Whose Black is it Anyway?: Television, Competing Claims, and Conditions of Possibility in the Black Digital Popular

by

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Dedication

To my parents, Paul and Heather Meyerend, who have loved me unconditionally and taught me what kindness is.

To my friends and chosen family that have sustained me and held me up in moments of need.

And to myself for finishing (ayo).

Acknowledgements

This dissertation is a testament to the unwavering support of my community. I took on the task of writing, but I would not be at this point if not for the many people who have been by my side. These following few pages are nowhere near enough to capture the gratitude I feel, but it is heartfelt, nonetheless.

If anyone knows me, they know about the complicated relationship I have with religion; I was raised in the Black Pentecostal church tradition with two parents who are immersed in the faith to this day. And though I have many critiques, if I am honest with myself, the church was the first place where I learned what Blackness was and, in many ways, sparked the questions that would later evolve into this dissertation research. The Black church was a space where I saw the intersections of faith, politics, race, and community; it was where I learned about a lineage and tradition of joy, of speaking out against injustice, of looking to those on the margins and doing deep introspective identity work that forced me to think about structures larger than myself. It also taught me how to speak and to be ready to "give a word" in any season. Throughout my teenage years, I can remember sitting in the back of the church and the pastors calling me up to encourage the church folks without any warning. I quickly learned to always be prepared, an invaluable skill as I have moved through academic spaces. The city where I was born and raised and had these experiences is just as crucial to my foundation as a thinker and scholar as the Black church. I am forever indebted to Brooklyn, NY.

Brooklyn will always be home and a place that has kept me grounded. As I have

continued my research, I always have my people in mind: the friends I was raised with, whose

parents I also called mom and dad, who fed me, guided me, and are still praying for me. I have

to shoutout Rashidi Dennie, Kadeem and Akeem Earle, Paul Bennett, Keyon Lewis, Matthew

Scott, Joshua, Matthew, and Michael Pyle, Aunty Nat, Aunty Marcia, and the rest of my CHC

family. We may not talk as much these days, but to my guys, know that anytime I research or

present, I am always thinking of you all as the audience for my work.

As a teenager in Brooklyn, I remember feeling drawn to history and English in high

school, and I must thank Ms. Barton for pushing me to read carefully and thoughtfully – to be

critical in the way I examine texts as I worked through books like *Things Fall Apart* and the

works of poets like Langston Hughes. I carried this curiosity with me into my college studies, but

it was in my junior year of college at Multnomah University that I officially became an English

major, and this step set me on the path toward academic research and a doctoral program.

Until this point in my life, I had all the aspirations to become a pastor; I was studying theology

and preaching as a young adult, devoting myself to examining the biblical text and learning how

to communicate these ideas to congregations. However, as I began to take courses and write

papers within my English major, I felt a gentle tug away from leadership in the church and a

path into the world of critical theory and literature.

I am forever indebted to Dr. Schaak and Dr. Hintze-Pothen, the two English professors at

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struggling with and against authors. To Dr. Hintze-Pothen, thank you for introducing me to

literary theory, helping me navigate critical race theory and Black feminist texts, and meeting

weekly as we read *Beloved* outside of class. I will always remember how you turned lectures into sermons, writing tutor meetings into demonstrations of care, and papers into moments of self-reflection. To Dr. Schaak, I would not have applied to a Master's program if it was not for you. You went far above and beyond what any professor is asked of. I am continually grateful for our classes– American Literature I and II, the 20th-century political novel, and countless others. It was in these classes that you gave me the space to think about Blackness and its position within American cultural expression – the contradictions that exist and the power contained in writers that were provocative and critical in their analysis of the racial system in the U.S. We made connections from Thoreau and Emerson to Dickinson and MLK, to the writers of the Harlem Renaissance and so many others; I could feel myself growing as a writer and thinker in these moments. But more than that, I am thankful for the conversations about life beyond the academy. In my senior year of college, you set aside time for me every Friday afternoon, an open slot that could be filled with whatever we wanted. We talked about Christianity, literature, sports, dating, and movies, but most importantly, you encouraged me to make decisions for myself. I remember struggling between staying in the Portland area, working as a pastor, and going to Idaho State University (ISU) to pursue an M.A. in English. You reminded me of the Transcendentalist line of thinking – "Trust thyself. Every heart vibrates to that iron string." I took those words to heart and believed in myself to make the right decision for my soul. And though I haven't preached much since those days, I remind myself that it's not that I don't preach anymore; it's that my pulpit has changed.

My time at Idaho State University was a two-year stretch that profoundly impacted my growth and development as a scholar. It was also an isolating time – I moved to Pocatello, ID, as

a 21-year-old who didn't know anyone, living in a place that felt like a different world. I would

not have made it through without the community I developed there. Thank you to the "moms"

of the department – Jessica Hoffman-Ramirez, Emily Ward, and Elise Anderson – for ensuring I

ate meals and drank water, taking me out on birthdays, and reminding me I was cared for. I also

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which allowed me to finish my M.A. without going into debt. Thank you, Dr. Jessica Winston

and the Diversity Resource Center, for finding me funding to go to my first academic conference

in Chicago – the Critical Mixed-Race Studies Conference, where I had the opportunity to be

around other academics and students who showed me what a future in academia could look

like. It was here that I discovered the work of Dr. Ralina Joseph, an outside member of my

committee, whose work on mixed-race Black identity provided me with the language and

theoretical framework I needed to write more critically. I want to express my gratitude towards

my M.A. thesis advisor, Dr. Alan Johnson, for helping me realize that everything is a text and

validating my decision to research *The Key and Peele Show*, where I first began to think about

popular culture, mixed-race identity, Blackness, television, and social media platforms as sites

of inquiry. These lines of thinking have evolved and grown sharper in their exploration, but this

was the starting point.

My M.A. thesis at Idaho State University, "Laughing Between the Color Line: Mixed-Race

Humor in *The Key and Peele Show*," though clumsy in much of its analysis, sparked a desire to

think more critically about the intersections of race, technology, and media. My professors at

ISU pushed me toward doctoral research, and in the fall of 2016, I moved to Ann Arbor, MI, to apply to programs at the University of Michigan while working as an adjunct lecturer. The academic year of 2016-2017 was crucial for me; although I was not enrolled in a doctoral program yet, I was teaching full-time at the Milan Federal Prison through the prison education initiative that gave incarcerated men and women the chance to gain an associate degree. I had the opportunity to interact with students from all walks of life but predominantly Black men in my English composition and literature classes. These classes and my students have shaped me in more ways than I can count, strengthening my resolve as an educator and researcher and reminding me of the thoughtful and fruitful conversations that can occur in the classroom.

In the fall of 2017, I started my PhD in the Communication and Media Department at the University of Michigan, and it was here that my dissertation research began to form more clearly. Although many professors from my first two years took academic positions elsewhere, I am thankful for their care and attentiveness in the classes I took and taught with them – Robin Means-Coleman, Katherine Sender, and Aswin Punathambekar. I had the opportunity to take a Global Digital Cultures class with Dr. Punathambekar, and it was in this class the first iteration of my dissertation prospectus took shape. Thank you, Aswin, for your guidance and mentorship, for pushing me to think about Blackness as not only centered in the U.S. and always to consider the lineage of scholarship, how theory and schools of thought are always in process and building off each other; I have tried to keep this present through my research. Another critical class in the development of my scholarship was Algorithmic Culture, taught by Christian Sandvig, the co-chair of my dissertation committee. Thank you for giving me the space in your class to develop the first version of my eventual dissertation chapter and published article. I

must thank the other co-chair of my dissertation, Derek Vaillant, for meeting with me and always being willing to talk through the big ideas of the dissertation while pushing me to ground them in relevant and thought-provoking case studies. There are many other classes and professors whom I am grateful for during my time at Michigan – Beza Merid, Jimmy Draper, Muniba Saleem, another committee member, Sarah Murray, and Sonya Dal Cin, to name a few. Thank you, Sonya, for always having an open office door to me; your kindness and genuine care for me will always hold a special place in my heart.

I would be remiss if I did not spend some time talking about Andre Brock, a committee member whose research and scholarship have been so foundational to this dissertation. You have shown me what it means to be a scholar who is, first and foremost, Black. During our time in Michigan together, I will never forget the moments in your office where we would "philosophize," talking about Drake or *Atlanta* or whoever the main character was on Black Twitter that week; these conversations were a reprieve from the stuffiness of what academia can be. But at the same time, there were many discussions rich in academic substance. You pushed me to think about Black cultural expression considering digital technologies, never in a deterministic way that was one-sided, but always considering the cultural moment and the agency of Black folks as creatives and producers.

My time in Ann Arbor from 2017 - 2021 was filled with friends and loved ones I am eternally grateful for. There are so many people to thank – my Umich comm cohort and friends – Jessica Roden, Matea Mustafaj, Lauren Hahn, Lupita Madrigal, Pratiksha Menon, Rae Moors, Gabriel Li, Cait Dyche, Ta'les Love, and Sriram Mohan. I am also thankful to my friends outside my department – Andrew Kitchen, Christian Bass, Izzy Gainsburg, Briana Green, Reuben Perez,

Lastly, I need to spend some time thanking my family. Aunty Kay, Aunty Becky, Sherree, Nana, and Pop-pop, thank you for all the prayers and support since I was a kid. Grandma Ruby, I miss you, and I hope you are proud of the legacy you created as the matriarch of this family. To my brothers, David Meyerend and Tremar Yetman, I am who I am because of you two. I am forever grateful that we were raised in Brooklyn together. Trey, you have always supported and been proud of me every step of this academic journey; that has not been forgotten. David, I know I have annoyed you as long as I have been alive as a little brother, but the love has always been present, and I am grateful that as we became men, we found that we were not just brothers but friends.

To Paul and Heather Meyerend, I am currently tearing up writing this section because I could not ask for better parents. Thank you for loving, encouraging, pushing, and giving me the space to grow into the man I am today. Thank you for tricking me into thinking that getting books from the library and reading them as a kid was a treat; I wholeheartedly believe that these moments sparked my curiosity and would evolve into this academic journey. Dad, you have shown me that strength lies in kindness and humility, modeling what it means to be a husband and father who puts others ahead of himself. And Ma, you are my rock. So much of me is because of you; I would not be half of who I am without your prayers and support. You passed down your style, curiosity, and love of learning and reading, but most importantly, you have loved me and shown up for me in my lowest moments, reminding me that there is something spiritual and otherworldly about a mother's love. Thank you.

- Daniel Meyerend, October 2023, Seattle, WA

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Abstract

 My dissertation analyzes popular cultural representations of Blackness as a reimagination and negotiation between television industries, streaming platforms, audiences, and the digitalization of these screen industries – a space I call the Black Digital Popular. Representations of Blackness and Black mixed-race identity in film and television have long been a subject of scholarly research in media studies. Still, in the burgeoning era of digital studies, one must return to these representations to understand how representation, industrial practices, and logics are better understood in light of contemporary internet distribution platforms. How do these platforms affect the conditions of possibility for representations, and how do digital technologies mediate audience understandings and constructions of race? The cultural theorist and media scholar Stuart Hall asked, "What is this Black in Black popular culture?" my dissertation uses this notion as a foundation to ask, what is this Black in the Black Digital Popular? The question posed is not to create some sharp and well-defined divide between Black popular culture and Black digital culture, but rather to highlight the shifting conditions of possibility for what Blackness is - as we take into consideration new technological affordances and ever-changing media industry logics, the digitalization of screen industries, and audience and user practices in the digital sphere around screen productions that come to constitute larger industrial formations.

The Black Digital Popular, then, is a digital sphere in which user practices and popular culture collide, a rich layer within Black technoculture where I am interested in the pathways to meaning-making and how this journey is mediated by technology. The Black Digital Popular is a space where Black users and media industries wrestle with and reform imaginations and representations of race and make identity claims on Blackness that are both political and pleasurable. There are always tensions surrounding the ways we draw boundaries around identity, and particularly Blackness, as what it is and what it isn't. These tensions are brought to the surface in several ways, and my dissertation explores this issue from several different vantage points – most notably through popular culture representations of Blackness that encompass gender, sexuality, and mixed-race identity while interrogating understandings of digital technologies and user practices, television, and tech industry moves.

Introduction

What is this Black in the Black Digital Popular?

In 2016, I moved to Ann Arbor, MI, to work as an adjunct lecturer while applying for

Ph.D. programs at the University of Michigan. I made it a goal to reach out to professors across

disciplines whose scholarship I admired and with whom I wanted to build relationships. I met

with one of the Black professors from a Humanities department a couple of times, and the

conversations were rich and fruitful; we covered a range of topics – discussing Black television

shows like Cosby and how to grapple with its now tainted legacy, growing up in a Black

Pentecostal church in Brooklyn and the lasting effects that carried into adulthood, and memoirs

from Black mixed-race men like James McBride, Trevor Noah, and Thomas Chatterton Williams.

We spent a moment thinking about the complications within mixed-race Blackness – the

politics of this positionality, the anti-Blackness that can exist within these conversations, and

how to imagine space for mixedness within Blackness and vice versa. In the midst of this

conversation, he said something that stuck with me, and I have grappled with it ever since. He

paused momentarily, looked at me, and said, with a twinge of humor and a hint of truth behind

it – "Danny. You're the right kind of Black."

It took me a moment to digest the statement, and I was silent for a minute before

chuckling and recognizing the irony, humor, and painful truth behind the statement. We talked

more in-depth about these words, and he expounded about having the right skin tone, having

the right texture of curly hair, and being "articulate" – that loaded word aimed at Obama over

the years. No offense was taken from me at these statements; the space we had cultivated so

far gave room for some light jabs at what it means to be light-skinned, mixed-race, and Black.

We talked about proximity to whiteness, the mixedness of Obama, the messianic narratives

that get attached to mixed-race bodies, and the exotification of women. But most importantly,

we returned to the broad, seemingly unanswerable question that has guided my research since

– what is Blackness, who gets to define it, and why has this question remained so persistent in

U.S. culture?

As my time as a Ph.D. student and researcher continued, this question became more

and more specific while at the same time growing more expansive in its reach beyond issues

purely around mixed-race Black identity in a U.S. context. I became aware of how digital and

internet technologies were highlighting other forms of Blackness beyond the U.S., how

platforms like Twitter and Netflix exposed me to more niche cultural representations of

Blackness from places like the U.K. and Nigeria, becoming intertwined with my Western-

focused conceptions of race. I began to think more concretely about the conditions of

possibility for Blackness in different moments, what gets folded in and out of Blackness at

various socio-historical junctures, and how shifts in digital technology impact the productions of

Blackness in popular culture. Representations of Blackness and Black mixed-race identity in film

and television have long been a subject of scholarly research in media studies, but in the

burgeoning era of digital studies, one must return to these representations to understand how

representation, industrial practices, and logics are better understood considering contemporary

internet distribution platforms. Platforms and their affordances – the possibilities available to

users alongside the "constraining, as well as enabling, materiality of artifacts" (Hutchby 2001) –

affect the conditions of possibility for representations, and audience understandings and constructions of race are always mediated by digital technologies. By digital technologies, I am referring to the broad range of tools, systems, and devices at work in social media and streaming environments, which profoundly affect how we experience entertainment, communicate, retrieve information, and understand race in this contemporary moment.

Blackness is always a political and social negotiation, and different constituents have very different ideas about how Blackness at this moment is being defined, how its borders are being policed and by whom, how it is conceptualized in our racial imaginaries, and how digital spaces and technologies are changing but also reifying ideas about race. This project focuses on contemporary understandings of Blackness in televisual spaces, digital platforms, and media industries. Racial identity is crucial to understanding how life is valued within a system of racial capitalism, as a political category, and as cultural capital. There are always attempts to solidify images of Blackness to manage it, profit off it, fight for it, and push its boundaries. Rather than asking what Blackness is, it is more productive to examine the *competing claims* on Blackness and the *conditions of possibility* that structure the productions of the Blackness we see. In thinking about this contemporary moment, how has the entrance of new digital technologies into our everyday life, both in the essential and the quotidian, complicated understandings of what race is and how it is understood? How do mixed-race identity, shifts in industry logic, and the digital complicate how we know what Blackness is and who gets to define it?

My dissertation analyzes popular cultural representations of Blackness as a reimagination and negotiation between television industries, streaming platforms, audiences, and the digitalization of these screen industries – a space I call the Black Digital Popular (BDP).

How do these platforms affect the conditions of possibility for representations, and how do digital technologies mediate audience understandings and constructions of race? The cultural theorist and media scholar Stuart Hall (2006) asked, "What is this Black in Black popular culture?" My dissertation uses this notion as a foundation to ask, what is this Black in the Black Digital Popular? The question posed is not to create some sharp and well-defined divide between Black popular culture and Black digital culture, but rather to highlight the shifting conditions of possibility for what Blackness is - as we take into consideration new technological affordances and ever-changing media industry logics, the digitalization of screen industries, and audience and user practices in the digital sphere around screen productions that come to constitute larger industrial formations.

The Black Digital Popular, then, is a digital sphere in which user practices and popular culture collide, a rich layer within Black technoculture where I am interested in the pathways to meaning-making and how this journey is mediated by technology. The Black Digital Popular is a space where Black users and media industries wrestle with and reform imaginations and representations of race and, in the process, make competing identity claims on Blackness that are both political and pleasurable. The BDP is an arena of negotiation that this dissertation explores, demonstrating how the meanings of and claims on Blackness are affected by pressures in particular spaces in specific historical contexts. The pressures come from all directions – industries, users, technologies, and in examining these pressures, I hold on to the central questions of what the conditions of possibility for Blackness are and what the competing claims on Blackness are.

These two questions are the through line in this research, as well as the foundational analytic for using the BDP to examine different texts, platforms, sociopolitical moments, and user responses and actions. They ground this work by focusing on the process – how Blackness comes to be and is co-produced by different factors in different settings – not a causal or end result. In many ways, the title of this dissertation – *Whose Black is it Anyway?* – is an exemplification of the tension that exists, of the different things fighting for a piece of what Blackness is. The process of fighting and wrestling is what I am most interested in, and I highlight this struggle by tracing an ongoing complication of Blackness and the digital through the medium of television. The ways that television has been produced, how it has been received, and how people can respond to it now as opposed to 30 years ago have shifted vastly because of technological, economic, and sociopolitical changes. The BDP is a framework I utilize to trace and understand these shifts. It allows us to think about the digital from two sides – how media industries are employing digital technologies as a mode of creating productions of Blackness, as well as how users are taking up the digital in their own distinctive ways to forge meaning-making practices. The BDP is a structure that highlights Black identity, not in an essentializing monolithic approach, but one that is dynamic and ever-changing, always considering the various dynamics and pressures put on Blackness. There are always tensions surrounding the ways we draw boundaries around identity, and particularly Blackness, as what it is and what it isn't. These tensions are brought to the surface in several ways, and my dissertation explores this issue from several different vantage points – most notably through popular culture representations of Blackness in television that encompass gender, sexuality,

and mixed-race identity while interrogating understandings of digital technologies and user practices, television, and tech industry moves.

Defining the Digital

The digital is a loaded term, bound with claims of futurity and advancement. It is tempting to conceptualize the digital as a product of contemporary times, as purely comprised of electronic technology that generates, stores, and processes data, but as Reigeluth (2017) emphasizes, the digital must be understood as "in continuity with 'previous' or existing social, political and economic structures, and not only in terms of change, revolution or novelty." The digital is a persisting lineage, one that started long before the introduction of the devices we associate so readily with the term. Manovich (1994) speaks to digital imaging breaking from "older modes of visual representation while at the same time reinforcing these modes." Essentially, he puts forth the idea that the digital, while new, is still at its core about what has always been done – indexicality and organization. Even though Manovich's example centers on photography, the principles he emphasizes still apply to the current digital landscape and the construction of race within popular culture. Peters (2016) frames the digital as "counting the symbolic," speaking to how the digital points to/indexes all possible worlds outside our real one. But at the same time, digital media manipulate our social imaginary, framing the way we see reality and creating it in some instances.

Alongside notions of indexicality and organization, this dissertation also understands the digital as an industry and contested ideological space. I pay close attention to Western technoculture, particularly how conceptions of Silicon Valley ideology prioritize innovation and forward progress above all else (Leon and Rosen, 2021). This kind of thinking is foundational to

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understanding the back and forth that exists between media industries and users, as well as the tools that are employed to produce content and retain user attention. In the same breadth, my conception of the digital is not purely antagonistic or top-down in a deterministic, imbalanced manner that only fosters inequity (though that is certainly true and happens). I still leave room for the space of the digital to be transgressive, where users can push back and create and reform in ways that are both innovative and life-giving. It is tempting to dip too far into one camp or the other, but I strive to highlight shifts and changes in the digital as opposed to stark definitions.

The rise of digital media and specifically the internet was revolutionary in countless ways, but for many, the rise of this technology was to usher in the rise of a post-racial space where race would be eliminated (Nakamura 2007). This has not been the case, and in fact, digital spaces and technologies have complicated the notion of race. While it has yet to create some new category or idea of race, the digital, for race, is an opportunity or even a demand to categorize and demand. Perhaps more important than defining the digital in concrete fashion is to understand how race, specifically Blackness and mixed-race Blackness, is contested in the digital. The digital has radically reorganized media systems, but it also asks questions about race and how race is reorganized. When Netflix makes a category or introduces a thumbnail image to draw in users, the digital has asked Netflix to categorize in specific ways. The organization of the medium asks you to classify and categorize and provides an entry point into re-asking questions that we may have thought to be settled. We must ask again: what counts as Black? The question of what counts as Black in the digital is a massive one, similar to other questions this dissertation poses – but the space of the BDP and the medium of television in the arena of

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popular culture is how I ground this work and seek to explore these questions. When I do

define the digital, it is via changes I see in an industry, noting shifts in what television is and

how it is defined from the late 80's and '90s up until the contemporary moment. In tracing

these shifts, the digital is made clear as simultaneously an ideology, a space, an industry, and

user practice.

Black Popular Culture, Black Studies, and the Black Digital Popular

Hall (2006) speaks of the theater of popular culture as a "profoundly mythic space"

where desires and representations of identity are constantly being constructed, negotiated,

and renegotiated by industries and audiences in a tenuous back and forth. He speaks to the role

of "popular" in popular culture as solidifying the authenticity of popular forms, "rooting them in

the experiences of popular communities from which they draw their strength, allowing us to

see them as expressive of a particular subordinate social life that resists its being constantly

made over as low and outside." Thus, the space of popular culture is contingent on

performance, but more than performance, it is also determined in part by the threshold of

authentic representation. But to reduce this space to merely authentic vs. inauthentic is a

disservice to the complexity that exists, and Hall cautions against an approach entrenched in

simple binary oppositions. Rather than focusing on some essentializing view of a monolithic

"authentic" Blackness that stands behind these representations, a better entry point of analysis

is to ask, what are the competing claims *on* Blackness, alongside the origins and diasporic

amalgamations that constitute what Black is in these spaces?

Hall (2006) goes on to insist that there is no pure form of Black popular culture that

these forms are always:

…the product of partial synchronization, of engagement across cultural boundaries, of the confluence of more than one cultural tradition, of the negotiations of dominant and subordinate positions, of the subterranean strategies of recoding and transcoding, of critical signification, of signifying. Always these forms are impure, to some degree hybridized from a vernacular base.

This emphasis on the vernacular extends and connects to Gilroy's understanding of Black modernity, arguing that Blackness should be understood as a "vernacular variety of unhappy consciousness" (1993). Gilroy goes on to claim Blackness as a counterculture for modernity, pointing to Black music as a means of expressive creativity and subjectivity. Hall also picks up on the theme of the vernacular and expressivity, writing that Black popular culture, "in its metaphorical use of the musical vocabulary…has enabled the surfacing…of elements of a discourse that is different – other forms of life, other traditions of representation." Hall and Gilroy push back against logocentric forms of Western modernity to assert a cultural expressivity within Black popular culture, one that relies heavily on forms of music. The counter-narrative to modernity within Black popular culture has a broad theoretical base in Black Studies. This genealogy provides an important context for understanding how Blackness has been named and co-produced in Western social, cultural, and political life.

There is a lineage within Black Studies that articulates Black life to disrupt Eurocentric narratives of identity and logic stemming from the Enlightenment philosophy. In *The Black Shoals*, King (2021) theorizes Blackness as an interruption of the "smooth flow of modern and postmodern thought on the questions of slavery and genocide." As she examines Black thought, aesthetics, and politics, her project seeks to "halt the all too smooth logics of White settler

colonial studies." Ultimately, this work forces us to reckon with how "the human" is constructed and how Blackness has informed this project while simultaneously being constructed as less than human. This line of thinking can also be found in the work of scholars like Sylvia Wynter (2003) and Saidiya Hartman (1997), who speak to philosophical and material underpinnings of how Black life is structured within the United States. Although these projects within Black Studies are rooted more solidly in history and philosophy, they also provide an entry point into thinking about representations of Blackness within popular culture and media texts as they come into contact with new digital technologies, particularly from the standpoint of technological progress being a primarily white enterprise.

Brock (2020) highlights this notion of technology being so intertwined with whiteness, specifically in his iteration of Dinerstein's matrix of technology that emphasizes the Internet as a predominantly white, male space. Kim (2000) asserts that "racial categories, meanings, and distributions are constantly reconstituted in American society, perpetuating the position of whites at the apex of the racial order and those of non-white groups below." She speaks to how the concept of race was developed under the context of colonizing the New World. "It was only as they encountered or forcibly imported different groups of color whose labor they sought to exploit in the context of economic development in the New World that Americans of European descent began to construct a classification system in which different human 'races' were identified, evaluated and ranked." It is within this context that whiteness is constructed as the standard by which all other races are measured and solidified as normative and hegemonic. Conceptualizing whiteness (and race more broadly) in this way is bound to Omi and Winant's racial formation theory as it "exposes racial categories and meanings as human constructions

that pervade the social, economic, political, and cultural realms and function in all of these to maintain the dominance of Whites over non-Whites." Kim uses Omi and Winant as a theoretical departure point, maintaining that racial categories and meanings are constantly being reproduced and challenged with significant socio-structural implications. This exposition of whiteness as the standard and at the top of the racial hierarchy is a crucial foundation for understanding technological progress as an ideology that seeks the maintenance of the status quo. At the same time, I am still cautious about defining the digital strictly in terms of whiteness and advancement at the expense of marginalized groups. Digital spaces, in many ways, reflect these preexisting racial hierarchies, while at the same time, give room for disruption and combatting the status quo.

Time and time again, there are examples that underline how Blackness is marked as an interruption of these spaces and categories, specifically as it encounters different technological systems, whether platforms or algorithms. The collision of Blackness with technological systems that are rooted in white, Eurocentric ways of knowing and thinking reveals not only something uncomfortable about the ways that identity (more broadly speaking) is conceptualized, but it also reveals how technologies attempt to and in part construct and classify Blackness. Towns (2015), in his work on the Underground Railroad as a media object, writes about the "taken-for-granted forms of classification, categorization, and mapping that are far from neutral but continue to devalue and racialize subjects and spaces." This begs the question, is the notion of classification inherently a white enterprise? And if so, how then is Blackness conceived within this enterprise? My project seeks to unveil how images of Blackness in popular culture intersect with classification systems within digital technologies that ultimately reveal the constantly

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shifting nature of Blackness. As referenced by King and others within the Black Studies

tradition, Blackness is a constant disruption in the ongoing project of constructing "the human,"

and my project examines this phenomenon as Blackness comes into contact with new digital

platforms and technologies.

Brock (2020) speaks to the nature of Blackness on digital platforms like Twitter.

complementing Gilroy's understanding of Blackness within modernity by advancing a libidinal

economy of Black technoculture, arguing that "the same expressive creativeness and

subjectivity he identifies in Black music" can be found in the ways that Black users innovatively

utilize the digital. According to Brock (2020), the artistic performances that Gilroy speaks of in

The Black Atlantic can also be read as "libidinal moments that are expressed as relations and

mediated by technology." When thinking of Black popular culture, there is always the

temptation to navigate through and around the mundane and pleasurable to arrive in the arena

of the political to find "meaning that matters." Throughout *Distributed Blackness* Brock urges us

to reconsider the relationship between political motives and expressive culture, contending

that libidinal energies drive these political moments.

Blackness continuously takes on new meanings and motivations depending on where it

is and how it is contextualized – televisual texts, algorithmic systems, user discussions on social

media platforms, and media industry marketing. Representations of Blackness are constantly

traveling across "different discursive geographies and technologies" (Gray 1995), and due to

this movement, there is insight to be gained when thinking about how Black representations

are generated. When Blackness is a focal point of analysis on several registers, in different

industrial spaces, in audience engagement, and in popular practice, in the digital, it becomes

possible to make critical examinations of competing claims on Blackness. Examining these discursive sites - internet-distributed television, the tech industries that produce them, and the digital spaces where users forge their own meaning-making practices, reveals the instability of race while also affirming its malleability to become something solid and recognizable. The heart of this dissertation is ultimately concerned with this tenuous back and forth between media industries and audiences surrounding the notion of Blackness and how technology mediates this dialogic relationship. This work offers a dialectic between longstanding cultural discussions of race and representation within media studies and the ongoing project of digitalization. Various media industries are governed by different logics and technologies, and they must be taken into careful consideration as their effects on the production of texts, the conceptualizations of audiences, and industry practices themselves are examined.

Algorithms, Audiences, and the Black Digital Popular

Kriess (2016) refers to digitalization as the way in which "many domains of social life are restructured around digital communication and media infrastructures." This concept is a foundational part of this dissertation, particularly in uncovering one piece of how Blackness is reconfigured and constructed in the Black digital popular. The rise of streaming platforms and algorithmically curated content is one arena in which we get a glimpse into how computational processes are used to "sort, classify, and hierarchize people, places, objects, and ideas, and also the habits of thought, conduct, and expression that arise in relationship to those processes" (Hallinan and Striphas, 2016). My dissertation is concerned with a number of digital technologies and how they interact with Blackness, and I explore specifically how algorithms intersect with our daily lives in meaningful ways and how algorithmic understandings of people

have serious implications for how various facets of our identity are configured in the digital –

including race, gender, and sexuality.

Alongside the focus on popular culture and how it is taken up by users in digital spaces,

this dissertation brings to light the ephemeral, constantly shifting nature of Blackness. I argue

that there is no concrete "Blackness" in the digital; it is continuously fluctuating and being co-

produced by different factors in distinctive settings. In some ways, algorithms can be thought of

as generating a particular kind of Blackness as well as the choices that users and industries

make in response to and in conjunction with these newer digital technologies. These digital

technologies mediate the back and forth between audiences and industries, and the

intertwining of industries, users, and technologies is a ripe matrix for examination. There is a

nebulous back and forth between media industries and audiences surrounding the notion of

Blackness, and technology is a key factor that mediates this dialogic relationship. User

interactions with digital technologies are always reflective of cultural, moral, and social choices

(Brock, 2015), requiring a critical cultural approach to Internet-distributed television that

interrogates industries and users as offline cultural and social practices frame them.

One of the many objectives of media industries is to establish and promote specific

identity categories to customers, with the ultimate goal of maximizing profit. Thus, when

thinking about racial images on the internet, specifically platforms like YouTube, Twitter, and

Facebook, users now have the ability to create visual racialized images as well as choose to

share, distribute, and respond to images that may reinforce problematic hegemonic ideals or

distribute counter-hegemonic images. The dynamic and ever-evolving nature of Blackness as an

identity and representation can be greatly impacted by advancements in technology. With the

ability of technology to shift and create different kinds of images, it is essential to conduct

research in this area to better understand how technology can shape the perception of

Blackness in various contexts.

Television Studies, Cultural Studies, and the Black Digital Popular

D'Acci (1994) utilized an integrated approach to television texts that emphasized four

key nodes of analysis: the text itself, history and contextualization of the object of study,

audiences, and industries. She argues that the television program, its viewers, and its historical

context are all sites of negotiation in the struggles over meaning and discourse. In her analysis

of the text and industrial practices of the television show, which featured two lead female

protagonists and a number of women as writers and producers, she posits that network

primetime functions as a technology of gender, one that "produces women as consumers,

target audiences, representations, and spectators." Gender is, therefore, not a fixed identity

category but is something that is constantly in flux, and television plays a crucial role in

constructing the gender of its audiences. The notion of Blackness is a multifaceted and dynamic

construct that is constantly being negotiated and renegotiated through various discursive

practices. Among these practices, television has emerged as a potent medium that significantly

influences the formation and representation of Blackness. The cultural and social significance of

television as a form of mass communication cannot be underestimated, as it plays a vital role in

shaping public perception and understanding of Blackness. Therefore, it is crucial to examine

and critically analyze the ways in which television contributes to the ongoing discourse around

Blackness and the implications of these representations for broader social and cultural issues.

D'acci's framework is useful when thinking about digital platforms like Netflix and how they can

function as a technology of race that constructs racial identities in particular ways. Her four nodes of analysis are a helpful lineage and starting point for thinking about the Black Digital Popular as a space of negotiation that pays close attention to how identity is constructed while also attending to user agency alongside the digital.

Another key text alongside D'acci is Lotz and her work *Redesigning Women* (2006); she addresses the rise of shows centered on female protagonists as an iteration of a particular kind of feminism. In the book, her goal is not to evaluate how certain shows reach, fall short, or exceed expectations of some kind of ideal feminism; rather, she is interested in the arena of women's television and how/why certain choices were made to target specific demographics of women. She uses an industrial-cultural approach to understand different constructions of woman, women, and femininity, paying attention to the locations of audiences and the productions of particular shows. There has been an explosion of Black content in the past decade (UCLA Hollywood Diversity Report, 2020), pushing audiences and critics alike to make sense of these representations. The BDP is a productive framing to think about why and how certain choices are made to produce Black content, why industries seek to increase the numbers, as well as how Black audiences are navigating constructions of themselves that they are seeing on screen.

While my dissertation is concerned with the analysis of media texts and the different types of representations, I am cautious of falling into the trap of the notion that media representations directly support or challenge racism. Gates (2020) calls for a refocusing of our attention "away from just issues of representation and onto industrial practices and matters of labor, and in doing so, posits that there arise different possibilities for new questions that we

can begin to ask. Performance and representation are important, but at some point, the attention needs to shift away from these objects and onto the industrial factors and digital technologies that govern performance- what kinds of motivations exist – economic, political, audience-driven, but also the conditions of possibility laid by algorithms and the digitalization of screen industries. Gene Demby, cultural critic and host of NPR's *Code Switch* once said, "Representation matters, but it ain't magic." The sentiment behind this statement rings true, and while images do matter, they never do work outside of the histories and contexts in which they circulate. Gates (2020) goes on to say, "Black images in popular culture have always been evaluated to a large extent in direct relation to those that came before them, and always in the context of whether the images improve the perception of African Americans in society, as well as the supposed authenticity of the characters and experiences that they depict." The notion of what Blackness is and how it comes to be defined and by who is of crucial importance in this dissertation, and I am interested in the idea of "Black" as it comes to be defined in the process of circulation throughout pop culture by digital technologies (Gates 2020).

Hall (2006) speaks of the signifier Black within Black popular culture as "It has come to signify the Black community, where these traditions were kept, and whose struggles survive in the persistence of the Black experience (the historical experiences of Black people in the diaspora), of the Black aesthetic (the distinctive cultural repertoires out of which popular representations were made), and of the Black counternarratives we have struggled to voice." Several scholars aforementioned, in their own ways, were concerned at varying points with the tensions that existed between industry and audience readings of media texts, and in pointing out these tensions, substantiated the notion that audiences are not passive in their reception of

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these texts. Furthermore, audiences are, in many ways, constructed and imagined by industries and the digital tools they employ.

Methods

My dissertation envisions how Blackness in digital spaces is a product of a reimagination between television industries, streaming platforms, audiences, and the digitalization of these screen industries by employing a Cultural-Industrial and Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis (CTDA). To examine this reimagination, I highlight several "situations," moments that produce a sense of the emergence of something into the present (Berlant 2011), and occurrences that are juxtaposed to display turbulence or slippage within how we define and understand Blackness. My notion of a cultural-industrial analysis draws from Punathambekar (2013), who conceptualizes the Bollywood industry as a "zone of cultural production shaped by multiple sites of mediation, including the operations and social worlds of industrial shifts and audience practices…" The method used throughout his work is one he calls "an integrated cultural-industrial analysis," where he examines data from four modes of analysis: a textual analysis of trade and worker artifacts, interviews with film/television workers, ethnographic field observation of production spaces, and professional gatherings, and economic/industrial analysis. Punathambekar continues the lineage within the Cultural and Media Studies tradition of moving beyond only textual analysis, understanding how the Bollywood industry was, in part, a product of a reimagination between the state and media industries. My dissertation employs this methodology to examine phenomena from several angles – the decisions that tech industries make to use specific technologies, the technologies themselves and the content produced by them, and the user habits and choices that interact with these objects.

I also utilize a critical cultural approach to Internet-distributed television and platforms that interrogate industries and users as they are framed by offline cultural and social practices through the work of Brock (2016; 2018; 2020). Critical technocultural discourse analysis (CTDA), as coined by Brock (2018), focuses on an "analysis of the technological artifact as well as user discourse to unpack connections between form, function, belief, and meaning of information and communication technologies." This method asks how technologies mediate identity, power, and the politics of racial identities. Brock's work on Black Twitter further elaborates on the utility of this method, focusing on an "analysis of the technological artifact as well as user discourse to unpack connections between form, function, belief, and meaning of information and communication technologies" (2020). He reframes Black Twitter as a ritual drama and then "highlights the structure, engagement, invention, and performances of these Twitter users employing cultural touch points of humor, spectacle, or crisis, to construct a discursive racial identity." The close attention paid to the technology and its affordances alongside cultural and social practices is invaluable in how this dissertation understands the construction of race through digital technologies and shifts in larger cultural paradigms.

Each of my chapters focuses on themes and texts that highlight understandings of Blackness from several vantage points, and these methods are a means to analyze the complications of televisual texts and the BDP. The nature of this dissertation relies on a deep understanding of the relationship between televisual texts and technological artifacts, how media industries employ them, and user choices/actions. A Cultural-Industrial analysis focuses on industrial and economic shifts in light of political and cultural happenings, and in order to fully understand the competing claims on and conditions of possibility for Blackness, these

shifts must be carefully attended to. The transformation of the television industry from network to cable to the contemporary era of streaming has had a significant impact on how Blackness is constructed and received by audiences in the sphere of popular culture, and my dissertation draws out these tensions by highlighting these developments. CTDA is also vital in tracing these advancements, but it focuses more specifically on the relationship between user identity and technology, specifically how Black identity and discursive practice shape technological interactions and understandings. This method showcases how users actively seek agency and pleasure in the digital while making significant political claims. When we delve into the nuances of these engagements, we can gain a deeper insight into the various ways in which people navigate the digital.

This dissertation does not employ methods to understand the technical aspects of how different technologies function – the inner workings of machine learning algorithms or the coding decisions that are made to design what we may see on platforms. It is possible to see this as a shortcoming methodology-wise; a deeper understanding of how digital technologies work on a more procedural level may yield insights that speak to inequity and bias in programming language and code. There is existing work that speaks to these issues (Noble 2019; Benjamin 2019; Sweeney 2019), but in this dissertation, I am more concerned with cultural understandings of technology, how they are presented and discursively constructed, alongside how audiences interact and speak back to texts and technological shifts.

Chapter Overviews

The chapters in this dissertation have been chosen to underline the specificities of how the meanings of and claims on Blackness are always affected by the pressures in spaces in a

specific historical context. By closely examining the claims around identity that are made by

industries and audiences, this dissertation offers an analysis of the complex relationship

between meaning-making and socio-political contexts. Chapter 1, "*From Huxtable to Hulu:*

Networks, Platforms, and the Sign of Blackness," is an overview of television industry shifts

from the mid-90s up until the contemporary moment and the sociopolitical climate in the US

alongside these changes. The chapter begins with an analysis of The Cosby Show at its height,

examining narratives of upward Black mobility and American exceptionalism placed on the

show and audience understandings of the series as indicative of racial progress. I then examine

the political moment of the mid to late 90s in the U.S., particularly the Clinton administration

and its' tough-on-crime policies alongside the multiracial movement that sought to expand

census categories. Though not thought of as in conjunction with each other, I argue that both

major political and social moments were rooted in strong anti-Black sentiments that resurfaced

in cultural productions.

As the chapter continues, I introduce the figure of Obama in the 2000's, and how his rise

to political prowess and subsequent media coverage was indicative of the tensions within

mixed-race Blackness. I also interrogate the growth of new media technologies in television,

participatory culture, and web 2.0: how these major shifts affect our understandings of Obama

and the very nature of Blackness itself. The final section of the chapter considers the

contemporary streaming era of television, what I call the digitalization of screen industries and

how that intersects with the larger push from tech companies/media platforms like Netflix and

Hulu to produce/uplift Black film and television. This uplift is a ripe moment to consider within

the BDP, showcasing the negotiation of what Blackness is from streaming platform initiatives

and audiences looking for Black representations on screen. As I begin to think through the moves that the industry makes under the guise of celebrating diversity or empowering Black voices, I am interested in how these efforts are mediated by the digital and what I call "racial anxiety." The responses of companies to a movement like Black Lives Matter are far less rooted in a desire to be aligned with a politics that seeks racial equality and more associated with concerns of being perceived as intolerant or even racist. Thus, the moves made by these businesses center on surface-level remedies that are far less impactful than they would imagine, and this chapter seeks to unpack the political, cultural, and digital landscape where these decisions are being made.

Chapter 2, "Mixed-Race Black Identity in the Digital Sphere: YouTube and the Legacy of *The Key and Peele Show*," highlights the anxieties around the competing claims on who and what gets to be considered Black in popular culture as it is continuously reconfigured through digital platforms. The highly visible nature of these comedians and their relationship to Obama provide an entry point into the tensions that surround mixed-race identity and Blackness. By engaging with their digital shorts on YouTube that amassed hundreds of millions of views and hundreds of thousands of comments, it becomes possible to examine public readings and debates more precisely around how Blackness is defined and understood by both industries and audiences alike. This chapter looks at two user groups – one, the producers of the content (Key and Peele, The Key and Peele Show), and two, the people who discuss them (commenters on YouTube). As I take a critical cultural approach to Internet and new media technologies, I track the shifts in Key and Peele in what I call a reorientation towards Blackness, one that highlights a mixed-race Black identity that is less focused on a biracial identity rooted in exceptionalism or

transcendence. Instead, this identity finds its roots in a politically charged Black comedic

tradition. The conclusion of this chapter focuses on the comedians after the ending of the

successful Comedy Central series, focusing specifically on Jordan Peele's career as a director

and filmmaker, setting the stage for an explosion of Black horror/sci-fi in television and film. I

build off the understanding of racial identity construction in chapter one, further expanding on

the pressures that exist within the space of popular culture, television, and audience

understandings of what Blackness is and what it should look like. The space of YouTube and

Obama's presidency are complicating factors that once again reveal the shifting nature of

Blackness that is dependent on the space and time it exists in.

Chapter 3, "Watchmen (2019): A Meditation on Blackness and Technology," explores

the themes of Blackness and Technology in the critically acclaimed HBO series *Watchmen*. The

chapter picks up where chapter 2 ends, tracing the renaissance of Black horror and sci-fi

following the entrance of Jordan Peele into the world of directing and producing and the

success of *Get Out*. I categorize *Watchmen* as a byproduct of Peele's acclaim as well as blending

genres of sci-fi, horror, and Afrofuturism. HBO's *Watchmen* reminds us of how source material

can be shifted and reinterpreted in imaginative ways with vastly different concerns; the show

centers on Blackness while also being undergirded by technology, explorations of Black

masculinity and femininity, and histories of racism and slavery. *Watchmen* forces us to grapple

with the memory and weight of anti-Blackness in the U.S., centering on a Black female

protagonist and her journey of self and familial discovery. But the show also raises fascinating

questions about the sources that power technological advancement and how the central

organizing feature of race is always present. This chapter provides a meditation on race and

technology in *Watchmen*, using what I call a *counter-historical haunting* to examine distinct

themes from the show. In the space of speculative fiction, where Blackness is typically pushed

to the margins, *Watchmen* provides a valuable look into the possibilities that exist for Blackness

in this genre, providing a space where Black humanity is explored and interrogated.

I utilize a more traditional critical discourse analysis in this chapter to analyze the text,

paying close attention to how Blackness disrupts the status quo of social relations, regarding an

understanding of Black life beyond its relationship to whiteness and anti-Black struggle. There

are still elements of a Cultural-Industrial analysis present as I examine the platform of HBO as a

medium for Black content, but this chapter relies more exclusively on the text itself and not the

interactions of users with the content on second-screen applications. The choice here is

intentional, and though there is much to gain from examining the ways that audiences speak

back to the text, I stay grounded in the primary text of *Watchmen* to showcase the richness of

Black life that can exist on screen. The show provides a vastly different understanding of

Blackness than we typically see in the sci-fi format, showcasing a parallel to other types of Black

television examined in the dissertation – one that furthers the complications of how we see

Blackness as part of and constructed by the digital.

Chapter 4, "The Algorithm Knows I'm Black: From Users to Subjects," highlights the

shifting conditions of possibility for Blackness as it is reconfigured through algorithmic channels.

I examine the dissatisfaction of Black Netflix subscribers on Twitter regarding the portrayal of

Black actors in movie thumbnails, particularly when the films predominantly featured white

casts. The prevailing sentiment among these complaints suggested a perception that Netflix

employed misleading tactics that targeted consumers based on their racial identity. Netflix, in

response to these criticisms, contended that the absence of inquiries about users' racial identity made it impossible to personalize the Netflix experience in this way. The ways we understand and define race are not fixed or objective but rather a product of historical, cultural, and societal contexts. As such, it is important to recognize the ways algorithms can shape our racial identities. For many of the Black users who complained about Netflix's tactics as being intrusive or coercive, the dominant understanding seemed to be one of misrecognition – that is, Netflix incorrectly assumed certain things about user's identities. While this framing can be useful, this chapter shifts the analysis to the more fruitful terrain of construction and how the entanglements of industries, platforms, and user practices/understandings coalesce into this notion of the Black Digital Popular. The portrayal of Blackness on Netflix is inextricably linked to how media industries perceive Blackness and construct it. Utilizing CTDA of the platform itself, trade press documents, and user responses surrounding this situation, I explore how Netflix utilizes thumbnail images to construct and profit from Blackness – a process that involves the restructuring of the economy of representation, as Netflix strategically presents images that appeal to consumers to generate revenue and retention on the platform.

Together, these chapters form a cohesive narrative, progressively deepening our understanding of the negotiation, construction, and representation of Black identity within the ever-evolving landscapes of television, technology, and user engagement. This dissertation spans a range of time periods, televisual texts, and digital technologies, illuminating the utility of the Black Digital Popular as a framing device for understanding complex arenas of negotiation. Each chapter introduces a new complicating factor – a historical understanding of Blackness in television alongside shifts in technology, the intertwinement of mixed-race identity

and claims on Blackness in the digital sphere of YouTube comment sections, the refashioning of

sci-fi source material to highlight Black identity and its relationship to technological power, and

finally what it means to construct Blackness is algorithmically curated spaces.

Chapter 1

From Huxtable to Hulu: Networks, Platforms, and the Sign of Blackness

Introduction – Cosby and Network Television

In 1992, *The Cosby Show* aired its final episode, marking the end of an 8-year run of one

of the most successful network television shows. The NBC product, although now removed

from most platforms following the trial and conviction of Cosby in 2018, was heralded as one of

the great Black television shows, purporting "positive" images of the Black family – one that

didn't rely on tropes such as hip-hop and life "in the hood" that figures like Cosby saw as

damaging to the advancement of Black life in the U.S. But despite his political/moral leanings,

when thinking about the most impactful television shows of all time – sustained commercial

success, broad cultural impact, and a continual presence decades later – *The Cosby Show* must

be mentioned in these lists. The timing of the show was poignant, airing in a decade that

constituted the reign of a political regime under Reagan hostile to the aspirations and

advancement of Black folks in the U.S. Reaganism in the 80's was a political project steeped in a

repositioning of whiteness to a state of victimhood, a reclaiming of "family" values, an

economic system committed to the maintenance of a class system, and a war on drugs that

singled out marginalized communities (Gray 1993). It was within this context that the Cosby

show aired for the first time, at the height of Reaganism, while also in a time when many critics

and television experts prematurely forecasted the demise of the situation comedy genre (Gray

1993). During its tenure on NBC, it was one of the most consistently high rated shows, and long after its end continued to enjoy syndication success and spin off shows.

Taking a step back to some decades earlier, while Black comedians were explicitly talking about racial injustice issues (the 60's and 70's), Cosby chose to focus on different material altogether. He is quoted as saying:

> "'I don't think you can bring the races together by joking about the differences between them…I'd rather talk about the similarities, about what's universal in their experiences'…Cosby embodied the optimism of the integrationist New Frontier—his squeaky-clean likeability and universalist comedic approach won over audiences regardless of race, creed, or color" (Haggins 2007).

It was this same comic persona that was carried into his most famous artistic endeavor, *The Cosby Show*. The NBC show was profoundly invested in espousing the important values and outlooks of a new and emerging Black middle class (Jhally and Lewis 1992). Cosby's rhetoric within his stand-up that spoke to "the privileging of the pursuit of a middle-class, civil rights era informed American Dream" found its ultimate amalgamation in *The Cosby Show* (Haggins 35). The NBC show was the fulfillment of *the* American Dream that Cosby saw as indicative of Black progress and inclusion within the U.S. as citizens. Cosby as Dr. Huxtable, with a wife and three kids who were intelligent, driven, and headed to college represented the sensibilities and values that Cosby so carefully crafted and presented to the public.

The Cosby Show is a confluence of key shifts in understanding televisual audiences as well as contestations around the sign of Blackness in these kinds of texts and network television. There has long been debate about the effects of this show – critiques of

respectability politics and enlightened racism (Jhally and Lewis 1992), upward mobility, and

tensions around highlighting positive images of the Black family. But as many critiques are

leveled at the show, the same amount of praise can be highlighted. Gray (1994) writes,

"Furthermore, it employed Black writers, directors, and producers and placed African American

life at the center of commercial network television." *The Cosby Show* is one example of how a

politics of representation can be misinterpreted as indicative of racial progress. Many of the

white respondents in the study of the show saw the Huxtable family as a marker of how the

playing field had become level, and to them, the notion of a racial hierarchy with whiteness at

the apex and Blackness at the bottom seemed a forgotten sin of the past. Through hard work

and determination, a Dr. and Mrs. Huxtable was a reality for any Black family that sought to do

so. Yet, in the year before *The Cosby Show* ended, the beating of Rodney King by four police

officers and the subsequent L.A. riots occurred. In and throughout the90s, mass incarceration

rates of Black men and women skyrocketed, and Black folks are continuing to be policed in

harsh and punitive ways with little to no accountability or justice.

There is always the temptation to conflate depictions of marginalized communities on

screen and in popular culture with political and social progress, and while these images do

matter, they must always be tempered by a strategic understanding of the contributing factors

– shifts in industry imperatives and technologies as well as the sociopolitical moment. The

explosion of mainstream progressive representation on broadcast television, cable, and

streaming platform has increased the diversity we see on screen in large quantities, but to what

end? Gray (2013) speaks to a cultural politics of diversity that seeks recognition and visibility as

the end itself. When thinking about the number of Black characters and television shows that

exist currently, Gray provides us with a starting point to think about the kind of representation that seeks representation as *the* end goal. Do these representations do anything to unsettle the alignment of power and difference that exists? This chapter is not interested in making definitive claims about the utility of the Cosby Show or other televisual examples as it pertains to advancing Black American politics. What I am fascinated by are the conditions of possibility for Blackness at this moment - the constraints of network television and the technologies available, the U.S. political climate and its constant shifting, as well as the role that popular culture plays in mediating racial politics. Texts like *The Cosby Show* illustrate how meanings are always open to interpretation and subject to negotiation, a key concept that the Black Digital Popular holds on to.

To fully understand the depth of this dissertation – the competing claims on Blackness and the conditions of possibility for it to exist within televisual industries and internet-distributed television, there needs to be a historical understanding of how the sign of Blackness has been represented. In order to accomplish this, I trace a brief lineage of Black representations and key instants of Black racial formation from *The Cosby Show* until the contemporary moment, citing case studies of popular television shows and rhetoric that existed around these depictions. Alongside these representations, I track the development of broadcast, cable, and digital shifts in technology, examining how these lines of inquiry intersect and feed off each other, producing new ways of understanding representations and audience formations. This Black Digital Popular is always concerned with the key questions of what Blackness is and who gets to decide what the boundaries, entry points, and exit points are. The following chapters focus on three distinct elements – the rise of Obama to the presidency

alongside the growth of the Key and Peele show as the first self-proclaimed biracial comedians

and the growing notion of participatory culture on digital platforms like YouTube and Twitter,

the explosion of Black horror and sci-fi post *Get Out* in 2017 and its critical and monetary

success, and the introduction of algorithms as a co-producer of Blackness within Netflix and

internet distributed television. This chapter contextualizes and lays the backdrop for

understanding how these moments came to exist.

I argue that the sign of Blackness within televisual representations has shifted alongside

cultural, political, and technological changes, and more than shifted, they are also indicative of

the ways that racial politics play out in the public arena. The site of cultural production is a

crucial space for understanding representations of Blackness, ones that are not limited to

capitulation or resistance (Carrington 2016). Hall (2006) reminds us that popular culture is

always contingent upon "the experiences, the pleasures, the memories, the traditions of the

people," and as these concepts come to life on screen and in other mediums, there is always a

range of other factors that must be accounted for. Representations always rest in a complex

zone where audience understandings and desires intermingle with industry imperatives for

profit and attracting advertisers, affected by the constraints of network, cable, and streaming

technologies. In this chapter, I contend that that conditions of possibility for Blackness are

always shifting, and we see these manifestations in several ways: the rise of the situation

comedy on network television, the multiracial movement, and the push for a cultural politic of

colorblindness, the rise of cable and the so-called democratization of the internet and user

contributions, and the introduction of streaming platforms. These moments provide a

genealogical understanding of the conditions of possibility for Blackness, revealing the tensions around its construction and co-production in different spaces of negotiation.

Black Representations and Black Audiences in the Television Industry – 90's and 2000's

There is a long tradition of scholarship studying the formation of Black audiences and the tenuous relationship they have had to mainstream media (Means-Coleman, 2014; Squires,). For most of the 20th century, Black audiences found themselves on the margins of mass media productions, having to oppositionally read media texts or create niche independent products that were much smaller in scale (Rhodes 1999**).** Before the 1980's, there was an establishment of three networks – ABC, NBC, CBS – and for the most part these networks created programming that aimed at the largest television demographic, white middle-class nuclear family units. However, this began to shift with the growth of the Fox television network in the 80's and their offering of "risky, youth oriented and Black targeted programming" (Fuller 2010). Fox and its entrance into the network television arena began to break the dominance of the established big 3 and provided a "temporary venue for Black-produced programming that wasn't as obligated as CBS, NBC, and ABC shows to translate culturally specific content for the broadest possible (white) audience" (Zook 1999). Alongside this network success, the proliferation of cable channels and spread of cable franchises in the 1980's was also a key component in shifting the kind of television content being produced as well as a reevaluation of the relationship that the big three saw between themselves and Black programming aimed at Black audiences (Gray 2004).

The site of television is always a struggle and contestation over representations of difference, and the rise of cable programming and the strategy of narrowcasting cleared the

way for programs like Cosby (Gray 2004). The success of *The Cosby Show* (although it wasn't the first of its kind) in many ways legitimized and proved the success of the family situation comedy as a core genre and staple for success. Networks recognized that Black folks watched television at rates far higher than the rest of the population and these audiences were concentrated in urban areas. This recognition and potential profit to be made was a strong motivator for networks to make "safe" risks like the situation comedy and talk shows, a shift that aimed a more explicit urban sensibility and lifestyle. Before the post-network era, Black television shows needed to have significant crossover appeal in order to remain relevant and funded for multiple seasons. Gray (2004) writes, "Television representations of Blackness operate squarely within the boundaries of middle-class patriarchal discourses about whiteness as well as the historic realization of the social order." And because of this requirement, Black television shows were continuously thought if in terms of what is safe or palatable for white audiences (Gray 1995).

However, new broadcasting networks like Fox, WB, and UPN changed this for a moment. Their narrowcasting strategy, also known as niche marketing, was an opportunity where "advertisers could reach desired customers instead of addressing a mass market, often for lower rates" (Fuller 2010). These networks realized they could attract advertisers with relatively cheap programming that could still turn a profit, but soon enough it was realized that the most coveted demographic was young urban white people, and Black programming in many instances was limited to a single night or cancelled altogether (Fuller 2010). And it was in this instance that cable television became more of a home for Black television, as it relied less on advertising and more on a subscription-based model, and also because Black viewers and households generated a higher percentage of cable revenue than other groups (Walker 2004).

Because of these numbers, cable showed a wide variety of Black representations, but at the same time these efforts were aligned with cable network imperatives to grow subscription models from wide-ranging audiences. Fuller (2010) reminds us that initiatives to foreground Black representations reveal how that shifts in strategies from these companies are always indicative of "the exigencies of the television industry, not the inherent goodwill or good taste of cable executives and subscribers, that shape what Blacks are on the TV screen, 'no matter what the [cable channels] tell you."

Although Fuller and Gray are speaking to a different period than the coming televisual examples in the rest of the dissertation, a historical understanding of how Black audiences were catered to and constructed by network and cable industries in the 90's and early 2000's is crucial to interrogating the tenuous back and forth that continues to exist between audiences (users) and industries. What we gather from this historical juncture is how Blackness is constantly in negotiation and always in flux – dependent on the sociohistorical moment, the mediums available to push content out, the imperatives of industries to satisfy top-down demands and increase profit, but also the needs of audiences and what they are searching for in their watching practices. When all these things are considered, it is possible to construct a more rounded sense of the conditions of possibility as well as develop sharper frameworks for understanding cultural productions.

A Framework for Understanding the Cultural Production of Television

There has been a long history in Cultural Studies and Television Studies documenting the conditions of possibility for representations of Blackness to exist (Hall 1988, Gray 1994,). One of the key insights traced from the CCC and the Birmingham school to the dominant form

of media studies today is how meaning is produced, distributed, and understood/interpreted. The encoding/decoding model was a way in which Hall could start to articulate the social relations of cultural production more sharply – examining producers, television programs, and audiences. Although this method of examining media was rooted in structuralist thought and semiotics, it also raised serious questions and concerns about the power in the encoded text and the meaning that is (supposedly) decisively entrenched within these texts. The model stresses how audiences can accept, resist, or negotiate encoded messages. Thus, there is a sharp turn from conceptualizing audiences as passive receptors and a move to understanding audiences as able to accept or decode messages as they are encoded on the production end, where they can counter/refuse the ideological power and authority of the text by applying oppositional or divergent readings.

Hall (2006) speaks of the site of popular culture as a place of "strategic contestation," where there are always positions to be won regarding power and representation. Specifically thinking about Black popular culture and the forms that it comes in, he writes:

"Always these forms are the product of partial synchronization, of engagement across cultural boundaries, of the confluence of more than one cultural tradition, of the negotiations of dominant and subordinate positions, of the subterranean strategies of recoding and transcoding of critical signification, of signifying."

The forms that Hall writes of are always impure, never essentialized, and always "molded to the mixed, contradictory, hybrid spaces of popular culture." Blackness is thus continuously being negotiated according to specific cultural and political needs that resist essentializing. As some have tried to essentialize Blackness as signifying a particular set of practices and ideologies, Hall

cautions against it because it "naturalizes and dehistoricizes difference, mistaking what is historical and cultural for what is natural, biological and genetic." If Blackness (or any racial identity) is rooted in what is natural, biological, or genetic as opposed to what is historical, cultural, and political, there is a danger of reifying racism in popular culture.

Popular culture is a space where representation is always at play, and Hall (2006) notes that we tend to privilege experience as "life really is out there," but he makes the argument that Black life cannot be lived *outside* of representation. "There is no escape from the politics of representation, and we cannot wield 'how life really is out there' as a kind of test against which the political rightness or wrongness of a particular cultural strategy or text can be measured." As commodified and stereotyped as the space of popular culture can be, is still a profoundly mythic space, a theater of popular desires and fantasies. "It is where we discover and play with the identification of ourselves, where we are imagined, where we are represented, not only to the audiences out there who do not get the message, but to ourselves for the first time." Hall frames the site of popular culture (and I think also entertainment media) as a space where desire and fantasy are played out in significant ways, where audiences are able to get a sense of how Blackness is imagined and represented.

Returning to Jhally and Lewis (1992) for a moment, they employed an ethnographic method of analysis, utilizing the academic lineage from Hall and the Birmingham School, embedding themselves in the homes of families to watch and discuss episodes of *The Cosby Show* to understand raced perceptions of the show. By conducting interviews and engaging in ethnographic fieldwork with Black and white families in Massachusetts, the two scholars sought to tease out cultural beliefs about race and racism in an American context. What they

discovered was a range of parallels and contradictions in the answers of the differently

racialized subjects regarding the show. For many of the white audiences, they saw the Huxtable

family as similar to themselves, upholding a liberal, colorblind understanding of race that

contributed to an understanding of the absence of racial prejudice in the U.S. Similarly, Black

families/audiences also saw this as indicative of racial progress despite their experiences and

responses revealing the opposite. Although this chapter and dissertation are not explicitly

focused on audience analysis or users, this extended Cosby example is a microcosm of the

complexities that arise in the matrix of popular culture, politics, audiences, industries, and the

constraints of televisual technologies.

The Multiracial Movement, Mixed-Race Representations, and Anti-Blackness

While much has been written about Black television in the 90's and the multiracial

movement of the 90s, there is utility in examining these phenomena alongside each other and

their effects. The 90s were a peculiar moment for the signs of Blackness within television – the

Cosby Show ended, and depictions of Blackness were limited to the situation comedy on

network television (for the most part). Organizations like the NAACP and entertainers like Chris

Rock were quick to call out the lack of Black actors and actresses on primetime television. In

June of 1999, the NAACP orchestrated a protest against the four major networks – NBC, CBS,

ABC, and Fox and their 26 new primetime shows that had no non-white lead characters (Fuller

2010). This protest did not illustrate a new concept to Black viewers and critics, but it was a

more public rallying cry that recognized the need for change. Popular shows like Friends and

Seinfeld had casts that were exclusively white and, at the same time, represented a lack of non-

white characters even as they were set in urban spaces with higher world-majority populations

(Fuller 2010). Even smaller networks like UPN, which relied on Black-led situation comedies like

The Parkers, Moesha, and Girlfriends, were now showcasing dramas like *Buffy the Vampire*

Slayer and *Dawson's Creek*, with dominated majority-white casts.

While there are several factors leading to decisions like these – both economic and

industrial – it would not be an oversimplification to acknowledge the undercurrent of anti-

Blackness that lies beneath the surface of these decisions. Wilderson (2020) speaks to the

positionality of Black people within the modern world, claiming that they "do not function as

political subjects…Blacks are not human subjects, but are instead structurally inert props,

implements for the execution of white and non-Black fantasies…" Winters (2020) speaks more

to the Afropessimist underpinnings in Wilderson's work, calling it a "heuristic strategy for

diagnosing how Black people are positioned, contained, and punished for prevailing discourses

and arrangements." These understandings of anti-Blackness provide a framework for

interrogating the conditions of possibility for Blackness as well as the competing claims on it in

media industries. However, to call into question the humanity of Blackness from outside

perspectives is not to negate Black people's agency and humanness but rather to "reframe

Black agency as necessarily and always engaging the fundamentally anti-Black world as it is and

projecting radically alternative conceptions of what it is to be human and live in society" (Jung

and Vargas 2021). The world of cultural production and television is not exempt from these

notions, and when considering how representations come to exist, it is never simply a matter of

metrics or audience success. Anti-Blackness weaves itself into the very fabric of industry choices

and disguises itself in the form of doing what is the soundest economically or thinking about

what "viewers really want." We see these sentiments of anti-Blackness across a range of media

texts, and particularly as we examine rhetoric around depictions of multiracial identity in the 90's as well.

In 1993, *Time Magazine* (image 1) published an issue titled "The New Face of America: How Immigrants Are Shaping the World's First Multicultural Society." On the cover of the magazine is a computer-generated image of a woman who is a mix of several different races. In the moment, the cover was innovative and revolutionary – highlighting the rising rates of interracial couplings and immigrant populations in the U.S., pointing towards a tan future that (seemingly) was to decenter whiteness as the norm and standard. It is also interesting to note the descriptive text that is to the left of the image, telling the audience that she was "created by a computer," a phrase that highlights the role of technology in the creation of a world that moves beyond the confines of race. Ultimately, the image forces us to grapple with the narratives that have been historically attached to mixed-race individuals, and the broader implications for what their physical bodies embody for the future of race relations. Joseph (2013) describes these shifts in understanding, calling out how "representations of multiracial bodies transitioned from discursively maligned intolerable creations to celebrated future bridges to a color-blind utopia." The Time Magazine image is the inevitable culmination of the supposed U.S. melting pot trajectory, indicative of broader cultural desires placed on mixed-race people and specifically the potential that lies within them to unify and deconstruct the very idea of race. Berlant (1996) speaks to the cover, "new faces of America," speaking of it as a computer-generated, racially hybridized, feminine representation of a future, post-white American population. She argues that these are an amalgam of racially hybridized phenotypes – "the civic and commercial solutions to problems of immigration, multiculturalism, sexuality,

gender, and (trans)national identity that haunt the U.S. in the present tense. Since 1993, there

have been several articles written that explore growing mixed-race populations - *National

Geographic*, *The Washington Post*, *USA Today*, and a host of other publications, which I argue

represent a continuous desire to equate multiraciality with racial progress but is ultimately

another materialization of anti-Blackness.

Figure 1.1 The New Face of America, Time Magazine 1993

There has been a consistent theme regarding the treatment of mixed-race identity in mainstream media, with it often being treated in simplistic and unsophisticated ways, being fetishized as inherently beautiful, marketed as the key to post-racial feature devoid of racism, and to hurdle old fights about affirmative action and the effects of slavery and Jim Crow on Black Americans. Spencer (2014) claims that "the dominant media in particular are woefully misinformed in regard to race, postraciality, and the meanings and possibilities of mixed-race identity in the United States (163). Mainstream media have perpetuated these claims; sources such as the *New York Times*, *Time Magazine*, and *Newsweek* have constantly reinforced problematic ideas associated with mixed race individuals and the roles they play in culture and social progress. Spencer (2014) goes on to call for better representations of mixed race in mainstream media, asserting that the conversations around mixedness generally stem from "the uncontested authority of young mixed voices, a gaping deficit of countervailing scholarly perspectives, and spectacular pronouncements that race as we have known it is dying before our eyes have been the staples of mainstream mixed-race media coverage". Essentially, he is cautious of a representation of mixed race that predominantly calls attention to personal identity and not social and political inequalities. Though Rainier is speaking to print and online media forums (newspapers, magazines, etc.), I believe that his critique extends to the realm of popular culture.

As Hall (2006) reminds us, the site of popular culture is always a place of strategic contestation, where there are always positions to be won regarding power and representation – "There is no escape from the politics of representation, and we cannot wield 'how life really is out there' as a kind of test against which the political rightness or wrongness of a particular

cultural strategy or text can be measured." The political and cultural moment of the '90s in the U.S. was particularly fraught, coming out of the tail end of Reaganism and at the height of the Clinton presidency, a liberal administration that put emphasis on tough-on-crime policies that contributed heavily to the astronomical rates of mass incarceration for Black men and women. At the same time, the multiracial movement of the '90s was gathering momentum, an effort spearheaded by advocacy groups, politicians, and parents of multiracial children who were fighting for the right to check off more than one box on the U.S. census.

In the early 1990s, a number of multiracial representatives heavily critiqued the federal racial classification system, arguing that categorization should include the ability to select multiple racial categories or a multiracial check box. Dalmadge (2004) writes, "On the one side are those…who believe that the Multiracial Movement needs to focus on removing the concept of race either through the introduction of a multiracial category…on the other side are those who believe that multiracial people should be a 'protected' group." Williams (2006) discovered that the leaders and participants of multiracial advocacy groups were overwhelmingly white women married to Black men. The most famous of these women is Susan Graham, founder of Project Race (Reclassify All Children Equally), who led the fight for the multiracial category on the census and even had her young son testify before Congress so that he did not have to identify as Black. Conservatives like Newt Gingrich were highly visible and active in establishing a category for mixed-race individuals on the census and giving them autonomy to identify in terms that were not monoracial. But the question must be posed: What investment does a conservative politician like Gingrich have in making mixed-race people a visible and distinct population recognized by the government?

Gingrich and the broader conservative agenda are ultimately invested in maintaining the

status quo, and this maintenance will always come at the expense of Black life and the

upholding of power structures that privilege whiteness and its hold on economic, social, and

political realities. Torres (2003) speaks to the extremes of these initiatives, calling out how civil

rights movement footage has been appropriated and repurposed to signal that appropriate and

complete gains have been made from the civil rights movement. This kind of logic is one that

we see repeatedly, and the move towards a multiracial identity categorization in the 90s,

although grounded in a supposed motivation for people to identify in the ways that they

wanted to, inevitably revealed a desire to distance oneself from Blackness and Black political

aspirations seeking equity and forward progress. While the multiracial movement of the 90's

was already in full effect, with conservative politicians advocating for color blindness and the

removal of race and group-based policies, there are moments like the *Time Magazine* cover

clearly pointing at the coming century in which multiraciality will not only be tolerated but will

be worshipped. Sexton (2008) posits that Blackness and anti-Blackness were the motivations for

distancing from monoracial categories, writing that "the more fluid racial classification is, the

more Black political concerns and desires are intolerable".

DaCosta (2007) speaks to the result of this push, writing: "Largely due to the efforts of

multiracial activists, in 1997 the U.S. Census Bureau changed its racial enumeration policy to

allow individuals to mark one or more racial categories" (2). DaCosta then goes on to reference

a *New York Times* article that was published in 2003 that declared the arrival of "Generation

E.A." (ethnically ambiguous), further tracing the transformation of the ways that mixed race has

been represented in political and cultural arenas. Similar shifts were happening in the world of

academia. Root (1993), an important scholar and author in the multiracial movement of the late 20th century, created a document that she termed "The Bill of Rights for People of Mixed Heritage." This constitutional approach to the process of self-identification for mixed-race individuals marked a shift away from race as a social construct and political category to a logic more rooted in ethnicity and parentage.

Although there have been attempts in the past to speak to the issue of mixed-race in more popular discourse, television shows, books, movies, and other texts, there is a need to more rigorously interrogate how multiraciality has been manipulated for political and cultural gain as well as how audiences are grappling with these images. In 1998, Danzy Senna (author of the famed novel *Caucasia*) wrote a short piece titled *The Mulatto Millenium*. She writes:

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

The epigraph above, written by Senna, satirically illustrates the ways in which mixed-race was being represented. Written in 1998 for Salon, Senna's article was almost prophetic in her description of how mixed-race would function in the coming millennium. Senna's comments in *The Mulatto Millennium* are indicative, then, of larger political and social desires that are more than just mixed-race people advocating for the right to identify as more than monoracial, although personal identity is still a crucial component to understand when examining this phenomenon in the past two decades. What gets attached to mixed race are narratives of

progress, exceptionalism, post-racialism, and racial futurity. Senna represents a constituency

that seems to especially disregard the notion of mixed-race to ultimately deconstruct race and

to claim a unique multiracial identity. The authors speak to complexities that accompany

representations of Blackness and mixed-race in the popular culture sphere, but in order to

more comprehensively understand these depictions in our contemporary moment, the

intersections of race, representation, and digital technologies must be attended to.

Web 2.0 and the Age of Obama

While technology was advancing rapidly in every sector imaginable, the 2000s brought a

renewed sense of technological progress (and anxiety for some), particularly with the entrance

of Web 2.0, the internet we have come to know. There was a large strategic shift in the

positioning of the Internet, most notably going from an application to the Web as a platform.

Alongside these shifts, new ideas were pushed forward, with users being positioned as

controlling their own data and the core competencies of the new Internet being announced as

services (not packaged software) grounded in an "architecture of participation" that relies on

more democratic processes (O'Reilly 2009). In the early years of the 21st century, the rise of this

new Internet and new media was seen as a massive threat to the television industry, with many

executives and legacy corporations having a fear that TV is dead/dying, influenced by the

coming technological disruption of the internet (Lotz 2018). In the late 90s, cable companies

had invested $80 billion in digital infrastructure, a move that at one point was thought to be the

death of cable and legacy companies who had purchased many of them. But in 2006, it became

clear that the Internet would be the reason for the survival of these companies, and the cable

service industry shifted into the Internet service industry, and by 2010, high-speed Internet

access became integral to daily life (Lotz 2018). The role of the Internet here foregrounds the concept of Internet distributed television, defined by Lotz (2017) as "online portals distributing series produced in accord with professionalized, industrial practices of the television industry." The term here is invaluable in its recognition of the internet's influence on the televisual texts we see in terms of production and output, while also maintaining a firm grasp on the enduring legacy of traditional television efforts.

The growth of the internet for many signaled the beginning of a post-racial era; the rise of the digital was conceptualized to solve social inequality along racial lines. The digital divide was closing, and the growing unfettered access to the internet and other technologies like cell phones, computers, and laptops was supposed to usher in a wave of equality like we have never seen. It is no coincidence then, that a rising politician by the name of Barack Obama was chosen as the keynote speaker of the Democratic National Convention in 2004. Nakamura (2013) refers to Obama as our first "wired" president and "digital commander in chief, a harbinger of a new age in more ways than one." The DNC convention was a coming-out party of sorts for the soon-to-be president, and in the years leading to the 2008 election he capitalized on this momentum while utilizing the tools of a new media ecology. His presidential campaign occurred simultaneously with the spark of new social media platforms like YouTube, SNSs, and Twitter (Nakamura 2013). Everett (2013) examines both user-generated content and media coverage of Obama's presidency, arguing that he became the "uber-celebrity media text, one capable of testing the limits of new media's digital democracy credibility, while engendering a plethora of racial significations-novel and familiar." The rise of Obama in the mid to late 2000s

was a peculiar phenomenon, one that relied on the new digital technologies available but also on the promise that he would usher in a post-racial future.

Joseph (2010) explores critiques of anti-Black racism in mixed-race African American representations leading up to Obama's first presidency, referencing a quote from Obama's 2008 "What is Patriotism?" speech where the president makes references to his mixed-race identity and speaks to the uniqueness of his story and ascension to the oval office as only having the possibility of occurring in the U.S. context. Using the speech as a framing mechanism for the book, she writes:

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

The cultivation of Obama as a racial subject able to understand both sides of the Black/white divide was crucial in his ability to capture the vote of the American people. Elam (2011) speaks more about Obama's positioning within conversations about mixed race, claiming that "Obama is often heralded by mixed-race advocacy groups as proof that multiracials will eventually inherit the earth." This attention to the messianic characteristics of the exceptional multiracial is crucial in understanding that promise that is seen in the mixed-race body and points to something otherworldly that transcends Blackness but also race itself.

Joseph (2010) speaks further to this, claiming that "some of the exceptional multiracial's primary characteristics are that he or she is smarter, more attractive, and generally more redeemable because of the residue of whiteness" (26). One reporter from MSNBC, Ed Gordon, stated the following in 2008: "If ever there was an African American man who had that entrée to those folks [white folks], it would be Barack Obama. He's half-white, he's Ivy League. He's all the things that white America considers safe." Obama is representative of all the progress that America has made regarding issues of race and racism. As a mixed-race Black man, his presidency highlights progress, inclusion, and acceptance of diversity. Though he may perceive himself as racially Black, Obama still references his mixed-race parentage to occupy multicultural spaces and even employ a particular narrative – a kind of narrative that, while it may not explicitly state a post-racial future through the mixed-race body, implicitly states that there is an understanding of both sides of the issues. In *Dreams From My Father*, the president clarifies this point: "As it was, I learned to slip back and forth between my Black and white worlds, understanding that each possessed its own language and customs and structures of meaning, convinced that with a bit of translation on my part the two worlds would eventually cohere" (82).

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

and though this was a personal decision made by Obama regarding his own identity, his

platform as President made this act political. Speaking to this, Elam (2011) writes:

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

The public negotiation of Obama's racial identity since 2004 has been a touchpoint for

understanding the competing claims around Blackness in a number of arenas, revealing the

fraught nature of how boundaries are drawn around Blackness. The entrance of new digital

technologies, multicultural promises of exceptionalism and a post-racial future, and the hopes

of the first Black commander-in-chief and what that entailed for progress in the fights against

racism and anti-Blackness all factor into the images and narratives we see in the cultural and

political sphere. These images and narratives reveal the constant struggles faced in how

Blackness and mixed-race identity are defined in relation to each other, particularly in televisual

representations.

The Fox Searchlight film *Belle*, based on the story of Elizabeth Dido Belle, a Black mixed-

race daughter of a white wealthy aristocrat and a slave as well as being granddaughter of the

first Earl of Mansfield, who was the Lord Chief Justice of England, depicts interraciality as a

bridge between the races, a means to move forward in a time of inequality. And although

interracial relationships *can* exist within the confines of a healthy context because of the

assumed agency that people have, the historical realities of rape, coercion, miscegenation and anti-miscegenation that have for so long shaped Black/white sexual relations must be attended to by cultural critics and academic researchers alike.

In more recent years, there have been several moments within popular culture and film where conversations surrounding sexual interracial relationships have been sparked. The first was a movie titled *Where Hands Touch* set in Nazi Germany, starring Black actress Amandla Stenberg in which she plays a biracial teen born to a German mother and Black father who falls in love with a white teen who is a part of Hitler Youth. The trailer and subsequent film sparked outrage and debate all over social media platforms, with many users claiming that this simply isn't the time for a movie about interracial love when hate crimes are on the rise and KKK memberships are increasing in numbers. Months later in April of 2019, Ancestry.com released a thirty-second commercial depicting an interracial couple in America during the times of slavery where a white man is attempting to marry a Black slave woman by suggesting that they could escape to the North. It ends with a call to consumers to buy the product to find out if stories like this one may exist in their families. The commercial was taken down from all social media platforms after a couple of days due to the enormous backlash that the company received as a result of airing the commercial.

Although these media texts extend beyond the terms of Obama's presidency, they are still indicative of how multiracial texts were harnessed to encourage narratives that oppression, anti-Blackness, and racism are decreasing. The multiracial movement leading to the promises of a new and better form of democracy under Web 2.0 and the rise of Obama to the presidency established a cultural narrative of American exceptionalism hurtling towards progress, a future

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devoid of racism. This kind of progress is a necessary fantasy held by power structures that have a profound investment in maintaining the status quo, leading us to a moment where Blackness is more visible to than it has ever been despite its continuous position of precarity.

Conclusion: The Streaming Age and the "Return" to Blackness in the Post-George Floyd Era

In 2019, the Netflix subdivision Strong Black Lead (SBL) aired its first promotional video at the BET Awards – a star-studded digital short headlined by over 40 Black creators, actors, and actresses such as Ava Duvernay, Spike Lee, and Laverne Cox. The video titled "A Great Day in Hollywood," modeled after the famous photo "A Great Day in Harlem," was narrated by then-14-year-old Caleb McLaughlin, a rising star in the acting world and most well-known for his leading role in the Netflix original *Stranger Things*. The choice to cast McLaughlin as the narrator is undoubtedly an intentional one, meant to imbue within the audience a sense of youthful hopefulness. It signals a merging of generations and talent, but with the lasting imprint that this initiative from Netflix, alongside the career of the narrator, is just beginning. The decision to air this television spot at the BET Awards highlights a specific kind of cultural capital that Netflix is trying to utilize – one that signals a Black industrial authenticity to audiences.

In the year following the introduction of SBL to the public - the summer of 2020, there were protests that erupted across the country in the wake of the murder of George Floyd by uniformed police officers earlier that year. Alongside the protests, there were large swathes of pledges made by companies to support and contribute to the growth and sustainability of Black life from several vantage points – scholarship funds, jobs, leadership positions, and increasing the number of representations. Netflix and Strong Black Lead seemed in a prime position to lead the way for other companies and streaming platforms not only in terms of representation

but also in terms of its approach to hiring practices and shedding light on injustice using their

platform. The SBL team produces content on several digital platforms, releasing YouTube

interviews with the stars of their most popular shows, hosting a regular podcast, and engaging

with users on Twitter (Jean-Philippe, 2019). The team claims that Netflix is not hesitating to

"carve out space for Black creators, Black stars, and Black audiences with relatable marketing

campaigns, real-time social media conversations, and a constant push for more Black content"

(Jean-Phillipe, 2019).

Figure 1.2 – A Great Day in Hollywood, 2019

However, it is always necessary to contextualize these kinds of initiatives, understanding

how television industries are always making concerted efforts to re/present Blackness in ways

that are both palatable and profitable. The framework of the Black Digital Popular pushes us to

think about the formation of Strong Black Lead and ask the question, is it possible for Blackness

to be represented on its own terms in that space? Furthermore, what does it mean for

Blackness to be represented on its own terms? Is it the presence of Black creators? Black

leaders? Black actors in televisual content? Hall (2006) speaks of the "Black" within Black

popular culture as signifying the Black community where Black traditions are kept and "whose

struggles survive in the persistence of the Black experience (the historical experiences of Black

people in the diaspora), of the Black aesthetic (the distinctive cultural repertoires out of which

popular representations were made), and of the Black counternarratives we have struggled to

voice." In theory, it is possible for platforms like Netflix to tap into these aesthetics and

counternarratives, but another litmus test for these platforms is the sustained longevity of their

initiatives and commitments to uplifting, supporting, and paying Black creators and employees.

Time and time again, history has shown the precarious relationship that television

industries have with Blackness; the first section of this chapter traced the rise of the situation

comedy on network television, only for many of these shows to be canceled and defunded

quickly. And while there is a litany of shows on Netflix showcasing Black content, in 2022, the

company fired 150 full-time employees and dozens of contract writers, with most of these

employees coming from "Netflix's large-scale diversity communications initiatives" (Lawrence

and Burton, 2022). These kinds of industry moves should come as no surprise, but what they do

illustrate are the ways that streaming platforms and on-demand television can elide calls for

equity and instead showcase representations that cater to Black audiences. If you were to look

at the range of movie and television categories on platforms like Hulu, Netflix, or Max, each of

them will have sections and titles dedicated to Black content. What these kinds of categories

illustrate is an awareness of how they need to make certain images visible to fulfill idealized

markers of liberalism and acceptance. Media industries and corporations are still crucial sites

for the circulation and repetition of multiculturalism and the modern-day liberal subject, and

with their capacities for making identities visible, these spaces are still looked to for more

"inclusive, representative, and diverse representations" (Gray 2013). Digital platforms and

companies like Netflix and Twitter are in the business of engaging in circulation practices and

circulating identities that are, to some degree, based on discourses of market choice and

progressive notions of diversity. Although Netflix has made tangible efforts to construct an

image of Blackness that is inclusive and forward-thinking, I argue that these attempts initiate a

desire for representation as an end in itself. The responses of companies to a movement like

Black Lives Matter are far less rooted in a desire to be aligned with a politics that seeks racial

equality and more associated with concerns of being perceived as intolerant or even racist.

Thus, the moves made by these businesses center on surface-level remedies that are far less

impactful than they would imagine.

The rise of Netflix and the streaming model in television and film stands in stark contrast

to the start of this chapter, which examined *The Cosby Show*, showcasing the changes in the

political, cultural, and digital landscape that have led to this point. The rest of the dissertation

builds off these changes, continuing to examine how Blackness on screen is always a contested

site of negotiation between industries and audiences. This chapter traced the rise of cable and

web 2.0 that led to the contemporary era of streaming, and the subsequent research extends

these tracings, looking more concretely at texts and situations that illuminate the ways that

different groups are grappling over the sign of Blackness. This chapter finds its footing in

holding on to political, social, and cultural happenings as crucial to understanding the

conditions of possibility and competing claims on Blackness. I maintain this throughout the

dissertation by further expanding on the Black Digital Popular and concepts introduced in this

chapter: mixed-race identity and Blackness in the digital, the promise and harm of technology

in relation to Blackness, and how digital platforms reorient and restructure Blackness while

users push back and fight for their own identities to be seen and made salient.

Chapter 2

"Where was Black Jeff": YouTube and Mixed-Race Blackness in *The Key and Peele Show*

Introduction – America's Son and the Promise of a Multiracial Future

In 1997, Tiger Woods became the youngest golfer and the first Black man to win the

Master's golf tournament, one of the most prestigious achievements for any athlete. Following

this victory, Woods chose to appear on the Oprah Winfrey talk show on ABC**,** and it was on this

show that he first constructed his own racial identity as something distinct from Blackness –

"Cablinasian." Several scholars have paid close attention to this moment, highlighting the

implications for mixed-race identity, Blackness, and multicultural ideals (Cole and Andrews,

2001; Washington, 2015; Ibrahim, 2012; Squires, 2007). Ibrahim (2012) posits that this

confession on Winfrey's show marked a departure from a previous identity grounded in

Blackness through masculine progeny to that of multiracial representative. Woods, in

positioning himself within the lineage of Black male athletes who paved the way for him –

thanking Jackie Robinson, Muhammad Ali, and Lee Elder (first Black man to enter the Masters

in 1975) as paving the way for him to achieve his success – was inscribing his own Blackness.

But on Oprah, Woods represents a sharp turn from heir to a Black lineage of male dominance

and exceptionalism to multiracial poster child, with the emphasis on the gendered components

of a racialized identity – those who have garnered acclaim and a spotlight in the American

cultural sphere since the Loving V. Virginia law was passed in 1967. Woods became an icon for

multiracial children everywhere, but more than this, the meeting between Woods and Winfrey is indicative of the encounter, or better yet, the rift between Blackness and multiracialism.

The role of Oprah as a successful Black woman with a major network television show at this moment is a peculiar one, her platform and show being a conduit for Woods to make his voice and identity clear to the public. In the mid to late 90s, Oprah's talk show possessed a cultural capital that was an important part of shaping the kinds of discourse the American public was interested in on a mass consumer level. Her show reached substantial audiences, garnering records for daytime talk shows as well as winning several Emmy awards. When Tiger Woods took this stage on Oprah, she was, in fact, validating the moment as a key part of American cultural consciousness and establishing the value, intrigue, and spectacle of publicly negotiating Woods's racial identity. As he comes out to the live audience, she says the following words as a way to introduce him: "You don't even have to like golf because Tiger Woods transcends golf…He's just what our world needs right now, don't you think?...I call him America's son" (qtd. in Cole and Andrews, 2001). Oprah's language here and Woods's declaration of a Cablinasian identity facilitated a narrative that sought to leave the sins of a nation behind and march into a color-blind future. Similar to the sentiments around *The Cosby Show* in chapter one, there is a desire to leave behind uncomfortable conversations around race and anti-Blackness, to relish in the idea of a future where equality and opportunity is readily available to those who reach out and grasp it.

In this moment, regardless of its truth, Woods becomes "an appointed symbol of national multiracial hybridity" (Cole and Andrews, 2001). The iconography of Tiger Woods in the moment of his self-identification as Cablinasian is crucial when regarding the tensions that

can exist between multiracial and Black identities; the term "hails from nowhere other than his own powers of invention, and as an idiosyncrasy, it rhetorically cuts him off from the tradition of Black ancestral accomplishment that makes him ours" (Ibrahim, 2012). To further these claims, later that year, in 1997, Republican Thomas Petri introduced a bill that would include a multiracial category in the 2000 Census that he called the "Tiger Woods" bill (Nishime, 2012). In support of this bill, Newt Gingrich is quoted as saying "Millions of Americans like Tiger Woods…have moved beyond the Census Bureau's divisive and inaccurate labels. We live in a Technicolor world where the government continues to view us as only Black and white" (qtd. In Nishime, 2012). Gingrich once again reminds us of the broader conservative agenda spoken of in the previous chapter that weaponizes multiracial identities to usher in a post-racial era founded on anti-Blackness, showcasing how racial identity is always subject to politicization.

The Oprah moment, grounded in the medium of television, provided viewers with an intimate glimpse into discussions surrounding both multiracial and Black identities on both a national and private scale. Televisual spaces have continued to be a platform where mixed-race identities are publicly examined – offering critics and researchers ample space to explore the lines of discourse around nation, race, and progress in American popular cultural politics. Chapter one laid the backdrop for the relationship between the kinds of Black representations we see on screen and the sociopolitical moment and the example of Woods extends and points to these conversations once more. Woods embodied the "imagined ideal of being and *becoming* American which, in its contemporary form, requires proper familial affiliations and becoming the global-American" (Cole and Andrews, 2001), and this example points us towards conditions of possibility for Blackness within the vehicle of television as it intersects with

conversations around multiraciality. And although this moment occurred in 1997, it is still a

poignant one as we look to future examples of self-proclaimed mixed-race identity in televisual

spaces.

The Key and Peele Show, Obama, and Mixed-Race Narratives in the 21st Century

Fast forward to 2012, and Keegan Michael Key and Jordan Peele released the pilot

episode of *The Key and Peele Show* (*The K&P Show*) on Comedy Central. The show represented

a return to a style of comedy similar to the wildly popular *Chappelle Show*, in that both shows

employ the use of half standup/sketch and half digital shorts while still relying heavily on

themes of race and ethnicity for their content and source material. In their opening duologue of

the premiere episode, the two comedians come out to a live audience and immediately launch

into a commentary about being biracial. Essentially, the bit relies on becoming adept at lying on

an everyday basis, and the comedians jokingly talk about "dialing up their Blackness" in

different settings to scare white people but also to never be the whitest sounding Black guy in

the room. The duologue leads into their first digital short, where director Peter Atencio brings

elements of film-like cinematography (a focused production design and visual effects) to each

video, which are uncommon for the medium of sketch comedy.

Alongside the heightened production value of the digital shorts, another crucial element

to take note of is the entrance of two Black comedians into the predominantly white space of

sketch comedy and the construction of the show lending itself to bite-sized YouTube portions

(Demby 2013). The cinematic features presented throughout the five seasons were an effective

style that was dynamic and groundbreaking, attracting an audience conditioned by media-

saturated culture. Rather than restricting the show to a television format that would later have

to be broken up and edited into shareable segments, the show was already edited in this

fashion, enabling its material and messages to become more potent because of the availability

of its show. Their opening duologue, "White Sounding Black Guys" on YouTube, has amassed

over twenty-three million views since its upload date of January 31, 2012. What these numbers

illustrate is the online participatory culture that *The Key and Peele Show* has utilized since the

show's conception. In multiple interviews on late-night television shows, Key and Peele talk

explicitly about how their show is spread among different viewers through social media

(particularly YouTube) and the sense of ownership that many feel when introducing friends and

users on the internet to clips from the show (Key 2016**)**.

By engaging with *The Key and Peele Show* and their performances of Black masculinity

and mixed race, it becomes possible to examine more precisely the more public readings of

mixed race and the narratives that get attached to them. Similar to Obama and his rise to

presidential success, some critics were quick to take up the comedians as the multiracial saviors

of the comedic arena, a claim undoubtedly tied to the narratives of progress that are so readily

attached to the bodies and concept of mixed-race identity. At the same time, many were

critical of the comedians, as evidenced in one *Salon* article from 2012 titled "Key and Peele's

edgeless, post-racial lie." Richardson (2012) heavily critiqued the comedians, calling attention

to their content as being too consumed with soothing white liberal consciences to be funny.

Wilson (2012) wrote another provocative article titled "Key and Peele Are Selling Comedy

Blacks Aren't Buying." Within this article, he attacks the comedians for incessantly referring to

their racial identity, writing, "Key and Peele go to extraordinary lengths to consistently remind

their audiences of their biracial heritage and who they are both a product of white mothers and

Black fathers." Alongside this critique, he positions them in light of other comics in the Black

comedic tradition, such as Eddie Murphy, Dave Chappelle, and Redd Foxx, claiming that these

older comics were explicit in their positioning as Black men and were still able to reach broad

demographics. Key and Peele's constant referencing to their multiracial identity harms them

more than it helps them reach Black audiences, and Wilson's critique of the comedians

disconnects them from a Black comedic tradition that is explicit in its assertion of a Black

identity as well as speaking out against racial and political injustice aimed towards Black people.

These kinds of critiques are not without foundation, as the comedians (particularly in their first

two seasons) clumsily negotiated notions of race and politics, establishing exceptional

multiracial ideals or anti-Black sentiments.

There have been many similar critiques made of Obama since his entrance into the

American political sphere. Mcneil (2014) is critical of President Obama's shifting positionality to

Blackness, contending that Obama has publicly identified with symbols of African-American

culture while, in other moments, distancing himself from the community to appeal to a white

audience. There have long been critiques of Obama and how he asserts or voids different racial

identities to seize the gains of a civil rights movement. Hutchings et. al. (2021) also speaks to

this occurrence, claiming that "the Obama campaign drew attention to his bi-racial ancestry

and highlighted visual associations with Whites in order to curry favor with his constituency."

Obama was indeed strategic in this regard, and as Hutching's piece highlights, an analysis of

Pew survey data finds that white people who categorized Obama as mixed-race instead of Black

perceived him in more favorable terms and were also more inclined to believe that he did not

share common interests with African Americans. The case of Obama is an interesting one when

thinking about the tensions that exist between multiracial identity and Blackness, particularly as we consider not only his campaign strategy leading up to his 2008 election, but his subsequent time in office as well over the next eight years. On the 2010 census, President Obama indicated African American as his sole marker of racial identity, which some multiracial camps saw as damaging to the progression of the fight for the multiracial identity and a reification of the one-drop rule that stemmed out of racist and segregated policies.

There is an intimate connection between Obama, his presidency, and *The K&P Show*. The show was first aired in 2012, at the tail end of Obama's first presidency and in the midst of his reelection campaign, and the comedians were quick to (in part) attribute the conception and eventual success of the show to his presidency in multiple interviews. In this chapter I examine sketches and audience reactions that display the complexities that exist around mixed-race Blackness as well as how Key and Peele have asserted a racial identity that comments on political, social, and economic inequities. I argue that the comedians complicate and destabilize notions of race, but this endeavor parallels the affirmation of race's existence and the effects that it has for Black people. *The Key and Peele Show* has given substantial attention to mixed-race identity, and though the comedians started this conversation from the standpoint of personal identity, I contend that throughout the course of five seasons, they established a mixed-race Black identity that is still explicitly connected to Blackness and Black struggle, particularly in response to the Black Lives Matter movement and its presence on digital platforms. The trajectory of identifying less with a biracial identity is apparent across the five seasons spanning three years, and I contend that larger political and social engagements with memories of violence and anti-Black racism cause a shift in the racial performativity of mixed-

race Black comedians like Key and Peele. The shift in their racial performance is ultimately

indicative of a reorientation towards Blackness – specifically, a Blackness that is aligned with a

more politically and racially charged Black comedic tradition. Alongside this shift, the content

production of *K&P* formatted for and distributed through the platform of YouTube and its

affordances structure specific constructions of mixed-race and Black identities as well as give

users/commenters the ability to struggle with and against racial formations.

This chapter focuses on larger narratives of mixed-race that are constantly in flux and

conversation with the performances of the comedians and the digital platforms on which they

are published. It is also an entry point into understanding how Blackness at this moment is

being defined, how its borders are being policed, and by whom, and how it is conceptualized in

our racial imaginaries. I highlight *The Key and Peele Show* and the conversations surrounding

the show about racial identity to once more establish a space of negotiation – one that gives an

opportunity to understand the process of how Blackness comes to be constituted in select

environments as a result of technological and sociopolitical factors. The chapter is twofold in its

examination of these comedians: 1) conducting a critical technocultural discourse analysis

(CTDA) of YouTube comments specific to the *K&P* digital shorts, and 2) tracing the evolution of

Key and Peele and their relationship to Blackness and mixed-race identity through close

readings of their digital shorts alongside larger political and social engagements from 2012 –

2016.

Audiences, Technology, and Television

Audiences are always contending with the manner in which they are portrayed, looking

to understand and interpret the implications of their representation within various media

contexts. Means-Coleman (2014) pays close attention to the ways that Black audiences specifically are grappling with this issue, focusing on a historical tracing of how the Black situation comedy came to be and ethnographic study. Her framing of the ways that audiences struggle with Blackness on screen is useful in my examination of the ways that people understand mixed race in relationship to Blackness. When examining *The Key and Peele Show*, this relationship can be better understood through a critical discourse analysis of the YouTube comments for specific videos that are dealing with mixed-race identity and Blackness. The useful dialogue that can occur on YouTube through the comments section of videos is a ripe site for analysis. The interactions that can occur here between users can provide insight into the ways that people understand, struggle with, and respond to visual texts. Strangelove (2010) writes, "YouTube is not merely an archive of moving images. It is much more than a fast-growing collection of millions of home-made videos…YouTube is a social space." Within this social space, there is room for users to engage in meaningful communication to create online community. When we can critically analyze what individuals are commenting on, it becomes possible to uncover the intersections of online communities and meaning-making, and comments under Key and Peele digital shorts on YouTube will provide insight into the ways people grapple with mixed-race and Black identities.

Aymar (2017) addresses how "small-scale development processes restructure the politics of representation in television and art, allowing us to see value and innovation where it has historically been hidden in performances of cultures, organizations, and technologies of exhibition." He goes on to claim that "Internet, or "networked" (digital, peer-to-peer), distribution offers ways to experiment with representations that are different from legacy

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"network" (linear, one-to-many) distribution" (Aymar 2017). Media industries are always in the

business of establishing and "selling" a particular kind of identity category to consumers to

ensure profit, but the reception of these identity categories is never static, and there is always a

contestation between audiences and industries about what they should look like. Elam (2011)

writes that race is seen to be less about personal choice and identity than as a "public

commodity with a value decided according to certain protocols." Race is always dependent on

social and political conversations, and in these moments, race and technology become

malleable commodities that are constantly being shaped by systems of power that seek to

control and manage race as a means of maintaining power. The *Key and Peele Show*'s emphasis

on mixed-race identity and position on a platform that gives users the opportunity to speak to

and discursively construct identities reveals the struggle over meaning that is always occurring.

"Dating a Biracial Guy"

In the first season of *The K&P Show*, the comedians pay close attention to their mixed-

race identity from several angles, exploring code-switching, race, and its codification in the

body, clothing styles, and masculinity. The introductory remarks made by the comedians in S1

E1 serve as a framework for their approach to their show, and this was the first nationally

televised comedy show in which the main writers and actors were claiming a very specific

mixed-race identity and addressing issues of race, culture, and politics from this standpoint.

This kind of framing asserts mixed race as a focal point of analysis rather than a byproduct of a

larger discussion.

An early sketch from season one titled "Dating a Bi-racial Guy" is an example of the

comedians addressing these themes, and it starts out with Key and a white woman that he is

dating sitting across from each other in an upscale restaurant. As they are talking, the woman

flags down a waiter to ask for some water, but he rudely tells her that a waiter will approach

them when ready. Key is immediately apologetic, and as the waiter leaves, the girlfriend

responds: "Umm what was that? Where was Black Jeff?" Key is thrown off by the question and

seems genuinely confused, but she goes on to explain the premise of her question, claiming

that she "read somewhere" that if you date someone who is bi-racial, you're supposed to get

the best of both worlds, i.e. the Black side and the white side of someone. And in the moment

of the waiter being disrespectful to the woman, Black Jeff – more aggressive, angrier – would

have been the appropriate choice to make. From this point on, the movement of the digital

short is logical – Key has to figure out when to be "white Jeff" and when to be "Black Jeff." His

whiteness corresponds with being apologetic, civil, and at times a pushover and usually is

enacted when someone is treating them fairly; his Blackness is called to bat only when there is

a threat or a perceived disrespect, but part of the short's humor is predicated on Key being

unable to accurately decide which side of him is necessary.

The problem with the progression of the sketch, however, is that Key isn't the one

deciding which racial identity he needs to have moments. His girlfriend, who remains nameless

throughout the video, is the one guiding him and giving him clear directions about which Jeff is

needed. There is a moment when a waiter comes to the table again and is perfectly cordial; Key

looks across the table, and the woman mouths to him silently, "white Jeff." Key then nods

quickly and discreetly so that he can quickly turn his attention to the waiter and perform

accordingly. The white woman's control of Jeff's performance throughout the ordeal is telling of

how we ascribe specific qualities to and evaluate race. Elam (2011), in her commentary on *The*

Chappelle Show's "Racial Draft" sketch (the premise is that monoracial groups are teams and they are drafting mixed-race celebrities once and for all to one racial category) writes about the ESPN like commentators as such:

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

The key part of this quote to focus on is Elam's usage of the three terms to describe the commentators – connoisseurs, evaluators, and arbiters. These words relay the idea that it is ultimately white power structures that decide on the stability or malleability of racial typologies. Within the spectacle, although people of color are making decisions as to which mixed-race individuals belong to which monoracial category, it is ultimately the commentators who are making the judgment calls on what is taking place and guiding the fictional (and real) audience in how they are to interpret the events taking place. Similarly, the white woman in "Dating a Biracial Guy" is deciding for Jeff how he should respond to different situations.

The lack of a name given to the girlfriend and the vague reference to "reading somewhere" about mixed-race identity can be read as a nod to the invisibility of whiteness and how it can sometimes escape specificity and be tied to a particular body or politic (Dyer 2005). What I find particularly compelling about the way that mixed race is constructed in relation to whiteness and Blackness is how whiteness constructs mixed race be certain things at certain

times. Joseph (2012) traces the numerous ways in which mixed-race people have been

constructed as a response to social or political needs, at times taking the form of the

degenerate, the tragic mulatto trapped between two worlds, the race leader, passing as white,

and at times transcending the very premise of race itself.

"Dating a Biracial Guy" is then indicative of how whiteness, depending on the context,

will shape mixed race according to their needs. As the white woman introduces the concept of

getting the best of both worlds when dating a biracial guy and constantly directing him in his

performance of race, she is ultimately the one who has something to gain. Whether it be faster

service or more of a specific food item, the woman is reaping the benefits of Jeff's apparent

racial malleability. Pointing once more to the multiracial movement of the 90s as chapter one

explored, conservatives were highly visible and active in establishing a category for mixed-race

individuals on the census and giving them autonomy to identify in terms that were not

monoracial. Mixed race is equated with progress and decreasing racism; accordingly, the more

that mixed-race people are spoken of in these terms, the less likely it is that conversations

about race and racism occur. Identifying as mixed-race no longer becomes a choice simply

about personal self-identification, but there are now broader implications that affect the ways

we perceive racism or the lack of it.

When speaking about the right of mixed-race people to identify as biracial, it's

interesting to note how Key and Peele identify in this manner a way to frame their digital shorts

and sketch routines on the show. Specifically thinking about the sketch with the biracial

boyfriend, Jeff immediately accepts the duality of racial background and chooses to perform as

mixed-race, in the sense that race is a stable entity, and the mixing of white and Black produces

separate and distinct elements that come out in different situations. There is a scene in the short where a nice waiter asks the couple if they want water, and Key mistakenly becomes Black Jeff and, in the process, gets the waiter to offer them a bottle of their finest water for free: "That's what I said bitch." At the end of the exchange, Jeff is pleased with the tangible results, and he seems aware of this newfound power that accompanies his Blackness. His aggression is feared, and in white space, he can bully his way into getting what he wants, in this case, the restaurant's finest bottled water. Ultimately, his Black and white identities cannot coexist in a coherent and acceptable manner, and as Black Jeff continues to yell and disturb the restaurant space, the couple is eventually kicked out. This sketch can be seen as revealing the absurdity of what people believe to some degree about the lives of mixed-race individuals and how they interact with others in different contexts. And perhaps on a simple level, that was the goal; Key and Peele were heralded as being a new breed of multiracial comedian accessible to all audiences, and at this moment, they chose to focus on a context that revealed the bizarre notions that people (particularly white people) carry about mixed race.

"This isn't Art Class, It's Genetics": Audience Responses to *Dating a Biracial Guy*

Although the visual text analyzed is undoubtedly rich in its material and is worth examining considering Key and Peele's own racial identity and personal experience, there is also value in grappling with and understanding the ways in which people take up this text, how they speak to and about mixed-race, and particularly how Black folks understand mixed-race in this current political moment in relationship to Blackness. When thinking about *The Key and Peele Show*, one must consider the platform of YouTube and the affordances it gives users to comment on sketches from the duo as well as interact with each other. The sketches produced

by Key and Peele on their show are primarily released through the Comedy Central YouTube

Channel, and in the earlier seasons of the show, there were only a dozen or so videos from each

season on the platform. "Dating a Biracial Guy" was not one of those sketches, and when it first

aired on Comedy Central, it could only be viewed through a cable subscription or a membership

with Hulu or Amazon Prime. However, since 2017, Comedy Central has uploaded all the digital

shorts that aired in the episodes across the five seasons**.**

Although the "Dating a Biracial Guy" sketch aired in 2013, it was uploaded to the

Comedy Central YouTube channel on February 25, 2018, allowing for a more contemporary

audience to grapple with these notions of race. One of the first things that struck me in the

comments in the section was the number of self-proclaimed biracial people (Black and white)

who wrote that they identified strongly with the sentiment in the video. In the first two

hundred comments, there were eight users who responded in this way. One example was

Andre Brice, whose comment received 836 likes to date: "Haha, as a half Black - half white guy,

there is a lot of situational race selecting that occurs." Andre's comment is representative of

what the other users who identified as biracial commented on the video, but what was striking

about these remarks was the debate that ensued following each of them.

Under Andre's comment, several users from varying backgrounds took it upon

themselves to argue the case of Andre Brice and his mixed-race identity. The main

argumentative thrusts seemed to stem from those who thought that Andre (and Key and Peele)

needed to accept the fact that regardless of his white parentage he was Black, and those who

argues that the biology of mixed-race people discredits any type of one-drop rule. One user,

Brother Ares, commented, "Haha, you can't be "half white" you're just Black. It's like paint.

Once Black gets into the white it's always grey no matter how much white gets put in." There were many negative reactions to this comment, with most people finding the analogy offensive, comparing people to paint. To further back his claim, Brother Ares later writes, "Haha, so many triggered people. Let me make this simple: if you see Key or Peele, they're considered Black. My point regarding paint is that it was an analogy. Maybe brown would've been more accurate. Once you mix brown paint into white paint it will always be a shade of brown, no matter how much white you put in it."

The main objections to this logic, from both white and Black users were rooted in a framing of race as biological more than anything else. Hannah White exemplifies this kind of thinking in her comment, "THEIR MOMS ARE STILL CAUCASIAN WOMEN THEIR GRANDPARENTS ARE CAUCASIAN YOU CANT TELL SOMEONE HALF OF THEIR FAMILY DOESNT EXIST BECAUSE OF YOUR STUPID PAINT ANALOGY. ITS CALL DNA DIPSHIT SOMETHING PAINT DOESNT HAVE." User Hyper Dee also comments, "Brother Ares Obama's facial features are as African as anything, and yet he is half white. It doesn't matter how that person appears, biologically they are half white and half Black." Similarly Grace Nambo4 writes, "Brother Ares bro this isn't art class, this is genetics." These three comments are indicative of a racial logic entrenched in ancestry and DNA passed on from parents of different races. Thus, the category of mixed-race is not simply a matter of performance as seen in the Key and Peele sketch; it is inherently based on what is invisible to the naked eye – genetic coding. While some popular notions of mixed race herald it as the key to undoing race as we know it, at this moment, mixed race serves to reify and uphold it. Joseph (2012) speaks of it this way:

The notion of "mixed race" and "monoracial" as separate categories to describe certain

African Americans can seem almost nonsensical and voluntary, and yet representations

of mixed-race Blackness do just this. Contrary to much popular discourse on mixed-race,

the fact of mixing does not automatically disprove racial categories because the terms

themselves include race: the names for mixed-race people signal their grounding in race

itself. Indeed, the very ability to "mix" races rests upon the premise that race is a stable

and singular entity.

The responses of many of these YouTube participants reveal an understanding of mixed-race

as, first and foremost, the mixing of DNA and genetic coding. Rather than focus on the linguistic

or physical coding of whiteness and Blackness seen in the sketch – the aggression and AAVE of

Black Jeff or the passivity and apologetic tone of white Jeff – users defending the right to

identify as mixed-race opt for the more "scientific" grounds to argue their claims. Although the

comments written by those who self-identify as bi-racial depict an affinity to Black Jeff/white

Jeff and the constant code-switching that occurs, the arguments that take place in these

threads do not necessarily place expectations on mixed-race people regarding how they should

conduct themselves depending on context. But the sketch raises a series of questions about the

relationships and proximity of mixed race to whiteness and Blackness. Perhaps, the sketch is

not so neatly tied up and packaged, and audiences are not accepting the digital short to

dismantle gross generalizations about mixed-race identity, but rather it is a means to

understand how we code whiteness and Blackness through speech and the body. The short

invites us, whether consciously or not, to muse on the logic of race and performance as well as

the investments that structures of whiteness have in mixed-race identity and Blackness.

Key and Peele and the Return to Blackness

In the later seasons of *The Key and Peele Show*, Keegan Michael Key and Jordan Peele,

the co-stars of the Comedy Central hit, altered the format of their show, switching from a

hybrid style of digital shorts and improv in front of a live audience to the two comedians

speaking with one another in a car driving through the desert as the introduction to each of

their sketches. In the third episode of the final season of the show, Key and Peele are

introducing the next digital short of the show through their typical banter in the car, and Peele

recalls a moment in high-school during a choir session where the director needed someone to

play tambourine during a song and offered it to him (because he's Black and expected to have

more rhythm than his white classmates). However, as he starts to play, he tells Key that he just

can't get on beat or find the proper rhythm:

Peele: "By the end of the class I was ashamed that I was half-white."

Key: *laughs*

Peele: "I still am."

Key: "You're still ashamed that you're half white?"

Peele: "Yeah"

Key: "I hope your mom isn't watching this episode,"

Peele: "No she's fine. She's probably ashamed of it too."

Key: *laughs*

The conversation between the comedians here presents the audience with a different framing

of their relationship towards mixed-race as opposed to their first season. The opening joke of

the premier season of the *K&P Show* back in 2012 was predicated on their self-proclaimed bi-

racial identity, discussing how adept they are at lying on a daily basis – omitting the fact that they are white or Black in certain contexts while dialing it up in others. But in the final season, there are rare mentions of their mixed-race identity, and when they are mentioned (as seen in the choir example), there is a cognizant and purposeful distancing from whiteness.

As we begin to think about *The Key and Peele Show* and its legacy in more contemporary moments, particularly the reception and interrogation of mixed-race identity in online spaces, Peele's joke about the shame he feels from his whiteness is acutely relevant as we consider the racial climate since the inception of the Black Lives Matter movement up until post-George Floyd. This chapter interrogates how Blackness is being policed and defined, the tensions that exist, and, in my opinion, the lack of nuance that can exist when it comes to understanding how there can be space in Blackness for mixedness and vice versa. Blackness is continuously negotiated according to specific cultural and political needs that resist essentializing. As some have tried to essentialize Blackness as signifying a particular set of practices and ideologies, Hall cautions against it because it "naturalizes and dehistoricizes difference, mistaking what is historical and cultural for what is natural, biological and genetic" (2006). If Blackness (or any racial identity) is rooted in what is natural, biological, or genetic as opposed to what is historical, cultural, and political, there is a danger of reifying racism in popular culture.

Figure 2.1 – Peele in Hoodie, YouTube

Black Skin, White Hoodies: Key and Peele and the Response to BLM

In season three of *The Key and Peele Show*, which aired in September of 2013, the comedians released a sketch called "Hoodie," in which Jordan, as portrayed in Figure 1, finds himself walking through a predominantly white suburban area sometime in the afternoon. As he makes his way through the neighborhood, there are similar reactions to his presence: from mothers, fathers, and children alike. Jordan is dressed as a high-school student, wearing a Black hoodie, jeans, sneakers, and a backpack. However, it is clear that he is unwanted in this neighborhood; a white mother rushes outside to bring her two young children into the house, and a middle-aged man mowing his lawn stops to stare at Jordan menacingly while shaking his head as if to say he doesn't belong here. To this point, Jordan is a bit surprised by these reactions, attempting to smile and off-handedly wave, but his actions will not change anything. The video reaches a climax when a policeman in a cop car turns onto the street and starts to speed up when he notices Jordan. It is at this moment that the camera shots go back and forth

between the face of Jordan and the white officer as the car continues to gain ground. The music

swells dramatically in the background, and right as the two are about to converge, Jordan flips

up his hood, presenting the profile of a young white male on its side. The cop takes one look,

smiles, nods, and rides off whistling, pleased that his initial assessment of the situation was

wrong.

The sketch video in which Jordan plays the young man in the hoodie directly mirrors the

incident involving Trayvon Martin and George Zimmerman, and the ending of it reveals a stark

truth: if Trayvon Martin was white, perhaps he wouldn't have been killed. Jordan's character is

a portrayal of the disparity between white and Black communities; in a predominantly white

suburban space, the presence of Jordan's Blackness is disruptive and threatening and is seen as

something with the ability to corrupt and damage the presumptions of white society. The white

police officer is perceived to be the only line of defense between the white inhabitants of the

community and Jordan, and his tenacity in hunting the young man down is representative of

the "us vs. them" mindset that exists within police forces. Jordan is unarmed and alone, yet he

is perceived as a threat. By the end of the video, his actions show that the only defense against

police violence is to physically change and become white. Whiteness is still associated with non-

deviancy and civility (Dyer 2005), and the only means by which police brutality can be

transcended.

With this digital short, the comedians provide an intervention into the discourse of

violence against Black people by bringing out the irony of a Black man flipping up a hood to

escape violence from a white police officer. The hood is eerily and terrifyingly reminiscent of

the Ku Klux Klan and their use of hoods to hide their identities to enact vicious acts of brutality

on Black men and women. The fact that Peele uses the hood to escape the white police officer reveals a subtle irony in showcasing how such a significant item like a hood which is, which is so entrenched in historical violence against Black people, the piece of clothing that provides safety for a Black man in a white space. Furthermore, Peele's portrayal as a Black man in this sketch that so closely mirrors reality gives insight into how he asserts a mixed-race identity that is explicitly tied to Blackness. The digital short profiles Peele as a Black man, not a mixed-race one, and this is something that the comedians do consistently throughout the show.

This sketch marks a pivotal moment in the tenure of *The K&P Show*. Previously, the show had dealt with issues of race and inequality, but this video responds directly to a crucial moment in America's 21st-century racial consciousness – the 2012 murder of Trayvon Martin. The story and subsequent case had gained traction in the cultural sphere, predominantly through social media and Black Twitter. Lavan (2015) writes, "Major pressure from the social media community helped publicize the case and secured a trial for George Zimmerman after police in Sanford, Florida refused to make an arrest." Thus online, online organizations pressured law enforcement into giving the incident the judicial attention it deserved. It is this same kind of pressure, in my opinion, that has influenced *The K&P Show* to speak about issues of police brutality and how Black men and women have been affected. Like many sketch comedy shows, part of its success relies on topical humor, paying attention to relevant cultural events, and in the case of the "Hoodie" sketch, it is clear that the comedians were very aware of the Black Lives Matter movement occurring in the contemporary digital age.

In their fifth season, Key and Peele became even more political in response to many of the police shootings – Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, and others.

Similar to "Hoodie," in May of 2015, the comedians released a promo video for their new season, titled "Negrotown." The video constructs a fictional world, Negrotown, which is a utopia of sorts for Black people where racism no longer exists, and they are able to exist without experiencing trauma. Though this video was released before the start of the fifth and final season, it was not aired on television until the very last episode, and it was the final sketch shown before the episode's, as well as the show's, finale. The concept of Negrotown is a bold statement from Key and Peele and one that has significant implications when examining the K&P Show as a narrative that spans over five seasons and that reflects Key and Peele's changing attitudes toward Black struggle as self-proclaimed biracial men.

In this final sketch, Keegan plays a Black man walking late at night down an alley where the only other person present is a homeless man (played by Jordan). As he continues to walk down the alley, a police car suddenly appears, and a white officer begins to threaten Keegan and apprehends him for seemingly no reason. He resists the officer, and it is at this point that the officer slams Keegan's head against the car door, and he loses consciousness. In this dreamlike state, the homeless man takes him through a portal to another world, as seen in Figure 2. The rest of the sketch takes place in musical form, with Jordan singing most of the lyrics explaining how Negrotown functions. Keegan is skeptical at first, unable to believe that this utopian realm for Black men and women could exist, but as the song continues, the lyrics begin to make clear what this place is. "In Negrotown you walk the street, without getting slapped, harassed, or beat . . . You can wear your hoodie and not get shot . . . No trigger happy cops or scared cashiers" ("Negrotown"). A significant portion of these lyrics magnifies the violence inflicted upon Black people and reveals the desperate need and desire for a place that

exists without these dangers. These lines shed light on the comedians' attitudes towards their own Black identity as well as their political leanings regarding social justice issues. The portion of the song referring to wearing a hoodie without getting shot is reminiscent of their "Hoodie" sketch in Season 3, displaying continuity in their exploration of the horrors of police brutality and the growing Black Lives Matter movement.

The comedians have always been political, but the direct lyrics of the musical reveal a critical assessment of racism and anti-Blackness, and the video's placement in the finale solidifies this irrefutable image in the eyes of viewers across the country. Key and Peele explicitly comment on the injustice by suggesting that the only escape from inequality can be found in a utopian Black society, and not only that, but this society only exists in one's mind – in a dream-like state induced by unconsciousness. "Negrotown" came on the heels of the Baltimore riots surrounding the Freddie Gray case – another Black man who was killed while in police custody. This event was especially significant because the harsh conditions of inner-city life for Black Americans were broadcast on a national scale. Thus, "Negrotown" is both affirming and damning because it creates a fantasy of hope, and yet this fantasy comes crashing down when it is realized how illusory it is.

Figure 2.2 – Welcome to Negrotown, YouTube, 2023

By the end of the song, Keegan has become fully invested in the ideology of Negrotown,

joining in with the communal singing and final dance number (Figure 3.3). There is a collective

sense of unity and hope among the Negrotown community, and yet, this hope is grounded in

something unattainable. When the number finishes and Keegan returns to consciousness, he is

still being arrested, and he exclaims to the officer, "I thought I was going to Negrotown," to

which the officer responds, "Oh, you are." The officer's response is an obvious reference to

prison, and the sketch ends with the severe reality of the Black man's relationship to the law,

law enforcement, and the prison system. What Key and Peele accomplish through this digital

short is, on one level, a scathing critique of police brutality within this country in response to

grass roots social media activist movements, but on another level, revealing of their

relationship to Blackness as mixed-race men.

Figure 2.3 – Negrotown Final Song, YouTube, 2023

It is useful once again to return to the presidency of Obama and his connection to the

content of the show, as well as the political shifts that were taking place in the 2010s. Though

he may perceive himself as racially Black, as chapter one emphasized, Obama still referenced

his mixed-race parentage to occupy multicultural spaces and even employ a particular narrative

– a kind of narrative that, while it may not explicitly state a post-racial future through the

mixed-race body, implicitly states that there is an understanding of both sides of the issues. In

Dreams From My Father, Obama clarifies this point: "As it was, I learned to slip back and forth

between my Black and white worlds, understanding that each possessed its own language and

customs and structures of meaning, convinced that with a bit of translation on my part the two

worlds would eventually cohere" (2007). Part of Obama's appeal to many voters and to his

constituents is grounded in his ability to represent himself as a Black man with mixed heritage

without using the same rhetoric as Black politicians of the past, such as Jesse Jackson and Al

Sharpton, among others.

However, after the trial of Trayvon Martin's killer finished, and he was pronounced not

guilty, President Obama spoke to the media and said: "You know, when Trayvon Martin was

first shot, I said that this could have been my son. Another way of saying that is Trayvon Martin

could have been me 35 years ago" (qtd. in Lewis, 2013). At this moment, he made a clear

statement to the American public, claiming that if he was not in office, his Black life could have

been in danger, exposing a belief in American anti-Black violence. It is tempting to read a more

progressive politics into this statement, to see these words as a shift into a more radical

platform for the president, but what I am more interested in are the implications for different

multiracial narratives examined so far. In post-civil rights America, the advances made by Black

individuals are often heralded and showcased as indicative of the progress that has been made,

and the ascension of a mixed-race Black man to the highest seat of power was the pinnacle of

this publicizing. But Obama's words in front of reporters in response to Trayvon Martin reveal a

different kind of framing for the President, one that draws attention to the positionality of

Blackness in the racial hierarchy of the United States.

This racial framing stands in sharp contrast to the opening example of Woods and

Oprah in this chapter, where they leaned into narratives of the new American citizen, the

"unequivocal embodiment of America's future multicultural citizenry" (Cole and Andrews

2001). In previous moments, Obama, similar to Key and Peele, was categorized in these terms,

placating a white citizenry and audience who needed a safer, more palatable Blackness that

signaled a beige raceless future. But the Negrotown moment and Obama's comments reveal a mixed-race Black identity that actively pushes back against these kinds of assertions. I argue that Key and Peele have left behind a post-racial, multiculturally progressive ideal in order to align themselves with a more traditional, politically charged Black comedic tradition. Comedians such as Chris Rock, Paul Mooney, and Dave Chappelle have made a career out of inflammatory and provocative comments against government systems and institutional racism, and when *The K&P Show* was first released, their material was perceived by some critics as "safer" and more palatable. But by the final episode of their show, it is clear that they are not transcending Blackness or claiming a biracial identity that disconnects them from the Black experience. What these comedians end up doing is addressing the tension that exists, exploring "the possibilities for a mixed-race expressivity that is continuous with, rather than parallel to, a capacious African American tradition constantly in dialogue and debate with itself" (Elam 2013). The final image of Negrotown is a reminder of the haunting effects of slavery and the Jim Crow era, retelling the "persistence, multiplicity, and interconnectedness of diasporic anti-Black forces…that are impossible to negate" (Jung and Vargas, 2021). Whereas the Woods example and much of the rhetoric around Key and Peele and Obama look towards an imagined reality that exists beyond the confines of racism and anti-Blackness, the comedians take great care to leave us with the lasting image of a fantasy worth imagining despite its phantastic nature – a world where Blackness is free to exist without consequence.

Conclusion – Audiences, the Struggle over Meaning and Looking Beyond *The K&P Show*

This chapter explored the dynamics surrounding the construction of mixed-race Black identity within the digital realm, specifically through the lens of Key and Peele's presence on

YouTube, the legacy of their Comedy Central show, and the significant backdrop of Obama's presidency. I underscore the substantial anxieties stemming from the competing narratives dictating who and what qualifies as Black in popular culture, a narrative continuously reshaped by the influence of digital platforms. By scrutinizing the content producers (Key and Peele), the chapter unveils a reorientation towards Blackness, shedding light on a mixed-race Black identity that deviates from exceptionalism. Instead, it roots itself in a politically charged Black comedic tradition, challenging preconceived notions and sparking public debates on the definition and understanding of Blackness within both the entertainment industry and its audiences. Ultimately, this chapter deepens our understanding of racial identity construction, emphasizing the pressures within popular culture and television while highlighting the complex interplay between self-perception and audience interpretation in the digital age. It emphasizes the socially constructed sense of race and its malleability within the dynamic landscape of digital platforms, showcasing the evolving nature of Blackness.

After the success but ultimate end of *The Key and Peele Show*, many critics and fans alike had questions about what was next for the two comedians and whether they would continue to work on separate projects or go their separate ways as entertainers. The first project post-finale was a film called *Keanu*, a lighthearted but absurd comedy that explored the comedians going through a series of wild adventures to recover a cat named Keanu that was stolen from Peele's character. And for a moment it seemed as if the duo would potentially keep uniting for feature comedy films, but soon after there were whispers of Peele making his directing debut in the horror genre. And in 2017, *Get Out* was released, the directorial debut of Peele that was met with tremendous success. To some, the content seemed surprising, but

when examining many of the characters and scenes with Peele's handprint on them in *The Key and Peele Show*, the connection was always there. Peele has also remarked publicly on the connections he has always seen between comedy and horror, teasing out absurdities that speak to cultural anxieties bubbling beneath and above the surface. *Get Out* was timely in its release, animating a "reinvigorated interest in assessing slavery's 'afterlives' and its transgenerational impact on Black life in the present, neoliberal assumptions around equality and colorblindness, the plague of police brutality, and American jurisprudence as a booby trap for Black bodies" (Wynter 2022). The film's politics are tied intimately to its contemporary moment, being released just two months after the inauguration of Trump. Lloyd (2019) calls *Get Out* "the scariest new film about the oldest of American horrors," and a harsh reminder of the failings of a nation that proclaimed a post-racial 21st century.

Peele's directorial debut emphasized the failings of white liberalism, foregoing more blatant racial boogeymen in favor of an underneath-the-surface, more amorphous villain. Keetley (2020) speaks to the racial paranoia present in the film, "encompassing the appropriative desire of whites for the Black body as well as the anxieties of African Americans that surviving and thriving in white society risks succumbing to white interests." In many ways, Peele has revolutionized the horror and gothic genre, infusing a sharp critique of 21st century politics of race into his work. And while themes of racial inequality and critiques of structural anti-Blackness have been present in his earlier work as a comic, Peele's foray into the world of horror has given him a sharper focus into exploring race and ethnicity. It is fitting then, that the through line in the final image of *The Key and Peele Show*, a scathing critique of police brutality

and the treatment of Black people, is taken up in *Get* Out, refined and distilled to be even more

expansive and piercing in its interrogation of Black life in the U.S.

Chapter 3

Watchmen (2019): A Meditation on Race and Technology

Introduction – *Watchmen* and the Lineage of Black Horror and Sci-Fi

In October of 2019, HBO released the critically acclaimed and Emmy award-winning

show *Watchmen,* a reimagination and reinterpretation of the 1986 Alan Watts' original comic

series. The original source material focused on a group of superheroes in the early 20ᵗʰ century

– divulging the complexities and anxieties that came with fame, power, and corruption. The

HBO series elaborates on this primary text, extending this world to include more attentive

meditations on race and African American history in the U.S. The show provides a sharp and

stunning exploration of Blackness, racialized power, and the U.S. police state and government.

Critics were quick to pick up on these themes and heralded the show as a beacon of Black

television that continues to shed light on the dark underbelly of racism and white supremacy in

the U.S. without solely focusing on Black trauma and pain and the end all be all (Burroughs et al

2023., Gillespie et. Al 2020). Wanzo (2020) speaks to this issue:

> "There has been a lot of discussion recently about Black trauma being overrepresented
>
> in popular culture. Yet as *Watchmen* shows, we have not even begun to scratch the
>
> surface of this history. Here, the speculative becomes the grounds for a pleasurable
>
> affective trajectory that also avoids the traps of uplift narratives that too often cheapen
>
> Black history."

The speculative here is also a means to examine how Blackness is re/presented in the world of Watchmen (the original series) that had previously foreclosed the possibility of exploring Blackness as a key component in the social fabric of the U.S. The legacy of slavery has had and continues to have lasting, damaging effects, and this is clear in Watchmen, but the HBO show also provides a sense of "speculative joy" (Wanzo 2020) that pushes the audience to imagine a future of Blackness beyond suffering. HBO's *Watchmen* is in a line of Black sci-fi material, but its presence on HBO as a primetime television event, its critical success in awards shows, and its attentiveness to advanced representations of Blackness and technofuturism set it apart from other shows and movies in the same genre. Moreover, it centers Blackness in a narrative world that previously sidestepped questions around race and inequality in the U.S. *Watchmen* carefully crafts narratives around Blackness that highlight the past sins of a country while also moving past the tropes of Blackness as solely connected to trauma and pain.

The historical past is not changed, but events have happened before the series starts that have radically altered the status of the history of race and the status of Black and white relations, though we also see entrenched, familiar forms of white supremacist belief. What *Watchmen* accomplishes is a peculiar understanding of historicism, specifically one that relies on disruption. Historians speak of counterfactual history often, a speculative exercise that pinpoints how changes to key historical moments would lead to different results. This endeavor has also been taken up in the world of literature, with texts like *The Man in High Castle* and *Bring the Jubilee* exploring alternative endings to the Civil War and World War II. But while these novels explore how global political dynamics would have changed as a result of these alternatives, *Watchmen* disrupts the flow of history to shed light on the pervasiveness of anti-

Blackness and racism that currently exists, what I term *counter-historical haunting*. This haunting is sharp and piercing in its reach but does not rest in an acceptance that Blackness must exist only in terms of slavery and its afterlife. Further speaking to the notion of haunting in *Ghostly Matters*, Gordon (1997) draws on critical race theory to designate conceptions of race and emotional responses to racism that appear in literature, media, and everyday life:

> Indeed, it seemed to me that haunting was precisely the domain of turmoil and trouble, that moment when things are not in their assigned places, when the cracks and riggings are exposed, when the people who are meant to be invisible show up without any sign of leaving, when disturbed feelings cannot be put away, when something else, something different from before, seems like it must be done.

Watchmen forces the audience to grapple with the evils of a country that has refused to remain buried, but alongside this counter-historical haunting, Watchmen also employs technofuturist elements that showcase a Blackness that is both textured and intricate.

Hall (1988) speaks to the mythic space of popular culture, how it is a stage where desires, fantasies, needs, and wants about race play out. In many of these performances and representations, particularly when it comes to Blackness, the register of success is judged in the context of representations that came before it and how it progresses "good" narratives that aren't rooted in negative stereotypes (Gates 2020). And while Gates rightly (2020) heavily criticizes this approach, there is still some utility in contextualizing Black art within the other productions that have come out before and around it. As we saw in Chapter one, the Blackness we come to see on screen is always a confluence of dynamics, and for many, the uplift of the nuclear Black upper-middle-class family in Cosby was the *needed* image despite the many

critiques leveled at it. But whereas *The Cosby Show* set the stage for family-based situation comedies, Watchmen showcases a very different kind of Blackness, going out of its way to highlight issues *The Cosby Show* sidestepped while also being part of a sci-fi/horror renaissance in Black film and television.

The notion of speculative joy in Black cultural arts productions stands in stark contrast to a critique that many have leveled at other Black television shows, what Giorgis (2021) calls the "impossibly broad banner of Black Trauma porn." Part of the rise is due to the success of Jordan Peele's *Get Out* as referenced in chapter two, a film that won the Oscar in 2018 for Best Original Screenplay and brought in $255 million globally. The scale of this success marked a shift in the attention placed on horror and science fiction made by Black creators, and many projects were greenlit in the wake of this juggernaut – a *Candyman* sequel, the television adaptation of *Lovecraft Country* (also on HBO), Amazon Prime's *Them*, Peele's *Us,* and his CBS reboot of *The Twilight Zone*. Means-Coleman (2023) speaks to the success of Peele's movies and the aftermath, where audiences are being exposed to "fantastic horror movies, but also a return to Blacks *in* horror, with characters parachuted into films that weren't originally written for Black characters, or people trying to capitalize on the Black horror trend." Black horror has existed for more than 100 years, but there has been a sharp increase in mainstream crossover impact since 2017 (Means Coleman,qtd. in Wilkinson, 2023). In some regards, this explosion of Black horror and sci-fi is heralded as a win for Black stories, but Giorgis (2021) counters these anticipations, pointing to excessive violence and disturbing sequences such as the murder of a Black infant and simultaneous rape of his mother in *Them*, posing the key question of how creators deploy violence and whether it is necessary and redemptive to Black visual texts.

Running parallel to the wake of *Get Out* is also the more public/visible renditions of

Afro-futurism in television and film. The genre/ideology has long existed, with many pointing to

Octavia Butler and her fictional works as the most exemplary and nuanced depictions of the

cultural, artistic, and intellectual movement. Broadly speaking, the genre uses techno-culture

and science fiction as a lens for examining the Black experience, providing alternate realities

and narratives contrary to historical fact, utilizing elements like time travel and futuristic

societies (Strong and Chaplin 2019). One of the defining elements of Afro-futurism is asking the

question, what does it mean to be human, and who gets to define it, all the while centering

Black diasporic life? The 2018 Marvel production *Black Panther* was one of the most visible

pieces of media that integrated elements of Afro-futurism into its storyline. Released almost

exactly a year after *Get Out*, the film was wildly popular on a global level, grossing over a billion

dollars in revenue. The film is not without critique, with some critics like Warner (2018) calling

out the movie as a Disney product steeped in performative industry logics that showcase plastic

representation. There are always questions of authenticity that come with the marriage of

massive conglomerates like Disney and Black creators and the concessions they must make in

order to appease ideals for commercial success. But at the same time, the film was a center-

stage product that showcased a mainly Black cast and afro-futurist elements, bending "time

and space, merging both ancestral history and future possibility with the spiritual (Strong and

Chaplin, 2019). I contend that the success and acclaim of Black Panther, coupled with Get Out,

set the stage for a wave of Black television and film in the sci-fi/horror genre.

Watchmen occupies an interesting space in this lineage, displaying elements of horror,

sci-fi, and afro-futurism. Carrington (2016) identifies four qualities of Black speculative fiction:

surrealism, haunting, Otherhood, and Afrofuturism. Many of these concepts delve into the concept of time, and "the stakes of Black futurism are revealed all the more powerfully by the notion that the way Black people experience and relate to time may not be fixed or linear" (Gunn 2020). These themes are ones that we see over and over throughout the series, displaying a keen awareness of the genre and the staples within. *Watchmen* is by no means a perfect media text when it comes to representations of Blackness, but it is a text that harnesses elements of Afro-futurism and Black speculative fiction to provide a valuable entry point into discussions around the conditions of possibility for Blackness in contemporary media. One does not have to look far to see how the genre flattens and outright erases the existence of Black women, and if they are present, the roles that they play are secondary at best. Gunn (2020) speaks to a mythical Black subject in the future who enjoys subjugation, "defined by their utility for white people towards white goals." These tropes are particularly salient when it comes to Black female characters within the genre, further reminding us of how they are expunged time and time again. *Watchmen* once again intervenes here, centering the plot on Angela Abar (played by Regina King), allowing us to grapple with the complexities of her character - a Black policewoman, a mother, a masked vigilante, but also a grieving daughter with no connection to her past. This reorientation of the Watchmen world focused on a Black woman reminds us of how much the original source material has been altered, leading audiences to the subject matter in line with the preceding Black sci-fi and horror texts since 2017.

Its fall 2019 release date built nicely off the momentum that was set by Get Out and Black Panther and its placement on HBO adds a dimension of intrigue, particularly as the platform has become a home for Black adaptations and revisions – revisiting novels like

Lovecraft Country and rebooting shows like the animated hit *The Proud Family***.** It is a useful

reminder to classify digital media as not just about technological change but also adaptations

from one form to another. HBO's *Watchmen* reminds us of how source material can be shifted

and reinterpreted in imaginative ways with vastly different concerns; the show centers on

Blackness while also being undergirded by technology, explorations of Black masculinity and

femininity, and histories of racism and slavery.

Critics, academics, and the popular press have sharply explored these themes within

their writing, publishing pieces in the Atlantic and New York Times, as well as several academic

journals. While these pieces have been enlightening and revealing of Watchmen's brilliance,

the themes of technology and race in the series have yet to be explored in depth. The show is

ripe with themes of Blackness as technology and the role of whiteness in technological

advancement, absolutism, and supremacy. *Watchmen* forces us to grapple with the memory

and weight of anti-Blackness in the U.S., centering in on a Black female protagonist and her

journey of self and familial discovery. Whereas racism is steeped in social practices and

structures, anti-Blackness centers on notions of "the Social and the Human…their constitutive

rejection of Blackness and Black people" (Jung and Vargas, 2021). The show provides a valuable

intervention in that it tackles issues beyond policy and structural transformation (though these

things are present) and looks towards an ontological reorientation of Blackness, steeped in a

joy that perhaps is not as speculative as it may seem. The show also raises fascinating questions

about the sources that power technological advancement and how the central organizing

feature of race always undergirds these sources. This chapter provides a meditation on race

and technology in *Watchmen*, examining three distinct themes from the show grounded in a

counter-historical haunting. I utilize a Black technological understanding of race and a Black

feminist Afrofuturist lens to conduct a critical discourse analysis of 1) biotech and collective

memory through the lens of our Black female protagonist, 2) the character of Dr. Manhattan as

a technological being, with his blueness/Blackness as a thought-provoking reflection on

essentialism and racial binaries, and 3) a critique of whiteness, technology, and power

structures. In the space of speculative fiction where Black characters are expendable or

nonexistent (Brown, qtd. in Gunn, 2020), *Watchmen* provides a valuable look into the

possibilities that exist for Blackness in this genre, providing a space where Black humanity is

vital and lifegiving, showcasing a technological prowess rooted in Blackness instead of white

technological determinism. The show provides a valuable moment to once again think through

the different forms that Blackness takes depending on the medium and moment. By

highlighting the opportunities that exist for Blackness within sci-fi, this chapter grounds us in

thinking about the process of the battles and negotiations that are always taking place: industry

imperatives to capitalize on trends, audience calls for Black content, and how these

representations build off or depart from earlier iterations of Black televisual texts.

A Quick Watchmen Summary

The revamped series focuses on Angela Abar, a Black policewoman in present-day Tulsa,

OK, investigating a vast conspiracy dealing with a white supremacist terrorist organization

called the Seventh Kalvary, rising U.S. Senator Joe Keene, a narcissistic tech mogul Lady Trieu,

and the most powerful man on the planet – Dr. Manhattan. The series begins with the murder

of the Tulsa police chief and Abar attempting to discover how and why he was murdered. She

discovers his body hanging from a tree with an old Black man in a wheelchair claiming that he

committed the crime; Angela takes him for questioning (without involving the official police), and a chain reaction of events both past and present are set off. We discover that the man in the wheelchair is Abar's grandfather, whom she never knew existed, and he was also the first masked vigilante – Hooded Justice – who foiled an early 20th-century white supremacist plot created from the earlier iteration of the Seventh Kalvary. This tradition continued through the hands of Senator Joe Keene, who, although he seemed like he was a law-abiding citizen invested in the well-being of the police force and the citizens of Tulsa, is funding the Seventh Kalvary and the police in a twisted plot to gain political and material power. The quest for power centers around one figure – Dr. Manhattan, a god-like blue superhuman who gained power from a nuclear reactor accident. Towards the end of the series, we discover that Angela's long-term partner and husband *is* Dr. Manhattan, hiding in plain sight, inhabiting the body of a Black man fitted with an amnesia device that disrupts his frontal cortex. The device that causes him to lose memory of everything happened before the device was implanted by Angela, which causes him to forget that he is Dr. Manhattan. This was a plan concocted by them both in order to give them the chance at a normal life. As the plot unravels, it is revealed that multiple players are aware of Manhattan's existence - Keene, the Seventh Kalvary, and Lady Trieu, who has conducted a device that will transfer Manhattan's power to herself. Through a range of twists and turns, Abar slowly puts the pieces together in order to stop the conspiracy and, along the way, reckon with her own troubled past and family history that explores the wounds of racial trauma, collective memory, and reconciliation.

The Strange and Arresting Nature of Blackness: Contextualizing Race and History in the U.S.

The pilot episode opens with the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre occurring while focusing on a young Black boy (we later discover this was Angela's grandfather) and his crying mother watching a film inside an otherwise empty theater. While explosions and screams are heard faintly outside the theater, there is a moment where our attention is diverted to the screen and the film being played – a story centered on Bass Reeves, the Black deputy of Oklahoma. As the scene on screen comes to an end, we hear the young child reciting the deputy's lines alongside him, "There will be no mob justice today. Trust in the law." The juxtaposition of these lines, with this Black officer on screen, alongside the Tulsa Race Massacre occurring, a brutal act of racism and terror against the Black population of Tulsa, OK, is immediately brought to the forefront for the audience. We are forced to grapple with this peculiar opening and wonder how this material connects to the strange Watchmen world of superheroes and villains.

Immediately after the Tulsa Race Massacre opening, we are thrust into the modern world of Tulsa, where a Black police officer wearing a uniform with a yellow mask pulls over a pickup truck driven by a white man in a flannel and trucker hat. Interestingly, the officer is unarmed as he approaches the vehicle, but once he suspects the driver of being part of a white supremacist terrorist organization called the Seventh Kalvary, he returns to his car and requests for his firearm to be unlocked from its holster. We are confronted with two odd occurrences in this scene – the officer wearing a mask to hide his face and the need to have his gun released by a superior at the police station. The reversal of roles in this situation is an interesting framing of the current U.S. police state, flipping things upside down. The cops are masked, not the criminals. The officer is Black. And in this moment, the viewers are in fear for the police officer's

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life. The haunting music swells as the cop radios over and over for permission to have his firearm released. The tension thickens as the gun jams twice when he attempts to take it out as he receives the green light from his superior. And when he finally uses it, there is a sense of relief, a collective reprieve now that the officer can defend himself. But as the music comes to a halt and we hear the policeman's anxious breathing return to a more normal pace, gunfire lights up the screen, and we see the truck driver standing in front of the police car with a semi-automatic rifle and a Rorschach mask on.

Both scenes occur in the first 10 minutes of the series premiere and is quite the repositioning of the police state and who we should be empathetic towards. Our first introductions to officers of the law in *Watchmen* are the fictional Black Bass Reeves on screen in the movie theater and the policeman who pulls over the pickup truck. At first glance, this scene, alongside the Black officer being shot and even our introduction to the main character of the show – Angela Abar (Regina King), a Black police detective, is a puzzling depiction of the police following the Tulsa Race Massacre – one that seems to fall under the genre of "copaganda" (Bernabo 2020). The term describes how televisual texts present police and law enforcement in positive and affirming fashion, while downplaying police brutality and racism within the criminal justice system. As the show continues, those haunting lines from the opening scene of the massacre in the theater become as important as ever – "Trust in the law." In the lineage of her grandfather, Angela learns that the justice system is incapable and corrupt, and a series that starts with the scales of sympathy tipped towards law enforcement ends with a compelling critique of the U.S. police and military state.

In the final minutes of episode one of the series, we are confronted with the image of hanging – or better yet a lynching – a man hanging from a tree with a man sitting next to him in a wheelchair while holding what looks like a flashlight. This image immediately conjures the tragic and brutal history of Black men and women murdered at the hands of white terrorists. Yet, in this scene, we are left with the image of a white man hanging from a tree – the chief of the Tulsa police and a 90-year-old man Black man, Angela's grandfather, waiting patiently for Angela to arrive. This is a common occurrence in the series: visually arresting compositions that infuse strangeness into scenes that we think we are familiar with. This sense of strangeness manipulates historical events and imagery along with our knowledge of what did (and didn't happen) – providing new conditions of possibility for what Blackness can be. These early scenes of *Watchmen* set the stage and prepare the viewer for encounters with Blackness within science fiction that challenge how Blackness is constructed and who it is constructed for.

Nostalgia Pills, Biotech, and Black Collective Memory in Sister Night

The general premise of the *Watchmen* series centers on the story of Regina King's character (Sister Night) and her family, tracing her lineage to the first Black masked superhero in the early 20th century, her relationship with her husband Cal (who we later find out is Dr. Manhattan), and her role as police officer and detective uncovering the schemes of multiple players trying to harness the power of Dr. Manhattan. Critics have paid sharp notice to King's character, focusing on her to explore how racial trauma is passed down from generation to generation, but also understanding the complexity of all the identities she embodies and how she navigates the looming and tangible threat of white supremacy. But alongside these

important themes, King's character also leads on a path toward the complicated relationship between technological progress and Black identity.

At the end of episode 5, Agent Blake (a federal agent sent to aid the police in Tulsa) discovers that Angela has been investigating outside of the parameters of the law - hiding suspects, circumventing protocols, and withholding information from her superiors. One of the key pieces of information is the involvement of her grandfather, the self-professed killer of Angela's boss and the former police chief. Before he escapes some episodes earlier, Angela is left with a bottle of his pills, red in color and described as "for his memory." Right as Agent Blake is confronting Angela, she learns that they are nostalgia pills, a now-banned technology in the world of Watchmen. Originally for dementia patients, the tech inserted chips into your brain, harvested memories, and then placed them in a pill. The product was wildly successful, but too successful, and people got addicted. President Redford (actor Robert Redford) and the FDA had to outlaw it in order to halt the growing epidemic. Angela is warned that she should not take any of the pills, especially when they are someone else's, but in a flash, she takes all her grandfather's pills at once to stop anyone else from getting their hands on them. She is placed in a holding cell, and as they try to get her to sign a release that would allow the hospital to pump her stomach, she is suddenly transported to the world of her grandfather (in his body) as a young, newly married police officer in New York City in the early 20th century.

Throughout the rest of this episode, we are taken on a journey across the life of a young Will Reeves, but through the eyes of Angela, reliving them. At times, we see Will talking; in other moments, we see Angela, and then there are moments when we hear their voices blended. The lines blur between who is experiencing what, but through it all, we see how a

lineage of hurt, fear, pride, anger, and even love is passed down from generation to generation. What is interesting to note about this use of biotech is that Will uses the pills in a manner different from what they were intended for, as well as what they were abused for. It becomes clear throughout the episode that these pills were intended as a mode of memory preservation for future generations, and it further reiterates the endeavors of Black interactions with technology and how Black folks reinvent and repurpose technology in creative and outside-of-the-box ways. Fouch (2006) speaks to the notion of reclaiming technological agency, and the work of Brock (2020) and Dinerstein (2006) is important here as well, illuminating the ways that Black folks navigate their relationship to technology, often reshaping or "incorrectly" using tech to suit their needs or express what they are seeking to express. This is a crucial dynamic that manifests throughout the show and a key framing that sheds light on minority engagements with technology.

The nostalgia pills are a key piece of technology that legitimizes Will's memories and experiences of racism and struggles against white supremacy. In one section of the episode, Will catches a man attempting to burn down a Jewish deli and turns him into the precinct. He then discovers the arsonist has been freed and returns to the station to confront them. One of the officers tells him that he's having memory problems, and as he responds, we see Angela's face saying, "My memory is fine." We see her beginning of a kind of Black collective memory being passed from one generation to the next, a tech-infused oral tradition, a kind of memory and storytelling that has long been a fixture in Black communities for generations.

"My memory is fine" is a line that echoes the larger sentiments of a fight to retain and preserve memories that have long been under attack. Fights against Critical Race Theory

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(Sprunt, 2021) (or at least very flawed understandings of or straw man arguments of it), the

attempt to ban the speeches of Dr. King, and even the widespread rejection of white privilege

as a concept by conservative politicians are all modern-day attempts to silence and disregard

the memories of racism and discrimination that have so profoundly shaped the U.S.'s political

and economic system. Time and time again, the collective memory of Black trauma is

challenged and undermined, and *Watchmen* reveals that this is white supremacy at work,

where racism is utilized as a technology, a mapping tool (Chun 2009) that draws the contours of

what is and isn't presentable and acceptable as knowledge for the general public. Angela's

grandfather takes matters into his own hands, knowing that these kinds of stories are almost

always wiped clean from a nation's memory, manipulating technology in order to accomplish

the goal of preservation.

Later in the same episode, as Angela progresses through her grandfather's memories,

we discover that he is actually the first masked vigilante in the Watchmen universe – Hooded

Justice – a figure who is quite literally whitewashed in the history books (a modern retelling of

his rise to fame is played a white actor). Will Reeve's turn to finding justice outside the law is

marked by several moments – most notably when he is beaten and hung almost to the point of

death by fellow white police officers because of his attempts to call out racism. We see Angela

(not Will) walking back home holding a hood with a noose and ropes around her neck and

wrists, and as she is walking, there is a woman being attacked and robbed by a group of men.

Will puts a hood on and brutally attacks the men in order to save the woman. Immediately after

we see him walk back into his home and tell his wife, "Ok I'm angry." After some back and

forth, his wife says something powerful to him – "You ain't gonna get justice with that badge

Will Reeves. You gonna get it with that hood." Hooded Justice is born, and we see the clear

passing down of this legacy to his granddaughter, Angela.

The episode fast forwards to some months later when Hooded Justice is an established

figure, as in someone the public is now aware of and even supportive of (if his racial identity is

hidden). His fame has grown so much that he has inspired a group of masked vigilantes to form;

they call themselves the New Minutemen and he is recruited to join them. As Will delves

deeper into the world of vigilantism, he discovers a sinister plot from a white supremacist

group in the lineage of the KKK called Cyclops. In essence, they are using projectors, and

something called mesmerism to exercise some form of hypnosis/mind control over Black folks

to get them to riot and kill each other – which can be directly tied to America's actual history of

the CIA sowing Black neighborhoods with drugs and the knows manipulation of the Black Power

movement by FBI agents and subordinates of Hoover. Reeves discovers this after a riot

occurred at a movie theater that Black members of the city frequented. He brings the problem

to the New Minutemen, but the leader is skeptical and tells Will he'll have to solve Black unrest

all on his own. Will does this exactly, discovering the plans and headquarters of Cyclops by

himself and essentially going on a killing spree, piling all the bodies together into the

warehouse and setting it on fire.

There are many themes to tease out of this series of events, the power dynamics that

exist between Will and the other Minutemen, the shouldering of responsibility to solve Black

unrest, and the murder of white supremacists that hail the lineage of the KKK, but what I find

most interesting about this moment is how technology underscores all of it. Fouch (2004)

speaks to the relationship between marginalized people and technology, asserting a vital

framework to center in these moments: "the rise of technological power to oppress

marginalized groups and inhumanely exploit individuals, communities, and societies." In the

Watchmen universe, Cyclops has coined a new type of technology, something that harnesses

the flashing light capacity of projector screens to actively oppress and murder members of the

Black community. The simple act of going to the theater is now a dangerous event where you

could be subjected to mind control to do the bidding of a white supremacist terrorist

organization. Regardless of how fantastical this may seem, the underlying racial and power

dynamics remain poignant – technological advances can and have had horrifying impacts on

marginalized groups. Many of these technologies are framed as forward-thinking, innovative,

equitable, and for the good of society, but upon further examination, there are disturbing

implications (Werth, 2019; Hannah-Moffat, 2019).

The episode ends with the destruction of Cyclops, and then we are taken to the present,

where Will Reeves is seen taking the police chief to his death using the same hypnosis

technology that was created to slaughter Black people and turn them against each other. We

are left with the image of Angela (Will) sitting in the wheelchair, holding the flashlight while the

chief is swinging above her after being instructed to hang himself. Reeves reminds him of his

own lineage, the Ku Klux Klan robe that belonged to his father and his father before him, and

we are left with the racial and racist parallels between these two families. Angela is the vehicle

that takes us through this journey, bearing the weight of a country's sins through the memories

of her grandfather. Through the medium of the nostalgia pills, she is transported violently to

the past, a key trope of the genre that we see throughout the show. But alongside the

mutability of time, there are elements of haunting embedded deeply in *Watchmen*, most

notably seen in the moments when characters are transported to the past. Carrington (2016) writes:

> "The concept of haunting in speculative fiction refers to the persistent presence of the past in the present. It acknowledges the ongoing impact of historical traumas, such as slavery and colonization, and explores how these legacies shape individual and collective experiences. Haunting serves as a metaphorical lens to examine race, memory, and the unresolved tensions that continue to reverberate through society."

Try as she might, Angela cannot escape the legacy of her grandfather and all that it entails. Seeking justice within the confines of the police state and ultimately having to reckon with how that same system has brutalized and dehumanized her family is an affliction experienced by multiple generations in *Watchmen*. Though different in many regards, there are still striking similarities to the reorientation towards Blackness and sharp racial critique from Key and Peele in the previous chapter that explored whiteness and the police state, particularly the antagonistic relationship towards Black people in the U.S. "Trust in the law" becomes a haunting phrase that shapes Will and Angela; as she relives his memories as him, we are reminded of the individual and collective experiences of trauma. At the same time, *Watchmen* shows how revisiting the past and facing the ghosts of the past is necessary to move into the future. It is a position of privilege to not have to revisit the past, to have the option to move beyond it, to tell those who have been the most traumatized that they are having memory problems, that what they are experiencing is in fact not reality.

Watchmen is continuously bringing us to a state of haunting and bringing to light the sins of the past, the sins of a father, and the sins of a country, revealing a much-needed reckoning through varying technological mechanisms. Will brings this haunting to reality when he confronts the police chief of Tulsa with his disturbed past and entanglement with the KKK and white supremacy. There are indeed "disturbing" elements to the show, ones that reveal what previously lay dormant in the country's psyche – and no matter the attempts to silence or repress, they are here to stay. Tuck and Ree (2013) write that the U.S. is "permanently haunted by the slavery, genocide, and violence entwined in its first, present, and future days." They go on further to frame this kind of haunting as something that has a refusal to stop: "For ghosts, the haunting is the resolving, it is not what needs to be resolved." In the series, the showrunners prioritize this aspect of speculative fiction – the history of anti-Blackness has not been forgotten and still needs to be a critical lens through which we interpret sociopolitical issues. The show raises a fresh look at how deeply embedded anti-Blackness is within the U.S., but at the same time, it imagines a future beyond anti-Blackness, giving a hopeful vision of how Blackness can exist and stand on its own terms, all while centering a Black woman and her relationship to the most powerful being on the planet.

What's Black and Blue with Tech All Over?

There have been many renditions and evolutions in science fiction as to what the superhuman entails. Depictions of these futures on screen have spanned a range of identities, but rarely have we seen Blackness at the forefront of these representations. Black science-fiction authors and fans have long criticized the genre for its racism and erasure of Black people in speculative futures, "gesturing to the absence or subordination of Black people in

mainstream science fiction" (Gunn 2020). The lack of representation here is not simply about

putting more Black faces and bodies in these narratives but points to a larger phenomenon of

how whiteness works within these spaces – mapping out a readership that "wants nothing

more than endless variations on medieval Europe or American colonization" Jemisin (2018). The

world of science fiction, similar to the utopian hopes pinned on the dawn of the internet age,

was a world flattened by "equality." Campbell (2016) writes, "Science fiction often implies that

racism will be dead in the future. At least, they never really address it so we can only assume it

will be."

HBO's *Watchmen* centers Blackness around a technological narrative, placing Black

characters at the forefront of what the superhuman can be. The show becomes an arresting

matrix and confluence of Black users manipulating technology – police tech, masks, weapons –

for their own gain, while also holding technological power within themselves that has the

power to rewrite and reshape history and the political and material landscape that they are

inhabiting. What is particularly interesting about Dr. Manhattan's character is that the tech is

embedded in his body, and although Blackness does have a technological identity, the series

materializes this identity in a tangible way. *Watchmen* provides us an entry point into

understanding the relationship between Blackness and technology but also Blackness *as*

technology. Watchmen provides us with yet another vantage point and complicating factor

different from the previous chapters of this dissertation – Blackness as a technology in and of

itself that asserts dominance from the body itself. Watchmen showcases not just Black people

reclaiming their technological agency but becoming the tech themselves.

Brock (2021) speaks to how scholars first sought to understand information technology use by Black folk: "the Black body was only legible through its perceived absence: absence from the material, technical, and institutional aspects of computers and society." But in Watchmen, even though it is a decidedly different context and framing of Black folks and technology, the Black body is hyper-visible, and the technical aspects of futurity and power are very much grounded in the body. This is not to limit Blackness solely to the body, but it does ground the technology of power in a material sense and opens to us the possibilities for what it means when we see technological power grounded in a Black body, which becomes even more stimulating when we consider the historical relationship of Blackness to technology.

The rise of technological power to oppress marginalized groups and inhumanely exploit individuals, communities, and societies is a vital framework to center when we think about the relationship between marginalized people and technology (Fouche 2004). Walton (1999) also reminds us how certain narratives of technology are given to the American public at large, predominantly being presented as innovative, progressive, and advancing health and ease of life, but this largely overlooks the tenuous and sometimes outright adversarial relationship that Black folks and other marginalized groups have with technology. Fouche (2004) writes, "Since African Americans historically have been denied basic human rights, participation in the larger American processes of social, cultural, and technological development has been extremely limited." Essentially, he is speaking to how technology needs to be race-ed, a task taken up by other scholars such as Chun (2009) and Nakamura (2007, 2011) – analyzing the gendered and racialized components of tech or how race can be used as a means to further entrench racist policies and ideas about Blackness. Chun (2011) speaks to race as a technology:

Race in these circumstances was wielded —and is still wielded —as an invaluable

mapping tool, a means by which origins and boundaries are simultaneously traced and

constructed and through which the visible traces of the body are tied to allegedly innate

invisible characteristics.

Chun articulates the ability of race to draw out and shape policy, immigration, economic

inequality, and migration patterns, revealing how the idea of race (though it has tangible and

material consequences) is a tool wielded by those in power. But in *Watchmen*, although we see

these elements present, it is almost as if they take it a step further and make race the actual

technology. The Black body of Dr. Manhattan contains the power to shape nation-states

through brute force and might. It is a power sought after, and try as you might, you cannot

unsee the image of this omnipotence residing in and being so intertwined with Blackness. And

to further this image, Dr. Manhattan is in a romantic relationship with a Black woman, a

deliberate move that links his relationship to Blackness.

In episode 9, *A God Walks into Abar*, a clever play on words that alludes to Dr.

Manhattan meeting Angela Abar for the first time in a bar in Vietnam, we discover the origins

of their love story. The episode takes a trip to the past 10 years earlier when Dr. Manhattan

walks into a bar in Vietnam (the 51st U.S. state post-Vietnam War in this revisionist world). It is

there that he meets Angela Abar, a uniformed officer having a drink on "Manhattan Day." The

day is a commemoration (to some) of Dr. Manhattan ending the Vietnam War by wiping out the

rebel soldiers in a mass killing using his god-like power. To some, Manhattan is a hero, a patriot

acting on behalf of the states to ensure the freedom of those across the globe seeking help

from tyranny. Angela sees this differently and believes that he is responsible in some fashion

for the death of her parents, who were killed by a bomb set off by those angry at the U.S.

imperial power occupying the country. In a very different light, Manhattan and his power is

another form of technological warfare, one that extends and reiterates the colonialist

dominance of the U.S. It is another form of American exceptionalism (Puar 2007), a notion that

relies on a deep-rooted belief in western politics and systems of government as *the* purest form

of governing between the state and its citizens:

> Exception refers both to particular discourses that repetitively produce the United
>
> States as an exceptional nation state and Giorgio Agamben's theorization of the
>
> sanctioned and naturalized disregard of the limits of state juridicial and political power
>
> through times of state crisis, a 'state of exception' that is used to justify the extreme
>
> measures of the state."

American exceptionalism is embedded in the history of U.S. nation-state formation, and

this narrative is a part of being *the* American citizen. This notion of *the* American citizen takes

on many different forms, always shapeshifting; the Chapter Two example of Woods as the

multiracial (yet somehow raceless) American son stands as a different framing than this notion

of exceptionalism, yet both are still rooted in a U.S. centric model rooted in anti-Blackness.

The U.S. has long used the "war on terror" to legitimize its efforts in the Middle East to

pathologize other marginalized groups who separate themselves from U.S. notions of power

and democracy (Puar, 2007). From Westward expansion and manifest destiny to Jim Crow to

the war on drugs to the war on terror, the U.S. has a dark history of murder, forced

capitulation, surveillance, and policy change, all in the name of progress. The earlier, and I

argue, white version of Dr. Manhattan is a chilling reminder of how U.S. imperialism operates,

and particularly how advances in technology are often troubling and outright damaging for many marginalized communities. Dinnerstein (2006) speaks to it in more depth:

> Technological progress has long structured Euro-American identity, and it functions as a prop for a muted form of social Darwinism—either "might makes right," or "survival of the fittest." Here is the techno-cultural matrix: progress, religion, whiteness, modernity, masculinity, the future. This matrix reproduces an assumed superiority over societies perceived as static, primitive, passive, Communist, terrorist, or fundamentalist (depending on the era).

The assumed superiority undergirded by technological progress is an avenue unexplored by Puar but remains tightly bound to the concept of American exceptionalism and is made evident by *Watchmen* and the storyline of Vietnam becoming the 51st U.S. state. Dinerstein's emphasis on technological progress being so intertwined with Euro-American identity is also connected to Wynter's (2003) exploration of Man, and the larger Black studies central question of what is defined as human, a key theme within science fiction as well. This question is also fundamental to the HBO series, as it provides us a treatise on the conditions of possibility for Blackness. The character arc of Dr. Manhattan forces us to reckon with what exactly human is, especially when his racial and human identity is blurred by technology and racial shapeshifting.

It is quite the jarring shift from the revamped Watchmen series to reposition Dr. Manhattan from that of an advanced U.S. war machine to a Black man, but also one who is intimately involved with a Black woman. Manhattan introduces himself to Angela in his blue god-like state, and as their relationship progresses, he realizes that he needs to take on a different physical form. Ultimately, it is Angela who decides what this form should take; she

brings him to a morgue and asks him to inhabit the body of a Black man, and he does so by

utilizing a technological device that gives him temporary amnesia in order to leave Dr.

Manhattan behind and become Calvin (Figure 3.1)

Figure 3.1 – Dr. Manhattan in his human state as Cal

As we attend to the character of Dr. Manhattan, it is worth paying attention to the

blueness that he inhabits in his powerful god-like form. The blueness of Dr. Manhattan's skin,

also present in the original comic series, is a marker of technological progress. The theme of

blueness and technology can be traced through other representations on screen as well as

cultural understandings of tech. Shedroff and Noessel (2012) point to the color blue as a marker

of technological progress and futurity. Dr. Manhattan's character, particularly when he is in his

god-like state and his continued transformations are key to thinking about the evolution of

technology, race, and power. In many ways, Manhattan is a boundary object for technological

desires. Blueness is an avatar of technology – Dr. Manhattan turns from white to blue to Black

and then back to blue (with traces of Black?). The shift in color here is similar to the popular

and successful Avatar franchise, where a white soldier undergoes surgery (with a touch of mysticism) to transform into a non-earthly, more advanced alien body, one that is faster and stronger but also blue. Critics have leveled strong critiques of the films, speaking to white savior tropes and Native appropriation (Adamson 2012, Cettl 2019). These critiques rightly assess how a white man becomes a blue alien to take them into battle against U.S. colonial military powers, acquiring the highest position of leadership in the alien hierarchy.

One could occupy a more paranoid (Sedgewick 1997) reading of Dr. Manhattan and *Watchmen*, one that relies on a mode of interpretation that is "predisposed towards suspicion…relying on unmasking fraud and finding out betrayal as the means of proving itself right." This lens would see Dr. Manhattan's character as similar to *Avatar's* main character; the most powerful Black man in the universe had to originally be white and then blue as the result of a science experiment gone wrong. Essentially, one could claim that Manhattan is, in fact, not Black at all; he is just a powerful god-like being masquerading or hiding in a Black body until it is time to return to his natural form. There is a scene in episode 8 where Dr. Manhattan, now in his new body, reconnects with an old acquaintance, Adrian Veidt (also known as Ozymandias, a former masked vigilante who partnered with Manhattan decades prior) who looks at him and says, "This is an interesting form. Don't you know this kind of appropriation is considered problematic now?" The comment further enhances the notion that Manhattan's race/shapeshifting is no more than a shallow hull, a mere plastic shell of Blackness rooted in fraud.

But this kind of reading precludes the possibilities of examining the shifting nature of race, how it is a constant negotiation, one that fluxes between stable and unstable depending

on the sociopolitical moment. This chapter provides a different conception of Blackness than the others in this dissertation – Blackness is always historical, but whereas other chapters attend to the ephemeral shifting nature of Blackness, *Watchmen* grounds us in the body, even as something as material as a body can be shown to be very much a Black canvas that can be altered. Manhattan provides an enigma when it comes to understanding his racial identity. Is he still white? Black? Blue? Mixed-race? In many ways, Manhattan is all these things, depending on the time and place.

The show reveals a good deal of information about Dr. Manhattan pre-accident; we know him as Jon Osterman, a white nuclear physicist with German parents who came to the U.S. in the mid-20th century. But as we trace the evolution of Manhattan in all his "different colors", his racial identity is muddied, leaving the audience to piece together the different identity narratives we have been given over 60 years within the show. The notion of Manhattan as mixed-race or bi-racial is a useful framework, not because of his parentage or shape-shifting, but because of the terms mixed-race/bi-racial. Earlier chapters in this dissertation explored the sometimes-illogical nature of how we conceive the term "mixed race" U.S. racial formation. Joseph (2010) speaks to what underscores these terms – a presumed stability of race, one that is logical and almost mathematical in nature; when two things are mixed, they produce a consistent and established form. But a closer examination of these terms and the contradiction within them is beneficial to examining the racial identity of Manhattan, showing the premise of race as unstable and constantly shifting.

Another crucial component and critique within mixed-race studies that Chapter Two examined is the notion of exceptionalism, and Joseph's (2010) analysis poignant once more as

she pays close attention to the messianic characteristics of the exceptional multiracial and how crucial it is to understanding that promise that is seen in the mixed-race body that points to something otherworldly that transcends Blackness, but also race itself. In earlier renditions of Dr. Manhattan, as seen in the original comic series and the movie adaptation, it is a fair assessment to speak of him as transcending race. He is raceless and in fact, not considered human. Even in the newest HBO series, Veidt poses the question to Manhattan, "Why are you posing as a human?" The color of his skin (blue) and the power he possesses disidentify him with humanity and place him in a category of his own. In the original graphic novel, Dr. Manhattan is Jon Osterman, a white nuclear physicist who was caught in a radioactive particle test that imbued him with god-like powers while also turning him blue. His character transcends humanity, and though he is powerful, this same power disconnects him from aspects of his humanity.

But the 2019 HBO series brings race back to Manhattan, compelling audiences to reinterpret the character in relation to Blackness. Even when Cal loses his human form due to the removal of the amnesia device (created by Ozymandias) that was placed in his forehead through Angela – she looks at him immediately after and says, "You still look like Cal." It's noteworthy that when we see Dr. Manhattan post-Black body, he is in fact, still marked by Blackness in a tangible way (Figure 3.3). Even as he walks around in his blue state, I contend that Angela still perceives him as Black, and this is quite the repositioning of Dr. Manhattan and his relationship to race and technology.

Figure 3.2 – Dr. Manhattan in his blue god-like state

Raced Understandings of Tech in Contrast to Black Speculative Futures

Throughout the series, we are confronted with raced understandings of technology in contrast to Angela and the Black Dr. Manhattan. Veidt, also known as the World's Smartest Man, is responsible for dropping a genetically engineered squid on New York in 1985 in order to end the Cold War. In this process, millions of people are killed, but he is convinced of his plan's success in that warring countries turn their attention to an existential threat rather than to each other. Veidt maintains this charade, creating technology that drops the remnants of squid periodically on different parts of the U.S. To reflect on this character and how technology is intertwined with him and his actions is to reflect on how technological progress can be a primarily white enterprise (Dinerstein 2006). Innovation and progress are the only things that matter in these endeavors, regardless of who or what must be sacrificed. We see this ideology

through Ozymandias and in the original source material, as well as the HBO remake in Senator Joe Keene.

In the Watchmen universe, Keene is the up-and-coming political figure who has high hopes of achieving the presidency. In the early episodes of the show, we know him as the impetus behind the law passed in Tulsa that requires police officers to keep their identity a secret and wear masks to protect themselves and their loved ones because of an event called the "white night" – where members of the Seventh Kalvary murdered dozens of police officers in a planned tactical attack. We later learn that that it was, in fact, Keene who was behind the attack, using both sides to his advantage in order to enact his plan that should end with the capture of Dr. Manhattan and the transfer of his power to himself. In the show we hear the chilling words from Keene, "It was getting pretty hard to be a white man in America, so I figured I'd go ahead and be a blue one." In that same speech, he speaks to the supposed attack on Whiteness in America, particularly white masculinity and has high hopes of utilizing the power of Dr. Manhattan to restore balance. The language here is eerily similar to the language of Reaganism in the 80s that Chapter One expounded on in relation to contextualizing *The Cosby Show* a repositioning of whiteness as that of victimhood, enhancing fears of immigrant and minority groups terrorizing and threatening the status quo (Gray 2004).

It is within this system of white dominance that Keene operates, pushing it further by also representing a form of white technological progress, one that this dissertation has argued sees innovation and progress as inevitable but also as something that demands whiteness be the cornerstone and highest point of the racial hierarchy (Kim, 2000), actualized at the expense of Black life. His ominous plan to take Dr. Manhattan's power relies on the elevation (or some

would say restoration) of whiteness to its proper place at the top of the racial hierarchy. It hinges on an understanding of what the U.S. has been, and specifically who the quintessential U.S. citizen has been, an idea that comprehends American as having an implicit racial modifier – white (Killian and Greg 1964). It is this kind of ideology that is called out and materialized in the series, providing a marked and named experience of whiteness.

A crucial part of *Watchmen's* storyline is technological absolutism, or at least, the belief in it from certain characters. Lady Trieu is the prime example of this, and there is a direct connection between what she is attempting to do and the realm of technological progress where we see attempts to manage Blackness, shape it, and use it in ways that are profitable and garner revenue. What drives Lady Trieu (and many of these companies) in their push for technological evolution are innovation and invention, and all is sacrificed at this altar. Blackness has been utilized and co-opted as cultural capital in the service of progress, even as it has been demonized and ostracized in the same breath. One does not have to look far to see the influence of Black culture globally, and the metaphor of its power being extracted and harnessed by force is still relevant. In the world of the revisionist series, particularly to Lady Trieu and Senator Keene, it may be inconsequential to them as to the racial identity of Dr. Manhattan's human form. Power is power. It is raceless, genderless, and sexless. But the choice to produce Jon as a Black man throughout the series cannot be lost on the viewer, and power is most certainly marked by race, gender, and sex. Dr. Manhattan's Blackness provides us an entry point into examining the centrality of race as the centerpiece of a hierarchical system that produces difference (Hall).

In the finale of *Watchmen* (2019), we are confronted by an intricate web of plans laid bare by the major players in the series – Senator Joe Keene, Lady Trieu, Jon (Dr. Manhattan), and Angela Abar (Sister Knight). At the forefront of all these moving parts is the construction of Lady Trieu's quantum centrifuge machine, a device designed to extract Dr. Manhattan's power and transmit it securely to Lady Trieu. She has grand plans to use this power to eradicate world hunger, create sustainable energy resources, and usher humanity into an era of actual world peace. When *Watchmen* aired in 2019, the plot line of the eccentric philanthropist and tech mogul seeking to solve all the world's problems seemed almost a bit too on the nose, and yet, as we reflect on this series in 2022, the plot line is just as, if not even more relevant.

Musk, Gates, Zuckerberg, Bezos, and the list can extend even further when we think about the billionaire class of tech CEOs with grand ideas of saving the world from itself. One of the interesting aspects of the way *Watchmen* approaches the idea of technology is how, in the finale, it is Dr. Manhattan's power that everyone is seeking: a Black but not Black (?) man. Dr. Manhattan's character offers us an interesting conundrum when it comes to his racial identity – a white man turned blue and all-powerful by freak accident, who then becomes Black but blue once more as his life ends. Although Jon is not from Black parentage, we are presented with a Black materiality, one that holds immense power and potential beneath the bodily surface. What happens when we frame Lady Trieu and Senator Keene's attempts to harness this power as not only an effort to command the energy of the most powerful being in existence, but as a choice to harness power embedded within a Black man?

It is a power that is sought after by various agents – Ozymandias seeks to destroy it, white supremacists seek to harness it to put themselves back on top due to a harmful and

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twisted understanding of whiteness as losing its power, and Lady Trieu looks to capture it to supposedly solve the world issues of hunger, death, war, famine, etc. In the end, all these actors fall short in their attempts to harness this power. Instead, the power of Dr. Manhattan is taken (or given) to Angela Abar. The final moments of the finale show her eating a raw egg, with its contents holding the atomic components of Manhattan, as he previously explained 10 years earlier, the first time they met in a bar. In that first conversation, Angela jokingly asks him if he can walk on water, and in the final scene of the last episode, we see her foot hovering over the water of the swimming pool in her backyard. As her foot gets closer and closer to the water, the anticipation thickens, and right as it touches the water, the screen goes dark, and *Watchmen* is no more. The most powerful being in the world is a Black woman.

Conclusion

In 2020, Regina King accepted the Emmy for Outstanding Lead Actress in a Limited Drama Series or Movie for her role as Angela Abar in *Watchmen*. Her speech was heartfelt and full of gratitude, and among many things, she also encouraged people to vote and actualize their power in the upcoming election. But what I found most compelling about her speech was her decision to wear a shirt with Breonna Taylor's face on it, the twenty-six-year-old Black woman who was murdered in her home by three police officers in Kentucky. The shirt is a brutal reminder of police brutality and corruption within the criminal justice system, but it also stands in sharp contrast to the role she just won the Emmy for – a Black policewoman uncovering a white supremacist plot that stretched from the federal government down to the local police.

This chapter once again engages popular culture seriously, as having a key role in mediating racial politics (Carrington 2016). The web of televisual texts, technology, and Blackness provides rich vantage points by which we can assess and contemplate racial dynamics. Blackness achieves an assortment of meanings in culture, and there is always the complex dilemma of industry constraints and imaginative texts that seek to push and challenge the status quo. The genre of speculative fiction, and specifically Black speculative fiction, is ground for disruption, where texts have the ability to interrupt "linear notions of time…and offer a space for Black people to assert their agency, rewrite history, and envision new possibilities for themselves and their communities." My dissertation is always aware of the shifting nature of Blackness, the conditions of possibility of and competing claims on it, and Watchmen reveals the messiness of production and interpretation – what it means to push representations of Blackness to the forefront that stand in contrast to those before it. I hold on to Blackness as an identity and force that disrupts ideals around technological progress, and this chapter is a key popular culture text that brings this disruption to life and forces us to think about the collision of Blackness and the digital.

Watchmen is an instance where we are allowed the opportunity to grapple with the complexities that arise in the complicated matrix of gender, race, technology, and a world steeped in anti-Blackness. The show rarely provides the audience with clear and cut readings of its characters; it is comfortable in its ambivalence while also centering on Blackness and specific Black historical moments. Critics have spoken to the ambivalence and historical markings of Blackness in the series, and I build off these reflections by raising the importance of raced understandings of technology within the show, revealing how Blackness can haunt, persist,

exist in the past, present, and future, and still be expansive its capacity to showcase liberation and freedom beyond trauma.

Chapter 4

The Algorithm Knows I'm Black: From Users to Subjects

Introduction

In October of 2018, several Black Netflix users took to Twitter to air their grievances about images in movie thumbnails featuring Black actors with minor roles, even when the movie itself was a majority white cast. A large sentiment behind these complaints was a belief that Netflix was using "intrusive advertising tactics to mislead subscribers based on their ethnicity" (Shepherd, 2018). In response to these critiques, Netflix claimed that because users are not asked about their racial identity, it is impossible to personalize the individual Netflix experience using identity markers. Stacia Brown, a podcaster and writer for *The Washington Post*, was one of the first to post to Twitter about what she was seeing on her Netflix account (Figure 1). As the image shows, Brown's complaint was that *Like Father* features two Black actors from the film that did not have significant roles but were still placed in the thumbnail as a way to draw viewers in.

Figure 4.1. Screenshot of original tweet from Stacia Brown.

The response from Netflix sets up the algorithm as a separate entity, distinct from human subjectivity, but despite this claim, the fact that Black users experienced being marketed to by Black actors in thumbnails reveals how race is still present within Netflix's recommendation algorithm, even though the company positioned the algorithm as neutral (Martin, 2019).

At first glance, it may seem forward-thinking that race is not represented or quantified in the data that Netflix uses to make recommendations to its users – titles to watch, niche categories, thumbnail images, etc. Race, in this instance, is not defined rigidly, or in fact, the case could be made that it is not defined at all. In systems of the past, there was a variable called race, and Netflix avoids this kind of classification, proudly claiming the creation of new consumer categories that are "post-demographic" (Gaw, 2021), but what they are doing is clustering people together by actions. And if there are Black users doing similar things on the platform, then Blackness will still appear as an output in some capacity. Despite Netflix's claims,

and even their concerted effort to remove race as a variable within their system, Blackness (and

racial identity more broadly) emerges through the system. The lack of specificity and attention

to race as a variable within the Netflix platform ends up reproducing some of the older notions

of identity that they are trying to avoid by not including it as an identity marker. Bucher (2018)

speaks to how algorithms "ascribe meaningfulness and value through the ways they grant

visibility and render relevance," but in the case of the Netflix thumbnail algorithm, what kind of

Blackness are they making visible?

There have been number of moments in recent years that reveal how race is

misrepresented and flattened by digital technologies. In 2020, a pixelated image of President

Obama unsampled to the image of a white man, being generated by an artificial intelligence

tool called Face Depixelizer (Truong, 2020). The photo spread on Twitter, and users were quick

to call out the problem of bias in artificial intelligence and machine learning. An even earlier

example of technology sidestepping the variable of race can be found in how Facebook

implemented an "Ethnic Affinity" category as a part of their ad-targeting tool. Even though this

category was included in the demographics category, Facebook executives stated that this was

different from a racial category because the company doesn't ask its users about their racial

identity (Angwin and Parris Jr., 2016). However, in 2016, it was discovered that advertisers

could exclude Black and Hispanic ethnic affinity groups from seeing their ads, and the attempt

to not categorize race in more traditional ways resulted in the negative outputs that were

(supposedly) being avoided. In all these examples, race is an emergent entity as opposed to a

category that is well defined, and yet, community detection of race still occurs. Machine

learning accomplishes identity categorization differently than systems of the past; with older

methods, there was no database available to categorize user behavior, but as contemporary

digital technologies emphasize capturing the patterns emerging from data, the same older,

more rigid notions of racial identity are being reproduced.

If race is a social construct (Omi and Winant, 2014), consistently being negotiated

according to social and political needs, then what sense can we make of how algorithms

construct our racial identities for us? What needs are met, and what rights are violated when

our racial identities are constructed by recommendation systems seeking to keep us coming

back? At the heart of this situation are the complexities that arise when examining the matrix of

race, technology, popular culture, and user practices (Seaver, 2013), and it is within this matrix

that we can keep exploring the competing claims on Blackness.

This chapter explores the interplay between algorithmic cultures and representations of

race, examining the identity and voices of users and how their agency is affected within

algorithmic systems. The Netflix situation explores the conditions of possibility for Blackness in

spaces where users and algorithms are reforming in relation to one another. Scholars such as

Noble (2018) and Benjamin (2020) focus on an imminent threat found within algorithms and

technological systems, calling attention to widespread structural issues of racism and

discrimination that are still embedded within these systems. Alongside this important research,

scholars such as Gillespie (2010) and Seaver (2018) have spoken to issues of platformization,

focusing on the artifact itself and how these systems are managed, implemented, and

positioned for users. All this work has shown shifts in how racial identity and media

communication are understood, and at the same time, it is possible that questions of identity

can be rendered invisible or rendered outside of the user. Users are seeking agentic traction in

these algorithmic spaces, and this work addresses how Black users are positioning themselves to make sense of the digital constraints placed on them.

I focus exclusively on Black users within a U.S. context, and it must be stated scholars have long called for decentering the West as the primary site of research. There is important and critical work being done outside Western contexts; scholars such as Koskina, et al. (2019) and Punathambekar and Mohan (2019) point to the rise of digital and mobile technologies in in the Global South, examining how notions of representation, platforms, identity, and power are shifting in this new digital landscape. And although this chapter centers on U.S. Netflix Black users, this case study speaks to the larger phenomenon of users and agency, as well as complicating and interrogating the stability of national borders and spaces of interaction in digital environments. Fundamentally, issues of man and machine are being examined here, and this is a provisional study of an important phenomenon –the tenuous back and forth between algorithmically curated content and the user. This case study interrogates the intersections of race, algorithms, and culture, exploring how the Netflix thumbnail algorithm presented representations of Blackness that felt coercive and manipulative to Black users, and asks two key questions:

1. What kind of Blackness does the Netflix thumbnail algorithm present to users, and how do users understand the ways that Netflix uses/does not use race?

2. What does the Netflix situation reveal about the categorization and representation of Blackness within digital platforms seeking user engagement?

Algorithmic understandings of people have serious implications for how various facets of our identities are configured (Cheney-Lippold, 2017). Race is still a variable and significant

factor in Netflix's thumbnail algorithm, despite claims from the company that state otherwise. This chapter will also give an inside look into Netflix's algorithm for recommending visual material to its subscribers. Finally, I examine how users responded to algorithmically curated content. I employ a Cultural-Industrial analysis and Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis (CTDA) to examine representations of Blackness in digital spaces. Black subscribers of Netflix heavily critiqued the algorithms used to advertise content to them, and I use these methods to examine how Netflix constructs Black users as Black subjects in order to keep them engaged with the platform. This final chapter takes to task the notion of one of the many ways that Blackness can be constructed algorithmically, displaying the slippage and turbulence that exists when Black users encounter renditions of Blackness in the digital. As this dissertation has maintained, the Black Digital Popular is a space of negotiation and contestation, and the Netflix situation elaborates further on these concepts by focusing our attention on a specific thumbnail algorithm and how Black users grapple with an identity marketed towards them.

Algorithms and Who We Are

In order to capture attention and make decisions for people, algorithmic systems must take in significant amounts of data to build algorithmic versions of users and ultimately decide what is best suited to different individuals (Kyung Lee, 2018). Vaidhyanathan (2018) speaks to the role that companies like Google and Facebook play in managing and filtering information for users, pointing out that the rise of the information economy has necessitated the growth of industries devoted to capturing our attention. These larger tech companies are constantly determining for users what to prioritize and are in fact shaping what people seek after or look for to entertain themselves. Vaidhyanathan (2018) references the "unrelenting drive" that

companies have to surveil and tag complex consumers in order to demand their attention, which he ultimately sees as distracting, exhausting, and dehumanizing – treating us "each as a means to a sale rather than as ends in ourselves." Though Vaidhyanathan is considerably pessimistic about the relationship between people and companies' attempts to shape habits and time spent engaging with different platforms, his point of how we are transitioning to an information economy is relevant when thinking about how algorithmic systems affect user behavior. A platform like Netflix and its machine learning algorithm that recommends titles to users is an attempt to decide what is valuable and interesting for people.

Gillespie (2016) describes the algorithm as a trick- "the term refers specifically to the logical series of steps for organizing and acting on a body of data to quickly achieve a desired outcome...most of the 'values' that concern us lie elsewhere in the technical systems and the work that produces them". What is interesting about this definition is the fact that algorithm designers aren't interested in finding a correct answer or a single and certifiable answer but rather a threshold of operator or user satisfaction. These algorithms "are trained on a corpus of existing data" (Gillespie, 2016). How this data is selected and prepared could be of more importance to the sociological concerns that people have about algorithms (Pasquale, 2016), but there are even more implications to consider when we ourselves are part of the data and being understood as such.

Cheney-Lippold (2017) speaks to this notion of being understood as data and algorithmic persons:

"Through various modes of algorithmic processing, our data is assigned categorical meaning without our direct participation, knowledge, or often aquiescence. Our social

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identities, when algorithmically understood…when employed in marketing, political

campaigns, and even NASA data analytics, their discursive contents realign our present

and futures online."

This kind of categorical meaning without the direct participation of users is an invaluable

framework when thinking about Netflix and its changing thumbnails as a result of user

interaction and choices. Without people making conscious or explicit decisions about how they

want to be seen or understood, Cheney-Lippold (2017) argues that our data is shaping our

identities through the online purchases we make, posts we like, sites we visit, etc. When these

things occur, "the different layers of who we are online, and what we who we are means, is

decided for us by advertisers, marketers, and governments" (Cheney-Lippold, 2017). These

categorical identities are unconcerned with what makes people what they are, but they are

concerned with how to quantify people in terms of data and the choices they make online.

Once people are quantified in terms of data, it theoretically becomes easier to adapt and

personalize models toward individuals and predict what they want.

When thinking about predictive models and how they function, Gandy (2000) writes,

"the use of predictive models based on historical data is inherently conservative. Their use

tends to reproduce and reinforce assessments and decisions made in the past." To some

degree, it is a limiting approach because it tries to maintain what has already been done and

understood without giving space for change. Cheney-Lippold (2017) further elaborates on this

process, speaking to how algorithms process real-time data to produce identity categories that

are most efficacious for the systems they are a part of. Although Cheney-Lippold is not explicitly

talking about recommender systems, the principles here are still applicable, specifically when

considering what the most useful categorical identity is when streaming sites like Spotify and

Netflix are trying to cater to users on their platforms. As Rupert (2012) writes, "The subject is

made up of unique combinations of distributed transactional metrics that reveal who they are

and their capacities, problems and needs." People become subjects comprised of data for

platforms to engage them and retain their presence for as long as possible. But more broadly, it

also provides an entry point into thinking about how streaming platforms like Netflix are

attempting to curate particular versions of Blackness, as well as how the process of

digitalization has far-reaching effects on domains of social life, particularly popular culture and

internet-distributed television.

The Netflix situation is also a moment to consider the structures and technologies

behind the representations we see on screen. Gates (2018) calls for a refocusing of our

attention "away from just issues of representation and onto industrial practices and matters of

labor" and, in doing so, posits that there arise different possibilities for new questions that we

can begin to ask. Performance and representation are important, but attention should also be

placed on the industrial factors and digital technologies that govern performance, the kinds of

motivations that exist-economic, political, and audience-driven, but also the conditions of

possibility laid by algorithms and the digitalization of screen industries. I argue that the kind of

Blackness represented through Netflix is contingent on a shift in the ways that Blackness is

being understood in industrial logics, one that grounds its construction through algorithmic

curation and an attempt to be all things to all people. The construction of Blackness by Netflix

through thumbnails is a restructuring of an economy of a politics of representation that has an

investment in trapping users to profit off continued engagement**.**

Recommender Systems: What's the Goal?

The goal of any recommendation system is to keep users engaged for as long as possible but also to keep them coming back to use the platform. This process, depending on the platform, uses images, items, titles, advertisements, etc., to appeal to users' sensibilities. Seaver (2019) speaks to a "vernacular critique of algorithmic systems as traps…concerned with policing the boundary between freedom and coercion." Seaver addresses one of the fundamental tensions in examining the role of recommender systems in keeping users engaged – freedom to choose and compulsion. If these kinds of systems are programmed to discover what users are interested in and want and reproduce this effect, then the platform is functioning effectively, and users are getting exactly what they want from the product – a personalized feed that caters to individual needs. From a consumer standpoint, people want the best product possible; if they are paying for a service, whether it be streaming music or television, they want the platform to "know" what they want and give them the best return on my investment. But at the same time, there is a struggle between conceptualizing an algorithm as a system that is simply learning what people like and giving it back to them or as capturing attention in a way that is manipulative. Seaver (2019) puts it well: "...the tension between "satisfying users and capturing them is not easily resolved."

Recommendation systems and the companies who employ them are still in the business of giving customers what is necessary for them to keep returning, and the longer you are active on a specific platform, the easier this becomes. Seaver (2019) writes, "a retained user was, in a simple sense, bigger in the logs—they left more traces, which provided more data for recommendations." But there is a point at which a line is crossed, and recommendations enter

the realm of compulsion and unethically getting users to engage for extended amounts of time.

The Netflix recommendation system creators claim that the ways that they market to different

users are based solely on user interaction and nothing else (Figure 2)-there is no understanding

of race, gender, sexuality, class, etc., but algorithms are distinct mediums that have still

particular logics that can further entrench social hierarchies (Gaw, 2020; Seaver, 2013). The

complaints of Stacia Brown and other Black users on Twitter about the thumbnail algorithm

reveal how outdated and harmful notions or racial identity can be present even when the
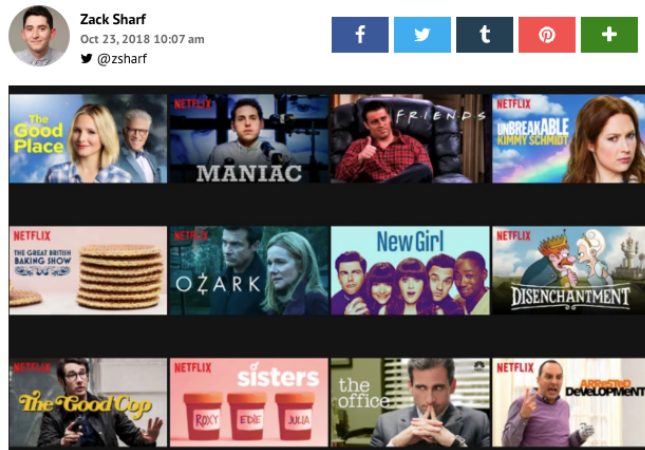
variable of race is absent.

Figure 4.2 Screenshot of IndieWire Article Title Page

The Netflix Recommendation Algorithm

Gomez-Uribe and Hunt (2016) published a paper on the Netflix recommender system in

the ACM Transactions on Management Information Systems journal to discuss the various

algorithms that make up the Netflix recommender system and describe its business purpose. The recommender system at Netflix is not one algorithm, but "rather a collection of algorithms serving different use cases that come together to create the complete Netflix experience." (Gomez-Uribe and Hunt, 2016). They go on to state that a big part of their system is put into place because humans struggle to choose between options, and if the user cannot choose something, there is a greater risk of the user abandoning the service completely. "The recommender problem is to make sure that on those two screens, each member in our diverse pool will find something compelling to view and will understand why it might be of interest." (Gomez-Uribe and Hunt, 2016). The switch from DVDs to streaming has revolutionized the algorithms used by Netflix to recommend options to their users, and there is a vast amount of data that is now available to adjust for different users. The company has access to how and what different users are watching, including "the device, time of day, day of week, and intensity of watching" (Gomez-Uribe and Hunt, 2016).

One of the main algorithms used by the Netflix recommendation system is the personalized video ranker (PVR) algorithm, which organizes the entire catalog of videos for each member profile in a personalized way, selecting the order of the videos in genre and other rows, and is the reason why the same genre row shown to different members often has completely different videos. Gomez-Uribe and Hunt (2016) go on to advocate for the use of recommender systems because they can democratize access to long-tail products, services, and information, but from a machine-learning perspective, they claim that machines have a much better ability to learn from large amounts of data and can in turn make beneficial predictions in areas where human capacity is not adequate.

The authors also focus on how improving engagement is strongly correlated with improving retention. In line with this thinking, they designed "randomized, controlled experiments, often called A/B tests, to compare the medium-term engagement with Netflix along with member cancellation rates across algorithm variants (Gomez-Uribe and Hunt, 2016). This journal article provides a look into the "Black box" (Pasquale, 2016) that is the Netflix recommendation algorithm, and although it is not completely comprehensive, it does provide insight into what Netflix privileges as most important within their platform. Unsurprisingly, Netflix is most committed to keeping users engaged with the platform for as long as possible, and they take into consideration several factors – what users see when they first sign in, how rows of titles are organized, and personalized feeds. Seaver (2019) writes of it this way: "Where the goal of recommendation had once been to accurately represent the future, it was now to keep users streaming, retaining them as paying subscribers." With this in mind, we turn our attention to the instance of users complaining about Netflix using race as a ploy to get Black users to watch movies that they would not otherwise watch.

User Responses to Algorithmically Curated Content

As reported by Iqbal (2018), Netflix implemented a new algorithm in December 2017 that started to show personalized images to all its subscribers. Iqbal (2018) writes, "Artwork personalization became a priority after the company's own research proved that it was the biggest influencing factor on a viewer deciding what to watch, constituting 82% of their focus." Alongside all the other factors that go into the multiple Netflix recommendation algorithms, imagery was now a component that factored into keeping users on the platform longer as well as helping them to choose titles to watch more effectively. But as users like Stacia Brown began

to complain about the company targeting viewers by race to get them to watch certain

programs, the idea of Netflix personalizing images took a much more insidious turn. To some

Black users, the misrepresentation of Netflix's actual offer felt disingenuous. Iqbal (2018)

interviewed Tobi Aremu, a filmmaker from Brooklyn, who responded as follows:

> "It's beyond feeling duped," he said. "Because if something is Black, I take no offense in
>
> being catered to. I am Black, give me Black entertainment, give me more – but don't
>
> take something that isn't and try to present it like it is. I wonder what the makers of
>
> those shows and films think. If it was me, I would be very upset."

Aremu's comments reveal the uneasiness that certain users feel when seeing images used to

advertise movies and television shows that aren't filled with Black cast members who have

significant roles. But at the same time, his comments raise questions about how the Netflix

algorithm is accounting for race. Netflix is taking in data, how people present themselves

through choices online, and responding accordingly. The recommendation algorithm for Netflix

has seemingly concluded that Black users can be best marketed to if there are images of Black

actors and actresses in thumbnails of different movies and television shows. Netflix constructs

users in its own image, interpellating Black users as Black subjects, and when categorical

definitions like racial identity are reconfigured through an algorithmic channel, there is a clear

miscommunication between what users want and how they are perceived.

Stacia Brown and her response to this situation on Twitter are indicative of the usability

of the Black Digital Popular, examining large-scale relationships that exist between media

industries, technology, popular culture representations, and Blackness – all centering on what

Blackness is, who gets to define it, it and according to what standards. Chapter Two highlighted

the space of YouTube comment sections where meaning-making and community discussions take place, and similarly, Twitter is a ripe space for analysis, particularly as we begin to examine how technology use for Black people is rooted in survival, joy, and resistance (Brock, 2020). Within the platform of Twitter, specifically Stacia Brown's thread discussing the thumbnail situation, we see Black users' responses to algorithmically curated content, and more specifically, how these responses echo, on a much larger scale, the complicated relationship that Black users have to technology.

Gates (2020) speaks to what makes popular culture texts Black, calling attention to the labor that Black audiences put forth into claiming something as their own. These texts become Black, not through quantitative calculation of Black faces, workers, directors, actors, etc., but through how Black communities make them their own. We see that much of this process is about how Black audiences and users take up representations and, in some shape or form, exert a kind of labor to reproduce something that *becomes* Black. At the same time, these waters become murky as industries and algorithms attempt to capture and recreate these renditions of Blackness, in many ways producing something that is an imitation of Blackness. This imitation is something that users on Twitter were quick to call out, sparked and sustained by Stacia Brown's original tweet.

There were several Black folks in her Twitter thread that joined in and posted screenshots from their own Netflix accounts as well as give anecdotal evidence to verify the claims that Ms. Brown was making:

Blerds just wanna have fun @SGBrownAuthor · Oct 18, 2018   ...

Replying to @slb79

Yes! I saw a promo for The Good Cop and all it showed me was scenes with Isiah Whitlock Jr. in them. I loved it, so I actually searched for more info on the show. When I saw the other promos for the show, I was disappointed. It felt like I'd been tricked.

Silkk the Chaka Khan @BoyandPiano · Oct 18, 2018   ...

Replying to @slb79

Love Actually feels egregious to me 'cause I honestly don't even remember there being a black guy in it.

Figure 4.3 Screenshot of Tweet Responses to Stacia Brown

Both tweets echo the sentiment behind Aremu's earlier comments, a dominant feeling of betrayal and feeling coerced into watching content that only appears to be suited to Black consumers on the surface.

The artwork personalization algorithm can be understood as making Blackness into an identifiable marker that would clearly signify something to ensure users are tuned into it. The logic behind may not be explicitly coercive, as in coders programmed this algorithm with explicit racist intentions, but it is still damaging. In this context, the algorithm wasn't incorrect; it shifted its goalposts in terms of what Blackness could be. Blackness, as understood by users, was the presence of a Black actor/actress in a thumbnail image that signified "Black content." Black content can be determined in several ways, but a common, if not improper, mode of measurement would be the simple presence of Black faces-directing and acting. And if that were a sufficient definition, then the Netflix algorithm would in fact be marketing Black content to Black users.

However, this is not the case; for the most part, any of these movies or shows would not be classified as Black. What we begin to see in this context is how Blackness operates as a trick

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or a means to trap users and how Blackness is turned into a very definable characteristic – a visible phenotypic object, Black faces. There is the illusion of Blackness, while at the same time, and contradictorily so, Blackness is physically present. The Netflix thumbnail algorithm is not explicitly racist, but it is still responsible for making visual aid decisions that represent Black actors/actresses as features in films in which they did not have significant roles. Warner's (2017) notion of plastic representation is relevant here, a phrase that she defines as "a combination of synthetic elements put together and shaped to look like meaningful imagery, but which can only approximate depth and substance because ultimately it is hollow and cannot survive close scrutiny." As she describes the hollowness of plastic representation, the Netflix thumbnail situation comes to mind easily. When users clicked on films and shows that had Black faces center stage, they quickly realized from the content itself that they had been sold a false bill of goods. From the images of these thumbnails alone, there is indeed a "superficial visual diversity" – one that approximates Blackness. In a much broader sense, the Netflix situation is representative of how Blackness is a valuable commodity that can bring attention, users, and profit when assembled in particular ways. The value that Blackness brings as a commodity to drive profit in the sphere of television and popular culture is no new phenomenon; Chapter One's exploration of Netflix's Strong Black Lead and increases in Black content on HBO through both original programming and adaptations of existing works speaks to this significance. Nevertheless, despite these advancements, there persist certain contradictions that lead to socio-cultural and economic inequities.

In a very real sense, Blackness has historically been constructed as or claimed to be other, less than, dangerous, subhuman (Chito-Childs 32), and yet at the same time and in the

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same breath, is the heart of American culture and a product that continues to sell even as the profits do not return to the creators. The significance of this contradiction is not just the injustice of it all, but the conditions of possibility that exist for these very real exemplifications to come to the surface. In the realm of algorithmic design for Netflix, Blackness can occupy a liminal space, one that extends the boundaries of Blackness or shifts the possibilities of Blackness into something that, when made explicit to users, is then not perceived as actually Black.

If users on Netflix are constructed and understood by their choices made on the application – how much time they spend searching for titles, how long they watch a particular episode of something, which actors and actresses they search for, etc., then these actions could be considered signs given off. From these signs, the thumbnail algorithm, as it is programmed to do, makes assumptions about individuals to cater to them specifically and, in turn, keep them engaged on the app in both the present and the future. Seaver's work on recommender systems, particularly the notion of these systems as a trap intended to hook users into returning, is once again salient. In this example, Netflix is influencing future action in the sense that they want to appeal to your preferences so that you are constantly consuming their product, both now and in the future.

When users engage with the Netflix platform, perhaps out of sheer curiosity, boredom, or any other host of reasons, the algorithm will assume different intentions, that the action was performed for reasons other than the information conveyed in this way. Users may consciously or unconsciously create certain impressions, and Goffman's work from *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* is another useful framing as he writes that "others, in their turn, may be

suitably impressed by the individual's efforts to convey something, or may misunderstand the

situation and come to conclusions that are warranted neither by the individual's intent nor by

the facts" (1959). The thumbnail algorithm for Netflix has interpellated Black users as Black

subjects, seemingly concluding that Black users can be best marketed to if there are images of

Black actors and actresses in thumbnails of different movies and television shows.

Netflix looks at the signs given off to determine what users who like Black film and

television would enjoy, but it also overestimates the affinity of Black people to watch titles with

Black characters in them. Although there is no corporeal signifier or direct sign present for race,

there is a clear connection between people's choices to watch "Black" media and what the

algorithm believes these kinds of people to want. Cheney-Lippold (2017) speaks to how often

one's online and offline identities align and misalign- "Our individualities as users may be quite

insignificant. Rather, what our individualities can be algorithmically made say is how we are

now seen" – a poignant idea to raise when thinking about how Black Netflix users view

themselves as opposed to how the recommender system views them.

To return to Gomez-Uribe and Hunt (2016), "everything is a recommendation," and

personalization on the Netflix platform extends beyond ratings prediction to influence

everything displayed to a user, "from the items on a landing page to the categories those items

appear in, and even the art used to represent them." The recommender systems consist of

multiple algorithms, as stated previously, most of which come together on the homepage when

a user first logs in. This is a key factor when defining the Netflix experience, and "it is the main

presentation of recommendations, where 2 of every 3 hours streamed on Netflix are

discovered" (Gomez-Uribe and Hunt, 2016). There is a clear premium placed on what users see

and interact with as soon as they open the streaming platform, and Netflix was strategic in personalizing every aspect of user interaction. However, as the process of personalization was used to recommend content to users, there was a clear disconnect between what subscribers wanted from the application and what they were getting as a result of algorithmic processes that flattened Blackness into the mere appearance of Black actors and actresses.

Algorithmic Accountability and Black Twitter

Brock (2012) speaks of Black Twitter as a "social public" that is highly functional due to Twitter's combination of brevity, multi-platform access, and feedback mechanisms. He reframes Black Twitter as a ritual drama and then "highlights the structure, engagement, invention, and performances of these Twitter users employing cultural touch points of humor, spectacle, or crisis, to construct a discursive racial identity" (Brock, 2012) The emergence of Black Twitter has become a space where Black people have found a voice and a medium by which they can speak to and against dominant power structures. Lavan (2015) speaks of Black Twitter as initially referring to the large numbers of African Americans using the site, but as the momentum gathered, it evolved into "a news base, think tank and digital archive…a site of counter-narratives and counter-memory, assembling supplementary information that challenges the dominant narrative propagated in traditional media." Black Twitter has become a means of accountability in this digital age, enabling people to speak out against social injustice.

Although Lavan focuses predominantly on police brutality and state-sanctioned violence, the principle of Twitter operating as a space to speak out against racism and injustice is still salient. When Black Netflix users took to Twitter to voice their concerns about being

marketed to because of their racial identity, they were holding Netflix accountable. There was

wrongdoing, and regardless of who was at fault, Netflix was forced to talk to numerous news

outlets-Wired, The New York Times, The Guardian, Jezebel, and others-and answer for what

was happening on their platform. It is true that Netflix was not purposefully identifying users as

Black to get them to spend more time interacting with the interface, but users on Twitter

started, in their own way, the process of algorithmic accountability (Figure 2). Thus, at this

moment, Twitter galvanized news outlets to confront Netflix about an issue that was and still is

a manipulative way to market products to Black users of Netflix. Tweeting about race being

included in recommendation system algorithms is not the endpoint of algorithmic

accountability, but it is a start and a way to combat the notion that Blackness can be

essentialized, flattened, and turned into a variable as an unethical marketing ploy.

Conclusion

There are always stakes involved in representation – who is being represented, how

they are being represented, and who is doing the representing. In many instances,

representation is used as a quick fix to avoid more wide-scale changes in casting and structural

power within media industries (Benjamin 2019). There have been sharp increases of Black

representation in television the past few years – Shonda Rhimes and her ABC (and now Netflix)

list of shows, the Kenya Barris *"ish"* empire, even the explosion of Black content on HBO

(Watchmen, Lovecraft Country, This May Destroy You, Insecure, A Black Lady Sketch Show,

etc.). And yet, the Netflix situation still speaks to something different that is occurring;

Blackness is more visible than it is. This moment causes us to reflect on not just the ways that

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Blackness is being re/presented in quantitative terms, i.e., the number of and frequency of

images, but to interrogate *how* Blackness is being represented.

A key concept of Black Digital Popular is to challenge the lack of representation of

Blackness on its own terms, in its own space, and by its own people. The BDP gives room to

examine the tension that is readily apparent between the ways that Black users conceive of

themselves and how media industries seek to capture these renditions to create productions

that they think are in alignment. In media spaces, which are predominantly white on every

register-materially and ideologically (Brock, 2020); Blackness is subjected and represented in

ways that are often shallow, superficial, plastic, and palatable to white audiences. Alongside

these realities, the entrance of new digital technologies has pushed us to grapple with what it

means to be Black and algorithmically represented in white spaces. To be algorithmically

represented is a peculiar notion, one that relies on a series of attempts to capture identity

through the collection and assessment of user choices, both mundane and intentional. When

thinking of Netflix, for example, the description of how a library functions may be useful here.

The metric for a library, at its core, is about people checking out books; this is by far the easiest

way to measure success but also a way to profile those who come in and out of these

establishments. However, there are several activities occurring inside the library that are not

being tracked and taken into consideration – the amount of time people spend in the stacks,

titles they search for, light browsing, aisles they walk into, and even books they may pick up

before putting back down. But in the case of Netflix and other tech companies that employ

recommendation systems, if they were libraries, they would, in fact, have access to all those

details, and that information would be used to compile lists of books that would be deemed

attractive to the user. It returns us to questions of representation, coercion, manipulation, and how these systems construct us as users and create profiles of us by appealing to what we are most engaged by, or at least, what they assume us to be engaged by because of the decisions we make. We are constantly being classified and constructed by these systems, and Netflix, despite its push to become more inclusive and representative to all, is still rooted in white technological progress.

Although there is no corporeal signifier or direct sign present for race, there is a clear connection between people's choices to watch "Black" media and what the algorithm believes these kinds of people to want. There was no direct participation of users in terms of categorizing themselves to be presented with Black content, but categorization still occurs, and Blackness as an identity marker still emerges through the system. This kind of categorical meaning without direct or explicit action from users is an invaluable framework when thinking about Netflix, and it's changing thumbnails as a result of user interaction and choices.

In thinking about algorithms and other pieces of technology begin to shape culture, Hallinan and Striphas (2016) ask what happens when "…algorithms – become important arbiters of culture, much like art, film, and literary critics?" And though there is some truth to the cultural influence that algorithms hold, they are still produced and managed by the companies that employ them, who are methodically handling the images of algorithms we see and the information we receive about them (Sandvig 2014). Netflix is still the arbiter of race despite their claims that the thumbnail algorithm is neutral and purely reflective of user choices. The absence of a race variable appears progressive, but the lack of a variable does not equate to a lack of responsibility.

Media industries, among several things, are always in the business of establishing and "selling" a particular kind of identity category and form of representation to consumers to ensure profit. Television has always played a crucial role in how images and representations of difference are made "meaningful, legible, and familiar" (Gray, 2005). The rise of digital platforms like Netflix and implementations of new algorithmic media (Liang 2022) compresses Black identity into the mere presence of Black people rather than the nuanced representations of Blackness that Black users understand. These technologies can help shift and create different kinds of images (Burgess and Green, 2018), and when we consider how Blackness as an identity and representation has continuously evolved, more research into this area will be needed. The rise of streaming platforms and algorithmically curated content is one arena in which we get a glimpse into how computational processes are used to "sort, classify, and hierarchize people, places, objects, and ideas, and also the habits of thought, conduct, and expression that arise in relationship to those processes" (Hallinan and Striphas, 2016). The digitalization (Brennan and Kreiss, 2016) of screen industries has affected the circulation of Blackness, and in this contemporary moment, there is a ripe opportunity to once again examine how audience engagement feeds back into industry practices as well as observe how user practices around these productions come to constitute larger industrial formations. This chapter demonstrates how Blackness is flattened in algorithmically curated environments and how Black users speak back to that flattening, presenting a useful analysis of the intersection of algorithms, industries, and racial identity for future scholarship.

Epilogue

Changing Conditions, Endless Possibilities: AI, Technology, and the Future of Blackness

In June of this past year, a friend in the local Seattle arts scene invited me to an event called Scope Screenings – an underground film festival that happens every second Tuesday of the month featuring narrative short films, music videos, and a variety of high-quality short-form content. The event included a range of creators, a space filled with industry professionals, filmmakers, photographers, and musicians. Many of these creators were Black and people of color, and the art shown reflected these diverse perspectives throughout the night. Although I was impressed with many of the visuals I saw, there was one artist in particular who stuck out to me. He went by "Stable Chef" and his contribution to the festival was a solo-produced music video for the up-and-coming New York artist A$AP Twelvyy, most known as being part of the A$AP Mob, a rap collective featuring the likes of the world-renowned artist A$AP Rocky (better recognized these days as Rihanna's partner and father to their children). The song "Adventure Time," featuring Roc Marciano, was released in 2023, and the video premiered on April 25th. While watching the video in that small Seattle theater, what immediately caught my attention was the absence of any physical human presence. It was entirely animated, but the images seemed somehow different. The ways they merged in and out of each other, transforming into multicolored, almost hallucinogenic scenes and characters that reflected the lyrics from the artists, were visually arresting and kept me engaged in a manner that felt different from other moments of the night (Figure 5.1).

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Figure 5.1 – AI-Generated Bow Wow, YouTube 2023

After the video finished, the host for the event brought up the creator for a Q&A portion that gave him the opportunity to elaborate further on his creative process. To my surprise, he relayed to the audience that he used AI software to create the entire video. I found myself in an uncharacteristic position; as a researcher of digital technologies and race, my initial thoughts when hearing about AI and Blackness are instinctively negative. I am reminded of how artificial intelligence has produced racist and sexist outputs, discriminating against minority populations to cause harm (Schiebinger and Zou, 2018; Lawrence 2023). But in this moment, I was staring at a Black creative, creating visuals within a historically Black art form for a Black artist. As he began to explain further his experience with the software, he told us that there was no formal training for his work. There was no digital boot camp or course through a university – just him, a laptop, some friends to bounce ideas off, and a clear creative vision.

I am reminded of Brock's (2020) concept of "postpresent..the Black folk in digital spaces constantly engaged with the moment." Brock uses this term to "present how Black digital practice invests energies into *being*, a celebration of the now that incorporates past iniquities and future imaginings." There is much to be gained in thinking through the Adventure time example – an awareness of histories of the digital divide and racism, the ever-present harm that stems from minority engagements with technology, and even the promise of technology as liberatory or dominating. But I have a keen awareness of this moment as one of Black cultural production, first and foremost, rooted in a desire to create and draw on the long lineage of Black creativity and invention. Black artistic creation is the product of varying factors, a complimentary assortment of historical awareness, mythos, imagination, and legacy. Gilroy (1993) reminds us of the expressive creativity and subjectivity found in Black music, and Brock (2020) locates this same bent within the "performance and textuality of Black digital and social media practice." Though Brock pays close attention to the banal, everyday practice of Black folks in their digital engagements, his framework is invaluable here, pointing to the value of Black expressive culture.

The Scopes Screening moment was a powerful one for me because of the agentic traction I saw in the work and speech of this Black creative. It provided an opportunity to examine his digital practice on his own terms. It may be naïve of me to put this amount of weight on this situation; perhaps I am discounting industrial imperatives from label executives or managers to produce a product that reaches the outcomes and objectives necessary to keep the business alive. But if I am being honest, the interview on stage seemed removed from these

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constraints, less about how to make a product that audiences will consume on a mass scale and more about an artist who discovered a new way to create.

It is also tempting to fall into the trap of Black respectability here, to require that someone does "more" with their talents than create hip-hop music videos. Many on both sides of the political aisle, Black and white, fall into the trap that the politics of respectability promises, that through the right behavior and climbing of the social and economic ladder, the entire structural system of race relations can be reformed (Higginbotham 1994). Alongside the claims of respectability, there is also the notion of technological progress and modernity put forth by Dinerstein (2006) that many buy into. Speaking of the supposed imminent hope that technology will bring, he writes, "it is more accurate to say that technology is synonymous with faith in the future…" I draw these theoretical concepts together – respectability and technological progress – to explore the expectations for Black uses of technology further. Much of the discourse around AI has centered on white technological progress – rooted in matters like military advancement and automation in the workplace (Furman and Seamans, 2019; Bareis and Katzenbach, 2021). At its best (rooted in a sense of naivete), there are hopes for AI to solve global issues that have plagued society for centuries.

It may seem trivial to think about Stable Chef and his innovations in the world of AI. Wouldn't his time be better spent utilizing AI to facilitate a more equitable world? To somehow reduce harm against Black people? I don't raise these questions to mock them, nor do I discount the efforts made in these sectors to raise a voice for those who are the most marginalized. But once again I am fascinated by the conditions of possibility for Blackness in the sphere of AI and hip-hop. The images in the video spanned a range of cultural references – the

popular ESPN talk show First Take that at one point featured Skip Bayless and Stephen A. Smith

(Figure 5.2) John Coffey from *The Green Mile*, basketball players like Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and

Chris Childs (Figure 5.3) – all lining up with intricate lyrics and punchlines from the rappers. And

despite the kinds of images we saw, no matter the cultural reference to television shows or

movies, the finished product was undoubtedly...Black.

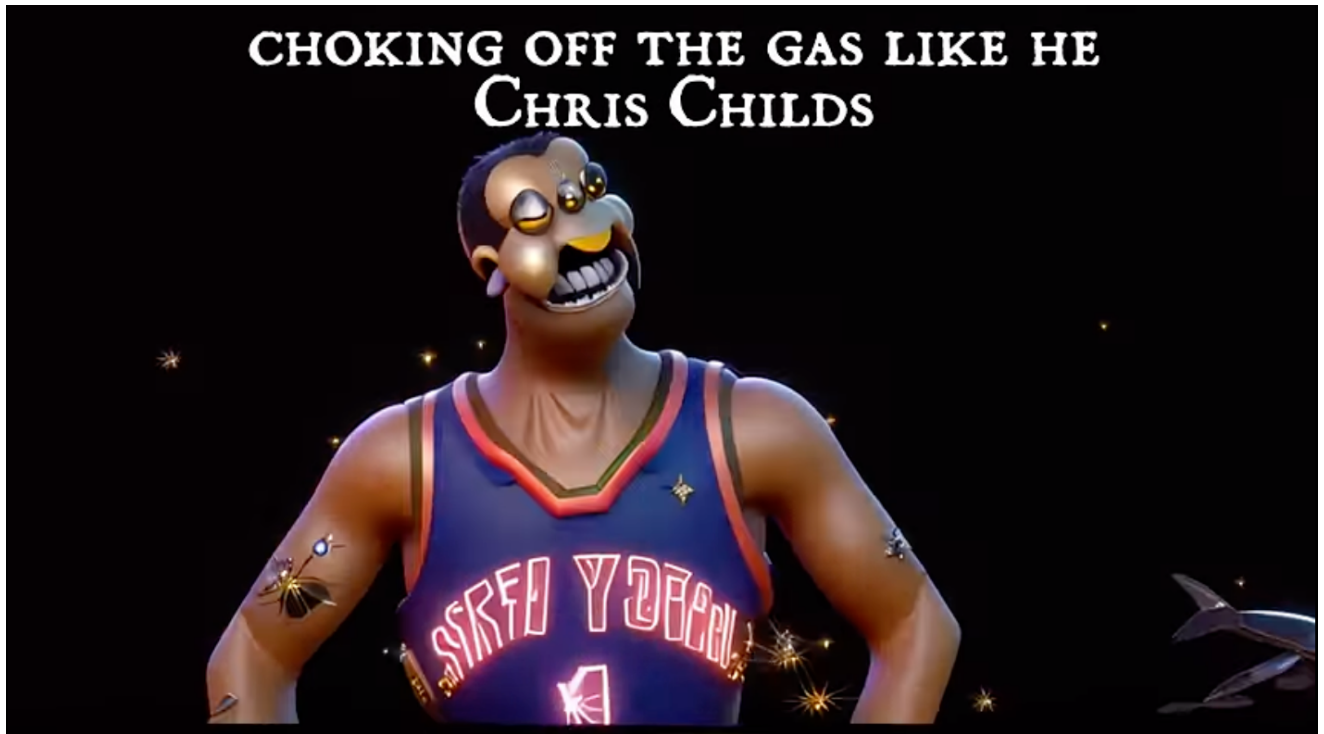Figure 5.2 – AI Generated Stephen A. Smith and Skip Bayless, YouTube 2023

Figure 5.3 – AI-Generated Chris Childs, YouTube 2023

This dissertation has explored two things: the conditions of possibility for and the competing claims on Blackness and undergirding it all has been the role of digital technologies and platforms. The Black Digital Popular is a space that holds a multitude of identities, tensions, efforts, and audiences, and each of my chapters has explored a different vantage point and complicating factor that reveals another key piece of what an expansive Blackness is in this contemporary moment. It has been argued that Blackness is always being mediated and co-produced by digital technologies, industry logic and constraints, audiences, and the ever-shifting socio-political moment. This dissertation has also charted the sign of Blackness within televisual spaces, pointing to the varieties of Blackness that are present - the family sitcom because of "safe" industry bets, shifts to more provocative images on cable subscriptions, and the rise of hyper niche content due to the internet and streaming platforms. The starting of

point of *The Cosby Show* is essential to understanding the rest of the case studies in the dissertation. As Chapter One noted, the sociopolitical moment of the 80s and 90s produced a show like Cosby's, and it set the stage for other shows like it to be created and sustained (if only for a moment) by television studios and audiences. As television technologies shifted, so did the kinds of Black representations that were constructed. In each of these moments, there are similarities in the ways Black expressive culture is manifested on screen, while at the same time, there are decidedly different images that are continuously changing. Alongside this tracing in the space of television, I have also paid close attention to how conceptions of race in the socio-political sphere are always changing, but what remains present is the ubiquitous appearance of anti-Blackness. A key example of this was the Multiracial Movement of the 90s, which I argued was an initiative taken up by a broader conservative agenda to weaken a Black political base under the guise of personal identity.

This movement leading into the 21st century, with the promise of the internet and new digital technologies and the rising political star Barack Obama, set the stage for an American nation consumed with the thought of *the* multicultural citizen, one who would eventually eliminate racism and inequity. I examined Obama and the comedians Key and Peele to examine popular rhetoric around mixed-race identity and its connection to Blackness, exposing how audiences on digital platforms still hold on to genetic understandings of race while also highlighting how these figures sought to claim a mixed-race Black political identity in response to digital social justice movements. Key and Peele are reminders of the complex interplay of racial identity, anti-Blackness, and the entrance of new digital technologies that Chapter One laid out in its historical overview. The concept of mixed race is a fascinating one, and its

understanding in different moments can stand as a litmus test for understanding the

boundaries of racial formation and Blackness. It can be weaponized as anti-Black, a means to

complicate the fight for political progress and personal identity, but as seen in Chapter Three

and the character of Dr. Manhattan, it is also a way to destabilize binaries and biologically

stable understandings of race. As I have examined a range of texts throughout this dissertation,

I have fought to steer clear of the good/bad binary that Gates (2020) so thoughtfully critiques in

Double Negative, instead looking to understand how and why representations come to be

because of the moment they are a part of and the lineage they exist within.

My chapter on *Watchmen* takes this task head-on, and I argue that the show utilizes

elements of technology in Afrofuturism and the Black horror tradition, what I call a counter-

historical haunting to present an image of Blackness that is not exclusively pervaded by the

legacy of slavery and anti-Blackness. Regarding the analysis of specific television shows, I chose

the text of *Watchmen* as a bookend to *The Cosby Show*, two markedly different depictions of

Blackness, but both decidedly Black, nonetheless. Their Blackness is not only a result of

directors, actors, showrunners, and writes, but mostly because of the ways that Black

audiences have taken up these texts and made them their own. Both shows achieved critical

and commercial success, but in 2019, the kind of Blackness we see on a streaming platform like

MAX through *Watchmen* is a glaring juxtaposition from the renditions of Blackness on network

television in the 80s and 90s. The conditions of possibility for Blackness on television have

shifted, and while there are still negotiations and grappling with the legacy of these two shows,

I argue that they are both cultural touchstones that bring to light what Blackness should or

needs to look like in different moments.

The *Watchmen* chapter puts forth different raced understandings of technology, leading into the fourth and final chapter, the piece of research most attentively focused on a piece of technology – the Netflix thumbnail algorithm. I argue that the algorithm constructs Black users as Black subjects, interpellating them without their consent, even without explicit knowledge of subscribers' racial identity. Despite attempts from the company to emphasize the neutrality of these types of systems and the lack of a race variable that is proclaimed to be progressive, race will always be present. The analysis of algorithms and race in this final chapter is a fitting end to the dissertation, as it pushes us to think further about the role of digitalization in internet-distributed television and the industrial formations constantly forming and reforming because of this interplay.

Netflix occupies a peculiar space in this dissertation, a shining example of the rise of streaming platforms with the entrance of Web 2.0, employing new digital technologies in innovative and advanced ways. But at the same time, they reproduce many of the older notions of classification and categorization that they claim legacy media outlets consistently got wrong. Chapter One examined an industrial attitude concerned with producing content catered towards specific demographics, and the Black family sitcom was considered a safe bet (for a time) that could reap economic profit. In the era of Netflix, they have gone the opposite route, with Reed Hastings, the executive chairman of the company, claiming that he is not concerned with consumer identity. And though there is still Black content on the platform, the thumbnail algorithm example reveals how identity is still a present and crucial variable within technological systems despite attempts to evade it. My dissertation provides an intervention

here, pushing for identity and the politics of platforms to be highlighted even more so in the realm of the digital.

Throughout this dissertation, I have held on to the popular in the Black Digital Popular, taking up the task of interrogating Black cultural texts as fundamental to understanding the sign of Blackness considering competing claims from audiences/users and media industries. In the lineage of Hall and Gray, I have taken popular culture seriously, finding the political and the pleasurable, exploring how moments can be weaponized as anti-Black while, in the same breadth, providing joyful and powerful moments of catharsis. It has always been my hope to see Blackness as capacious, containing multitudes that resist essentializing. The digital complicates Blackness, revealing new possibilities for what it can be, how it can be represented, and a future it can point us towards. This dissertation, though expansive in its reach with different texts in distinctive time periods, is still a starting point. It is a framework that highlights the key components similar to D'acci's circuit of communication but zeroing in specifically on how to understand Black expressive culture within the space of popular culture and the digital – a term that opens possibilities for surveying the competing claims on and conditions of possibility for Blackness.

There is much room to explore within the Black Digital Popular – to examine texts outside of the medium of television, to understand more acutely the role of gender and sexuality in digital popular spaces, and to see what new elements arise as co-producers and mediators of the constantly shifting, always amorphous sign of Blackness. The co-production of Blackness is no new conception, but the BDP pushes us further to think about the negotiation that occurs within co-production between factors that are constantly shifting. My work also

unapologetically centers on Blackness as a theoretical cornerstone, an ideology that stands on its own as an analytic and mode of interpretation – a disruption of white technoculture and prevailing Western philosophies. In years past, critiques have been leveled at Communication Studies, particularly about the "suffocating whiteness" within the discipline and the academy at large. (Calvente, et al., 2020). My dissertation takes this critique seriously, fostering a space that amplifies and values Black perspectives within the realm of digital media. The relationship between Blackness and the digital is an intricate one, but this dissertation maps these complexities by understanding the digital as a belief system, a space of mediation, an industry, and user choices and habits. The Black Digital Popular is a useful framework for the expanding field of Digital Studies, ensuring that racial identity is brought to the forefront of conversations and analyses. More specifically, it is useful to develop already existing research in platform studies (Casilli and Posada, 2019; Nieborg et. al., 2022), pushing these findings to think more acutely about the politics and racial negotiations of platforms.

Future scholarship can focus on the evolving landscape of user practices within the BDP, examining the everchanging conduits to meaning-making mediated by new technologies and platforms that continue to be developed. As the tensions surrounding the definition and boundaries of Blackness persist, there will always be a need to investigate the political and pleasurable dimensions of competing identity claims within the Black Digital Popular. Ultimately, the BDP provides a versatile framework for unraveling the ongoing complications and transformations of Blackness in the digital age, making it a thought-provoking and fruitful area for continued research and exploration.

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