations through popular media, television, music and movies. By taking this view, Chappelle ignores other large factors such as gender, ethnicity and socioeconomic status and their affects on authenticity.

Throughout this paper, I will seek to place Chappelle within the academic discourse on racial authenticity using his comedy sketches featured on *Chappelle's Show* as the main criteria. To put it simply, I wish to ask: "What does Dave Chappelle say that it means to be black?" As the paper progresses, I will seek to move from a broader, more generalized discussion of Chappelle's work, and examine individual sketches from the show and discuss how they relate to the works of some of academia's most preeminent scholars on race. Although I will mention the work of several scholars throughout this essay, Paul Gilroy, Stuart Hall and Frantz Fanon will serve as the three thinkers that I will be looking at in the most detail.

Before delving too deeply into Chappelle's notion's on what it means to be Black, this author feels the need to point out the obvious: Dave Chappelle is by no means the first African American comedian to deal with issues of race in America. In fact, Chappelle is the last in a long line of comedians dating back to times of slavery that has dealt with issues of race in the Black community, some of whom were not even Black. As Jerome J. Zolten points out in his study on Black comedians, "instead of a serious message laced with humor, the...comedian-as-orator laces humor with a serious

message.”² Whether this serious message portrays African American in a positive or negative light, one sees in the following examples that the history of humor has doubled as a history of social and political commentary.

Boskin and Dorinson point out that in the antebellum American South, slaves would use a veiled language and passive aggressive humor tactics to express the way in which they truly felt about their masters and overseers. In speaking of the well-known John-Master stories, which they say explains this early form of humor well, the two write, “John cusses out his massa whenever he pleases, when the massa is up at the big house and John is down in the field.”³ The racially insensitive language of “massa” employed in this example by Boskin and Dorinson provides a keen insight into the type of message portrayed by comedy like the John-Master stories at the time of slavery. In these stories, the Black subject, although he or she may be asserting some kind of agency, essentializes the Black race in terms of speech and action.⁴ As the progression of comedy regarding Black subjects moves further away from the time of slavery, we see this stereotype continue, morphing from the benevolent to the harsh racist comedy of the early 20th century first made into recording.

In the 1928 recording *The Virginia Judge* made by Walter Kelly, Kelly takes the essentialized Black subject and portrays him a light so negative that such a depiction could never pass the test of political correctness, or even basic moral decency, demanded by today’s society. In the recording, a Southern judge laments his role of having to

² J. Jerome Zolten, “Black Comedians: Forging an Ethnic Image,” *Journal of American Culture* 16, no. 2 (1993): 65.

³ Joseph Boskin and Joseph Dorinson, “Ethnic Humor: Subversion and Survival,” *American Quarterly* 37, no.1: 91.

⁴ Ibid

constantly reprimand the Black subjects of his jurisdiction that constantly fill his courtroom. Upon the judge asking a Black drunkard named Henry if he had been arrested five times this week, the subject responds, “Yes, suh. I would a been here that other week, but I got arrested over in Seabrook. I couldn’t come.”⁵ Reflecting on the same dialect employed in the John-Master stories, one sees here a devolution toward an extremely negative tone toward the Black subject. One possible explanation for the recordings developed during the time is that, while tales like the John-Master stories passed down from generation to generation by oral tradition in the Black community, recordings like *The Virginia Judge* were the products of white-owned and run studios. In essence, while the John-Master stories set out to allow Blacks to vent over the socially imposed and politically enforced subjugation, race comedy under the direction of white writers and performers often sought to essentialize the Black subject in overtly negative and offensive terms.⁶

Although not as patently offensive as recordings like *The Virginia Judge*, the iconic radio program *Amos and Andy* reinforced some of the same negative stereotypes of Blacks that Kelly’s recording did. Performed by two white men, Freeman Godsen and Charles Correll, the voices and actions of Amos and Andy conveyed the same portrayal of African American men in speech as *The Virginia Judge*. Slowed witted and frequently misspeaking, *Amos and Andy*’s conversations often followed the routine of ones such as this found in the 1929 recording, *The Presidential Election*.

Amos: Andy, tell me one thing. Is you a Democrat or is you a Republican?

⁵ Zolten, “Black Comedians: Forging an Ethnic Image,” 66

⁶ Ibid

Andy: Well, I was a Democrat, but I believe I done switched over to the Republicans now.

Amos: Ah, who's the mans dat runnin' against each other this heah election time? 'Splain dat to me.

Andy: Herbert Hoover vesuvius Al Smith.⁷

As one can see from this exchange between the two, the vicious stereotypes depicted in recording like *The Virginia Judge* found mainstream acceptance in the media of the time, as *Amos and Andy* served as one of nation's most popular radio programs before the dawn of World War Two. The show's reach was so pervasive in American culture that Zolten quotes George Bernard Shaw saying about his trip to America, "There are three things I shall never forget...the Rocky Mountains, Niagara Falls, and 'Amos and Andy.'"⁸

Around the same time that shows like *Amos and Andy* dominated the country's airwaves, Bert Williams became the first Black comedian to gain widespread acceptance in the majority white community. As one might conclude from the previous two examples though, Bert Williams did not gain acceptance within the white community by playing a strong, socially conscious Black man. Instead, writes Zolten, society forced Williams to a career "constrained to work in limited roles acceptable to white audiences, mainly, the stereotyped image of the shuffling, no-account 'coon.'"⁹ In other, less harsh words than those used by Zolten, Williams found himself obligated by society at large to maintain the roles purported by his contemporaries Kelly, Godsen and Correll. This neo-

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Ibid, 67

⁹ Ibid

minstrelsy continued to propagate this popular conception of the American Black man as slow-witted and grammatically inept, despite Williams' educated, well-spoken nature.¹⁰

About forty years following the careers of the men mentioned in the previous paragraphs, little considerable progress had been made concerning the perceptions of racial comedy in the United States. Although Black comedians continued to perform routines of subversion and resistance against societal oppression (such as those in the days of slavery), performing such acts in predominately white audiences was often met with categorical opposition. Instead, Boskin and Dorinson argue, such humor, "served many important functions including group survival, escape into pride and dignity, self-criticism, and the resolution of conflict."¹¹ Not until the emergence of Dick Gregory in the 1950s did a Black comedian perform non-stereotypical, African American humor to the acceptance of a white audience at large. Therefore, in this writer's opinion, Dick Gregory serves as the first concrete relation to Chappelle in our discussion, as both made themselves famous by successfully by selling racially tinged humor to a mixed-race audience.

In his humor, Gregory often turned issues of racial segregation and degradation into fodder for his comedic routines to the laughter of black and white audiences, whereas in years past such humor usually only found acceptance among African Americans. Zolten cites several examples from Dick Gregory's stand up acts to this effect, most notably, the comedian responding to a Southern restaurant owner's claim of "we don't serve colored people," with a witty retort of "That's all right, I don't eat

¹⁰ Ibid, 68

¹¹ Boskin and Dorinson, "Ethnic Humor: Subversion and Survival," 93

colored people.”¹² This joke, as Zolten points out, is borrowed from Ashcan Jones, a comedian who told the joke years before to only Black audiences, signally clearly the transformation issued in by Gregory of widening humor formerly meant for an all-Black audience to encompass a constituency of whites.¹³

A natural progression from the styling of Dick Gregory, Richard Pryor set the bar in the 1970s for what it meant to be funny while discussing racial issues in America. One of, if not the single, most popular Black comedian of the era, Pryor often dealt with race in a much more direct way than did Dick Gregory, bordering between comedy and straight-forward social commentary. Even though Dave Chappelle's comedy could not be deemed as “in your face” regarding issues of race as is Pryor's, elements of Pryor's humor can be found throughout Chappelle's stand up and in his work on *Chappelle's Show*, which serves as the basis of this discussion. This observation was even noticed by Pryor himself, when near his own death he claimed that he felt as though he had passed the torch to Chappelle.¹⁴

In mentioning Richard Pryor, this writer would feel remiss not to mention his antithesis in humor at the time, the ultra-clean, ultra-conservative Bill Cosby. Addressing issues of race in *The Cosby Show* much more differently than Pryor did in his stand up and movies, Cosby portrayed the Black family as socially mobile, his wife a lawyer and he a doctor, a portrayal that refutes whole-heartedly a negative, stereotypical essentialization of race. One would be surprised to learn then that a *Time* magazine

¹² Zolten, “Black Comedians: Forging an Ethnic Image,” 72

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ *Inside the Actors Studio*: Season 12, Episode Six.

<http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=2787517403276391321>

article on the success of Bill Cosby is what caused Dave Chappelle, a man whose own comedy essentializes race, to set his sights on entering the business.¹⁵

After examining the work of these comedians who preceded Chappelle, one finds that Chappelle's style of comedy is something that proves unique, yet unoriginal in the same frame. Minstrelsy and its ensuing forms provided philosophies, however crude, on what they saw to be Black, Dick Gregory pioneered the process of bringing Black humor to a universal audience, and Richard Pryor brought race relations to the nation's attention in a way that arguably no one until Chappelle had done. Therefore, in the ensuing examinations focusing on notions of Black identity, I, as the writer of this work, hope to continually demonstrate, as unique as Chappelle's views and ideas may be, he is undoubtedly one of the latest links in chain of comedic progression that dates back hundreds of years.

Before diving into the sketch-by-sketch deconstruction of Chappelle's comedy through the lens of the academic writings of race theory's most profound scholars, I find it necessary, for clarification's sake, to briefly explain how I interpret Chappelle's conceptions of what it means to be authentically Black. Over the show's two plus seasons, *Chappelle's Show* puts forth a portrait of cultural norms that constitutes one's Blackness in the American perspective. When I say this, I do not wish for someone to misconstrue the point of the argument and interpret the crux of it as saying that because Chappelle simply addresses the issue of race in his comedy that he puts forth a unique perspective on authenticity. Instead, I wish to show that when one studies these sketches,

¹⁵ Ibid

he or she finds that Chappelle's comedy carries an undertone of essentializing the Black community through skin color, music, television programs, cinema, dance and language.

Throughout his two plus seasons, Chappelle puts forth an essentialized image of not just African Americans, but also depicts a portrait of intra-group sameness for a variety of peoples. In the second episode of the first season, Chappelle parodies the public figure Ms. Cleo, a popular telephone psychic of the time with a Jamaican accent who purportedly possessed the ability to tell other's futures through tarot card reading. In his satire of Ms. Cleo, Chappelle creates an advertisement for his fictional "Dave Chappelle's Educated Guess Line," which claims to tell a caller's future not through any means of divination, but rather through the simplistic use of ethnic and racial stereotypes surrounding the caller. Chappelle correctly tells the future of his three callers featured in the sketch by pointing out a white woman's problems with her parents tracing back to her dating of a Black man, assuming that a Hispanic caller is named Miguel and drives a pickup truck with no insurance, and while receiving a collect call from a state penitentiary, guessing that the caller was Black before even hearing him speak. To add insult to essentialized injury, Chappelle also predicts that the collect caller will be back in jail within six weeks of his upcoming parole. In this sketch the viewer sees in a rather conspicuous manner the way in which Chappelle puts forth essentialized images of ethnic groups in his comedy. The white woman's parents' alleged racism, the generalization of the Hispanic caller and the Black man's problems with the law all relate to an essentialized view of race and culture, more specifically, an essentialized view predicated upon negative stereotypes regarding each caller's ethnic and racial category.

Another sketch that illustrates Chappelle's views premiered in episode one of season two, "The Racial Draft." Setting up the sketch by talking about how he and his Asian wife always argue about "which side of Tiger Woods is hitting the [golf] ball so good," Chappelle depicts a fictional draft, similar to those found in professional sporting leagues, but instead of teams selecting collegiate players, different races choose from a pool of mixed race celebrities to see who their race can claim as fully their own.

Although authors like Paul Gilroy and Stuart Hall definitively poke holes through this sketch's clear gaps in logic, the "Racial Draft" stands out as one of the most clear-cut examples of Chappelle's racial and cultural essentialization. By claiming that a person can enter fully from a mixed race background into a single state of group identity contradicts scholars dating all the back to DuBois and his discussion of double consciousness in 1903.¹⁶

Although sketches like the one discussed in the paragraph above could be dismissed by some critics who say that the sketch is too outlandish to be taken seriously in an academic and philosophical context, an argument that could be taken more seriously contends that instead of advocating an essentialization predicated upon skin color, Chappelle puts forth an identity for the Black community grounded firmly in what one could call the stereotypical Black, urban experience in America. To prove this point, one need look no further than episode eight of season two, featuring Fordham University's own Dr. Mark Naison as a participant in a mock game show called "I Know Black People." In the game show, the host, Chappelle, asks different contestants a series of

¹⁶ W.E.B DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Penguin, 1996) (orig. 1903).

questions in order to determine what type of person truly knows questions pertaining to Chappelle's essentialized culture.

These scenes briefly described above only scratch the surface of the essentialization of Black culture portrayed in *Chappelle's Show*. Several other sketches Chappelle performs subtly highlight the comedian's pension toward characterizing race-specific culture as one all-encompassing identity for its members.

Gilroy: Authenticity, Essentialization and Diaspora

In examining the implications of Dave Chappelle's comedy toward the modern discourse on race, there are several key scholars to which one must compare and contrast the work of Chappelle, as their work proves so seminal to the field that to not do so would be borderline remiss. The first of these is Paul Gilroy, a scholar of race and diaspora from the perspective of a Black man born and raised in England. And while one could attempt to dismiss the use of Gilroy in this examination of Chappelle by claiming that an Englishman's observations would not relate to the subtle aspects of Black *American* life depicted by Chappelle, a close reading of Gilroy's work reveals a universality in dealing with race that makes his work more than applicable to this current academic endeavor.

The work of Paul Gilroy covers such a vast array topics that in order to best use his scholarly research, one must limit the scope of his work that he or she is examining so as to not dilute its meaning. In my use of Gilroy, I seek to examine two main topics he discusses in order to look at the comedy of Dave Chappelle and its implications about race. First, I will examine Gilroy's discussions on authenticity, and then, more

specifically, I will focus on his discussions of diaspora and how one can use it as a tool to debunk myths about authenticity, identity and belonging.

In speaking of authenticity, I mean to elaborate upon the notion that something can be thought upon as “authentically” belonging to one race or ethnic group. While the term authentic can be ascribed to a number of different things aside from discussions of race and ethnicity, I only wish to examine the term in those contexts.

In his works, Gilroy seems to throw a wrench in the mechanism of labeling any one particular item as carrying an authenticity in relation to race or ethnicity. In his work *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Gilroy attacks the idea of ultimate authenticity on several different fronts. In discussing essentialism of racial groups, Gilroy speaks of a movement in academia at the time that stressed away from the dangers of essentialism and the labeling of authenticity.

In the name of anti-essentialism and theoretical [rigor] it suggests that since black particularity is socially and historically constructed, and polarity has become inescapable, the pursuit of any unifying dynamic or underlying structure of feeling in contemporary black cultures is utterly misplaced. The attempt to locate the cultural practices, motifs, or political agendas that might connect the dispersed and divided blacks of the new world and of Europe with each other and even with Africa is dismissed as essentialism or idealism or both.¹⁷

A fervent debate on authenticity arises from the question raised in the above excerpt taken from Gilroy. If there exists no such thing as an essentialized Black culture, then

¹⁷ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, (Cambridge: Harvard, 2000), 80.

how do we distinguish from what is and is not authentically Black music, cinema, theater and cultural practices?

The answer to the above question, at least according to Gilroy, is that one cannot perform the aforementioned task. Speaking about Alain Locke's characterization of the Fisk Jubilee singers as "uniquely expressive of the Negro," Gilroy speaks about the problems with such statements by saying, "[mutability of culture] has caused problems, particularly for those thinkers whose strategy for legitimating their own position as critics and artists turns on an image of the authentic folk as custodians of an essentially invariant, anti-historical notion of black particularity to which they alone somehow maintain privileged access."¹⁸ By taking such a negative tone toward critics and philosophers like Locke, Gilroy makes obvious his belief in the dangers of labeling any one particular to be authentically representative of the entire Black race.

Another problem with authenticity that Gilroy describes in his chapter on the subject in *The Black Atlantic* deals with Jimi Hendrix. Hendrix, Gilroy points out, "was reinvented as the essential image of what English audiences felt a black American performer should be: wild, sexual, hedonistic and dangerous."¹⁹ While Hendrix's counterparts on the other side of the pond may have purported him to be the essentialized image of the black American male, his contemporaries on this side of the Atlantic held a far different view. Gilroy mentions that Black Power advocates of the time saw Hendrix's music as influenced too heavily by white popular culture, leading to their labeling of Hendrix as a "white nigger."²⁰ These two historical contradictions of what

¹⁸ Ibid 91

¹⁹ Ibid 93

²⁰ Ibid

two different audiences thought it meant to be an authentic Black American lucidly illustrate the problems that Gilroy discusses in relation to authenticity, that the varied nature of different diasporic African cultures does not allow for a universal, inclusive notion of authenticity.

Turning the attention of this argument back to Dave Chappelle, one finds that in episode three of season two of *Chappelle's Show*, the comedian puts forth essentialized images of authenticity in relation to race through the media of music of dance. In this sketch, Dave sets out on the streets of New York City with famed guitarist John Mayer to examine the commonly held stereotype that white people can't dance. Chappelle's hypothesis in this endeavor is that, contrary to popular belief, white people can dance if you play the music they like: electric guitar. Chappelle and Mayer hit an array of New York City locales and prove the hypothesis put forth by Chappelle that white people are capable of dancing, but only if you play a specific kind of music that they, as a race, universally respond to.

As a control for their "experiment," the duo heads to a barbershop in Harlem to see how a mixed crowd of Blacks and Latinos respond to electric guitar. Not surprisingly, the crowd does not respond well, but becomes elated when Chappelle commands Questlove, the drummer from the group The Roots, to begin playing the drums. The African Americans in the barbershop begin to dance, but several of the Latinos respond apathetically. Chappelle then unveils a man standing behind an electric piano, who then plays a conga beat, causing the remaining individuals in the room to break out in dance. What should be taken away from this sketch in regards to Chappelle's portrayal of race is that each different racial category depicted responds to

one type of music only, the type of music that Chappelle communicates is essential to their respective race and culture.

Comparing the contentions put forth by Gilroy to the *Chappelle's Show* sketch described above, one sees the obvious discrepancies between the two. Whereas Gilroy has pointed out several historical examples that illustrate the flaws of purporting a single Black culture, Chappelle argues that three races possess corresponding musical styles to which individuals within the race are helpless at resisting the urge to dance. Going back to the Hendrix example explained by Gilroy, where would the guitarist fall on Chappelle's scale? Would his purported Blackness in England align him with that specific racial group, or would his style of guitar inflame inner passions within white subjects? This example put forth by Gilroy pokes a hole in Chappelle's hypothesis in the sketch; does Hendrix lose a component of his authentic Blackness when he abandons his inner propensity for drums and dons an electric guitar? Gilroy would obviously argue otherwise, as essentialization leads to the dangerous consequence of unnecessary exclusion.²¹

A useful tool that Gilroy uses in his arguments against essentialization is that of diaspora. Diaspora generally relates to the movement of one people from a common territorial origin throughout various parts of the world, but in speaking of diaspora, Gilroy commonly recalls the African diaspora. For the purposes of this argument, whenever the term diaspora is used, one can safely assume that, unless otherwise noted, it refers to the diaspora with its origins in sub-Saharan Africa.

²¹ Ibid 84-101

In speaking of diaspora, Gilroy explains that it can be used as an effective measure for disproving the ideas of essentialism that some may say exist among the African diasporic community.

The idea of diaspora offers a ready alternative to the stern discipline of primordial kinship and rooted belonging. It rejects the popular image of natural nations spontaneously endowed with self-consciousness, tidily composed of uniform families: those interchangeable collections of ordered bodies that express and reproduce absolutely distinctive cultures... As an alternative to the metaphysics of “race,” nation, and bounded culture coded into the body, diaspora is a concept that problematizes the cultural and historical mechanics of belonging.²²

In other words, Gilroy would find it preposterous to argue that, based solely on a shared ancestral home in sub-Saharan Africa, that the African Americans in the barbershop depicted in *Chappelle's Show* would share an intrinsic need to dance at the sound of a drum.

In his discussion of essentialism and music in *The Black Atlantic*, Gilroy employs two different commonly heard phrases to describe differing views on essentialism in the Black community. The first says, “It’s a black thing, you wouldn’t understand,” straightforwardly putting out the accusation that there exists an essentially Black culture to which only a certain few can prescribe. The second phrases says that there exists “different strokes for different folks,” recognizing the vast differences amongst members of the African diaspora, and allowing for those differences to manifest themselves in the

²² Paul Gilroy, *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture beyond the Color Line*, (Cambridge: Harvard, 2000), 123.

arts of music and dance.²³ Applying these two phrases to close out the discussion comparing Chappelle and Gilroy, one can clearly affix one to each of the subjects. Chappelle, in his essentialization of the Black race through a fixation toward one type of music while ignoring diasporic realities, would certainly say that such a phenomenon is a “black thing.” Gilroy, on the other hand, would more likely ascribe to the second saying in reference to black music and culture. The effects of diaspora on those members who have traveled over vastly different routes would call for an understanding of Black culture as being all about “different strokes for different folks,” debunking the myth that only one Black culture can prevail amongst all members of the African diaspora.

Stuart Hall and The Representation of Identity

Much in the same way that Paul Gilroy does, Stuart Hall attacks the problems of authenticity and essentialism by pointing out vast differences within the racial and ethnic groups that often suffer through the process of essentialization. In his article “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” Hall straightforwardly addresses the problems with the grouping of several distinct identities into one homogeneous culture. “Identity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think. Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, ...we should think, instead, of identity as a ‘production,’ which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation.”²⁴ While Gilroy and Hall are certainly similar in their philosophies, it is this idea of identity as a production that makes Hall a truly distinct figure. Even though Gilroy discusses examples of music and popular culture in his argument on authenticity,

²³ Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, 100

²⁴ Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora.” In *Identity, Community, Culture, Difference*, Edited by John Rutherford, (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1998), 223.

Hall posits that these cultural forms underlie our conceptions about identity and authenticity.

Born and raised in Jamaica but having lived all of his adult life in Britain, Hall, like Gilroy, speaks of the diasporic community in such broad terms that, although his ideas are somewhat specific to the influence of British and Caribbean cultures, they can be applied as well to the comedy of Dave Chappelle meant for audiences primarily in the United States.²⁵

Looking on how Hall bases his arguments on identity through representation in popular media, one draws a striking similarity to the comedy of Dave Chappelle, influenced so heavily by the popular culture in which he grew up. Chappelle, in his interview with James Lipton of *Inside the Actors Studio*, claims that he watched so much TV as a child that, before he could read even a digital clock, he proved able to tell time by network television schedules. In other words, he would know it was 7:30 by what show was on NBC.²⁶ Examining the representations of African Americans on television and in movies at this time and keeping in mind Hall's contentions about production of identity as our fundamental conceptions of identity, one finds it easier to accept the argument put forth in this essay that Chappelle's views of blackness are informed by the stereotypical Black urban American experience. In particular, shows like *Good Times*, which will be discussed again in this essay during a look at a *Chappelle's Show* sketch, portrayed African Americans in a seemingly negative light, though not overtly so.

In her autoethnography regarding her conceptions of class and gender on television, R.M. Boylorn tells of a childhood in which she and her sister would savor

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ *Inside the Actors Studio*: Season 12, Episode Six.

every possible opportunity to watch shows like *Good Times*, as they were “mesmerized by the Black characters who found a way to smile despite their setbacks and made a way out of no way.”²⁷ Reflecting back on her seven-year-old self in this account, Boylorn fails to account for the utterly negative stereotypes of African Americans portrayed in shows like *Good Times*, detailing the struggles of a black family living in poverty in the inner-city. In order to prove that these stereotypes prevailed in the show, one need look no further than the theme song of the show’s opening. In these lyrics, the singer insists that during all of the following situations, the characters are able to find “good times:” “temporary layoffs,” “easy credit rip offs,” “scratching and surviving,” “hanging in a chow line [assumed by this writer to mean a line at a soup kitchen].”²⁸ Through the ability of the African American to, as Boylorn put it, find a way to “smile despite all their setbacks,” shows like *Good Times* portrayed a type of neo-minstrelsy, characterizing the African American subject as a hapless, happy-go-lucky social subordinate, unable to hold any agency in his or her fight against institutional and social discrimination.

In his works, Hall puts forth that there are two main manners in which one can think about cultural identity in reference to representation. The first philosophy, to which Hall personally subscribes, is the idea that “there are...critical points of deep and significant *difference* which constitute ‘what we really are;’ or rather—since history has intervened—‘what we have become.’ We cannot speak for very long, with any exactness, about ‘one experience, one identity,’ without acknowledging...ruptures and

²⁷ Robin M. Boylorn, “As Seen on TV: An Autoethnographic Reflection on Race and Reality Television,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 25, no. 4 (2008): 416.

²⁸ “*Good Times* Theme Song Lyrics,”

<http://www.lyricsondemand.com/tvthemes/goodtimeslyrics.html>

discontinuities.”²⁹ The other, I argue, is the view that Chappelle’s comedy was informed by through shows like *Good Times* and continues to propagate. “Our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as ‘one people,’ with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of actual history.”³⁰

Perhaps nowhere in the two plus seasons of *Chappelle’s Show* do we see this view portrayed better than in the sketch performed in season two, episode eight titled “I Know Black People.” I discussed this sketch briefly earlier in this essay, but the undertones that it contains make it necessary for re-examination in light of Stuart Hall’s arguments. In the sketch, Chappelle plays the host of a fake trivia show called “I Know Black People.” The show asks a variety of contestants questions about what Chappelle would call the one true Black culture that are informed by the stereotypical Black urban American experience. In order to prove my contestation about Chappelle’s views on Black culture, I point first to his use of the show *Good Times* on two separate occasions during “I Know Black People.” In the first example, Chappelle asks the respondents to explain the occupation of Mr. Bookman, the handyman, and give one of his many nicknames on the show. In another, he asks the contestants to recite what he believes to be the most disputed and indecipherable of the *Good Times* theme song lyrics (“hanging in a chow line”). Chappelle then goes on to ask several more questions of the contestants, each putting forth an essentialized view of Black culture, ranging from “what is a badonkadonk?” to “why did Black people distrust Ronald Reagan?” a question to which he accepts a variety of answers, including that he was white and that he was a

²⁹ Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” 225

³⁰ Ibid

Republican. The grand prize awarded to the winner of the game show provides another example of Chappelle's conceptions of race as essentialized: a jar of Murray's Hair Cream, two bootleg DVD's and a pack of menthol cigarettes.

Although these examples in the context of the sketch are meant to be humorous, one cannot ignore the message that Chappelle makes regarding essentialized Black culture. Looking back to Hall's explanation of the two different conceptions of cultural identity, in this example one clearly sees that Chappelle appeals to the "common historical experiences," "shared cultural codes," and "continuous frames of reference" that Hall would later go on in his essay to refute.³¹ By claiming that Black people as a whole distrusted Ronald Reagan, Chappelle insinuates a common historical experience of unfortunate times under our nation's 40th president. And while certain aspects of Reagan's time in office, most notably the crack epidemic of the middle 1980s and the president's unfavorable views of social welfare programs, are commonly held to have affected African Americans disproportionately, to say that Black people as a whole had issues with the Reagan presidency is utterly simplistic and contrary to the arguments put forth by Gilroy and Hall. Specifically, Hall would argue that Chappelle's failure to acknowledge the existence of conservative and financially well-off blacks who would have flourished under the Reagan administration, ignores the "ruptures and discontinuities" that characterize the experience of African Americans as rendered by the nature of diaspora.³²

Continuing off of the argument just made about Chappelle's failure to acknowledge varied socio-economic experiences as a fracturing element of a supposedly

³¹ Ibid

³² Ibid 223

homogeneous Black culture, Hall also calls to mind that such an essentialist view of race and culture downplays another important distinguishing factor within a community, gender. Hall puts it bluntly in "New Ethnicities" when he writes, "the question of the black subject cannot be represented without reference to the dimensions of class, gender, sexuality and ethnicity."³³ Leaving ethnicity to the side for its own examination later in this essay, the splits created within the Black community by gender and sexuality, according to some scholars, provide perhaps the most clear cut examples of how the uniformity of a single Black culture proves non-existent.

Generally speaking, the popular conception of the Black community as a whole has been that of intense homophobia exerted on gay men and women of African descent. In her work *She's Mad Real*, detailing the lives of young West Indian girls in Brooklyn, Oneka LaBennett tells of the reactions of several young girls to a scene on the TV show *America's Next Top Model* that portrays lucidly the popular concepts of homosexuality in predominately black communities. One of the girls, in speaking about the spirituality of one of the models in the show, portrays the belief that Christians should be open minded, but do not necessarily have such broad mindedness in relation to homosexuality.³⁴ We will see later on as well that the girls' West Indian background plays a strong influence on beliefs like this, further advancing the idea of a fractured Black community rather than a single unifying one.

Returning back to the discussion on a high prevalence of homophobia among African Americans, one can find several examinations on the subject in literature and

³³ Stuart, Hall, "New Ethnicities," In *Identities: Race, Class, Gender and Nationality*, edited by Linda Martin Alcoff and Eduardo Mendieta, (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003), 92

³⁴ Oneka LaBennett, *She's Mad Real*, (New York: NYU Press, 2011), 161-162

film. Marlon Riggs' documentary *Black Is...Black Ain't*, details the man's findings on what it means to be Black, coupled with his reflections on the peculiarities of being both Black and gay in America.³⁵ In the same vein, famed civil rights activist Bayard Rustin wrote about struggles dealing with the prevalent homophobia of the Black community in *Time on Two Crosses*, a collection of his writings about his struggles to straddle the worlds of homosexuality and Blackness in the United States.³⁶ Turning for a second to a wider scope of the American continent, Isaac Julien explores the rampant homophobia of the Afro-Caribbean world in his film *The Darker Side of Black*.³⁷ All three of these works, coming from authors with different backgrounds, put forth the reality of homophobia among those of African descent as being worse than that of society in general.

Taking these facts into account, one cannot simply say then that Black culture falls inside of any uniform structure in history, feeling or thought. The examples of works by men like Rustin, Julien and Riggs detail the fact that the differences in lives of African Americans, both men and women, when examined through the lens of differing sexualities, produce concrete differences. I believe that one can safely assume that if Marlon Riggs or Bayard Rustin were contestants on "I Know Black People" and a question on homosexuality were presented, that Chappelle's essentialized views of racial belonging would exclude these men from an identity (blackness) that they spent a lifetime trying to reconcile with another identity (homosexuality). In examples like those

³⁵ *Black Is...Black Ain't*, DVD, directed by Marlon Riggs (1994; San Francisco:Independent Television Service, 1994).

³⁶ Bayard Rustin, *Time on Two Crosses: The Collected Writings of Bayard Rustin* (Berkeley, CA: Cleis Press, 2003).

³⁷ *The Darker Side of Black*, DVD, directed by Isaac Julien (1994; London: BBC, 1994).

dealing with homosexuality, we begin to see the validity of Paul Gilroy's slippery slope argument concerning authenticity and essentialization.³⁸

Moving on to Hall's last example of a fracturing force within supposed society of sameness, ethnicity proves to be a distinctive marker along with socio-economic status and sexuality. Returning once again to LaBennett's ethnographic work in *She's Mad Real*, one finds that the common experience of West Indian immigrants proves far different than most African Americans. Although West Indians and African Americans share many qualities that may cause them to appear the similar on the surface, a more detailed look shows differences between the two groups in dress, language, familial life, and several other aspects of culture.³⁹ As Hall points out by listing ethnicity as a divisive factor, the difference that exists between West Indian immigrant culture and purported African American culture at large prevents any attempt to merge the two into one, all-encompassing identity of the Black diaspora informed by shared historical experience and sentiment.

Fanon and The Reality of Race

In reading this essay, one might assume that I have some sort of bias against Dave Chappelle's comedy in relation to race. In full disclosure, while I agree with Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy in their presumed allegations against Chappelle's as being under-encompassing of Blackness' internal distinctions, this is not to say that Dave Chappelle fails to understand race in any significant way. On the contrary, on several occasions over the course of his show, Chappelle makes several remarks about racial relations in this country that, in my humble opinion, are astounding. Just as Chappelle's views on

³⁸ Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, 84-101

³⁹ LaBennett, *She's Mad Real*

authenticity found opponents in the debate on essentialism, authenticity and identity, so too does he find support in the academic community for some of his views of race. The most striking of these comes from Frantz Fanon.

Born in Martinique before living in France and Algeria, Frantz Fanon experienced first hand the nature of race relations on three different continents. A physician and psychiatrist wounded twice in World War II while serving in the French army, Fanon brought plenty to the table in terms individual experience in both professional and everyday settings.⁴⁰ One persistent fact that Fanon found throughout all these different regions and social circles, however, is that despite social niceties and presumed racial progression, the issue of skin color underlies all interactions between members of different races.

The first one of these settings that Fanon discusses in *Black Skin, White Masks* is that of everyday Parisian life. Fanon recounts his experience riding on a train in the city of lights, where a little boy cried to his mother for fear of this Black man occupying the same train car. Fanon writes, first quoting the child, “‘Look a Negro!’ It was true. It amused me. ‘Look a Negro!’ The circle was drawing a bit tighter. I made no secret of my amusement. ‘Mama, see the Negro! I’m frightened!’ Frightened! Frightened! Now they were beginning to be afraid of me. I made my mind up to laugh myself to tears, but laughter had become impossible.”⁴¹ In this example, Fanon explores the emotional

⁴⁰ Linda Martin Alcoff and Eduardo Mendieta, eds. *Identities: Race, Class, Gender and Nationality* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003), ix.

⁴¹ Frantz Fanon, “The Fact of Blackness,” in *Identities: Race, Class, Gender and Nationality*, eds. Linda Martin Alcoff and Eduardo Mendieta (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003), 63.

trauma inflicted by the blunt objectivity imposed upon him by the child for nothing more than the color of his skin.

Fanon suggests that this sense of Hegelian “otherness” is something that cannot simply be ignored. Instead it influences all social interactions with stunning severity. Fanon writes, “I came into the world imbued with the will to find a meaning in things, my spirit filled with the desire to attain to the source of the world, and then I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects.”⁴² In this excerpt Fanon tells that despite his intellectual aptitude and curiosity that society reveres in principle, his entire life’s pursuit has been plagued by the color of his skin superseding his objective successes in the eyes of whites.

To further this point later on, Fanon points out that even in the most esteemed of positions, Blacks are still seen first for their skin color and then for their advanced social or occupational rank. Fanon examines the danger and implicit racism of having one’s skin color attached to his or her career.

It was always the Negro teacher, the Negro doctor; brittle as I was becoming, I shivered at the slightest pretext. I knew, for instance, that if the physician made a mistake it would be the end of him and of all those who came after him. What could one expect, after all, from a Negro physician? As long as everything went well, he was praised to the skies, but look out, no nonsense, under any conditions! The black physician can never be sure how close he is to disgrace. I tell you, I

⁴² Ibid 62

was walled in: No exception was made for my refined manner, or my knowledge of literature, or my understanding of quantum theory.⁴³

Reflecting back on his own career as a physician in this excerpt, Fanon reveals that he felt increased pressure and expectations from those who were making him their “other,” neglecting his attributes of higher intellect and instead focusing solely on his race, which many had probably already determined had destined him for failure.

Returning back to the subject of this essay, Dave Chappelle, one finds that the comedian makes several observations throughout his show similar to those made by Fanon about his race serving as the main lens through which society at large viewed him. Opening his second show of season one, Chappelle says about being on television, “You can never say what you want to say to, man. If I said everything I was thinking it would freak America out. You wouldn’t want to hear a young black dude say half the things I be thinking.” To correct this problem, Chappelle posits that if he had a pretty, young white girl sing his thoughts, then they would lose their edge because of the change of their medium. Chappelle then calls out a young, female white singer who reveals some of his thoughts, including that AIDS and crack were invented by the government to intentionally destroy the Black community, the police care less about Blacks (to quote exactly, she sings “fuck the police”), and that he has doubts as to the official outcome of the 2000 presidential election in Florida.

And while it cannot be known for sure whether Chappelle actually believes some of these things or whether he simply put them out there for comedic effect, the correlation that he draws to Fanon’s observations in this sketch should not be lost. Just as Fanon

⁴³ Ibid 65

claims that others saw him as Black or as a Martiniquan before seeing him as a physician or a philosopher, so too does Chappelle suggest that society's conception of him as a Black man informs its reception of his message, hence the necessity for a pretty white girl to sing his thoughts.

Concluding Remarks: Why Does All This Matter?

Several times over the course of writing this thesis, I thought to myself, why does this subject matter? Do the views of a comedian really hold any importance in the world of academia? How can one even prove with certainty that Chappelle presents these views with earnest? After all, it is much harder to write a joke about the different diasporic nature of African Americans with disparate gender, socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds than it is to write a joke focused on stereotype. One could certainly say that Dave Chappelle would prove more entertaining at a cocktail party than Paul Gilroy.

After critical examination, however, this writer believes that Dave Chappelle's comedic representation of authentic Black identity deserved these, and perhaps further, analyses for two primary reasons. The first relates to Stuart Hall's ideas about popular culture influencing and being representative of views on authenticity and identity among members of diaspora. Just as Chappelle and members of his generation (like Boylorn) came to see *Good Times* as legitimate representations of their community, so too could a generation of young Americans come of age citing "I Know Black People" as a valid, yet simplistic, depiction of diasporic black culture.

The second reason why these representations in *Chappelle's Show* deserve academic scrutiny has to do with the historic role of the comedian as a social commentator. To reiterate a quote used at the beginning of this essay, Zolten, speaking

about an ancient oratorical practice of lacing a serious message with humor as a means to further one's argument, claims that the style has been reversed in the modern day as, "instead of a serious message laced with humor, the contemporary comedian-as-orator laces humor with a serious message."⁴⁴ Dave Chappelle himself hinted at this phenomenon during his episode on *Inside the Actors Studio* when asked how he deals with those people who say that his comedy crosses a line that should not be crossed.

I think that America needs an honest discourse with itself. This is like the greatest country in the world by default...but we could actually be the greatest country that ever existed if we were just honest about who we are, and what we are, and where we want to go...Things like racism are institutionalized. It's systemic. You might not know any bigots. You feel like, "well, I don't hate black people, so I'm not racist." But you benefit from racism just by the merit of the color of your skin. There [are] opportunities that you have. You're privileged in ways you may not even realize because you haven't been deprived in certain ways. We need to talk about these things in order for them to be changed.⁴⁵

Coupling this statement of purpose from Chappelle with his comedy examined in this essay, one begins to see a deeper purpose from the sometimes sophomoric, graphic and offensive humor on *Chappelle's Show*; by propagating essentialized, stereotypical portrayals of African Americans in his comedy, perhaps Chappelle sets out to destroy through humor those very same depictions that he appears to be proliferating. In this

⁴⁴ Zolten, "Black Comedians: Forging an Ethnic Image," 65

⁴⁵ *Inside the Actors Studio*: Season 12, Episode Six.

<http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=2787517403276391321>

light, Chappelle could serve as much more than a primetime comedian, but instead a social commentator seeking to right the injustices of institutionalized racism.

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