

BLACK CULTURE: A LAUGHING MATTER

BY

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Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of the  
Graduate School of Vanderbilt University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

Religion

May, 2013

Nashville, Tennessee

Approved:

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This thesis is dedicated to all people who look for value in knowing that becoming is a never-ending process.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am humbled and honored for professors, family, and friends who helped and encouraged me through this project. I thank Dr. Victor Anderson for his tutelage and friendship in my endeavors. I thank Dr. Lewis Baldwin for being a reader of this work. I thank Drs. Stacey and Juan Floyd-Thomas for words of encourage and support. I thank Dr. Herbert Marbury in furthering my thirst for knowledge in readings of black writers in the Reconstruction Era. I thank Drs. John McClure and Alex Spektor for guiding me to specific works of Mikhail Bahktin. I thank Dr. Janet Walsh, Dr. Monique Moultrie, Biko Gray, Jennifer Caudle, Lakisha Lockhart, Katelynd Wolf, and Carlin Rushing for helping me with my structure and grammar before Victor hacked away at my work.

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## CHAPTER I

### BLACK AUTHENTICITY: THE UNFULFILLED QUESTION

This thesis explores the questions and problems of black authenticity from the black intellectual era, i.e. DuBois. This is not an antiquarian question, but one that is existential situated and existential situated in my life. Black Church life has always been at the center of my life and education. I come from four generations of pastors and ministers. As a black Baptist, questioning God or not having a literal interpretation of the Bible was not permitted in my church community. My mother and father instilled in me devotion toward Christianity and a love for the Bible on a daily basis with Bible studies. As a PK (preacher's kid), other children looked at me differently or thought twice about playing with me, thinking that I might be "too holy" for them. Identity crisis plagued my early development, leading me to depression and anger, and my deep religious doubts aggravated my crises. Questions concerning authenticity were existential. Despite my self and religious doubts, I continued believing as I could and living with ambiguity with what was suspicious among my religious beliefs. Living with contradictions and the anger that ambiguity produced, led me to explore who I am and was becoming in a more sustained manner, which I began doing while at Vanderbilt Divinity School.

In my second year, I reexamined the notion of the "Imago Dei" in light of my existential concerns for authenticity. Despite depression, financial, and personal crises while in the MTS program, my experiences only increased my drive intellectually to

understand and study, what my professor, Victor Anderson, describes as the “Cultural Production of Black Authenticity.” I began trying to understand this process by reading with Professor Anderson Phenomenology, particularly Martin Heidegger’s Time and Being, Franz Fanon’s Black Skin, White Mask, then Theodore Adorno’s Jargon of Authenticity. While reading these books, I also read Jeff Chang’s Can’t Stop, Won’t Stop, Cornel West’s Race Matters, and Drs. S. Floyd-Thomas, J. Floyd-Thomas, Duncan, Ray, and Westfield’s Black Church Studies: An Introduction. I wanted to explore what the language of black authenticity might specifically mean for a “Hip Hop Generation” whose basic orientation toward identity is navigated through Popular Culture Media. By applying to the Religious Study Program at Vanderbilt University, I hoped to focus specifically on Black Religion and Culture Studies.

Through Dr. Anderson’s specialties in critical theory, phenomenology, pragmatism, social and cultural theory, I hoped he could help me hone in on the cultural production of identity. From my graduate studies experience, I explored black authenticity from infrastructures of media projections that are always mobilized toward making and remaking identities with every generation, including the “Hip Hop Generation.” This was my specific context of concern.

However, from studying this issue, I learned black authenticity is not a question of humanity; rather, it is a question of existence. Black authenticity is a cultural production, which is historical. It is not reducible to biology or genetics; therefore, it is not essential. Authenticity is just the rank and value of a particular object relative to a dominant culture, whether external or internal. I learned that this word, *Authenticity*, came from the world of mercantilism in the fourteenth century. For commercial goods to

be bought, buyers wanted assurance these specific products were genuine to their place of origin. Authenticity gave the product validity. After further deliberation, I asked myself the question that when it came to people, could this notion of authenticity also hold true? Did black people need validation to exist with other races of the world? If so, who was the authority in validating black people?

I looked at the works of David Hume, Immanuel Kant, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, and Thomas Jefferson. Their works helped me to understand that the production of blackness was for the purpose of seeing European genius as superior. In principle, the blackness that whiteness created would always be racialized to further white supremacy at the cost of black inferiority. If blackness continued to be understood through the lens of whiteness, it would continue to give credence for the black race to continue under domination of white oppressors. Their works gave rise to Black Intellectuals as David Walker and W.E.B. DuBois.

While reading these writers, I understood that their work was for the purpose of competing with European genius. Theirs was a work that wanted to redefine the Negro into an elite race of civilized people. As much as I am proud to have gained wisdom from these great writers, their work conflated images of black people that did not represent *all* black folk culture truthfully. Their work gave another side of black life to show a resilient people under the trial and tribulations of Jim Crow laws; however, their work continued to show black living as depressed people who were only trying to *survive*.

I understood my frustration of this dialectical problem of the white ideological obsession of black barbarianism that must be controlled, and the notion of black intellectuals as a gloomy and grim savior preoccupied on enduring the harsh realities of

life. Both views of black authenticity only tell oversimplified concepts of black living. These warring arguments caused me to give up on black authenticity to deal with the politics of black culture. By dealing with black culture, I notice the complexities of framing black folks as a static one-dimensional community. Through my thesis, I explore an ambivalent, materialist black culture that participates freely and pragmatically for vivifying black existence.

In chapter 2, I look at the difficulties of framing concepts of black culture, by way of the black intellectual structure of black elitists in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The goal is to focus on theories of the Black Intellectual tradition by way of DuBois. Through DuBois, black culture is framed by black elitism that does not leave possibilities for different identities of black culture to emerge.

In chapter 3, to contest European genius and the black intellectual structure, I set up black culture from the underside or everyday issues of black culture. Looking at black culture from the bottom-up helps to find many meanings that do not conflate black folks into typecasts. I do this through the notion of Mikhail Bakhtin's spirit of carnival. By using the carnival, I show through the religiosity of folk humor, a different aspect to deal with the black sphere to develop new meanings of black folk culture that becomes the example of black folk consciousness. In this section, I tell of my concept of the *racialized homeopathic* that is used as a resistance tool to racism through humor. The racialized homeopathic becomes a tool for exhibiting racializations blatantly through comedy to ridicule its narrow-mindedness.

In chapter 4, from the work of section two, I give examples of how carnival life and the *racialized homeopathic* is seen through the comedy of black comedian, Dave



Chappelle. Chappelle's use of comedy becomes a way of igniting conversation with the *other within black folk culture*, to dispel hegemony and begin dialogues towards an intentional social relationship.

## CHAPTER II

### COMPLEXITIES OF FRAMING BLACK CULTURE

*Folk* is a Germanic word derived from, *Volk*, meaning people. This word describes a specific group of common individuals living everyday existence. Folk are people who stay close to their origin instead of assimilating into a wider culture. In essence, folk are persons with a shared experience that contribute something to a broader society to show distinction. In his African-American work on the critical philosophy of race, W.E.B. DuBois creates groundwork for black cultural studies to emerge. Though his work helps to show the significance of black people to academia, does his effort deal with the normal understanding of black folk? Do the race politics of DuBois speak for the communal awareness of all African-American living? DuBois deals with a dialectical problem with writing his critical race philosophy. In one part, DuBois is defending black culture from white intellectuals who use social Darwinist theories in predicting the extinction of American blacks. On another side, DuBois must strategically show that blacks can distinguish themselves in America as a people without being absorbed into white culture for American identity.

Part one of this thesis, looks at the complexities of framing conceptions of black culture through the black intellectual structure of black elitists in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The aim is to center on philosophies of the black intellectual tradition by way of DuBois. Instead of arguing against social Darwinism, a concept used to promote

European genius, this essay claims that DuBois argues against the misappropriation of it. He trusted in class distinction, encouraging a civilized human selection among blacks. This does not mean race mixing, to produce refined blacks as predicted by Frederick Douglas, but intelligence breeding to eliminate coarseness among black folk. In essence, the author deconstructs DuBois to show that he does not pay attention to the interests of common blacks, but the significance of black intellectuals. In doing this, DuBois still shows classism inside blackness, which is created from white ideology. In order to complete this point, attention is given to a mini-genealogy of Hegel to social scientist of Darwinism. This venture will show how DuBois strategically criticizes and re-examines these concepts to deal with the race problem in America by civic awareness through education.

The context of *The Souls of Black Folk* happens in the Southern part of the United States after reconstruction. DuBois writes during the gap time of the end of slavery and the beginning of the twentieth century. Socio-economically, blacks were being exploited from their work in sharecropping. DuBois shows in his essay “Of the Quest of the Golden Fleece<sup>1</sup>,” the shrewd acts of Dougherty County merchants to bankrupt black tenants. Through the labor of cotton, DuBois shows the continuation of black oppression keeping race relations divided. DuBois seems to hope for a better lifestyle for the black race. The book becomes, for DuBois, a way to express pride in a black people. To express this pride, DuBois must show what part black people perform toward the rest of humanity while in subjugation. This argument is influenced by the work of Hegel.

Through Hegel, DuBois believes each race must make a distinctive influence

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<sup>1</sup>William Edward Burghardt DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1994), 90.

regarding humanity. This mini-genealogy begins with Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, a German philosopher, who looks at ontology from an analytical foundation. In his work, *Philosophy of History*, Hegel attempts to find meaning in history, which is a process for bringing mindfulness for human freedom. Through reason and what history has shown humanity, Hegel believes one can find rationality in historical accounts. He says, “History is the process whereby the spirit discovers itself and its own concept.”<sup>2</sup> Hegel believed that national patriotism was the highest deed a race can do. Using the work of Hegel, DuBois believes that different races and nations will have a time to make their mark in history.<sup>3</sup> In “The Conservation of the Races,” DuBois says that each race must make a unique contribution to the rest of civilization.<sup>4</sup> By finding meanings of humanity through history, Hegel gives reason for how people civilize themselves with the tool of social structuring through choice and independence. However, Hegel does not believe African people have a consciousness of civilization.

Hegel believes African people are not aware of their own unalienable right of being human beings. He describes this thought by claiming:

“The peculiarly African character is difficult to comprehend, for the very reason that in reference to it, we must quite give up the principle which naturally accompanies all our ideas- the category of Universality. In Negro life the characteristics point is the fact that consciousness has not yet attained to the realization of any substantial objective existence= as for example, God or law- in which the interest of man’s volition is involved and in which he realizes his own being. This distinction between himself as an individual and the universality of his essential being, the African in the uniform, undeveloped oneness of his existence has not yet attained; so

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<sup>2</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 62.

<sup>3</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Reason in History*, ed. Johannes Hoffmeister (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1980), 242-257.

<sup>4</sup> William Edward Burghardt DuBois, “The Conservation of Races,” in *Writings*, ed. Nathan Huggins (New York: Library of America, 1986) 825.

that the Knowledge of an absolute Being, an Other and a Higher than his individual self, is entirely wanting. The Negro, as already observed, exhibits the natural man in his completely wild and untamed state. We must lay aside all thought of reverence and morality- all that we call feeling- if we would rightly comprehend him; there is nothing harmonious with humanity to be found in this type of character. The copious and circumstantial accounts of Missionaries completely confirms this, and Mahommendanism appears to be the only thing which in any way brings the Negroes within the range of culture.”<sup>5</sup>

Through his writings, Hegel believes the Negro does not have a sense of its own history or culture. If this is so, blacks will no longer exist as a people and become imaginary.

Hegel builds in an importance for whiteness and a humiliation for blackness. Hegel builds a foundation for white supremacy. If whiteness is superior, then blackness must be its subordinate through taming.

The work of Hegel creates a blackness determined by white ideology, which is strong-armed on African people. White bias based on the taste of white genius and a preconceived history recorded for black people, sets in motion prophetic theories of African extinction. This is important to the work of DuBois who must create a literary voice for blacks to establish their own worth. DuBois must ponder on the fact that if black people have no record of their history, it gives way for an acceptance of barbarianism. The Historical documents of a people are the preservation of the intellectual and spiritual endeavors of a people. In brief, if black intellectuals resist writing their culture, they risk being written out of culture. The work of Hegel promotes for questioning of white fascination of black bodies as primordial. Future thinkers, who figure African people as primordial creatures, generate concepts for extermination if

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<sup>5</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Philosophy of History* (New York: Dover, 1956) 99.

blacks do not intellectually progress consciously. Just from this scholar, the meaning of blackness is shaped around appearance and essentialism that is built as a launching pad to form social Darwinism for the white race.

DuBois realizes that Social Darwinism makes a burden for a black culture establishing self-preservation. Social Darwinism is fashioned by using the natural selection theory of Charles Darwin to elevate European genius. Natural Selection is a process that states that genetic variants of an organism are reproduced to be natural fit or adapt better than their competition.<sup>6</sup> When this theory is applied to social, political, and economic issues, it promotes that the European race is superior to the race of Africans. This concept believes if a species does not evolve to adapt for survival, then a species ceases to exist. The concept is used in race to show that through history the white race has adapted, while the black race falls behind to stay a relevant race. This style of thinking is engaged by DuBois to understand white genius for black importance.

While in Germany studying, DuBois reads social-Darwinist philosophies to understand the importance of chronicling blackness. Many of his reading were on the 19th century philosopher Herbert Spencer. Spencer first endorsed the social-Darwinist idea. It would be used to show that Europeans are the intended rulers of the international world. Spencer did not like the phrase *Social Darwinism* himself; however, he employed it as “Persistence in forces to race.”<sup>7</sup> Spencer believed that whiteness was determined to not only survive, but also excel and heighten the human race through Caucasian brilliance. Within the same context of social Darwinism, Frederick Hoffman, a social

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<sup>6</sup> Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, (London: John Murray, 1871), 385-405.

<sup>7</sup> Herbert Spencer, *The Principles of Biology* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1864) 289-91.

scientist and statistician, wrote a publication titled *Race, Traits, and Tendencies of the American Negro*. He put together statistics that would prove that American blacks would eventually become extinct. Hoffman seems to become the expert in this subject because of numerical authority. This scientific pretension caused concern for a few black thinkers specifically in the Negro Academy.

Through statistics, some black intellectuals like Dubois believed math gave proof for white authority over blacks through natural right. If the Negro was to continue as a people, Hoffman held the notion that the Negro race should breed with their *white superiors*. This did not mean that race mixing did not have its own shortcomings for Hoffman either. Through race mixing, Hoffman claimed that Mulattoes had less liveliness than blacks or whites of pure blood. Hoffman even decided that he was convinced that few blacks were left who were wholly pureblooded. To say such a thing, was to show that the black race was diluted in vigor and could not compete with whiteness. However, this was the only way he believed blacks could maintain strength from extinction.<sup>8</sup> This becomes powerful in subverting Negro intellectual thinkers because such notions were already the public opinion among whites. With academic text being used to validate such claims, it upholds racist policies to dominate people of color. By the end of the nineteenth century, thinkers in science, anthropology, and the social sciences began seeing race not only as a biological concept, but also as a complex idea that included cultural, linguistic, ethical, and psychological attributes.

Not only was the race theory of Hoffman believed among common whites before his publication, but also the idea was valued among some black leaders. Frederick

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<sup>8</sup> Frederick Hoffman, "Race, Traits, and Tendencies of the American Negro," *Publications of the American Economic Association*, 11, n.1-3 (1896): 1-329.

Douglass, a black radical, states in his paper, *The Future of the Colored Race*, race amalgamation would be the way to progression. He says,

“My strongest conviction as to the future of the negro therefore is, that he will not be expatriated nor annihilated, nor will he forever remain a separate and distinct race from the people around him, but that he will be absorbed, assimilated, and will only appear finally, as the Phoenicians now appear on the shores of the Shannon, in the features of a blended race.”<sup>9</sup>

Douglas notices that if the Negro is looked at as inferior, to blend in race is better for American patriotism. Being seen in the America fashion makes claim for a person to be worthy of citizenship. Assimilation was the answer to social acceptance of whites and a way to put an end to race. Douglass had a strong impact on the beliefs of the American black, but his death gives way for new thoughts to be formed in black leadership through the Negro Academy. Even with the belief that race mixing would be a way for blacks to gain equality, this view was refuted at the time by white criticism indicated in the *Plessy v. Ferguson* trial. DuBois must show that blacks will not be annihilated if they do not race mix.

Social- Darwinism does not mean assimilation for Dubois. He believes in the radicalness of Douglass for black equality, but he does not want assimilation because it keeps whiteness in control over black bodies. From these arguments, DuBois has a difficult task. He has to find a way to use factors of social Darwinism to show the Negro as a nation. DuBois believes he cannot beat social-Darwinism ideologies. However, if DuBois can show that social Darwinism is not a race factor, but a class factor, it makes room for some blacks to count as equal with whites. While doing this, he must preserve

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<sup>9</sup>Frederick Douglass, “The Future of the Colored Race,” *North America Review* 142.354, (1886): 438.



the black race, but counter definitions of blackness that want to be scientifically proven for black inferiority. In essence, DuBois must only show Blackness as good, cover up flaws to this idea for his task of equality to work.

In 1897, DuBois addresses the American Negro Academy. The mission of the academy was to affirm the race identity of the Negro without accepting that the race would be abolished. DuBois wanted to save the Negro race by contributing a text of optimism. For black people, DuBois wants to show that blood purity was eliminated by the requirement of placement as the key element of group distinctiveness. Race purity was associated with strength, but it was not so much a goal to inherit it than it was to produce the well being of humanity through difference. For American politics in race, to exclude certain groups to keep European genius as high-class was to racially identify them as white to exclude blackness.<sup>10</sup> To keep from seeing race in terms of whiteness, DuBois highlights ethnicity from race to keep from condensing European identity to the color white.<sup>11</sup> This move keeps race from just being a natural physical trait, which fits a scientific definition, but helps to expand the term for potential expectations in the black race. DuBois places a revision on social-Darwinist work with this move. By going with ethnicity over race means not all groups who identify in whiteness have evolved therefore destroying natural selection through race. On the other hand, DuBois open up the scientific term for Africans to enter in based on intelligence being the factor for human determination. He states,

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<sup>10</sup> Robert Bernsaconi, , “The Logic of Whiteness; Hybridity and the Philosophy of Racial Segregation in the Nineteenth Century,” *Annals of Scholarship* 14.1, (2000): 75-91.

<sup>11</sup> William Edward Burghardt DuBois, “The Conservation of Races,” *Writings*, ed. Nathan Huggins (New York: Library of America, 1986) 817-18.

“It is our duty to conserve our physical powers, our intellectual endowments, our spiritual ideals; as we must strive by race organization, by race solidarity, by race unity to the realization of that broader humanity which freely recognizes differences in men, but sternly deprecates inequality in their opportunities of development.”<sup>12</sup>

DuBois uses three attributes to show the significance of a people to the rest of humanity. By physical attributes, DuBois is talking about the audacity for race immortality. In using the word intellectual endowments, he is speaking about the gift of rationality being passed generationally. Finally, spiritual ideals are to believe in more for the future of a people. In essence, DuBois wanted to make sure that the Negro did not divide on the basis of racial purity, but to unite around their shared morals and hope for a future in the midst of oppression. Such a move means blacks are significant through their gifts and not the weakness. The identity ideas of DuBois do not come from nowhere; they were built upon the thoughts of other black thinkers. While learning the canon of European genius, DuBois also knows the work of other blacks trying to create a black apologetic. Black thinkers like David Walker begin to rewrite the meaning of blackness for the purpose of being significant to not only their race but the dominant society as well.

*The Appeal* of David Walker refutes the opinion of Thomas Jefferson. The writings of Jefferson are influenced by social Darwinism; his writing however, look at inferiority as biological within black existence. Being a black apologetic, Walker presents a defense by way of the Exodus story. His case is made by showing black suffering as worse than Israelite slavery. In *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson believes God made Africans black to curse them. Walker wants to expose the work of Jefferson through the biblical authority of Exodus to destroy notions of blackness as subservient to

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 822.

whiteness. DuBois realizes from Walker that black separation for competing with whiteness gives strength for blacks to keep authority while flourishing through natural intelligence. Through Jefferson, blackness is a biological factor that gives speculation of what we see in difference. From physical traits, Jefferson believes these differences show a hierarchy in the species of the human race. Jefferson says:

“Besides those of colour, figure, and hair, there are other physical distinctions proving a difference of race... They are at least as brave, and more adventuresome. But this may perhaps proceed from a want of forethought, which prevents their seeing a danger till it is present. When present, they do not go through it with more coolness or steadiness than the whites... In general, their existence appears to participate more of sensation than reflection. To this must be ascribed their disposition to sleep when abstracted from their diversions, and unemployed in labour. An animal whose body is at rest, and who does not reflect, must be disposed to sleep of course. Comparing by their faculties of memory, reason, and imagination, it appears to me, that in memory they are equal to the whites; in reason much inferior, as I think one could scarcely be found capable of tracing and comprehending the investigations of Euclid; and that in imagination they are dull, tasteless and anomalous.”<sup>13</sup>

Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* supposedly describes the inferiority of blacks to whites in beauty, taste, and judgment by way of natural difference. Walker disagrees with Jefferson because God made Africans black to be good and in the image of God. He states, “I say, that unless we refute Mr. Jefferson's arguments respecting us, we will only establish them.”<sup>14</sup> Walker sheds light on developing a black identity separate from an oppressive fixation created by whites. By Walker redefining blackness not as a curse but as a blessing from God, gives acceptance for blackness to be more than inferior. DuBois

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<sup>13</sup> Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964) 265-66.

<sup>14</sup> David Walker, *Walker's Appeal in Four Articles* (Boston: David Walker, 1829).

understands that black blossoming refutes extinction based through divine will. He looks at other intellectuals like Blyden to expound on this claim.

Edward Blyden expands more on the duties of blacks to conserving identity.

Edward Blyden, the spiritual leader of the American Negro Academy, develops the duties of blacks more in “Study and Race,” when he says:

But the duty of every man, of every race is to contend for its individuality-to keep and develop it. Never mind the teaching of those who tell you to abandon that which you cannot abandon. If their theory were carried out, it would with all the reckless cruelty of mere theory, blot all the varieties of mankind, destroy all the differences, sacrifices nationalities, and reduce the human Race to the formless protoplasm from which we are told we came.<sup>15</sup>

Blyden later goes on to say, “Therefore, honour and love your Race. Be yourselves, as God intended you to be or he would not have made you thus.”<sup>16</sup> From these two black thinkers, DuBois does something different. Both Walker and Blyden speak on black identity through the terms of theology. The cause is understandable due to playing on the idea of God through the bible as the supreme authority. DuBois realizes that social Darwinism cannot stand if divine will does not allow it from the religious perspective of people. He also understands that the bible has been used to prove blackness as a curse. DuBois transforms race identity into a philosophically grounded discipline. This is not to say that DuBois does not use theological language, but by baptizing the language of God into the language of philosophy produces the work of black race to be taken serious in scholasticism. DuBois felt the progression of such a project hung on an elite collegiate faction to lead the masses.

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<sup>15</sup>Edward Blyden, “Study and Race,” *Black Spokesman*, ed. Hollis R Lynch (London: Frank Cass, 1971), 201.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 201.

DuBois develops the concept of the Talented Tenth to embody his idea of an educated elite to transform common blacks into civilization through social Darwinism.

He says in the abstract of his 1903 essay “The Talented Tenth”:

A strong plea for the higher education of the Negro, which those who are interested in the future of the freedman cannot afford to ignore. Prof. DuBois produces ample evidence to prove conclusively the truth of his statement that to attempt to establish any sort of a system of common and industrial school training, without *first* providing for the higher training of the very best teachers, is simply throwing your money to the winds.<sup>17</sup>

In his thesis, he states that the Talented Tenth, a small group of blacks, are educated to guide the broader black population away from the barbaric ideologies that white scholars use. He felt it was the educated *men* that uplifted the rest of humanity. To further this claim, in a speech at Atlanta University where he rhetorically asked the question, “ever a nation on God’s fair earth civilized from the bottom up?”<sup>18</sup> Dan Green states in his essay, “W.E.B. DuBois’ A Talented Tenth: A Strength for Radical Advancement,” that DuBois said, “His reply, of course, was that people have been and always will be raised and guided by those at the top as they pull those that are worth saving up to their level.”<sup>19</sup>

This comment says two things. First, it shows that social Darwinism is a *top-down* notion for progression. He believes *black folk* are too weak to fend for themselves. They need black heroes, not white leaders, to uplift the black race. Second, this remark initiates a debate on how DuBois speaks of another concept called “Double Consciousness.” To see

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<sup>17</sup>W.E.B DuBois, “The Talented Tenth,” *The Negro Problem*, ed. Booker T. Washington *et al.* ( New York: Arno Press, 1969) 31-75.

<sup>18</sup> W.E.B DuBois., “Post-Graduate Work in Sociology in Atlanta University,” Atlanta University Lectures: Athens, GA., circa. 1900.

<sup>19</sup> Dan Green, “W.E.B. DuBois’ Talented Tenth: A Strategy for Racial Advancement”, *Journal of Negro Education* 46.3 (Summer 1977): 360.

the Negro Race being raised from a *primal man* to a *civilized man* deals with solving the question of how do two national ideas exist in a single political body?

In a essay, “On the Reading of Riddles: Rethinking DuBoisian “Double Consciousness,” Ernest Allen wants to clarify by how the term is used differently in *The Souls of Black Folk* and *The Conservation of Races*. Allen says:

In both instances, the clash of incompatibilities, according to DuBois, took the form of a torturous conundrum experienced by blacks. This dilemma, in the first formulation at least, was taken as a *genuine* one, to be resolved through long-term education; but the second manifestation DuBois considered to be merely imaginary, one whose solution was to be found in rethinking the entire issue from a fresh perspective.<sup>20</sup>

“Double Consciousness” in *The Souls of Black Folk* becomes an endeavor to resolve the black race into the human race despite color, but intelligence. Through the work of Hegel, DuBois hopes for the black race to lose self-consciousness of them through the white gaze. By doing this, blacks realize the self to escape white disapproval of their color. In this aspect, “Double Consciousness” plays to the Talented Tenth theory, because the elite group who realizes self can help others realize self. At first glance, this notion can gain a popular response, but it can only be done *top-down* and not from the *bottom-up*. The main point of this perspective is the lower class of the Negro population will disappear through this process, which gives another appropriation for social Darwinism. However, “Double Consciousness” changes in meaning when used in “The Conservation of Races.”

In “Conservation” DuBois is not trying to dissolve the black race into the human race, he is creating a race identity for the Negro. He shapes this argument as such:

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<sup>20</sup> Ernest Allen, Jr., “On The Reading of Riddles: Rethinking DuBoisian “Double Consciousness”, *Existence in Black: An Anthology in Black Existential Philosophy*, ed. Lewis R. Gordon (New York: Routledge,1996), 50.

Here, then, is the dilemma, and it is a puzzling one, I admit. No Negro who has given earnest thought to the situation of his people in America has failed, at some time in life, to find himself at these cross-roads; has failed to ask himself at some time: What, after all, am I? Am I an American or am I a Negro? Can I be both? Or is it my duty to cease to be a Negro as soon as possible and be an American? If I strive as a Negro, am I not perpetuating that very cleft that threatens and separates Black and White American? Is not my only possible aim the subduction of all that is Negro in me to the American? Does my black mood place upon me any more obligation to assert my nationality than German, or Irish, or Italian blood would?<sup>21</sup>

This paragraph gives a different reading than *Souls*. This excerpt is not for merging into American life for full citizenship, but it asks for an African-American state separate from the United States. This assertion speaks more from ideas of Herder in emphasizing nationality, not race. Within both pleas, it is suggested that this national or racial consciousness stance comes from the concern to represent the Negro through the black intellectual. At either rate, both assumptions for identity through social Darwinism are not based on the way of life for *folk*. The definition of *black folk* must desert the lower class to make black intellectuals the common people. This point is highlighted in his essay on Booker T. Washington.

DuBois was a big opponent against Washington. He felt the thought of Washington was to allow for blacks to submit to white leadership by surrendering political rights to accumulate wealth through industrial careers. DuBois believed Washington was contradictory in wanting human equality through compliance. He says:

“ The question then comes: Is it possible, and probable, that nine million of men can make effective progress in economic lines if they are deprived of political rights, made a servile caste, and allowed only the most meager chance for developing their exceptional men? If history and reason give

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<sup>21</sup> William Edward Burghardt DuBois, “The Conservation of Races,” in *Writings*, ed. Nathan Huggins, New York: Library of America, 1986, 816.

any distinct answer to these questions, it is an emphatic No. And Mr. Washington thus faces the triple paradox of his career:

1. He is striving nobly to make Negro artisans business men and property-owners; but it is utterly impossible, under modern competitive methods, for workingmen and property-owners to defend their rights and exist without the right of suffrage.
2. He insists on thrift and self-respect, but at the same time counsels a silent submission to civic inferiority such as is bound to sap the manhood of any race in the long run.
3. He advocates common-school and industrial training, and depreciates institutions of higher-learning; but neither the Negro common-schools, nor Tuskegee itself, could remain open a day were it not for teachers trained in Negro colleges, or trained by their graduates.<sup>22</sup>

DuBois calls out Washington and Tuskegee for not taking interest in higher education. However, if the “Talented Tenth” was an elite of college-trained individuals to lead the masses, Tuskegee was an exemplar model of the “Talented Tenth.” Washington believed in uplifting the masses with leaders from the masses. DuBois wanted the best of blacks that were college educated to stand out from the black masses to jettison inequality philosophies. Such an idea causes black intellectuals to bear the burden of representing blackness to shield from negative images of common blacks. The *college-educated man* should not have meant these particular blacks were the saviors and fixators of the race. DuBois later admits being naïve in believing such an assumption.

A better class of the black race through higher learning did not stand in for social Darwinism to solve the race problem. DuBois had to come to terms that intelligence and leadership could not only come from black nobles. He realized more importantly that blacks who self-identified as being in the “Talented Tenth” were more threatening to the black race than helpful. Being in his eighties, DuBois speaks on this thought:

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<sup>22</sup> William Edward Burghardt DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1994), 31.



I now realize that the ability within a people does not automatically work for its highest salvation. On the contrary, in an era like this, and in the United States, many of the educated and gifted young black folk will be as selfish and immoral as the whites who surround them and to whom Negroes have been taught to look as ideals. Naturally, out of the mass of the working classes, who know life and its bitter struggle, will continually rise the real, unselfish and clear-sighted leadership. This will not be automatic or continuous, but the hope of the future of the Negro race in America and the world lies far among its workers than among its college graduates, until the time that our higher training is rescued from its sycophantic and cowardly leadership of today, almost wholly dependent as it is on Big Business either in politics and philanthropy.<sup>23</sup>

DuBois had to learn that by only seeing the black intellectuals as the face for blackness caused harm to the common black. It was not that he believed there should not be black intellectuals, but that many exploited the rest of the race. His moral conviction was to reshape the image of the black; rather his interest in the black intelligentsia only excluded black folk. The Talented Tenth showed for DuBois that social Darwinism if appropriated right could lead to intelligence breeding for the purpose civilizing *black folk*. However, DuBois learns later in life that effective trained leadership does not solely mean black college aristocrats.

DuBois should not be faulted for being in favor for a band of college-educated youth. Still his strategy assumes elevation for the black race can only come through the preoccupation of status and privilege. He thought a trained elite would resolve the open hostility of white attitudes. Unfortunately, DuBois was shown that those who were recognized as the “Talented Tenth,” could not transform the black race to gain equality for all. His work in critical race philosophy was befitting within his own life and work, but the situation remained more than that. The ideas of DuBois are a great start to hoping

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<sup>23</sup> William Edward Burghardt DuBois, *In Battle for Peace: The Story of My 83<sup>rd</sup> Birthday* (New York: Masses and Mainstream, 1952), 173.

for opportunity, nevertheless blackness expands further than shielding images of intelligentsia or media images of black tomfoolery. Blackness should be more than an essentialist thought to capture an idea. Blackness should be expressed through a phenomenological lens of multi-layered complexities, *as is*. Blackness cannot be captured in a concretized word to represent folk. Through Dubois, the fight for black equality is learned from the common lived experiences of *folk*, not elitist.

## CHAPTER III

### THE UNDERSIDE OF BLACK CULTURE: THE SPIRIT OF THE CARNIVAL

In looking at the complexities of framing conceptions of black culture, part one was framed around the black intellectual structure of black elitists in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The goal was to focus on theories of the black intellectual tradition by way of DuBois. Section two will be framed around black culture from the underside or everyday issues of black culture. Looking at black culture from the bottom-up helps to find meanings that do not conflate black folks into typecasts. In section one, it was argued that blackness should not be pigeonholed to form a definition that excludes the majority of everyday black people. European intellectuals used stereotypical notions of African people to prove white superiority over the race. These racialized ideologies created images of blacks as inferior and barbaric people who must be dominated. On the other side of this argument, black intellectuals tried to reimagine black folk under the terms set by European intellectuals to show blacks in a way to compete with their white counterparts. Ultimately, the result of their endeavor was white prototypes in blackface.

This section seeks to pose black folk culture through the notion of the carnival, presented by Russian philosopher, Mikhail Bahktin. By using the spirit of carnival, this section shows, through folk humor, a different aspect of the black sphere that develops innovative significances of black folk culture. These new meanings become the expression of black folk consciousness. The carnival does not create a spectacle seen within and without the black community; rather, everyone lives in the carnival and

participates in it because it embraces all by way of laughter. Through the carnival, hierarchical titles disappear to create a utopian society that restores and reintroduces equality into human existence. To execute this aim, the idiom carnival will be explained for understanding and appreciating the grotesque realism and complexities of black culture. This essay will give the origin of carnival life to introduce how its content can be implemented in black folk culture.

In *Rabelais and His World*, Russian literary theorist, Mikhail Bakhtin, identifies through European medieval culture, a second world of the carnival that developed centuries of ancient folk customs. Comic festivals were an important part of ancient Europe culture. Once the state of the church was established, class distinction and feudalistic structures emerged. Such politics created a culture of seriousness that caused individualism, restriction, inequality, and scarcity that excluded the festive elements of carnival culture from the now *official culture* of the state. The alternative folk culture of the *carnival* was a culture of comedy and festival that opposed the official culture of the church and feudal court. Therefore, the carnival was a way of challenging the culture of seriousness that rose from the construction of the state.

Sharing the feast days and Holy days of the medieval year, the carnival ridiculed feudal practices with carnival practices. The carnival was an unconventional life outside of the official life to establish an alternative way of living in community with liberty, egalitarianism, and wealth. Bakhtin writes:

As opposed to the official feast, one might say that carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions. Carnival

was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal. It was hostile to all that immortalized and completed.<sup>24</sup>

This medieval popular culture showed that there was life outside of the misery and brutality that national identity and economic expansion of the official culture demanded. Carnival gives way for a life that does not only deal with struggle without having escape. Carnival shows a form of existence for black culture. Carnival can be seen in black culture as a form of resistance that does not harp on the grimness of life without finding renewal. Many issues of black race apologetics can change with the auspices of the comic culture. The carnival shows that official life cannot remain superior if protests are made against the culture of seriousness.

By black intellectuals continuing to remain in the confines of serious culture, arguments for liberation remain in a grim sophistication of order and rank. Carnival teaches that official serious culture divides people instead of creating a deconstructive mode against xenophobia. By black intellectuals competing with the official life of white serious culture, closes the door of opportunity for new categories of blackness to emerge. On the other hand, the black intellectual structure creates an official life by gripping the life of blackness from allowing it to breathe new ideas to promote black flourishing. Such actions are done to place the control of blackness in the hands of black elites from white genius, while excluding new opportunities in black folk culture from everyday black people. Carnival moves further to instruct on ways for black existence that moves beyond survival through contextual analysis.

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<sup>24</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1968), 10.

Instead of succumbing to the challenges of war, feminine, and pestilence, the carnival mimicked and mocked the socio-political structures of the Middle Ages to interrupt hegemony:

The suspension of all hierarchical precedence during carnival time was a particular significance. Rank was especially evident during official feasts; everyone was expected to appear in the full regalia of his calling, rank, and merits and to take the place corresponding to his position. It was a consecration of inequality. On the contrary, all were considered equal during carnival. Here, in the town square, a special form of free and familiar contact reigned among people who were usually divided by the barriers of caste, property, profession and age. The hierarchical background and the extreme corporative and caste divisions of the mediaeval social order were exceptionally strong. Therefore such free, familiar contacts were deeply felt and formed an essential element of the carnival spirit. People were, so to speak, reborn for new, purely human relations. These truly human relations were not only a fruit of imagination or abstract thought; they were experienced. The Utopian ideal and the realistic merged in this carnival experience, unique of its kind. This temporary suspension, both ideal and real, of hierarchical rank created during carnival a special type of communication impossible in everyday life.<sup>25</sup>

Bakhtin makes sure to accent that context plays a role into why the carnival is needed.

When context is taken out of place, the content of information loses its value. European intellectuals gave a biased reading of blacks as inferior beings that need the expertise of whites to survive. Through philosophical ideas and anthropological writings of Christian missionaries, African people were objectified to primordial individuals. These ideas give rise to black intellectuals to understand the context of circumstance that placed blacks in levels of subjugation; however, they failed to give context of the inner world of blackness to places black people as human and not oppressed characters. Writers like DuBois, are right in showing the suffering of black people during slavery and the Reconstruction; however they miss the mark by giving incomplete stories of severe living in white serious

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 10.

culture but not the complete humanity of black people. Black scholars showed the trials of blacks to indicate the inequalities when compared to white citizens, but not other forms of experience in black life. The suspension of hierarchy during carnival makes a way for black culture to be obtained without violent acts of dominance.

Hierarchical suspension creates seasons of revival. For black culture, this period of renewal becomes the breaking point of resistance to carrying the burden of representation. When staying in the boundaries of an identity created by white or black intellectuals, roles and responsibilities in the upkeep of everyday life become an infirmity to killing the vitality of a people. Carnival overturns official life to turn it upside down and inside out. The suspension work of carnival creates a spirit of ambivalence to transgress the boundaries of official life and living. Under the carnival, nothing is left sacred; no one is exempt from its labor, yet all participate in its time of comical laughter. Such a period is not a mere holiday or a sponsored festival for secular or theocratic governments; it is a revolution. The religiousness of carnival is felt because such a force preexists priests, kings, and other superiors who defer their power to carnival. Bakhtin asserts: "Celebration of a carnival type represented a considerable part of the life of medieval men, even in the time given over to them. Large medieval cities devoted an average of three months a year to these festivities."<sup>26</sup> Hierarchical suspension can allow black culture to let go of the gripping seriousness of race to destroy identity boundaries and enter into a devout world of what Bakhtin calls grotesque realism. To understand this term, this thesis must first explore the cultural forms that exist in the carnival that allows people to enter the world of grotesque realism.

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 13.

Carnival life is revealed in speech patterns to bring life back into the material world. The three main cultural forms that are produced by the carnival are ritual spectacles, comic verbal compositions, and various forms of billingsgate. These forms created a grotesque realism that degraded all that is divine, essential, and abstract to return existence back in the material world, to the people, and to the body. Clergy and laity celebrated the ritual spectacles that were seen in Festival of the Asses or the Festival of the Fools. Its point was to bestow power to people in subordinate positions to mimic the ceremonies of the high offices of the church. Comic verbal compositions were parodies that were either written in Latin or performed vernacularly. Billingsgate is foul-mouthed blazons, oaths, or curses. The grotesqueness of each form helps to escape the strict beliefs of feudal Christianity. These grotesque realism principles perform as positive and negative, life and death, drinking and pissing, eating and shitting, new and old. It is an important element in the carnival because it is tangible and real. The utilization of the real creates a risk of offending the usual way of life. Such a risk is suggested in the advancement of black human social development.

The risk of carnival is based in its fluid framework of grotesque realism. This notion is instilled in a people who are continuously becoming. Such a project never ends, but refigures itself for connection to bodily form. Bakhtin writes:

In grotesque realism, therefore, the bodily element is deeply positive. It is presented not in a private, egotistic form, severed from the other spheres of life, but as something universal, representing all the people. As such it is opposed to severance from the material and the bodily roots of the world; it makes no pretense to renunciation of the earthly, or the independence of the earth and the body. We repeat: the body and the bodily life have here a cosmic and at the same time an all-people's character; this is not the body and its physiology in the modern sense of the words, because it is not individualized. The material bodily principle is contained not in the biological individual, not in the bourgeois ego, but in



the people, a people who are continually growing and renewed. This is why all that is bodily becomes grandiose, exaggerated, immeasurable. This exaggeration has a positive, assertive character. The leading themes of these images of bodily life are fertility, growth, and a brimming-over abundance. Manifestations of this life refer not to the isolated biological individual, not to the private, egotistic 'economic man,' but to the collective ancestral body of all the people.<sup>27</sup>

The richness of the carnival is in its sense of being public. Nothing is taboo, nor sacred, it is open. It vows to reach the lower strata to the everyday human being to make all matters reachable. Nothing is out of scope. Carnival makes it possible for narrow life to be extended for substantial developments of laughter to be manifested in folk life. Black culture though grotesque realism can gather the courage of open conversation with the bodily materialist sphere. Such lessons of mocking the serious world of a caste system of racial piety can be helpful for black culture. To mock the structure is to find a return back in flesh. Flesh in Christian doctrine is seen as sinful. The carnival gives black flesh salvation to re-interpret blackness no longer as evil, but good. Emphasis is no longer on the hierarchical ladder to find refuge. Black culture no longer needs validation from an authority to exist. The affirmation of life can be found in its unsolidified process of vulnerability. This type of openness allows for fear to be extinguished, the main reason for the carnival.

Grotesque realism establishes the use of laughter to conquer serious official life. Serious official life plays on xenophobic notions to create a rank and value in authenticating an objectification for otherness. To see the xenophobic nature of even the black other is to say that which does not fit among the specified black ranks. Carnival

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 19.

therefore degrades official life to even the playing ground. To degrade the structure of official life through laughter is to celebrate the life of folk culture. Bakhtin explains:

To degrade also means to concern oneself with the lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly and the reproductive organs; it therefore relates to act of defecation and copulation, conception, pregnancy, and birth. Degradation digs a bodily grave for a new birth; it has not only a destructive, negative aspect, but also a regenerating one. To degrade an object does not imply merely hurling it into the void of nonexistence, into absolute destruction, but to hurl it down to the reproductive lower stratum, the zone in which conception and a new birth take place. Grotesque realism knows no other lower level; it is the fruitful earth and the womb. It is always conceiving.<sup>28</sup>

Degradation becomes a way of *digesting* serious topics to break them down and absorb the essential parts of them to carry on life. Xenophobia becomes exposed as uncultivated information to the black cultural body. Laughter, in essence, becomes a mechanism that brings objects down to reality to defeat fear. When fear is let go of, rank and value are no longer needed. All topics are seen *as is* without fear of a take over in the life-world.

Through grotesque realism, it is realized that things are accessible in a multidimensional form for a full re-presentation, which is revealed in laughter. Laughter is the necessary tool of seeing things anew from a fixated seriousness. This reason alone is why it was eliminated from the religious culture of the European state. Instruments of domination and fear perpetuated the tone of serious medieval culture. Bakhtin writes:

An intolerant, one-sided tone of seriousness is characteristic of official medieval culture. The very contents of medieval ideology- asceticism, comber providentialism, sin, atonement, suffering, as well as the character of feudal regime, with its oppression and intimidation- all these elements determined this tone if icy petrified seriousness. It was supposedly the only tone fit to express the true, the good, and all that was essential and meaningful. Fear, religious awe, humility, these were the overtones of this seriousness. Early Christianity had already condemned laughter... John

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 21.

Chrysotom declared jests and laughter are not from God but from evil. Only permanent seriousness, remorse, and sorrow for his sins befit the Christian.<sup>29</sup>

Laughter then becomes outlawed for the sake of control through religious discourse. The point being made here is laughter holds a genuineness that promotes open-mindedness, untamed. It no longer holds truth to be held by a certain faction, but generously saturates truth to people in unconventional methods. Laughter is not afraid to be infamously known as evil, because nothing is foreign or horrifying to it. Laughter knows all matters are human, nothing more, and nothing less. Under this consideration, laughter has only a goal of making the revolting, weird, and different materials of life interrelate for playful human dialogue. This dialogue is never assimilated, only created and reworked for its context with whatever is seen as other. Laughter craves participation of all. No standard or specific type is desired, only an uncertain physicality that violates the normalization of boundaries.

The immediate object of our study is in folk humor as a way of framing black culture. This sphere of the carnival is never-ending and offers a countless assortment of expressions. As far as the spirit of carnival is concerned, this task is to show concrete evidence in which black folk culture can be assembled, framed, and creatively judged at its best point; this is to be found in the rib-tickling work of Dave Chappelle. In his creative world, Chappelle is clarifier for black folk culture. Using the work of Chappelle is not to transform his work for a means of attaining a goal he did not mean to construct. This work is committed to showing gratitude to his methods of laughter to understand his peculiar language of black folk humor.

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 73.

## CHAPTER IV

### BLACK HUMOR FOLK CULTURE: THE COMEDY OF DAVE CHAPPELLE

This section examines the elements of grotesque realism found in the comedy of Dave Chappelle. Four scenes from *The Dave Chappelle Show* will be used to analyze the language, style, and imagery of Chappelle. Each characteristic will prove how ritual spectacle, comical verbal compositions, and billingsgate are used to degrade and suspend authority in black folk culture. Basically, a religious component of carnival emerges to give appreciation to black experience. From this explanation, the term the *racialized homeopathic* is used to explain how grotesque realism is used within black folk consciousness as way of resistance to the disparities of racialization. Through comedy, Dave Chappelle deconstructs the seriousness of official black culture by ridiculing its meaning through a performative socio-cultural criticism.

Black comedian and actor, David Khari Webber Chappelle was born on August 24, 1973, in Washington, D.C. Chappelle is the son of two college professors. William David Chappelle III, the father of Chappelle, taught Music and Voice at Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio. His mother, Yvonne Seon, affectionately known as Mama Inga, has taught as a African and African American Humanities professor at Howard University, University of Maryland, Wilberforce, and Wright State, while serving as a Unitarian minister. Inspired by comedian Bill Cosby, Chappelle decided he wanted to be a comedian. As a high school student at the Duke Ellington School of the Arts in Washington, D.C., Chappelle began a stand-up comedy career. In 2003, Chappelle gained

success, which helped him land his own show on the Comedy Central Cable Network. Chappelle won two Emmy nominations for his trendy performance. His show was considered controversial because he repeatedly spoke to race relations in American popular culture. Four of his most provocative sketches will be analyzed to develop new meanings of black culture for resistance in black consciousness.

In the final episode of season two of *The Dave Chappelle Show*, Chappelle discusses the surrounding events of the presidential tenure of George W. Bush. He makes the point to say that he will make fun of any person or event except the president. However, to be subversive, Chappelle doesn't speak about President Bush, but deals with American refusal to authorize a black president to make war decisions without public questioning. This skit is pre-Obama era, but in a sense, is prophetic to an Obama presidency. The tactic of placing the president in black flesh suspends hierarchy to begin degradation. Chappelle, from the gate, problematizes race. This skit brings up two questions; first, is comedy allowed to mimic the POTUS as long as whiteness is not degraded? Second, what is the value of black flesh? Within the official life of black seriousness, these questions are limited to shield blackness by way of, education, accolades, and upbringing. Through the world of grotesque realism, blackness is not restricted to political correctness; but first, it is expanded to ridicule motive of power acts. Next, this skit measures not only the racialized notions of whites, but blacks as well. Chappelle shows this through the imagery of the skit.

The characters of the Black Bush<sup>30</sup> administration are an example of ritual spectacle. Through ritual spectacle, the characters of the presidential administration are signified as the *presidential homies of the 'hood*. Laughter comes to play because the figures ridicule the normative dress of political bodies. The *Black Secretary of Defense*, played by Mos Def, is typified as a local resident of a low-income neighborhood. He can be described as wearing a doo-rag to cover his head, large shaped sunglasses that cover his eyes inside a room, and a black hooded coat, as he gives a political report. While giving his report for recommending the nation to go to war, he speaks in a black vernacular representative of New York urban folk culture. One is compelled to laugh due to the contradictions at play. Instead of bring resolution to the skit; the comedy only brings up more questions. One might ask is it okay to be *black* while holding a political position? The Mos Def character gives no respect to the etiquette of the position of Secretary of Defense. On the other hand, should he have to as long as he fulfills the role of the position adequately? This character finds himself in a dialectical problem. On one hand, the character is offensive to whites. Due to the nature of this character, not fitting the political standardized image by wearing a suit and speaking typical English, shames normalized culture. On the other hand, the character can be seen as an embarrassment to black identity by not fitting the norm. No stone is unturned in searching for meanings of operating political roles while black.

Black Bush played by Dave Chappelle deals with challenging how far can power perform and speak on behalf of a nation without being interrogated. Black Bush dresses, moves, and acts in the role of a political figure, but being black blinds people from the

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<sup>30</sup> Dave Chappelle, Neal Brennan, and Rusty Cundieff, *The Dave Chappelle Show*, 2004.

layout. Chappelle shows through this character that more concern is placed on the dynamics of being black then the mechanics of being president. The setting is set as Black Bush prepares for questions at a press conference. One reporter asks the president about his motives for wanting to go to war with Sadaam Hussein. Black Bush gives the normative political jargon for answering media questions, but ends on a personal note that Hussein attempted to kill his father. After saying this, Black Bush pulls down an unnoticed boom microphone to emphasis the point as he says, “The nigga tried to kill my father!” His entourage gives adlibs in support of his presidential decision. The media, engaging in play, asks questions dealing with subjective reasoning and personal greed. Their questioning is not based on the presidential role, but the race-factor conducting the presidential role. Bakhtin emphasizes, “Fear is the extreme expression of narrow-minded and stupid seriousness, which is defeated by laughter... Complete liberty is possible only in the completely fearless world.”<sup>31</sup> Media reporters come in the form of white and black people who speculate if Black Bush is suitable to lead America. Chappelle plays on the current events of the first term of President Bush to present how much clout he had in running the nation.

Chappelle comically complicates identity to force the audience to think deeper in American identity in regards to national decisions. His humor becomes a deconstruction that is directed to all realities as a whole. The grotesque does not become separate from the laughter; it creates a religious devotion towards human association through comedy. The fear of a black man as president ridicules American politics to show that accountability regardless of image must be a factor for presidential responsibility.

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 47.

Chappelle is showing the participation of all, actor and audience, involved in this world of comedy.

In the second skit, Chappelle begins asking what would it look like if blacks won reparations for slavery in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?<sup>32</sup> He deals with ideas of giving a wealthy amount of capital to people who have mostly been impoverished. The world of carnival is open to official black serious life to explain the cons and pros of reparations. This skit brings in the ideas of language, memory, and responsibility. The words take on meanings for relationships carried over from the past. What is at stake is how do blacks and whites form relationships that cannot escape the past, nor secure the future? W. James Booth in his article *Communities of Memory: On Identity, Memory, and Debt*, focuses on ways of acknowledging identity accountabilities across time. Booth is looking for the moral importance of memory in political identity. Booth argues:

Of course, the past, in a casual, genealogical sense, gives the present a certain particularity, both in individual and collective identities. It need not weigh on us, however, it is not a burden, indeed, hardly even a presence, and it certainly does not necessarily give rise to debts or moral obligations. The historical past, a terrain mapped along a grid of times, does individuate us, individual or collective, whose landscape is uneven, marked by trauma, conflict, and guilt, and always eliding the past and present, that by gathering in this past, by appropriating it, gives us identity and a moral narrative of pride, shame, and indebtedness, that ties us across time to *our* past and the burdens this past imposes simply by virtue of being ours.<sup>33</sup>

Booth tells that past events, though they do give distinction to groups of people to explain a time, does not fix discrepancies going into the future. These memories belong to a people because they accept all that belongs to the recollection for a certain value.

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<sup>32</sup> Dave Chappelle, Neal Brennan, and Rusty Cundieff, *The Dave Chappelle Show*, 2003.

<sup>33</sup> William James Booth, "Communities of Memory: On Identity, Memory, and Debt," *American Political Science Review* 93.2 (1999): 254.



Chappelle ultimately says that reparations does not solve a problem of resentment in black folk culture but exposes a bigger issue of inequality.

The scene starts off with blacks waiting in line to cash their reparation checks at the liquor store. The audience laughs at the long line of blacks anticipating instant cash, but the point Chappelle is making is there are no banks in black neighborhoods. When describing the image of a black neighborhood, people can guarantee a liquor store to be present; however, the existence of a bank is ludicrous. The bank represents a place for people who have jobs, can manage money, and have assets to apply for loans. The liquor store represents a quick-fix solution that holds one over until the next pay period. Banks are not imagined in black areas for sake of wasting their usage, while holding certain apprehensions of robbery. The use of degradation is implemented not only to black culture, but the wider culture whose ramifications of greed cause banking discrimination. Laughter is at work by mocking the consumer-based economy. Chappelle dispels xenophobic images of black retaliation in folk culture to complicate races relations through showing American patriotism by spending.

By showing irresponsible black spending as a way to cut the national deficit, Chappelle uses ritual spectacle as a way of dialogism for black consciousness. This scene is very ambivalent in making a point for American unity, but does destroy hegemonic ideology. In this parody, a white news reporter describes how the stock market is fairing. He begins by saying the stock of Sprint Cellular has skyrocketed since the dispersal of reparation checks. The reason for such a phenomenon is that black people are paying their delinquent phone bills. Dialogism between the black and white cultures interacts for what Bakhtin calls a *fully valid consciousness*. This discussion presents a different way of

seeing life, which causes laughter. In retrospect, Chappelle is saying black people do not refuse to pay their bills because they are being spiteful to the phone company, but because they do not have the money. The ambivalence of laughter is freeing and resistant from the dominance of official serious culture. The conversation continues to see other ideas that remain silent due to color.

The white reporter continues to speak on the economy and says, “Fried Chicken stocks shoots up to 600 dollars a bucket, 80,000 record labels were started just today, and Cadillac Escalade Truck sales are at an all-time high.” He later says, “It seems like *these* people are breaking their necks to give this money back.” Grotesque realism gives a complex nature when used in carnival laughter. Bakhtin describes:

It is, first of all, a festive laughter. Therefore it is not an individual reaction to some isolated “comic” event. Carnival laughter is the laughter of all people. Second, it is universal in scope; it is directed at all and everyone, including the carnival’s participants. The entire world is seen in its droll aspect, in its gay relativity. Third, this laughter is ambivalent: it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives. Such is the laughter of carnival.<sup>34</sup>

In the seriousness of official culture, such conversations are shut down through narrow sensitivity. Through laughter, black memory is allowed to not necessarily forget the past, but it clarifies in new meanings. The reason people can laugh at such serious matters is that everyone participates in the comical ridiculing. No longer does the pain and joy of black experience become obsessed with white hatred, the memory becomes a celebratory performance.

Scene three is an attack on racism through the comic verbal compositions of disguise. The *Black White Supremacist* deals with the complex theme of the racist mask.

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<sup>34</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1968), 12.

From this theme, the task is called the *racialized homeopathic*. The mask is a way to reveal a truth while hiding identity. This theme of the mask is a way of protecting and exposing the complexities of a black and white world. Bakhtin writes:

Even more important is the theme of mask, the most complex them of folk culture. The mask is connected with the joy of change and reincarnation, with gay relativity and with the merry negation of uniformity and similarity; it rejects conformity to oneself. The mask is related to transition, metamorphoses, the violation of natural boundaries, to mockery and familiar nicknames. It contains the playful element of life; it is based on a peculiar interrelation of reality and image, characteristic of the most ancient rituals and spectacles.<sup>35</sup>

The racialized homeopathic is an approach to expose all to the chaos of myopic racializing, to create harmony and dismiss terror to frame black folk culture. Chappelle first does this by creating the character of Clayton Bigsby<sup>36</sup>.

The character of Chappelle called Clayton Bigsby is a rural blind black man who is told by his white schoolmaster he was white. Her reasoning for telling him this is so he would fit in with the other *blind* white kids of his school. While there, he is taught white supremacist ideology to carry on white hate. Bigsby becomes the largest leader of white power; however, no one knows who he is. Bigsby is dressed in redneck clothing and talks with a southern draw, while carrying a walking stick. He has wrote books called, *Nigger Book*, *Nigger Stain*, and *I Smell Nigger*, yet has not left his residence in many years. He agrees to do an interview to spread the message of white domination. He tells the interviewer, "Sir, my message is very simple, all niggers, Jew, Arabs, homosexuals, and all types of Chinks stink! And I hate 'em." From this statement, as sensitive as the

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 39-40.

<sup>36</sup> Dave Chappelle, Neal Brennan, and Rusty Cundieff, *The Dave Chappelle Show*, 2003.

content occurs, allows racism to be exposed under the mask of a black Klansmen. The racialized homeopathic is overwhelmed in irony that the trepidation of racism is reduced to rubble. This vernacular performance exposes many inquiries about race in black folk culture.

Clayton Bigsby first brings about possibility of self-hate and passing. Chappelle shows a black man, who is blind to the structuring of racism, and accuses his own race of being the problem of their inferiority. He continues in his bickering by saying that black inferiority is destroying that natural right of the white race. Further in the spoof, while riding in a pickup truck, Bigsby hears the sounds of rap music. He screams out racial slurs to who he believes are black men. To the surprise of the audience, the speaker blasting music is from the car of white teenage males. Hearing the black white supremacist calling the boys *niggas* excites the teenagers to believe they are officially cool by being named black. This tactic of a black white supremacist ridicules the serious badgering of black-nationalist and the serious bigotry of white chauvinist.

Second, this scene discusses if a black authority is okay when used for white domination? Clayton Bigsby is allowed to *pass* into a racist white world without malice because, "His commitment to the cause is that deep." Degrading through mask towards all cultures becomes a spiritual premise to awaken humanity. The message becomes simple in the words of Rodney King, "Can we all just get along." Racism for Chappelle is so absurd that it maneuvers internally in the various communities it once attacked. His use of mask becomes a way of making a virtue out of vulgarity. Grotesque realism is okay with playing the role of evil for the necessity of good in reality. Chappelle shows that if racism continues to reinvent itself, to wipe it away, communities must redefine

themselves for wisdom to emerge. The racialized homeopathic creates ways for injecting hate into the spirit of people in a playful manner to make them immune to the violence racism commits. Chappelle creates a dialogue for all to participate in because no one is left out in how race is religiously transcendent and immanent in black folk culture.

In the final scene, Chappelle uses performative billingsgate to take away the violence committed in black folk culture from the use of the word nigger. Again the racialized homeopathic is used to appropriate the N-word in a different context. The skit begins with a musical jingle of a white family called *The Niggars*.<sup>37</sup> The theme song goes, “N-I-G, G-A-R, It’s the Nigger family... Teaching Tim how to ride a bike, these are the Niggars that we like. N-I-G, G-A-R, It’s the Nigger family, it’s the Nigger Family, Yea!” Through laughter, billingsgate redefines and revitalizes black folk culture in several ways. Chappelle shows that such a word that has been used to offend and demarcate a people is now reimagined for positivity. He goes even further by saying how offensive is the word if it is used on a flesh of a different hue.

Chappelle ridicules identity politics in defining blackness for black folk culture thorough language and image. Based in the black and white television era of the 1950’s, the Nigger family begins the skit by looking at baby pictures of their white nephew. They discuss how the child has *those Nigger lips*. Thoughts of determining a typified model of *nigger lips* come into question. This statement suggests that participants of play must consider what norms are thoughtlessly performed through language. Nigger lips suggest symbolic imagery that is classified as substandard in serious official life. Bakhtin states:

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<sup>37</sup> Dave Chappelle, Neal Brennan, and Rusty Cundieff, *The Dave Chappelle Show*, 2004.

Wherever men laugh and curse, particularly in a familiar environment their speech is filled with bodily images. The body copulates, defecates, overeats, and men's speech is flooded with genitals, bellies, defecations, urine, disease, noses, mouths, and dismembered parts. Even when the flood is contained by norms of speech, there is still an eruption of these images into literature, especially if the literature is gay or abusive in character. The common human fund of familiar and abusive gesticulations is also based on these sharply defined images.<sup>38</sup>

The mockery that emerges in *nigger lips* is an imagined body part closed off in signifying black folk culture. If *nigger lips* mean fat, bulging lips, a statement is made on the taste of black image when compared to serious black and white culture. Chappelle complexes what image means by using billingsgate to be implied on whiteness. Language becomes mocked to ridicule type-cast of black folk culture.

To add insult to injury, Chappelle plays a black milkman to the Nigger family. This character becomes the expert for the *right* treatment of the N-word. The black milkman uses a role reversal for power politics in the word nigger. As the black milkman delivers milk to the Nigger family, he greets them by saying, "Good morning Niggers!" The character, as usual within the grotesque realism, is a typified *black token/ trickster*. Besides his wife, the black milkman is the only black active character in the skit. As the token black, the black milkman is characterized as bringing entertaining joy to a white audience. In this case, the character completes his task in a seditious manner. The black milkman *schucks and jives* dimwittedly for white pleasure, but adds intonation to the word to gain a play on words. He uses implicit meaning of nigger to ridicule other black stereotypes in reversal. After coming into the house, the character asks the family, "What

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<sup>38</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1968), 319.

you Niggars cooking?” After the family offers the black milkman something to eat, he says that he declines to eat because he would never want to “come between a Nigger and their pork”. He sheepishly slides the family their bill and remarks on how he knows Niggars are forgetful when it comes to paying bills. As he walks out the house, when the family goes to their normal duties, he runs back in to yell Niggars. Chappelle changes the meaning of the word nigger grammatically and contextually to take away the power of the word. For black folk culture, this act creates a rethinking of how the word should be used publicly. The system of billingsgate plays an essential role of images reflecting struggle in the midst of power. Billingsgate directs abuse to official life to defuse seriousness.

The aspects of the carnival through the comedy of Dave Chappelle have been examined to consider another framing for black folk culture. This paper has tried to show that humor could achieve new approaches and meanings in framing black culture. The paper has indicated that the grotesque realism of laughter opposes the official culture of serious life to dismantle hierarchy. Through performance, image, and language, the importance of laughter is needed to complex typified notions of race in search for deeper philosophies of black folk culture. Laughter creates dialogue between closed off groups to develop a human social development through performance. Black folk culture is acknowledged through grotesque realism that unleashes relief to suppressed thoughts. Chappelle ended the Nigger Family episode laughingly while saying, “All this racism is killing me inside,” Laughter as a socio-cultural performative critic for black folk culture frees clampdown emotions of seriousness through a classless, ambivalent world of the grotesque.

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