

SEEKING SALVATION:
BLACK MESSIANISM, RACIAL FORMATION, AND CHRISTIAN THOUGHT IN
LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY BLACK CULTURAL TEXTS

by

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But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness;
and all these things shall be added unto you.

Matthew 6:33

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Dedicated To

Jerry Wheaton and Janet Wheaton
I love you and appreciate you more than you know.

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Table of Contents

Dedication.....	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iii
List of Figures.....	xv
Abstract.....	xvi
Chapters	
Introduction: New Millennium Black Messiahs.....	1
Making a Case for New Millennium Black Messiahs.....	5
Historical Periodicity: Black Voices of the 1990s.....	11
Lit. Review: Black Messiahs, Race Theory, and Satiric Humor.....	17
Chapter Summaries: <i>Seeking Salvation</i> Enters the Dialogue.....	33
One: “Find the Cost of Freedom Buried in the Ground:” Racial Absurdity and Messianic Martyrdom in Paul Beatty’s <i>The White Boy Shuffle</i>	43
Entering the Critical Debate on TWBS.....	46
An Absurd Mis-Education in Black Authenticity.....	53
Performativity as the Pathway to Freedom.....	58
New Black Messiah Redefines Death.....	64
Seeing Religion Meaning Through the Veil of Racial Absurdity.....	75
Gunnar Kaufman as Messianic Martyr.....	80
Two: Not Yo’ Mama’s Black Christ: Visualizing Race, Gender, and Salvation in Renee Cox’s Photography.....	91
<i>Yo Mama’s</i> Artistic and Cultural Context.....	94
Visually Reconfiguring the Black Christ.....	108
Saviors, Superheroes, and New Racial Theories.....	125

Three: Saving the Next Generation: Reading <i>The Boondocks</i> as a Textual/Visual Salvation Parable.....	134
Jesus' Parable Based Pedagogy.....	141
Image-Texts as Satirically Humorous Theories of Race.....	149
Huey as Black Superhero-Savior.....	173
<i>The Boondocks</i> as Parable of Social Salvation.....	180
Conclusion: Black Messiahs in a Post-Race America.....	184
Bibliography.....	193

List of Figures

Figure

2.1	<i>It Shall Be Named</i>	102
2.2	<i>Yo Mama's Pieta</i>	103
2.3	<i>Untitled</i> from Black Dreams/White Sheets Series.....	105
2.4	Leonardo da Vinci's <i>The Last Supper</i>	109
2.5	Renee Cox's <i>Yo Mama's Last Supper</i>	109
2.6	<i>The Liberation of UB and Lady J</i>	122
3.1	Huey Must Save the Next Generation.....	138
3.2	Riley's Thug Mug.....	150
3.3	Huey and Reactionary Protest Strategies.....	157
3.4	Uncle Ruckus as Self-Loathing Santa.....	160
3.5	Granddad and Bill Cosby.....	163
3.6	Jazmine and Huey Meet.....	167
3.7	Jazmine, Cindy, and Colorblindness.....	170

ABSTRACT

SEEKING SALVATION: BLACK MESSIANISM, RACIAL FORMATION, AND CHRISTIAN THOUGHT IN LATE-TWENTIETH CENTURY BLACK CULTURAL TEXTS

by

Deidre Lyniece Wheaton

Co-Chairs: Angela D. Dillard and Joshua L. Miller

Seeking Salvation identifies black messiah-figures in Paul Beatty's novel, *The White Boy Shuffle* (1996), Renee Cox's photograph *Yo Mama's Last Supper* (1995), and Aaron McGruder's comic strip *The Boondocks* (1999) and argues that these characters are "new millennium black messiahs." These black messiahs seek to save their people from the dual threats of racism and narrow definitions of black authenticity. These dual critiques are made possible because the unorthodox messiah figures set in motion equally unorthodox salvation plans. Beatty's Gunnar Kaufman is a suicidal teen messiah and the next charismatic black socio-political leader. Cox becomes "Yo Mama"-- a nude black woman savior who takes on characteristics of a superhero, and McGruder creates Huey Freeman a pre-teen revolutionary leader intent to save the next generation by any means necessary.

These new millennium black messiahs expose the contradiction of a social and historical moment simultaneously described as “post-race” (or colorblind) yet mysteriously permanently racist. Using critical race theorist Derrick Bell’s “racial realism” and sociologists Michael Omi and Howard Winant’s “racial formation theory” as frames of reference, *Seeking Salvation* contends that although Gunnar, Yo Mama, and Huey emerge from very different genres, they nevertheless exhibit a common interest in grappling with issues of race and racism. Using the literary method of close readings, this study highlights the similarities inherent in these texts as well as the differences in artistic approach that emerge as a result of the artists working out of different mediums. *Seeking Salvation’s* central argument is that as these artists use the tradition of black messianism to enter a discourse on race and black identity at the dawn of the 21st century, their characters take on characteristics of the biblical Savior.

For instance, I offer a reading of Beatty’s central character Gunnar Kaufman, that likens the satirical messiah’s plan to achieve black salvation via mass-suicide to the concept of life through a commitment to death in Christian thought. Conversely in Renee Cox’s photography I highlight the fact that instead of focusing on death, her black woman superheroes and saviors are intensely invested in establishing abundant life by confronting those things that threaten life and liberty. To conclude the study of contemporary black messianism I offer a reading of Aaron McGruder’s comic strip and argue that lead character Huey Freeman is constructed as a racial savior with perpetually ineffective plans of salvation. Though Huey fails, I contend that the strip as a whole succeeds, and it takes on the characteristics of a parable in that it instructs by exposing truths about race and identity through satiric humor.

Although the artists only invoke religion and the concept of messianic salvation satirically, I suggests that any analysis of what these characters mean, what they teach us about race and authentic black identity, and what they portend for the future of social justice struggles in America is incomplete without a nuanced assessment of how the historical link between Black freedom and Christian freedom is manifested in these contemporary black cultural texts. A significant aspect of *Seeking Salvation's* analysis of what the new millennium black messiahs reveal about racial formation is its recognition of tensions between members of the Civil Rights and the post-Civil Rights generations specifically with regard to how Black identity is defined and racial injustices confronted. Gunnar Kaufman, Yo Mama, and Huey Freeman demonstrate a waning faith in the utopianism inherent in traditional black messianism. Their salvation plans parody the belief that dated methods of thinking about race will lead to the promised land of racial equality. At *Seeking Salvation's* core is the desire to uncover how this cohort of artists used parody and satire to reconfigure black messianism to represent Black identity at the end of the twentieth-century.

Introduction

New Millennium Black Messiahs

Writing from Birmingham, Alabama in 1963, civil rights leader Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. told a group of white clergymen, who had condemned his non-violent direct action protests, that even if the majority of white churches never supported ending racial injustice he would remain steadfastly hopeful about America's destiny. "I have no despair about the future," Dr. King proclaimed. "I have no fear about the outcome of our struggle [here].... We will reach the goal of freedom in Birmingham and all over the nation, because the goal of America is freedom." His confidence in the movement's and the nation's success was rooted in the belief that although Black people were "abused and scorned...[their] destiny [was] tied up with America's destiny," and America in King's view was destined to be a land of freedom and equality because of its "sacred heritage" and because of the "eternal will of God." That King wrote this historic letter from jail spoke directly to the fact that transforming America from what it was into what it could be would require those who loved justice to "recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church" and be willing to suffer the consequences that would result from standing against the status quo and disobeying unjust laws.

This vision of what America could be along with the call to suffer and sacrifice for the cause of freedom not only helped galvanize the supporters of the Civil Rights Movement, it also under-girded other African American struggles for freedom. Slave

insurrectionist and preacher Nat Turner, for example, reportedly likened himself to a crucified Christ after being arrested for carrying out what he believed to be “God’s judgment” against white slaveholders in the largest slave rebellion in United States history.¹ Turner believed he had received a series of visions from God directing him to rebel against those who maintained the system of slavery. Moses-like deliverer and conductor on the Underground Railroad, Harriet Tubman likewise claimed to see visions and dream dreams, which she also believed to be sponsored by God. After escaping from her own bondage Tubman made a number of trips back into the land of slavery to lead over 70 people to freedom. Turner and Tubman both believed themselves to have been instructed by God as they made strategic efforts to set in motion black people’s freedom from the bondage of slavery, but Civil Rights leader and Baptist preach, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. is likely the most recognizable figure in this socio-religious history. Like Tubman, King also had a dream, but soon after his efforts to bring the dream of dismantling Jim Crow to reality commenced, he realized that he had put himself as well as his family in danger. Death threats circulated and King explains that as he contemplated his situation, he sat alone at his kitchen table one night and took his fears to God in prayer. Immediately, he experienced the presence of the Divine and heard an inner voice speak these words: “Stand up for righteousness, stand up for truth; and God will be at your side forever” (King quoted in Chappell 91). After receiving this

¹ Nat Turner’s actions were dictated to Thomas R. Gray soon after his arrest. Though the tone Gray attaches to Turner’s narrative of the events has been called into question by scholars, there is an understanding that Turner did believe he had received a series of visions foretelling of the second coming of Christ. Turner believe he had been instructions for the Almighty to bring judgment of the “Serpent”—in Turner’s mind these representatives of evil were slave holders. During the rebellion, Turner and the other men involved murdered over 50 white men, women, and children. After being captured Turner was tortured. His body was quartered and burned. For more information on the rebellion see William Styron’s controversial narrative *The Confessions of Nat Turner (1967)* and Kenneth Greenberg’s *Nat Turner: A Slave Rebellion in History and Memory (2003)*.

revelation, King said that all of his “uncertainty disappeared,” and he “was ready to face anything” (King quoted in Chappell 91). In each of these examples African American freedom fighters of the past cited very similar experiences of being directed by and protected by God. This assurance gave them the strength to stand with authority against the enemy of slavery, segregation, and other social injustices.

Throughout African American history the struggle for freedom has had these very memorable leaders and activists who are sincerely concerned about black people’s salvation (i.e. their freedom) from the sin (or rather bondage) of racial and social injustice. Black activists and thinkers including Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. DuBois, Dr. King, Ida B. Wells, Mary McCloud Bethune, and others believed that Black people’s destiny was indeed intimately tied to America’s national destiny.² The objective of national redemption via black salvation was to establish or rather set in motion a transformation that would leave the country in a condition more closely resembling the principles of freedom and equality upon which it was theoretically founded.³

One of the primary rhetorical tools used to give voice to this connectedness of Black and American destiny was the jeremiad. Derived from “the Old Testament prophet, Jeremiah, who warned of Israel’s fall and the destruction of the Jerusalem temple by Babylonia as punishment for the people’s failure to keep the Mosaic covenant,” the term *jeremiad* literally means “a lamentation or [a] doleful complaint”

² Historian David Howard Pitney’s book *The Afro American Jeremiad: Appeals for Justice in America* (1993) examines the rhetoric of the jeremiad in the oratory of black leaders and activist like Douglass, DuBois, and King, the figures who he suggests use the jeremiad in its purest form. An equally important part of the narrative Pitney weaves of the black Jeremiad tradition is his acknowledgement that these men’s belief that American could ever be redeemed or perfected vacillated.

³ As will be discussed later in the Introduction, these very principles have begun to be called into question by Critical Race Theorists because they believe that the Constitution which promised these liberties is a tool that reinforces existing racial and social hierarchies. As such then there would definitely need to be a new way of defining freedom, if what is written in the law cannot be made available to all men and women.

(Howard-Pitney 6). Historian Howard-Pitney argues that above all else the American jeremiad is “a rhetoric of indignation, expressing deep dissatisfaction and urgently challenging the nation to reform” (6). Though the American jeremiad has its roots in early American Puritan society, the tradition was transformed in the hands of African Americans who applied it specifically to America’s contradictory status as a slave holding nation and simultaneously a nation that prided itself on freedom. The jeremiad became a particularly powerful rhetorical tool in Black freedom and social justice struggles because of the contradiction between ideals and reality. The jeremiad was also a potent tool because most Black freedom movements had some version of a Jeremiah-like prophet, spokesperson, or charismatic leader who possessed or to whom were ascribed characteristics of a liberator, a deliverer, or savior.

Frederick Douglass for instance had intense abolitionist leanings that allow him to be figured as a founding father of the Black Jeremiad tradition. A fiery critic of America’s “woman-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical [slaveholding] Christianity” and an equally fierce opponent of the contradiction inherent in a democratic and Christian nation that shamelessly sanctions and “makes itself the bulwark of American slavery,” Douglass advocated on behalf of the anti-slavery movement by serving as a prophetic defender of black humanity (Douglass 153, Andrews 123).⁴ He helped transform the American jeremiad tradition into a powerful rhetorical tool for abolitionists and those who would continue the freedom fight after abolition. Years later

⁴ The black jeremiad is a nineteenth century form of black messianism. It has its roots in abolitionists’ fierce protests against and warnings to white America for the immorality and sin of slavery. For more on the black jeremiad see David Howard-Pitney’s *The Afro-American Jeremiad: Appeals for Justice in America* (1990) or Wilson J. Moses’ *Black Messiahs and Uncle Toms: Literary and Social Manipulations of a Religious Myth* (1980). Both texts also offer assessments of Douglass’ place in the history of African American messianic traditions.

when Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. emerged on the scene of the modern Civil Rights Movement he used techniques similar to Douglass's in his speeches. He positioned the non-violent Black protesters to defend their humanity by standing against Jim Crow supporters who would deny them their basic rights as citizens. Because of the movement's success, King, like Harriet Tubman, began to be viewed as Black America's Moses -- a contemporary figure who like the biblical Moses would lead his people to the Promised Land of freedom and thus set in motion major changes in America's national consciousness of race.⁵

From a 19th century Black Jeremiah to a twentieth century Black Moses, these familiar examples demonstrate the centrality of faith in Black social movements of the past. They also raise the question of what has become of these faithful leaders? Are there Black Jeremiahs and Black Moses in the twenty-first century? What happened to those visionary leaders whose special assignment from the Almighty gave them the courage to wage seemingly impossible and always life-threatening battles? Did the visions, the dreams, and the prophecies stop with Dr. King's 1968 assassination? Or, did the revelations regarding the path to black salvation simply find some other, less overt, means of manifesting themselves to the leaders and saviors in the new millennium? If this is the case, who are these saviors? How did they redefine what it meant to be saved (to be free)? And, how did they go about seeking their salvation in a cultural context that on one hand boasts of being "post-race" yet in many ways proves itself to be permanently

⁵ In African American Christian religious thought Christ (the Messiah) is thought of as a second Moses. That participants in the Civil Rights Movement figured Dr. King a Black Moses, one who would lead them out of the bondage of Jim Crow segregation, speaks to the intimate connections in the discourse on black liberation and messianic salvation. For more on the Moses-Christ link see Kelly Brown Douglas's *The Black Christ* (1995) or Stephen Prothero's "Black Moses," in *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon* (2003). See David L. Chappell's *A Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow* for more on how Dr. King was thought of as a Moses type leader during the Civil Rights Movement.

racist? How did these black messianic figures function in a historical moment marked by an increasing skepticism of the conflation of black religious and black socio-political leadership?

These questions capture the essence of *Seeking Salvation's* critical point of departure, and they set the stage for an intellectual inquiry that explores what happened to black messianic salvation at the turn of the new millennium. Historian Wilson Jeremiah Moses posits that black messianic myths never really end: “when one myth dies out another one arises to take its place” (xi). Because these myths regenerate and give generation after generation a narrative of their history and destiny, Moses contends that they are “the most convincing proof of an ethnic group’s cultural health” (xi). Although Moses asserts that black messianic traditions would continue well into the twenty-first century, he also concludes that those messiahs who would emerge in the post-Civil Rights era would neither share the same commitments to black freedom nor have the same sense of special purpose with respect to American national transformation as did their predecessors. Moses identifies the success of the Civil Rights movement and the subsequent assassination of Dr. King as a sort of watershed moment in the black messianic tradition, which he describes using the following explanation.

While black messianic movements are clearly destined to continue well into the twenty-first century – and probably long after that – certain factors seem to threaten the persistence of traditional forms. The success of Martin Luther King’s crusade has, ironically, facilitated the diversification of black leadership roles. No longer are educated black people confined to careers in education and the ministry. The secularization of black leadership has led to a deemphasizing of the church and church-related colleges as centers of black artistic and intellectual life. In the process of modifying its religious character, black artistic and intellectual behavior has lost much of its *distinctively black quality*.... Like other twentieth-century peoples, the blacks of the United States are being inundated by

post-industrial culture, losing their folk traditions, being deprived of their illusions, and ultimately, of their values as well (15 italics mine).

Moses' sense that something very different will transpire with black messianism in the post-Civil Rights era is correct. The secularization of black leadership and the deemphasizing of the church Moses predicts are also evident in the myriad ways in which the artists examined here infuse religious settings, songs, and characters with parody and satirical humor. However his belief that these transformations to the tradition represent a loss of some "distinctively black quality" is precisely the sort of thinking about authentic blackness that Paul Beatty, Renee Cox, and Aaron McGruder examine in their artistic productions during the last decade of the 20th century and into the 21st century. The forecast for black messianism's and, by extension, Black America's continued cultural health is deemed rather bleak at the conclusion of *Black Messiahs and Uncle Toms* (1982). Moses' belief that black messianic traditions would continue into the twenty-first century was accurate, but his uncton that these post-Civil Rights messianic figures would lack purpose and be void of some distinctively black quality requires careful reconsideration.

Section I – Making a Case for New Millennium Black Messiahs

Seeking Salvation argues that rather than succumbing totally to gross patterns of postmodern, capitalist, individualist, cultural decline the tradition of using black messianism as a tool through which racism is exposed and freedom is defined was instead being employed by black artists across lines of genre to create very unorthodox black messiahs. Unlike the real preachers, rebels, activists, and charismatic leaders mentioned above (Nat Turner, Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, and Rev. King), the black

messiahs Paul Beatty, Renee Cox, and Aaron McGruder create are fictional and often explicitly satirical characters who take the shape of suicidal yet compelling socio-political leaders, pre-teen revolutionaries with dated politics, and even superheroes. Despite the variety of identities they take on – whether superheroes, charismatic leaders, or self-proclaimed messiahs – the characters Beatty, Cox, and McGruder create share a common interest in grappling with the meaning as well as the means of establishing Black American freedom. Each character is concerned with exposing the barriers to full freedom and equality. They all, in their own way, attempt to function as saviors. For this reason they are understood throughout this study as black messiahs—figures anointed by their creators (the artists) to do the work of seeking out a means of providing salvation for a lost people. These black messiahs or rather satirical saviors were needed because Beatty, Cox and McGruder had the artistic challenge of representing black identity and exposing racism in a paradoxical social moment that desired to be “post-race” (or rather color-blind) but was repeatedly proven to be inundated with evidence of the permanence of racism. The historical, cultural, and racial context being represented artistically demanded different types of black messiahs and that is exactly what Paul Beatty, Renee Cox, and Aaron McGruder created.

Seeking Salvation begins with a literary reading of poet and novelist Paul Beatty’s suicidal teen messiah, Gunnar Kaufman, whose memoir, or rather extended suicide note, is written into the narrative framework of *The White Boy Shuffle* (1996). Next mixed-media artist and photographer Renee Cox’s nude, black woman Christ-figure as presented in her controversial composition “Yo Mama’s Last Supper” (1996) is examined. This photograph is highlighted as a visual culture text that sparked fierce debates on issues of

artistic freedom, racial representation in religious imagery, and decency when it was displayed in the Brooklyn Museum of Art in 2001. To conclude, *Seeking Salvation* holds up to the light of scholarly inquiry cartoonist Aaron McGruder's comic strip *The Boondocks* (first published in the artist's college newspaper in the mid-1990s). This chapter figures lead character, ten-year-old, angst-filled Huey Freeman as a black revolutionary and superhero-like leader who possesses an unshakable desire for his people to be free.

In each of the following chapters I offer a close reading of these colorful characters whom I have termed *new millennium black messiahs*. These are messianic figures who arrived on the American cultural landscape in the mid to late-1990s convinced that they "must save the next generation" to use Huey Freeman's words. Their salvation plans vary dramatically. Gunnar promotes African American's mass suicide as a protest against American racial absurdity. Yo Mama literally exposes herself and visually contests the racist and sexist representations of black women that have thwarted their freedom and assaulted their self-esteem and self-image. Huey Freeman endeavors to use whatever tools he has at hand, the Internet, his newsletter, random phone calls to major government officials, and his righteous discontent as strategies to wage war against increasingly pernicious foes such as racist stereotypes and equally problematic notions of black authentic identity.

Despite the stark differences in their methods of seeking to attain salvation, what remains consistent in each text is how these new millennium black messiahs define what it means to be saved. For them, and therefore throughout this study, the term salvation is not limited to a spiritual or eternal salvation, like that attained when one has a conversion

experience and is “born again.” This spiritual turning of soul and birth into new life in Christ happens upon conversion, the process of salvation the Apostle Paul—convert par excellence—explains in his letter to the Romans. He begins by telling them that:

If thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. For with the heart man believed unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. For the scripture saith, whosoever believeth on him shall not be ashamed. For there is no difference between the Jew and the Greek: for the same Lord over all is rich unto all that call upon him. For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved (Romans 10:9-13).

Paul’s version of how one comes to be saved is premised on a Christology, which sees Christ as God incarnate, whose immaculate birth, earthly ministry of healing, preaching of a new gospel of grace, redemptive suffering, crucifixion, and subsequent resurrection from the dead paved the way for humanity to be reconciled with God and therefore free from bondage to sin and death. This Pauline Christology situates the crucifixion event and Christ’s submission to redemptive suffering at the heart of Christian salvation, which is available to all who believe. Paul’s version of what it means for Jesus to be the Messiah is certainly not uncontested as will be seen in Chapter Two, where womanist theologians enter the debate and offer an alternate hermeneutic of Jesus as Savior. These theological debates are central to my interpretations, but the artists examined here are not themselves engaged in explicitly theological debates.

The way salvation is used in relation to Gunnar Kaufman, Yo Mama, and Huey Freeman is not a spiritual salvation. These new millennium black messiahs seek after and attempt to pave the way toward social and racial salvation. The intriguing aspect of their quests is that much like the conversions of heart, mind, and soul that lead to salvation in the Pauline epistles the social and racial salvations they seek also require a

certain turning of society's soul and a transformation of racial consciousness. Essentially the process, which involves a change in thinking are the same but the intentions and goals of the salvation are quite different. The Christian convert desires oneness with God and strives for Christ-likeness. The new millennium black messiah desires freedom from racial absurdity and racist stereotypes and strives for a genuine sense of self beyond the veil of double-consciousness.

Genna Rae McNeil succinctly sums up what salvation would mean for the new millennium black messiahs examined here.⁶ In an essay titled "Waymaking and Dimensions of Responsibility: An African American Perspective on Salvation," McNeil posits quite convincingly that "whether affirming ultimate salvation or pre-eschaton salvation, in the African American experience the nature of salvation is to provide space—psychic, physical, and spiritual—in which to function as free beings" (63). The space to be a free being, which salvation provided was significant because it meant that "even when one could not fully exercise physical freedom, one retained the option of exercising one's inner authority and thereby determining for oneself...the significance one attached to one's life" (64). McNeil reinforces her point about salvation's ability to give the saved person an inner authority by quoting from Black theologian Howard Thurman who wrote that "[T]here is one option that remains available. I can select the things against which I shall stand with my life and the things for which I shall stand" (Thurman quoted in McNeil 64).

This perspective of salvation is a powerful one to which Gunnar Kaufman, Yo Mama, and Huey Freeman ascribe. They decide that they will stand against racism, and

⁶ Genna McNeil is a History Professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Though her scholarly publications and teaching focus on African American History, Civil Rights and African American women in social movements, she also has a strong interest in African American religious experiences.

they are determined that their identities will neither be surrendered to racist stereotypes nor black authenticity. When they make these choices, their lives illustrate the challenges of salvation and they also demonstrate an element of Christ-likeness that theologian Paul Tillich believed should characterize the lives of all Christians—a commitment to and responsibility for others. In a famous collection of sermons titled *The Eternal Now*, Tillich describes this responsibility of salvation using the following terms, which I quote at length because they are instructive in framing how salvation is understood in this study. After acknowledging that the term “salvation” had been “emaciated by mechanical repetition,” Tillich sets about offering a re-birth of this foundational principal of Christianity (113). He begins his sermon with these insights:

The two translations of the seventh petition of the Lord’s Prayer use two different images of what salvation is: “saving” and “delivering.” The word salvation is derived from the Latin word *salvus*, which means heal and whole. The savior makes “heal and whole” what is sick and disrupted.... Jesus calls himself the physician who has come to the sick and not to the healthy. But saving also means delivering, liberating, setting free. This is another image: we are in bondage.... Saving is healing from sickness and saving is delivering from servitude; and the two are the same.... Salvation happens whenever the enslaving power is conquered...whenever the sickness is healed. He who can do this is called the saviour. Nobody except God can do this. Those who are in chains cannot liberate themselves, and those who are sick cannot heal themselves. All liberating, all healing power comes from the other side of the wall which separates us from eternal life.... All liberators, all healers are sent by God; they liberate and heal through the power of the eternal given by them. Who are these healers? Where are these saviours? The first answer is: They are *here*; they are *you*. Each of you has liberating and healing power over someone to whom you are priests. We all are called to be priests to each other, and if priests, also physicians. And if physicians, also counselors. And if counselors, also liberators.... There are a host of liberators and healers, including ourselves, through whom the divine salvation works in all mankind. God does not leave the world at any place, in any time, without saviours—without healing power (113-115).

Tillich's belief that God never leaves the world without saviors or without healing power takes on an added level of meaning when we consider this definition of salvation in the context of the new millennium black messiahs to be examined in the following chapters. Because I agree that saviors are always present, I posit that even though these new millennium black messiahs are concerned with a social rather than a spiritual salvation they nevertheless appear to take on specific characteristics of the biblical Messiah. Each of the fictional characters performs the role of black messiah and promotes a way of salvation based on one of the following characteristics of Christ: Christ as crucified Savior. Christ as healer, liberator, and sustainer of life, or Christ as teacher. By taking on these various personalities of Christ, the new millennium black messiahs are able to interrogate racism and expose the challenges of defining black subjectivity and developing protest strategies in a social context that presents itself as "post-race" but which is blatantly race conscious.

In addition to analyzing the texts for evidence of engagement with issues of freedom and black identity, *Seeking Salvation* also situates itself within an ongoing scholarly discourse regarding race in America at the turn of the 21st century. The artists examined in this dissertation are positioned within a social context that has been simultaneously labeled "post-race" and permanently racist. The advocates of viewing America as somehow post or rather beyond race are said to hold three primary beliefs in common. These "post-race" tenets are explored in the edited collection *Whitewashing Race: The Myth of a Color-Blind Society* (2003). In the Introduction "Race Preferences and Race Privileges" the editors explain that:

The crude racial prejudice of the Jim Crow era has been discredited and replaced by a new understanding of race and racial inequality. This new

understanding began with a backlash against the Great Society and took hold after the Reagan-Bush revolution in the 1980s. The current set of beliefs about race rests on three tenets held by many white Americans. First they believe the civil rights revolution was successful, and they wholeheartedly accept the principles enshrined in civil rights laws. They assume civil rights laws ended racial inequality by striking down legal segregation and outlawing discrimination against workers and voters. They think racism has been eradicated even though racist hotheads can still be found throughout America.... Second, if vestiges of racial inequality persist, they believe that is because blacks have failed to take advantage of opportunities created by the civil rights revolution. In their view, if blacks are less successful than whites, it is not because American is still a racist society. In fact, a substantial majority believe that black Americans do not try hard enough to succeed and with the connivance of government, they take what they have not earned. Finally, most white Americans think the United States is rapidly becoming a color-blind society, and they see little need or justification for affirmative action or other color-conscious policies (1-2).

These beliefs born in conservative think tanks in the 1970s, translated in public policy in the 1980s, and to some degree they came to form a “new national consensus on race” in the 1980s, 1990s and into 21st century. This new racial consciousness, which I contend is effectively a racial mis-education, essentially forward the belief that since racism (in it’s overt, white-only, legalized, lynching) form has been defeated “racial inequalities in income, employment, residence, and political representation persist” not because of “white racism” but rather because of “the behavior of the people who fail to take responsibility for their own lives” (Brown *Preface* vii). The sense that inequity stems from a lack of personal responsibility rather than systemic institutional racism causes there to emerge a problematic assumption that America is “post-race,” colorblind, or rather beyond the need to focus on racism as a significant contributing factor to inequality. In an article titled “Beyond Race? Ideological Color Blindness in the United

States, Brazil, and South Africa,” George M. Fredrickson explains the danger of this type of thinking rather succinctly.

As we enter the twenty-first century,” Fredrickson writes, “three nations with long histories of racial differentiation and color consciousness—the United States, Brazil, and South Africa—would appear to share a commitment to going beyond race and achieving an egalitarian society in which skin color no longer matters.... In the United States the tide seems to have turned against race-based compensatory policies and toward “color-blind” constitutionalism.... The abstract proposition that phenotype and ancestry should not affect rights or status in an egalitarian society is unchallengeable. Yet the relation to reality and the programmatic adequacy of [color-blindness] is debatable. There is good reason to pay critical attention to the role played by ideological color blindness in these societies, given their long histories of white advantage and black disadvantage. The denial of race may be a denial of those histories (59).

The point Fredrickson raises is crucial because at a time when legislation such as Affirmative Action policies were creating increased opportunities for people of color a strong backlash against those policies commenced. And rather than citing the implementation of these color-conscious or race-based policies as influential in the process of making American society more equitable, critics began to posit that they were in fact evidence of reverse-racism. It was this sort of racial climate in which the artists examined in *Seeking Salvation* came of age. It was also this “post-race” yet persistently racist society to which these artists responded in their cultural texts. Much more so than do those who believe that racism has been defeated, Beatty, Cox, and McGruder recognize that like race, racism must be understood and represented with historical specificity because racism in 1955 would not look the same, be discussed using the same language, or be contested through the same methods in 1995.

Section II -- Historical Periodicity: Black Voices of the 1990s

What Beatty, Cox, and McGruder reveal about America's racial conundrum is directly influenced by the specific historical, cultural, and political moment during which the artists came of age. Cox and Beatty were born in 1960 and 1962 respectively. McGruder came along a bit later in 1974. Their dates of birth position them historically such that they were coming of age – in their early twenties or in McGruder's case in his teens – during the 1980s, a period that was post-Civil Rights, post-Black Power, post-Black Arts, and full of young people who were post-baby boomers. Politically the 1980s were characterized by President Ronald Reagan's agenda to "reduce the scope and intrusiveness of government in all areas of public policy" including the expansion of civil rights legislation and anti discrimination policies (Shull 3). Reagan's approach to government helped set the stage for very public and inevitably polarizing debates on controversial issues such as "busing, affirmative action, and aggressive enforcement of civil rights laws"—all of which the Reagan administration opposed (Shull 3). Reagan's positions on these issues echoed those of his supporters who understood that the post-Civil Rights moment in which they lived required that convincing lip service be given to a commitment to equal treatment and civil liberties for all citizens regardless of race, gender, sexuality, or physical ability. Reagan viscerally demonstrated that the rhetoric of equality need not translate into tangible change.

In fact, the Reagan presidency illustrated that even during a period when everything was now multicultural, nothing was meaningfully multicultural. During a period when increasing numbers of African Americans were graduating from college, attending graduate and professional schools not all was well in Black America. The class

divide was widening. So even as the successes of the Civil Rights Movement slowly began to have an impact on some African Americans, those on the other end of the spectrum endured drastic cuts in social services and rapidly rising incarceration rates. During a historical moment when a colorblind consciousness was promoted as the ideal means of eliminating racial division, it seemed that the very language of the civil rights movement was being hijacked to reverse the hard-won legislations of the 1960s. The racial tensions of the moment were in fact televised for all to see when the acquittals of several white police officers who had been caught on tape beating Rodney King, sparked the 1992 Los Angeles riots.

Paul Beatty, Renee Cox, and Aaron McGruder gained their educations in race at school, in their homes, and in the classroom that is American popular culture. One of the most telling biographical features that Beatty, Cox, and McGruder share and which they have all acknowledged impacts their art, is that they all spent some considerable portion of their formative years living in predominantly white middle or upper-middle class suburbs. Beatty lived in a California suburb until his family moved to Los Angeles when he was a pre-teen. Cox was born in Colgate, Jamaica, but she spent much of her life in upper-middle class Scarsdale, New York—one of only a handful of black families in her neighborhood. Though born over ten years after Beatty and Cox in Chicago, Illinois, McGruder shares with these other artists' experience of geographical movement into (or in the case of Beatty out of) predominantly white suburban neighborhoods. McGruder's family moved to Columbia, Maryland in 1980. This commonality is significant because both McGruder and Beatty have acknowledged that their work is at least thematically autobiographical, which suggests that their experiences of rather drastic changes in

geographical space influenced their understandings of race in America as well as their ideas regarding how black identity is defined. For example in the introduction to his edited volume of African American humor, *Hokum*, Paul Beatty recalls that in elementary school it was not uncommon for him to be called “oreo” and “nigger” in the same day.

This aspect of their background is central in other ways because it also places them among a cohort of similarly situated young black artists—who novelist Trey Ellis has termed members of a New Black Aesthetic (NBA). In a 1989 *Callaloo* essay titled “The New Black Aesthetic,” Ellis defines himself and a host of other contemporary black artists as “cultural mulattoes”—individuals “educated by a multi-racial mix of cultures” who are able to navigate in the white and black world because they are confident that they “no longer need to deny or suppress any part of [their] complicated and sometimes contradictory cultural baggage to please either white or black people” (235). They attain this peculiar cultural and racial status partially because of class privilege. Like Beatty, Cox and McGruder, Ellis acknowledges that he also he had not lived around a lot of black people except his own family until he moved into “Ujamaa, Stanford’s black dorm” (235). Ellis then acknowledges that many of the artists he identifies, as members of the NBA are “college graduates who are children of college graduates,” and their parents’ access to “relative wealth” has allowed this current generation to “feel secure enough to attend art school instead of medical school” (237). This privilege that class affords them essentially seems to have given these artists the flexibility to also be very critical of both the racism that would label them “nigger” as well as the definitions of authentic blackness that relegate them to the category “Oreo.”

Ellis suggests that the new black aesthetic artists are able to level these types of dual criticisms at least partially because of the groundwork laid by their predecessors. Artists like Ishmael Reed, Toni Morrison, John Edgar Wideman, Richard Pryor, and George Clinton were figures of the 1970s and beyond whom according to Ellis all “helped forge [the] current aesthetic” by “stripping themselves of both white envy and [black] self-hate” (237). Because they were able to purge themselves of the yoke of racist stereotypes and the bind of black authenticity, these artists were all about producing “super sophisticated black art that either expanded or exploded the old definitions of blackness, showing us as the intricate, uncategorizable folks we had always known ourselves to be” (237). Because of the foundation that these earlier artist set, “NBA artists aren’t afraid to flout publicly the official, positivist black party line,” which likely accounts for the fact that “a telltale sign of the work of the NBA is [their] parodying of the black nationalist movement” (236). As we shall see in the work of Beatty and McGruder in particular this parodying of the past includes both nationalist and integrationist black movements.

Perhaps the most revealing aspect of Ellis’ definition of the NBA artists that informs my sense of Beatty, Cox, and McGruder is his explanation of how they interpret racism. According to Ellis, these new black artists are neither “shocked by the persistence of racism as were those of the Harlem Renaissance, nor [he writes] are we preoccupied with it as were those of the Black Arts Movement. For us, racism is a hard and little-changing constant that neither surprises nor enrages.... We’re not saying racism doesn’t exist; we’re just saying it’s not an excuse” (240). Ellis’ articulation is instructive because if this is truly the perception of contemporary black artists, then it is

understandable that the works of art they produce do not offer specific methods or strategies of liberation or activism. If they are neither surprised nor enraged by racism and if they have accepted that it is unlikely to change, then it is understandable that they would not even attempt to construct texts that posit a path to transformation. Instead they create “*disturbatory art-art* that shakes you up” (Ellis 239). The idea that NBA artists are concerned with art that disturbs us only further supports my sense that Beatty, Cox, and McGruder ought to be considered a part of this artistic cohort because in their own way each of them have produced art that has been both celebrated and strongly criticized.

Their respective audiences generally received these artists’ work favorably. Beatty’s *White Boy Shuffle* (1996) appeared on the *Los Angeles Times* bestsellers list. Cox’s most infamous photograph *Yo Mama’s Last Supper* (1996) now adorns a wall in hip-hop mogul Russell Simmons’ home, and Aaron McGruder’s comic strip debuted in nearly 200-newspapers (the most successful in comic strip history) in 1999. Despite these positive receptions, the art they produced has also prompted considerable criticism and public debate. Fellow satirist Ishmael Reed described Beatty’s fiction as lacking in vision and ideological commitment. Cox’s photographs have been chided as racist, indecent, and lacking in artistic merit. McGruder’s comic strip has rather consistently been criticized for trafficking in gross racial stereotypes that only reinforced absurd racial assumptions about African Americans. Despite the controversy and criticism surrounding these artists, they have not only persevered and survived but have thrived artistically. They have succeeded in striking a cord or rather disturbing their audiences into taking notice of what they have to say about race, racism, black identity, and the meanings of salvation.

What most fascinates me about them is that in each case, it is evident that these artists and the characters they create are genuinely concerned about the condition of Black America in particular and America as a whole. For this reason I envision them as characters who function as black messiahs charged with the task of saving a lost people. Because neither Beatty, Cox, nor McGruder is literally concerned about salvation in a spiritual sense but rather are focused on salvation in a social and racial dimension, the characters they create take on unique messianic-identities. Gunnar Kaufman only satirically refers to himself as the new Negro demagogue, the savior of the blacks, and Black America's new leader. For Gunnar, messiah status means that he fulfills the position left void in Black socio-political leadership. Renee Cox's black woman messiah—Yo Mama—is not at all concerned with Black political leadership. She is focused intently on answering the call to liberate and save those in imminent danger from cultural stereotypes. She saves visually in much the same way that a superhero would. McGruder's pre-teen revolutionary Black leader Huey Freeman is somewhat of a combination of both black leader and a superhero. He believes he has all the right answers and he believes he knows the way, but as a leader he has a following of one (his friend Caesar) and as a superhero he unfortunately does not manage to save anyone. Though these characters approach black messianic salvation in very different ways what becomes apparent is that whether in the guise of a charismatic (suicidal) savior, a nude black woman superhero type Christ or co-mixing of the two these characters each share a common interest grappling with the pernicious problem of race and racism in a new social context.

That this particular cohort of black messiahs began to emerge in the mid-1990s and continued to evolve and mutate as we crossed over into the new millennium only suggests to me that we must see this particular historical moment as one in which battles were being waged over how equality would be defined and to what extent that definition will foster black America's salvation from racial injustice in a society that was increasing touting itself as post-race or colorblind. Importantly, Beatty, Cox, and McGruder's artistic productions place them within a much larger social and political discourse happening during the early 1990s regarding the meaning of race, the definition of racism (as individual actions or institutional phenomena), racial diversity, multiculturalism, colorblindness, and the extent to which these definitions and racial formulations would inform public policy regarding racial justice.

As I analyze these black messiahs and the artists who created them I pose the following queries around which *Seeking Salvation* is thematically organized. How are literary and cultural studies scholars dealing with Afro-Christian rhetoric in contemporary fictional and cultural products? For what purpose did Black artists use black messiahs in their late-twentieth century artistic productions? And how does analyzing these questions deepen our understanding of the dynamics of racism, the variety of responses to it, and the artistic attempts to construct Black identity and subjectivity despite it? In a nation where race-based despair comes in direct conflict with the rhetoric of color-blindness and a post-race consciousness, I posit that artists including, but certainly not limited to, those analyzed here have something significant to say about the meaning of race, black identity, and how to achieve racial justice in the twenty-first century. Beatty, Cox, and McGruder enter the dialogue on race through creative reconfigurations of black messiahs.

Their new millennium black messiahs challenge audiences and critics to reconsider whether or not black messianic figures retain their ideological and rhetorical power to be prophetic voices in the wilderness that is America's late twentieth century racial landscape. Are these young artists and the messiah-figures they create holy enough, sanctified, and set apart enough to sound a prophetic voice, or are they convinced that narratives of messianic salvation and black chosen-ness will have detrimental impacts on future Black social justice struggles?

Section III – Literature Review: Black Messiahs, Race Theory and Satiric Humor

Given the unfinished conversation on race in America approach *Seeking Salvation* takes attempts to synthesize insights from racial formation theory and Christian religious thought to offer an assessment of black cultural texts that would typically not be identified as useful sources for consideration in either field. Race theorist and cultural studies scholars, until relatively recently, have been eerily silent on the role of religion in racial formations. Consider for instance that in an essay titled "Race and Race Theory," one of the most prolific voices in racial formation theory, Howard Winant concludes his notes toward a new racial theory with the following words:

Will race ever be transcended? Will the world ever get beyond race? Probably not. But the entire world still has a chance of overcoming the stratification, the hierarchy, the taken-for-granted injustice and inhumanity that so often accompanies the race concept. Like religion or language, race can be accepted as a part of the spectrum of the human condition, while it is simultaneously and categorically resisted as a means of stratifying national or global societies. Nothing is more essential in the effort to reinforce democratic commitments, not to mention global survival and prosperity, as we enter a new millennium (183).

While I concur with Winant's sense that the elements of religion and race which stratify rather than unify should be resisted, I find the implications of his statement somewhat problematic because he does not seem to take seriously the positive role that religions can play in negotiating racial divisions and fighting social injustices. Despite the fact that Americans seem to be increasingly concerned with their spirituality and faith, Winant does not site religion as a crucial factor in the process of "understanding the changing significance of race at the beginning of the twenty-first century" (182).⁷

In much the same way that race theory scholars have perhaps overlooked the dynamic potential of religion, Black liberation and womanist theologians (whose articulations of the Black Christ in the post-Civil Rights era are central in *Seeking Salvation*) have not fully taken advantage of the developments in racial formation theory. They have tended to cling to dated definitions of race, racism and concepts of "ontological blackness" that are not conducive to a twenty-first century cultural context wherein personal irresponsibility rather than white racism is sited as the cause of savage inequalities along lines of race. Another deficit, that is beginning to be addressed among black and womanist theologians, is their tendency to use a very limited pool of sources in their theological constructions. Theologians have thoroughly mined the slave narratives, Negro spirituals, selected biblical narratives of liberation and/or survival, and womanist literature for evidence that God is on the side of the oppressed. While these sources have proven very fruitful as fodder for theological reflections, continuing to work within this

⁷ In the introduction to *Religion and Cultural Studies* Susan L. Mizruchi begins by stating that "Americans have never been more religious than they are now, at the dawn of the twenty-first century." Despite this fact, Mizruchi argues that with the exception of cultural historians, scholars interested in culture who were working in the closing decades of the twentieth-century particularly in the 1970s and well in the 1980s "tended to shy away from religion as a field of inquiry," perhaps because of the rise of the religious right during this era. Mizruchi explains that this timidity around religion has passed and in the current intellectual community, "the boundary line of religion and culture at the turn of the twenty-first century is a major site of intellectual action and interaction" (x).

same repository of sources will likely produce the same findings. It will also mean that the way race was constructed in those historical sources will not be adequate to define race in a contemporary cultural moment. Liberation and womanist theological reflections on religion and racism would be strengthened significantly if they followed in the path of cultural studies scholars and step into a new terrain of contemporary popular and visual culture texts such as those examined here.⁸ To do so would breathe life into black theology's understanding of racism and its definitions of authentic black identity. A shift in source material would also expand black theologians understandings of what constitutes legitimate expressions of Afro-Christian religious traditions.

Because *Seeking Salvation* reads black cultural texts through a lens tuned to religious nuance, this study demonstrates that such cross-disciplinary analysis is pregnant with the potential to expose the connections between race, religion, and social justice in the twenty-first century. Recent studies have already begun this very important work of thinking critically about these connections. Edited volumes such as Gary Orfield and Holly J. Lebowitz' *Religion, Race, and Justice in a Changing America* (1999), Bruce D. Forbes and Jeffrey H. Mahan's *Religion and Popular Culture in America* (2000), Susan L. Mizruchi's *Religion and Cultural Studies* (2001), and S. Brent Plate's *Religion, Art, and Visual Culture* (2002) all speak to the growing interest in this area of study. Orfield and Lebowitz's collection brings together essays that interrogate the variety of ways American faith communities have participated in social justice efforts of the past and how they could do so more productively in the future. Forbes, Mahan, and Mizruchi's

⁸ One exception is *Shamanism, Racism, and Hip-Hop Culture* (2005) in which philosophy and religious studies scholar James W. Perkinson examines elements of hip-hop culture and figures them as evidence of black people subverting white oppression. But, even in this study the emphasis is on a very distinct almost static white oppression.

collections take a different approach and explore the fruitfulness of using interdisciplinary methods to study religion in cultural texts or cultural texts as sites of religious performance and social critique. Plate's collection offers examples of how to effectively read visual art—either in a museum or in everyday life—with attention to religious meaning.

Some book length studies have also been completed focusing their attention on specific approaches to analyzing the role of religion in determining the meaning of race and the methods of contesting racism.⁹ One very insightful sociological study is Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith's *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (2000), which examines how evangelical Christians' strict adherence to their coveted core American values of capitalism, individuals, and freedom of choice "recreate racial divisions and inequalities" and thus undermine their "well-intentioned" efforts at racial reconciliation. Emerson and Smith suggest that one way to use evangelical religion to address the issue of black-white race relations is by making efforts to encourage multi-racial congregations and more extensive interactions within faith communities across racial lines. Borrowing from Reinhold Neibuhr's insights in *Moral Man and Immoral Society* when he suggests that it is "practically impossible" for people who are isolated within their own religious or racial group to display care, concern, and empathy for those in other groups, Emerson and Smith contend that "congregations that are racially homogenous are, by definition, part of the elaborate structure of racialization," which is designed to heighten racial boundaries and reproduce

⁹ Unlike the artistic texts I examine in *Seeking Salvation* the studies mentioned in this review of the existing scholarship do not deal with the need for dual social critiques. Not only racism but also issues surrounding black subjectivity and authenticity are also essential to any study that would seek to discern how religion can be used to make sense of race and social justice in the twenty-first century.

racial inequality (159, 154). An important elements Emerson and Smith overlook in their analysis however is that for people of color, particularly African Americans, racially homogenous congregations have been the site of some of the most significant struggles against racial inequality and injustice. *Seeking Salvation* keeps this historical and religious fact in mind as it analyzes new millennium black messiahs.

My interest in cultural texts that feature black messiahs is echoed in another book length study that has a similar concern with the person and personality of Jesus. Stephen Prothero's *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon* (2003) shares with *Seeking Salvation* the belief that "Jesus has an American history" and that examining this history sheds light on Americans' "ever-changing national sensibilities" (7). The shifts in America's visions of themselves have manifested in transformations of this American cultural icon. Prothero describes these transformations as follows:

Like the Apostle Paul, who once wrote that he had become "all things to all men" so that he "might by all means save some" (I Corinthians 9:22), the American Jesus has been something of a chameleon. Christians have depicted him as black and white, male and female, straight and gay, a socialist and a capitalist, a pacifist and a warrior, a Ku Klux Klansman and a civil rights agitator (6).

The ability of this American Jesus to be conformed into the image and adapted to the agendas of so many speaks explicitly to the need for careful exploration of what contemporary black cultural figurations of Christ as black expose about America's new racial sensibilities.

Though *Seeking Salvation* shares with Prothero's *American Jesus* a general interest in Jesus as a cultural product or text, my approach to new millennium black messiahs differs significantly from Prother's approach to the Americanized Jesus. Unlike Prother, I do not seek to exorcize religious meaning from the analysis. Prothero makes it

clear that his interrogation of the American Jesus “is on Jesus the person, not Christ the theological sign” (7). His subject of inquiry “is neither the ‘living Christ’ of faith nor the ‘historical Jesus’ of scholarship...[but rather his] quest is for the cultural Jesus...Jesus as he has been interpreted and reinterpreted, construed and misconstrued, in ... American culture” (7). Prother’s historical narrative of the American Jesus provided invaluable insights as I worked on *Seeking Salvation*. But, in the end my understanding of the tradition of Afro-Christian religious thought in social justice movements demanded that I not only consider these new black messiahs as products of American culture, for they are certainly much more than that. They are the newest branches on a very old tree of black messianism—an element in African American culture with deep social, political, racial and religious roots. A cultural studies approach coupled with an eye tuned to religious meaning is most effective to fully interpret what Gunnar Kaufman, Yo Mama, and Huey Freeman have to teach us about the future of black messianic traditions in the discourse on race, black identity, and racial equality in the mid-1990s and beyond.

Seeking Salvation argues that Beatty, Cox, and McGruder grapple with these complex questions of race by fusing traditional black messianic traditions with satiric humor. At this intersection of religious irreverence and racial absurdity, space is created in which black subjectivity is negotiated and plans of racial redemption are performed. Faith and laughter have long been understood as important tools and weapons of liberation and social critique for African Americans. The faith is viewed both as a source of succor in an oppressive world as well as a system of belief that spurs adherents to contest oppression. The laughter can emerge from both humorous and satirical sources. Satire is viewed here as a weapon that proactively exposes folly while humor is defined

as a tool that reactively shields or covers one from some pain that cannot be avoided. When Beatty, Cox, and McGruder construct their new millennium black messiahs they take advantage of elements of satire and humor, hence my description of their techniques as black satirical humor.

The way that these artists fuse Afro-Christian religious culture and satirical humor is intriguing because in much of the scholarship on contemporary African American literature and culture, scholars tend to focus on either one of these elements or the other, not both. The exception to this rule of course is when the black church, particularly the black preacher, is the subject of parody in literature, black comedy, films, music, and other genres of black artistic culture. Though humor and religion tend not to be examined together, there are rather extensive bodies of scholarship focusing on each respective tool of social critique. This scholarship is referenced and expanded throughout *Seeking Salvation*. Bible scholar Vincent Wimbush and fiction writer Langston Hughes offer rather insightful articulations of how religion and humor function in the following passages. The first is from Wimbush's edited volume *African Americans and the Bible* (2000), and the latter from Hughes' edited collection *The Book of Negro Humor* (1966). Wimbush begins this expansive collection with an introduction in which he explains how African Americans have been able to creatively manipulate what was intended as an oppressive religion and use it to their benefit. He begins by professing that:

Almost from the beginning of their engagement with it, African Americans interpreted the Bible differently from those who introduced them to it, ironically and audaciously seeing in it—the most powerful of the ideological weapons used to legitimize their enslavement and disenfranchisement—a mirroring of themselves and their experiences, seeing in it the privileging of all those who like themselves are the humiliated, the outcasts and powerless. It was seen as a sort of rhetorical

paint brushing of their existence and a virtual manifesto for their redemption and triumph.

Wimbush's articulation of how African American interactions with the Bible have allowed a racially oppressed people to lay claim, if only rhetorically, to lives of triumph and redemption, is tempered somewhat by Hughes' slightly less optimistic vision of what humor is and how it operates as a tool of racial liberation. Hughes posits that:

Humor is laughing at what you haven't got when you ought to have it. Of course, you laugh by proxy. You're really laughing at the other guy's lack, not your own. That's what makes it funny—the fact that you don't know you are laughing at yourself. Humor is when the joke is on you but hits the other fellow first—before it boomerangs. Humor is what you wish in your secret heart were not funny, but it is, and you must laugh. Humor is your own unconscious therapy.

Hughes' sense that humor is a form of unconscious therapy connects to Wimbush's claim that the Bible is a source of redemption because in this context both therapy and redemption are things that promote the continuance of life. Both the therapy of humor and the Christian rhetoric of triumph against the odds are necessary to embrace the complex contradictions that arise when racial realism—the belief that racism and racial injustice are permanent—meets the necessity of steadfast and committed social activism. *Seeking Salvation* contends that at the crossroads where black messianism and satiric humor meet the complexities of racial salvation in a post-race society are acted out. The tension of messiahs to promise salvation but who simultaneously saturate their salvation plans in satire echoes the paradoxical nature of Paul's explanation of the way of salvation to the Romans when he informs them that “we are saved by hope: but hope that is seen is not hope: for what a man seeth, why doth he yet hope for? But if we hope for that we see not, then do we with patience wait for it...” knowing that in between hoping and being

saved “all things work together for good to them that love God, to them that are the called according to his purpose” (Romans 8: 24-24, 28). Gunnar Kaufman, Yo Mama, and Huey Freeman see clearly the racial absurdity that transpires between hope and actualization, and they are thoroughly impatient so they set about proactively charting their own unorthodox paths toward redemption. Seeing religious meaning and social purpose beyond the veil of their satire unearths the unique approaches to thinking about race and authenticity that *Seeking Salvation* suggests lay hidden within these cultural texts.

My approach of using religion, specifically Christology, to excavate racial meaning in contemporary seemingly irreverent black artistic products yields results similar to those Wimbush suggests are possible when issues of race and racism are considered when doing religious studies especially biblical scholarship. Because our consciousness of race significantly impacts how we interpret Christianity’s sacred text, Wimbush proposes that scholars engaged in biblical studies should begin their hermeneutical investigations with black subjects in mind. Bible scholars should read this text as ones that is holy but not at all ahistorical—sacred yet also informed by social context. Wimbush contends that even those studying ancient or sacred texts have a responsibility to discern how their biblical interpretations foster racial justice and/or participate in the process of social change. I totally agree with his position and contend that the same is true of cultural studies and race theory. Just as race needs to be more central in religious studies, so too does religion need to analyzed with greater care in these fields. *Seeking Salvation* is just one example in a growing body of scholarship that

demonstrates how this religiously nuanced study of contemporary cultural products can inform the ongoing discourse on race in America.¹⁰

The specific dialogues on race *Seeking Salvation* enters are critical race theory and racial formation theory. A relatively new field of scholarship critical race theory (CRT) emerged in the 1980s at Harvard University. Two institutional events in particular gave rise to CRT. According to Kimberle Crenshaw, a “student protest, boycott, and organization of an alternative course on race and law at Harvard Law School in 1981” and the “Critical Legal Studies National Conference on silence and race” in 1987 set the stage for the development of this movement of legal scholars, who were ready to begin an honest conversation regarding why the legal victories of the Civil Rights Movement had

¹⁰ Scholars of African American literature have paid very close attention to the way Black artist have used aspects of Afro-Christian culture in their work to interrogate race and racism. Some critics who have been particularly concerned with the presence of religious faith and spirituality in African American literary texts include: William L. Andrews *To Tell a Free Story* (1986) and *Sisters in the Spirit* (1986), Francis Smith Foster *Witnessing Slavery* (1979), Yolanda Y. Pierce *Hell Without Fires* (2005), Kimberly Rae Connor *Imagining Grace: Liberating Theologies in the Slave Narrative Tradition* (2000), and James W. Coleman *Faithful Visions: Treatments of the Sacred, Spiritual, and Supernatural in Twentieth-Century African American Fiction* (2006). Each of these critics make special efforts to demonstrate that although “Christianity represents a contradictory faith for African Americans” because “its signs, symbols, words, and messages [which are premised on salvation and freedom] were used to physically and mentally enslave” them it remains an essential element in artistic expression and freedom struggles (Pierce 3). These critics concur that Christianity’s rhetoric of unity and oneness in Christ “has consistently been used to exploit, denigrate, and discriminate” against people of color (Pierce 3). Nevertheless, African Americans have rather consistently, Pierce argues, used the rhetoric, the words, the signs, the symbols, and the narratives of Christianity as tools by which they justified activism against their oppressors and as primary source material for their creative art.

This tradition is extended in the cultural texts Beatty, Cox, and McGruder produce—all of which have messianic figures that actively engage in battles with all sorts of absurd examples of racial injustice. My assessment of how these contemporary artists deal with religion shares some basic affinities with the aforementioned scholars, but it also has some significant differences. The 19th century artists these critics examine take very seriously the idea that the rhetoric of Christianity’s claim that the movement from spiritual bondage to freedom is also possible in the temporal world. Evidence of this freedom is demonstrated in the narratives of fugitive slaves, but the persistence of racism and racial injustice in freedom land is apparent in the silences and elisions at the end of the spiritual and slave narratives. These silences and omissions get voiced in the fiction written in the twentieth century that Connor and Coleman examine. These critics identify ways in which black artists use the liberation ethics and the fluidity of spirituality to negotiate a new era of racial oppression. I extend these critics’ work by examining texts produced at the end of the twentieth-century that use religious tools and satiric humor to navigate America’s treacherous racial terrain.

not translated into expansive social change.¹¹ Some of the founding legal scholars of CRT include Kimberle Crenshaw, Richard Delgado, Neil Gotunda, Charles Lawrence, and Patricia Williams, but the person given the most credit as a pioneer of CRT is Professor Derrick Bell. The element of Bell's scholarship that makes his insights so useful in relation to this study of black messianism and messianic salvation is his steadfast belief that racism is a permanent part of America's cultural consciousness. He terms this belief *racial realism* and defines it as a "mindset or a philosophy [that] requires us to acknowledge the permanence of our [black people's] subordinate status" (74). Embracing this reality, Bell contends, "enables us to avoid despair and frees us to imagine and enact racial strategies that can bring fulfillment and even triumph" in the midst of racial inequality (74-75). Racial realism is necessary because although "contemporary color barriers are less visible" they are "neither less real nor less oppressive;" yet as he explains, "the very absence of visible signs of discrimination creates an atmosphere of racial neutrality that encourages whites to believe that racism is a thing of the past" (75). The conflation of a belief among whites that racism has ended, the disappearance of explicit indicators of racism, and the strategic political attack on civil rights reform created a perfect storm of sorts that convinced Derrick Bell to eventually "concede that a commitment to racial equality merely perpetuates our disempowerment" (76).

¹¹ CRT emerged to challenge the neo-conservative attacks on civil rights legislation, but this field of legal scholarship also took to task those white liberal legal scholars engaged in Critical Legal Studies (CLS). CLS scholars responded to the Reagan administration's attacks on civil rights reforms by arguing that, it was for the most part ineffective to seek to combat racial oppression by arguing for legal rights. Crenshaw summarizes their perspective by explaining that CLS scholars believed that "even engaging in rights discourse is incompatible with a broader strategy of social change. They view the extension of rights...as ultimately legitimating the very racial equality and oppression that such extensions purports to remedy" (103). In this political and legal context CRT movement emerged to contest both "New Left and New Right critiques of the civil rights movement" (103).

Nevertheless he adamantly believes that despite the permanence of racism, “the struggle against racism remains worthwhile and valuable” (433). The tension inherent in his scholarship is perhaps most provocatively presented in an oft-quoted passage from *Faces at the Bottom of the Well*, which reads as follows:

I want to set forth a proposition that will be easier to reject than refute: Black people will never gain full equality in this country. Even those Herculean efforts we hail as successful will produce no more than temporary “peaks of progress,” short-lived victories that slide into irrelevance as racial patterns adapt in ways that maintain white dominance. This is a hard-to-accept fact that all human history verifies. We must acknowledge it not as a sign of submission but rather as act of ultimate defiance (Bell 12).

One way Bell embraces the reality of racism’s permanence as a sign of ultimate defiance is through his commitment to producing critical race theory writing. The central objective of Bell’s brand of narrative legal scholarship is, as Richard Delgado explains, to use “legal storytelling...[as] a means by which ... the particulars of lives lived at the margins of society, margins that are rapidly collapsing toward a disappearing center...may introduce their views into the dialogue about the way society should be governed” (Delgado 57). Because Bell’s philosophy of civil rights activism is guided by racial realism, the stories he creates are not the myths of survival and “tales of hope and struggle—for example, that of the Promised Land—to inspire and comfort the community during difficult times” (57).

Bell writes narratives based on painful realities of black American’s status in the United States. One of his more disturbing and controversial stories is “The Chronicle of the Space Traders”—a story in which Bell ponders whether or not Americans would sell their African American citizens to aliens. The story is filled with arguments for and against the trade, and rather predictably ends with Black Americans being gathered into

camps and sent to an uncertain fate. In discussions of this story, Bell has revealed that most African American readers are confident that America would sell them while most whites are not convinced that the story would end that way. The divergence in responses signals the type of racial consciousness that exists in the US. It is within this context that CRT was developed. Its overarching objectives were “to understand how regimes of white supremacy and its subordination of people of color have been created and maintained in American” and to “not merely understand the vexed bond between law and racial power but to *change* it” (Crenshaw xiii). These common interests demand that critical race theorists commit to “not simply explicate but also to intervene in the ideological contestation of race in America, and to create new, oppositionist accounts of race” (Crenshaw xiii). These oppositional accounts of race are necessary according to critical race theorists because “the deeply transformative potential of the civil rights movement’s interrogation of racial power was successfully aborted as a piece of mainstream American ideology” when “integration, assimilation, and the ideal of colorblindness became the official norms of racial enlightenment” (Crenshaw xvi, xiv).

Throughout the following chapters I identify specific ways in which Gunnar Kaufman, Yo Mama, and Huey Freeman use their status as satirical black messiahs to proactively engage in the work of creating oppositional definitions of black identity and exposing the contradictions and fallacies of America’s colorblind, post-race consciousness. These characters juxtaposition of the hope inherent in black messianic salvation and the harsh racial realities of their historical moment, signal that the end of the 20th century would require new narratives, new myths, new saviors, new strategies, and new ways of articulating the meaning of race.

Michael Omi and Howard Winant's racial formation theory as articulated in their book, *Racial Formation in the United States From the 1960s to the 1990s* (1994), is central to my readings of the new millennium black messiah's and their methods of negotiating race by reconfiguring black messianism. Omi and Winant set forth a theory of racial formation that is premised on the fact that the meanings of race are constantly changing. These shifts in what race means directly impacts how people in different historical moments define and therefore seek to attain racial equality. This premise of racial formation would support my suggestion that since the historical moment Beatty, Cox, and McGruder represented in their art was so vastly different – racially speaking – these artist had to have unique messianic figures to capture the complexities of the cultural moment.

Though I have already described the historical context in which these artists came of age and the artistic contexts in which they produced their black messiahs, a word of explanation regarding how Omi and Winant believe racial meaning is made during different historical moments is instructive. Their conclusions regarding what happens to race and equality in the 1990s is especially informative because it helps stage my analysis of the cultural texts Beatty, Cox, and McGruder used to artistically represent this moment.

Omi and Winant argue that the confusion regarding race and equality in the 1990s grew directly out of the struggles over race and equality that transpired during the Civil Rights and the Black Power Movements from the 1950s through the 1970s. Prior to the mid-1960s America's "racial dictatorship," (a racial consciousness that negated the humanity of Black people, made them slaves, and one which existed "from 1607 to 1865-

-258 years”) was the order of the day. This racial dictatorship achieved three essential things that solidified America’s racial ideology. It “defined ‘American’ identity as white.” It organized the ‘color line’ [as] the fundamental division in U.S. society,” and it “consolidated the oppositional racial consciousness...originally framed by marronage, slave revolts and indigenous resistance...[by creating] the ‘black’ where once there had been Asante or Yoruba” (65-66). Essentially America had a racial ideology that sustained itself by erasing ethnic specificity and constructing black identity, which was by definition subordinate and un-free.

This racial hegemony was contested by the Civil Rights Movement’s call for racial democracy, which in essence is a call for transformation in racial thinking. The racial minority movements of the 1960s were crucial because they placed race center stage in American politics and strategically took advantage of the racial dictatorship’s consolidation of racial difference. The social movements took the categories “black” and “American” and rearticulated them; the “minority social movements create collective identity, collective subjectivity, by offering their adherents a different view of themselves and their world; different, that is, from the characteristic worldviews and self-concepts of the social order which the movements are challenging” (Omi/Winant 88). In the Civil Rights Movement the demands for an end to Jim Crow segregation and for governmental support for equality in hiring, voting, educational, and housing practices meant a drastic alteration in the definition of American identity as well as in America’s racial ideology. Because this movement was successful in its challenge to America’s white racial hegemony it set the stage for a “reformulation of the meaning of race in general” (Omi/Winant 89).

This reformulation process is evidenced powerfully at the end of the 1960s when generational and ideological shifts began to take place among Civil Rights organizations. Particularly following the assassination of Dr. King in 1968 and in the wake of explosions of urban unrest and riots, the calls for Black Power signaled a turning point in the approach to combating racism. No longer would black people assume that those in control of resources and power would willingly submit to equal justice and fairness. Therefore they began making strides to organize rather stridently around racial identity – black pride – in an effort to establish a sense of collective identity through which communities would pool their resources and promote variations of black nationalism, because it was already clear to them that the changes in legislation, the federal programs, and various gains won as a result of the activism of the 1960s had unfortunately not been effective in producing significant changes in the lived experience of most Black Americans.

Interestingly the turn toward self-defense and nationalism coupled with the urban unrest and decay of the late 1960s and 1970s, only lent credence to the aforementioned 1980s conservative backlash against the very real though in the end limited civil rights reforms of the 1960s. Those intent on undermining the already limited gains did so by appropriating the very language of civil rights and reinterpreting or rearticulating it. “Beginning in the 1970s, the forces of racial reaction [racial equality backlash] seized on the notion of racial equality advanced by the racial minority movements and *rearticulated* its meaning” (Omi/Winant 117). Their objective was to eliminate those programs that in their view established “a new form of privilege – that of ‘preferential treatment’” to racial minority groups (Omi/Winant 117). Their plan was simple on the surface, but racist at its

core: “a *color blind* society where racial considerations were never entertained in the selection of leaders, in hiring decisions, and in the distribution of goods and services in general” (Omi/Winant 117). The problem with this new vision of course is that America’s historical legacy of racial discrimination has created a situation in which racial identity carries meanings and assumptions that do in fact inform how we think about who is qualified to lead, who will do the job well, and who deserves quality goods and services. “In the aftermath of the 1960s,” Omi and Winant explain, “an effective challenge to the egalitarian ideals framed by the minority movements could no longer rely on the racism of the past. Racial equality had to be acknowledged as a desirable goal. But the *meaning* of equality, and the proper means of achieving it, remained matters of considerable debate” (117). These debates were yet settled in the 1990s, when Beatty, Cox, and McGruder began producing their new millennium black messiahs. Each of the following chapters elucidates how these artists used their art to seek, or perhaps more precisely to satirize America’s racial salvation and in the process enter the on-going debates on the meaning of race.

Section IV -- Chapter Summaries: Seeking Salvation Enters the Dialogue

Chapter One “Find the Cost of Freedom Buried in the Ground: Racial Absurdity and Messianic Martyrdom in Paul Beatty’s *The White Boy Shuffle*,” offers a close reading of Beatty’s protagonist Gunnar Kaufman—a young black boy who figures himself as a Negro messiah. This analysis of Gunnar’s fulfillment of his messiah gig highlights the affinities Gunnar shares with the biblical Christ who like Gunnar concedes to the fate of finding full-freedom in death. Gunnar Kaufman’s promotion of mass suicide as a means

of salvation from racial absurdity, Chapter One argues, draws on the belief that the historical Christ rebelled against the status quo through the willful and some might argue revolutionary submission to death. Additionally *The White Boy Shuffle* also gives us a textual representation of black identity by presenting Gunnar's memoir, which I contend is an extended suicide note, within the context of a novel that paints a fictional view of America's racial landscape at the end of the 20th century.

While Beatty's pathway to freedom is paved through an understanding of the black messiah as a suffering and crucified martyr, Renee Cox's visual representations of Christ as a Black woman conjure visions of a savior who rather than submitting to death instead revels in life. Chapter Two, "Not Yo Mama's Black Christ: Visualizing Race, Gender, and Salvation in Renee Cox's *Yo Mama's Last Supper*," posits that when gender is added as a category of analysis the concept of Christ as a martyr is rejected as a necessity for salvation. Instead when black women figure themselves as Christ-figures, rather than centering their Christ-consciousness on the Messiah as a suffering Savior they tend to focus more explicitly on Christ as a liberator, a healer, and a Savior concerned with life and wholeness. This second focuses on what Stuart Hall has described as racialized regimes of representation and argues that Renee Cox's photography, particularly her reinterpretations of iconic religious art, strategically contest racist and sexist visual representations of black female identity. Building on the foundation laid in the first chapter, *Not Yo Mama's Black Christ* offers just one answer to the question of how young black artists have attempted to defined authentic black identity and subjectivity despite American racism and racist stereotypes.

Chapter Three *Saving the Next Generation: Reading The Boondocks as a*

Textual/Visual Parable extends the analysis of how blackness is defined and racial salvation is negotiated at the turn of the new millennium. This chapter offers close readings of Aaron McGruder's comic strip and considers this image-text a powerful tool of social critique. What differentiates this chapter from the previous two is that it reads this racially charged comic strip by taking into consideration both its textual as well as its visual elements that convey contradictory messages, which are often intended to undermine problematic racializations. This claim is supported by close readings of lead character Huey Freeman, the self-proclaimed savior of his people, whose salvation efforts fail miserably with respect to Riley, Uncle Ruckus, and Jazmine DuBois—all of whom possess ideas about black identity and race from which Huey believes they need to be saved. The central concern in this chapter is to highlight the fact that although Huey fails in each of his roles to secure black salvation the comic strip as a whole succeeds because saves by engaging in an intriguing Christ-like ministry of teaching through parable.

Having offered close readings of three very different black messiahs, one represented literarily, one visually, and the other presented using image-texts, *Seeking Salvation* concludes by examining what these characters' revisions to traditional black messianism reveals about the future of this concept in the context of black salvation (freedom) struggles and American national redemption. In the conclusion, *Black Messiahs in a "Post-Race" America*, I reflect on the major insights of each preceding chapter and use them to explicate this post-race/ permanently racist phenomena. In the conclusion I implicitly consider whether or not Gunnar's, Yo Mama's and Huey's unsettling salvation plans are in the same vein as Derrick Bell's racial realism, or if their work in any way helps temper the uneasiness Bell leaves his readers with at the end of

The Space Traders. In this allegory of racial realism, America literally sacrifices Black people to an unknown fate to “save” itself from economic, environmental, and physical disaster. After much debate, the government votes to round up all of America’s Black citizens (even the so-called “Oreos” and “Uncle Toms” who were so often deemed not Black enough) and sends them in chains onto space ships waiting at the seashore. The story offers a rather bleak view of the proposition that black salvation and American redemption can coincide. Bell’s allegory illustrates America’s desperate need for salvation from the troubling racializations that lend themselves to interracial as well as intra-racial division. The artists examined in *Seeking Salvation* answer Bell’s call for salvation and create a cohort of black messiahs primed to confront the challenges of negotiating race and racism in a new millennium. These satirical yet quite serious saviors defend against bondage to racial stereotypes, but their plans of salvation are not the traditional narratives of wilderness wandering concluded with entrance into a promised land of milk, honey, and racial harmony. Theirs’ are stories of complexity and paradox rather astutely representing the historical and racial moment during which they were created. The question left unanswered is what these irreverent black messiahs and their unorthodox salvation plans portend for the future? What do they teach us about how to use the insights offered in artistic representations as beacons of light along the path of social practice?

Chapter One

“Find the Cost of Freedom Buried in the Ground:” Racial Absurdity and Messianic Martyrdom in Paul Beatty’s *The White Boy Shuffle*

Racism introduces absurdity into the human condition. Not only does racism express the absurdity of the racist, but it generates absurdity in the victims. And the absurdity of the victims intensifies the absurdity of the racists, ad infinitum. If one lives in a country where racism is held valid and practiced in all ways of life, eventually, no matter whether one is a racist or a victim, one comes to feel the absurdity of life.

Chester Himes, My Life of Absurdity

Martyrs are needed to create incidents. Incidents are needed to create revolutions. Revolutions are needed to create progress. *These are the tactics devised by the peoples of the world who wanted freedom.... At this point Negro martyrs are needed. The martyr to create the incident which will mobilize the forces of justice and carry us forward from the pivot of change to a way of existence wherein everyone is free. It is obvious that we can not stay here; we've got to go somewhere. If we can not of our own accord go forward, we will against our will be pushed backward....* After all, we have nothing to lose, except our lives, and one preferable change to win: Democratic equality.¹²

Chester Himes, Negro Martyrs Needed

Perhaps the most compelling yet least discussed aspect of poet Paul Beatty’s highly acclaimed debut novel, *The White Boy Shuffle* (1996), is its use of black messianic

¹² These epigraphic passages are taken from fiction writer and political activist Chester Himes’ second autobiography *My Life of Absurdity* and an article published in *The Crisis* (1943) titled “Negro Martyrs Needed.” The former passage is quoted in Paul Beatty’s edited volume *Hokum: An Anthology of African American Humor* (2007). In an interview with Dave Welch, Beatty described *Hokum* as a collection of humor that goes beyond folklore and jokes to include humorous statements from public figures including Muhammad Ali and Al Sharpton, excerpts from speeches and interviews with historic figures such as Malcolm X and Sojourner Truth, and all sorts of unintentional humor from people like Mike Tyson. Beatty explains that in *Hokum* he “wanted to get across the idea that humor is used in all kinds of different ways. Humor,” Beatty contends, “is definitely a tool to get across political and personal points” (<http://www.powells.com/authors/beatty.html>). That he beings the third and final section of *Hokum* by referencing Chester Himes is telling because Himes’ work (as does Beatty’s) acknowledges the absurdity of racism and the need to combat that racism is some way. Beatty’s turn to revolutionary suicide as a means of attaining freedom by instigating an incident follows the prescription Himes writes in “Negro Martyrs Needed.”

salvation to interrogate American racism, Black (in) authenticity,¹³ and the meaning(s) of freedom and racial equality at the end of the twentieth-century. *The White Boy Shuffle*'s (*TWBS*) protagonist, Gunnar Kaufman, participates in the tradition of black messianism directly by embracing the label of savior of the Blacks. As a result of experiencing the perils of coming of age in California during the "Reaganesque eighties and the riotous Los Angeles early nineties," Gunnar decides to contest the absurdity that racism introduces into his human condition by declaring himself the new black messiah—black America's new political leader (Charles 31). Having taken on this role, Gunnar recognizes he now has the responsibility of leading what he describes as "a divided, downtrodden, and alienated people to the Promised Land" (*TWBS* 1).

Gunnar's decision to accept this calling to become the new "savior of the blacks" effectively places him within a rich political, religious, social, and literary tradition of black messiahs charged with the task of ushering in black America's social salvation (*TWBS* 223).¹⁴ "On one hand," Gunnar explains in the novel's opening sentence, "this messiah gig is a bitch. On the other [he has finally] managed to fill the perennial void in African-American leadership" (*TWBS* 1). Once he fully embraces his position as Black America's savior, the one called to sacrifice in the interest of leading his followers into

¹³ I borrow the term "black (in)authenticity" from literary scholar J. Martin Favor's book *Authentic Blackness: The Folk in the New Negro Renaissance (1999)*. Favor argues that Black writers in the Harlem Renaissance engaged in explicit fictional contestations of black authenticity. They demonstrated through their characters that racial identity is not a given. It instead must be constructed. Favor contends that since racial identity must also be constructed in fiction, it can also be challenged in such a way that monolithic ideas of blackness as inherently rural and agrarian can be debunked.

¹⁴ For more on the connections between African-American and American concepts of messianism see Wilson J. Moses. "The Concept of Messianism, Sacred and Secular." in *Black Messiahs and Uncle Toms: Social and Literary Manipulations of a Religious Myth*, 1982 (1-16). Here Moses explains that African American's reliance upon the concept of a black messiah is so entrenched because it is borrowed from a very American and Christian belief that as a nation we are a "redeemer people." Having been converted to Christianity within this context but also under the shadow of slavery, Black people then began to define themselves as a redeemer nation within a nation. They therefore saw it as their God ordained mission to endure suffering and serve as the moral compass of the nation.

the promised land of freedom, Gunnar explains that there will “no longer [be] a need for fed-up second-class citizens” to search for a new “leader of the Black Community” (*TWBS 1*). Gunnar Kaufman will be the savior; however, the language and tone he uses to describe his position signals that his plan of salvation will be anything but ordinary.

In the prologue, Beatty reveals that Gunnar firmly believes the only way to save his people from lives mired in racial absurdity is to convince black people to commit mass suicide. Different people interpret his death salvation plan differently. Gunnar figures black people’s mass suicides as acts of resistant. But, he explains that the “TV Guide synopsis” of the film version of his life and movement would read: “In the struggle for freedom, a reluctant young poet” “unveils the oblivion that is black America’s existence and the hopelessness of the struggle” and “convinces black Americans to give up hope and kill themselves in a climactic crash ‘n’ burn finale” (*TWBS 1*). This media depiction of the suicide movement frames death as synonymous with hopelessness and resignation. In Gunnar’s hands however, mass suicide—either self-inflicted or victim precipitated—signs continued resistance in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds. The grave functions as his promised land. Death is the realm in which he proposes Black Americans will finally experience freedom from soul-murdering, identity-damaging, and justice-thwarting racial absurdity. Like so many who precede him in choosing death rather than bondage, Gunnar Kaufman likewise found the cost of his freedom in the willingness to embrace death.¹⁵ Gunnar fuses these attitudes regarding freedom and death and they become the basis of his black messianic identity. He is at once a

¹⁵ Some examples of people who made this choice include African captives who would have been made slaves. The descendants of Africans whose lives under the lash of slavery developed a conviction in them that they would have liberty or death, and Jesus who scripture proclaims submitted to death for the purpose of establishing more abundant and eternal life for those professing faith in him.

revolutionary leader, a martyr for his movement, and a satirical messianic figure. In Gunnar's life, death is not an end. Martyrdom is not synonymous with nihilism. It is evidence of a steadfast determination to live a life that is not submitted to the American racial status quo.

Section I -- Entering the Critical Debate on *The White Boy Shuffle*

If this assessment of Gunnar's messiah gig is accurate, why then has his position as Negro messiah been all but ignored by scholars who have directed critical attention to *TWBS*? Part of the explanation of this critical silence stems from the fact that reviewers and critics have rather unanimously concurred that above all else *TWBS* is a strictly satirical novel. Consequently those who have sought to understand Gunnar Kaufman have read his commitment to messianic salvation and his plan of liberation from racial absurdity as unfortunate spaces in the novel where, according to *New York Times* reviewer Richard Bernstein, Beatty's "satire slips over the border into a kind of nihilistic slapstick" (Bernstein 25). Bernstein's sense that in Beatty's hands the power of satire to expose absurdity and folly is diminished by the author's apparent lack of hope for any sort of meaningful change is echoed by a number of other reviewers.

According to Nick Charles, Gunnar is a "culturally displaced, ethically challenged Jack Kevorkian, a juiced-up euthanasist" who promotes suicide as "the ultimate remedy to the 20-30 million...disillusioned, 40-Acre and a Mule-less African-Americans" who have "enslaved themselves to every three-card monte movement that offered salvation or equality" (30). The glib terminology used to describe Gunnar in his review confirms that Charles, like so many others, reads Gunnar's decision to embrace suicide as a route to freedom as the ultimate in absurd black civil rights and liberation strategies. Charles'

sense that Gunnar's plan as well as his messiah status are parodies of Civil Rights and Black Power era methods of political and social leadership is certainly not unwarranted for even Gunnar asserts that since "past movements in the black struggle seem to have had the staying power of an asthmatic marathoner with no sense of direction" then "as movements go" his was "better than most" (*TWBS* 225). Yet reading Gunnar Kaufman's messiah gig as solely satirical leads to the erroneous conclusion that his actions are a sign of fatalism in the face of rampant racism or worse yet that his mass suicide plan is a symptom of what Professor Cornel West has described as the "disease of the soul," "the nihilistic threat—that is, loss of hope and absence of meaning" (West 23, 29).

Not only has the scholarly focus on *TWBS*'s use of satire and parody created a one-dimensional reading of Gunnar, which ignores the religious discourse under-girding his messianic actions, but the emphasis on satire has also prompted critics to leave *TWBS* with rather mixed or ambivalent understanding of what the memoir within a novel seeks to achieve. Richard Bernstein's assessment of *TWBS* demonstrates the paradox that seems to plague most of Beatty's critics. Bernstein lauds *TWBS* as a novel "of enormous energy and verbal dazzle," "a blast of satirical heat from the talented heart of black American life" (25). On the other hand he laments that it is also a novel "whose identity remains a blur" (25). "In the end" Bernstein suggests, "you may not have figured out exactly what 'The White Boy Shuffle' is striving to be, a political screed, a comedy routine, a commentary on American racism or a parody of the great American racial conundrum" (25). Offering a specific example of this problem he posits that "whenever [*TWBS*] seems about to adopt a position, Mr. Beatty pulls it into parody, which in fact, is how the book announces itself in its opening pages, when Gunnar declares himself to be

the new ‘Negro demagogue’” (25). The presentation of Gunnar as a black messiah, in Bernstein’s opinion, prevents the novel from taking a position and in the end leaves readers unsure of its identity.

Unlike Richard Bernstein who finds Gunnar’s messianic status a hindrance, I find it a rather insightful narrative strategy, which when read with attention to Afro-Christian religious thought and culture, helps to reveal aspects of *TWBS*’s identity that would otherwise go undetected—primarily its reconfiguration of black messianism to enter a larger discourse on the meaning of racism and the most effective means of attaining racial equality. Literary critic and African American satirist Ishmael Reed, who uses religious rhetoric and spirituality in his fiction and who has been identified as a literary forefather of Paul Beatty, does not share my optimism regarding Beatty’s fiction. Using an approach quite similar to that employed by Richard Bernstein, Reed admits that Beatty’s “writing skills are extraordinary,” but he goes on to lament that Beatty’s “subject matter—urban nihilism” is neither fresh nor particularly original. This assessment leads Reed to conjecture that for a writer as talented as Paul Beatty obviously is, “good writing isn’t enough. Beatty needs a vision” (135).¹⁶ Reed’s and Bernstein’s criticisms of Beatty and *The White Boy Shuffle* are perhaps most succinctly summed up by Jennifer Jordan in an article title “The New Literary Blackface” in which she discusses contemporary African American satire. Jordan suggests that writers like Paul Beatty, Trey Ellis, and Colson Whitehead, who she categorizes as Reed’s “literary progeny,” create novels that

¹⁶ Ishmael Reed’s comments on Paul Beatty that are included here are actually from a review of *Tuff* rather than *TWBS*. Nevertheless Reed’s critiques of Beatty’s writing and the substance and vision thereof are relevant to both novels. *Tuff* published in 2001 is a novel about another black man who like Gunnar Kaufman simply does not seem to fit in. Tuffy the central character and one of many misfits in the novel decides that since he has no other real skills he will pursue a career in local politics in Harlem. In many ways, *Tuff* is much like *TWBS* in that they both are infused with satire and parody of African-American culture.

“have an in-determinant meaning,” “are absent any heroes,” and are “devoid of ideological loyalties” (28). In essence, Beatty and his novel, although celebrated on one hand for how they critique race and racism using the tool of satire, are nevertheless rather consistently described as somehow lacking because of the novel’s blurred identity, in-determinant meaning, absent hero, and unclear vision.

That critics come away from *TWBS* with these sorts of readings is not especially surprising because the tendency to read *TWBS* as a novel that is exclusively satirical has caused critics to not even consider that Gunnar’s messianic status could be read as not only a critique of but also a salvaging of the powerful rhetoric of messianic salvation. The failure to take seriously what *TWBS* has to say about how these concepts continue to be effective or how they have come to be ineffective in the context of African American’s ongoing struggle for racial justice and freedom from racial absurdity has led to a serious gap in the scholarship on this novel.

“Find the Cost of Freedom Buried in the Ground” begins the work of closing this gap by offering a reading of *TWBS* that elucidates how it this novel rearticulates the discourse of traditional black messianic salvation, uses it as a tool to expose American racism as well as Black American notions of racial authenticity, and finally reconsiders whether or not narratives of messianic salvation retain their evocative power in a historical moment characterized by racial despair and cynicism. Essentially this chapter argues that rather than eclipsing the novel’s identity and preventing it from taking a position, Gunnar’s messiah status actually sheds light on why the reality of racial absurdity leads Gunnar Kaufman—the black messiah—to espouse death as the way to ultimate freedom.

I contend that *TWBS* poses two core questions: What does it mean to be black at the end of the twentieth century, and what is to be done when the accepted meanings of blackness foster bondage rather than facilitate freedom and racial justice? To use Gunnar's terminology: what course of action does one take when it is abundantly apparent that the dictate to "stay black" means you (your subjectivity/ identity) must die? *TWBS* sets about answering these questions by framing the absurd, freedom thwarting episodes of Gunnar's life with a prologue and an epilogue in which he reflects on his Black experience. Using memoir writing as his tool of reflection, Gunnar seems to have come to accept Derrick Bell's difficult to refute proposition that "Black people will never gain full equality in this country" (Bell 12). Gunnar in fact uses language quite similar to Bell's when he describes his plan of salvation and the motivating forces that have brought him to this conclusion. Gunnar argues that:

In the quest for equality, black folks have tried everything. We've begged, revolted, entertained, intermarried, and are still treated like shit. Nothing works, so why suffer the slow deaths of toxic addiction and the American work ethic when the immediate gratification of suicide awaits.... Lunch counters, bus seats, and executive washrooms be damned; our mass suicide will be the ultimate sit-in (*TWBS* 2).

Convinced that all other avenues for gaining equality have been exhausted without considerable results, Gunnar is firm in his decision that death via mass suicide is now the way to ensure freedom from a lifetime of being treated unfairly because of his racial identity. In the epilogue he shifts his focus to explain the theoretical impetus driving this rather drastic course of revolutionary action. In his farewell message to America he proclaims that: "It's been a lovely five hundred years, but it is time to go. We're abandoning this sinking ship America.... Black America has relinquished its needs in a

world where expectations are illusions, has refused to develop ideals and mores in a society that applies principles without principle” (*TWBS* 225).¹⁷ Likely referring to America’s vaunted principles of life, liberty, the pursuit of happiness, and equality, Gunnar and those Black Americans who have likewise grown tired of being denied these basic rights adamantly refuse to continue to embrace the illusion of the American creed any longer.

Gunnar’s conviction that the American creed of democracy and equality is an illusion as well as his belief that suicide is the best way to contest the contradictions are both reinforced through the tool of nomenclature. His name—Gunnar Kaufman—is an amalgamation of Swedish economist, Gunnar Myrdal and Beat poet, Bob Kaufman. In Myrdal’s landmark study on race, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (1944), he posits that an “overwhelming majority of white Americans desire that there be as few Negroes as possible” (167). If the Negro population could be “eliminated,” Myrdal explains, it would meet many white people’s approval, but “the Negroes cannot be killed off” because it would “go strongly against the American Creed” (167). “Voluntary exportation of Negroes could not be carried on extensively” because of “unwillingness...on the part of the American Negroes...who usually do not want to leave the country but prefer to stay and fight it out here” (167, 170). Gunnar Myrdal’s mid-century study is revisited and revised by Gunnar Kaufman

¹⁷ In this passage from the epilogue Gunnar’s thoughts on America’s principles echo the sentiments of the invisible narrator in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952) who in the epilogue to his narrative also reflects on his responsibility with respect to America’s national principles. Unlike Gunnar however, the Invisible Man feels that it is the duty of Black Americans to uphold these principles because Black people are in the best position, he believes, to be able to identify the places where the principles are not being upheld. The difference in approaches are intriguing given that Beatty’s protagonist takes such a drastically different view of the racial situation in 1996 than does Ellison’s protagonist at mid-century. In many ways Gunnar Kaufman is the Invisible Man after having emerged from the hole of hibernation.

who at the end of the 20th century is not as committed to enduring the pain of staying to fight. He chooses instead to fight by leaving this life.

Gunnar Kaufman's method of protesting racial absurdity by promoting suicides which are preceded by the victims' death poems has strong affinities to the artistic approaches of one of Paul Beatty's favorite poets Bob Kaufman--a popular Beat poet of the 1950s. Considered the first be-bop poet and a stellar jazz poet, Kaufman was arrested several times for screaming his poems at passers-by on street corners in San Francisco's North Beach area. The nomenclature similarity between Bob and Gunnar is given heightened meaning when we consider that Gunnar's decision to facilitate Black America's mass suicide by demanding that the US government drop an atomic bomb on them closely mimics a theme in Bob Kaufman's poetry. Kaufman's *Abomunist Manifest* (1959) incorporates into its title a term Kaufman created -- "abomunism," which according to Catherine V. Lindberg is "his contraction of ... communism, atom bomb, Bob Kaufman, and abomination" (Lindberg). In characterizing Kaufman's career, Lindberg describes Kaufman's poetry as "serious in its *black humor*." Kaufman's poetry effectively "recorded with both humor and pathos the pains of society's victims," and his life reveals an unwavering faith in the "ambiguous power of individual acts of cultural resistance in the continuing struggles of oppressed peoples" (Lindberg). This brief description of Bob Kaufman highlights just a few of the commonalities between him and young spoken-word poet Gunnar Kaufman whose very public suicide pact, subsequent mass suicide movement, and accompanying suicide notes in the form of death poems all come together to create a vibrant public performance of social resistance by way of death. Bob Kaufman was convinced that these types of very public displays contained

tremendous though sometimes unexplainable power—power that Gunnar Kaufman takes full advantage of and wields expertly as he uses the rhetoric of messianic salvation to contest racial absurdity.

Section II -- An Absurd Mis-Education in Black Authenticity

Gunnar's conviction that his suicide movement represents the most plausible path to racial salvation is best explained by situating his rather drastic methods in their appropriate context. The episodes presented in Gunnar's memoir, which is framed by a prologue and epilogue, attest to his belief that death is the only space of freedom for people defined as black. Gunnar's (mis-) education in American racism is the focus of the novel's first section titled, "Mama Baby, Papa Maybe." Here it becomes apparent that much of what Gunnar knows about race and racism he learns at school. As mentioned in the Introduction, *TWBS* focuses its attention on what it meant to be black during a very particular historical moment -- the mid 1980s through the early 1990s. Using an eclectic mixture of narrative tools: first person narration, poetry, drawings, e-mails, storytelling, and dreams, *TWBS* constructs a fictional landscape upon which twelve-year-old Gunnar transitions from his youth in an all-white suburb (Santa Monica), to his turbulent teen years in an urban hood (Hillside West Los Angeles), and on through his short lived experiences as a college student at Boston University. Each stage of Gunnar's life contains vivid examples of the absurdity that racism introduces into his black experience. Contradictory classroom multiculturalism, rampant urban nihilism, and the racial violence of the 1992 Los Angeles riots each bring to life the absurdity Gunnar must endure as he seeks to discover what it means to be black.

While in Santa Monica, Gunnar is mis-educated to believe that everything black is by definition negative. The following example illustrates his perception of what “black” meant. Gunnar contends that “Black was an unwanted dog abandoned in the forest who finds its way home by fording flooded rivers and hitchhiking in the beds of pickup trucks and arrives at its destination only to be taken for a care ride to the desert” (*TWBS* 35). Essentially, to be black was to be expelled from one’s own home, to prevail in spite of the odds only to have one’s triumphant return home thwarted by a persistent racism. This more theoretical understanding of blackness manifests itself practically when Gunnar attempts to understand his place within American blackness. He compares what people say about black people—they can dance, they love fried chicken, they love basketball, they are violent, and all sorts of other racial stereotypes—to himself and comes to the conclusion that since none of those racial markers applied to him, he was somehow different from other black people. The novel’s action is set in motion when Gunnar makes this belief known to his mother—Brenda Kaufman. Unwilling to allow her son to think that he can live in America and be exempt or excluded from the consequences of the nation’s racial consciousness, Brenda abruptly decides to move her family from a predominantly white suburb to Hillside, West Los Angeles where she is certain that he would get a “bitter taste of her vaunted traditional Black experience” (*TWBS* 46). Brenda Kaufman’s racial worldview is clearly quite different from her son’s. Though Gunnar knows he is black, he and his sisters the “black” people are not like them. The intergenerational tension over the meaning of blackness and its connection to racism (understood as a central feature in the Black American experience) is what prompts Brenda to relocate her family to a Hillside. In Santa Monica Gunnar had experiences as

one of only a handful of black children in his school, but his mother had in mind a very different type of black experience, which would give her son an idea of what it was like to really be black and experience blackness in an urban and multiethnic environment.

After only a short time in Hillside, Gunnar's lack of knowledge regarding how to be black in this new space leads him to have to endure several particularly brutal ghetto beat-downs. The people in Hillside consider Gunnar an Oreo (black on the outside and white on the inside); in their estimation of what it means to be black, he simply does not fit the bill. He has no *soul!* Consequently even Gunnar comes to a point where in a very telling dream he sees himself on display in a museum diorama as a guide explains that Gunnar is "the whitest Negro in captivity" (*TWBS* 52).¹⁸ This dream of himself as a

¹⁸ Beatty's choice to describe Gunnar as "the whitest negro in captivity" links his novel to the work of two very influential writers—Norman Mailer and James Baldwin. Mailer wrote an essay titled "The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster" in 1957 in which he explained how some young white people had begun to distance themselves from white culture and voluntarily appropriate black styles of dress, language, music and culture. The wedding, as Mailer described it, of young white existentialist (hipsters) to black culture stemmed from the fact that after World War II and its atrocities, there emerged a belief that the only way to really live was by embracing the danger of death. Mailer writes: "if the fate of twentieth century man is to live with death from adolescence to premature senescence, why then the only life-giving answer is to accept the terms of death, to live with death as immediate danger, to divorce oneself from society, to exist without roots, to set out on that uncharted journey into the rebellious imperatives of the self." With this as the definition of life, the hipsters wrapped themselves in black culture because for them blackness represented danger. Mailer's description of this phenomena is quite telling. He explains that "Any Negro who wishes to live must live with danger from his first day, and no experience can ever be casual to him, no Negro can saunter down a street with any real certainty that violence will not visit him on his walk. The cameos of security for the average white: mother and the home, job and the family, are not even a mockery to millions of Negroes; they are impossible. The Negro has the simplest of alternatives: live a life of constant humility or ever-threatening danger. In such a pass where paranoia is as vital to survival as blood, the Negro had stayed alive and begun to grow by following the need of his body where he could. Knowing in the cells of his existence that life was war, nothing but war, the Negro (all exceptions admitted) could rarely afford the sophisticated inhibitions of civilization, and so he kept for his survival the art of the primitive, he lived in the enormous present, he subsisted for his Saturday night kicks, relinquishing the pleasures of the mind for the more obligatory pleasures of the body, and in his music he gave voice to the character and quality of his existence, to his rage and the infinite variations of joy, lust, languor, growl, cramp, pinch, scream and despair of his orgasm." Having thus described what it meant to be black, Mailer argues that the hipsters put on the danger of blackness to meet some greater need to find "life." African American writer James Baldwin responded to Mailer's white negro thesis in an essay titled: "The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy" in 1961. Here Baldwin posits that more than anything else Mailer falls back on old language of Negroes as deprived and controlled by their natural tendency to pursue sexual pleasure for selfish and problematic purposes. The dialogue between Baldwin and Mailer is mirrored in *The White Boy Shuffle* with Gunnar and his best-friend in Santa Monica David Schoenfeld

white Negro in a cage and on display with the Hottentot Venus sheds light on how Gunnar currently sees himself as a young black boy who lacks all of the stereotypical markers of blackness. He is certainly visibly black on the outside, yet he laments that he is nevertheless somehow disembodied from real blackness once he enters Hillside. Though in his dream Gunnar is literally held captive and referred to by the onlookers as a cannibal because he eats Oreo cookies and is an Oreo (black on the outside and white on the inside), in his daily life captivity takes shape much differently.

Essentially Gunnar is a prisoner to the dictates of what it means to be black in Hillside. To escape further beatings and isolation from Hillside residents, Gunnar must learn how to be Hillside black. He must wear a mask of blackness that is in-authentic for him given the fact that his entire life had been spent in a predominantly white suburb as the funny, cool black kid. The lessons of the “ghetto intelligentsia” are much different however from what he learns in Santa Monica (*TWBS* 51). In Hillside Gunnar’s friends Nicholas Scoby (a jazz aficionado and neighborhood basketball star) and Psycho Loco (gang leader and singer in the church choir) teach him how to survive. The literally education him in the clothes, pastimes, and language of his new hood and offer help and protection as Gunnar slowly finds his niche. Gunnar – who just months before had been an adept skateboarder and surfer – finds a space for himself in Hillside by tapping into his *natural* athletic ability. His rise to prominence as a neighborhood basketball star succeeds in gaining him access into the hood instead of providing a way out of it.¹⁹ The

from whom Gunnar “learned [he] was black and that being black meant something, though [he’d] never learned exactly what” (*TWBS* 40).

¹⁹ See Tracy Curtis. “Basketball’s Demands in Paul Beatty’s *The White Boy Shuffle*.” In Michael Cocchiarale and Scott D. Emmert, Ed. *Upon Further Review: Sports in American Literature* (2004). Curtis discusses the significance of Gunnar’s street basketball career in the context of hoop-dreams of other young men who grow up in urban neighborhoods. My sense of things aligns with Curtis’ in that he posits that Beatty invokes this reversal in direction to speak to the fact that many hoop-dreamers do not make it out,

impact of Gunnar's Hillside education in blackness is made abundantly clear when after a long night of shooting up the neighborhood with Psycho Loco Gunnar returns home and laments to his mother that he has become "so black it's a shame" (*TWBS* 102). Gunnar's description of the transformation he has undergone indicates that he recognizes that his choice to become Hillside black has without question changed who he is and has led him to acquiesce to a number of absurd racial stereotypes regarding what it means to be black. Ascribing to these stereotypes places him in a yoke of bondage; he is held captive by social definitions of what constitutes realness or rather black (in)authenticity.

Beatty uses these episodes of racial absurdity to illustrate the myriad ways blackness is constructed and therefore not essential or biological. His perspective on racial identity foreshadows the insights E. Patrick Johnson makes in *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* (2003). As Johnson's title suggests, he believes that "because the concept of blackness has no essence, black authenticity" must be understood as being "contingent on the historical, social, and political terms of its production" (3). What Johnson means here is that he recognizes that what is avowed as authentically black at one historical or cultural moment can be vehemently disavowed in a different historical context. For instance, Johnson explains that because "blackness does not belong to any one individual or group" people "appropriate this complex and nuanced racial signifier in order to circumscribe its boundaries or to exclude other individuals or groups" (3). Though this can be a negative use of black authenticity—as was the case with Gunnar in Hillside—Johnson acknowledges that "there are ways in which authenticating discourse" is useful. One

and to testify to the fact that even those who do, as Gunnar later experiences, are still treated like the property of coaches (on the high school and college level) and businesses seeking to sell athletic gear and engage in the buying and trading of talented black basketball players.

particularly beneficial aspect of concepts of racial authenticity is the fact that they enable “marginalized people to counter oppressive representations of themselves” (Johnson 3). This is often the case, Johnson argues, in black freedom struggles when African Americans have turned to notions of black authenticity in the interest of forwarding a particular political agenda. “The key” to understanding black authenticity and authenticating discourses “is to be cognizant of the arbitrariness of authenticity [and of] the ways in which it carries with it the dangers of foreclosing the possibilities of cultural exchange and understanding” (Johnson 3). This is certainly true in the context of Gunnar Kaufman’s life in Hillside. The Hillside natives had a particular definition of what constituted authentic blackness. Black realness and Black soul were the foundation of their communal identities, and the aberration of a Black boy who lacked all of the cultural, linguistic, and stylistic accoutrements of blackness threatened the validity of their group identity. To survive in this new space, Gunnar would either have to flee or make adjustments to his personal identity (subjectivity) to fit in. He opts to wear the mask of Hillside blackness. He chooses to perform their version of blackness and escape their brutal beatings.

Section III -- Performativity as Pathway to Freedom

When he makes this choice, Gunnar enters a long tradition of Kaufman family racial performativity, which interestingly serves dual functions. Their performances allow the Kaufman men to survive and to undermine racial absurdity, through the use of their artistic talents. Gunnar’s family lineage explains his conviction that his own and Black America’s freedom from the bondage of racism would only be found in the grave.

The family narrative also quite vividly foreshadows his use of poetry as the vehicle through which African American suicides would leave their final words to those left behind. In the novel's first section "Mama Baby, Papa Maybe"—a title that is a play on Hortense Spillers' seminal essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar"²⁰—Beatty inverts Spillers' narrative of slavery. Rather than situating women as the center of the black family narrative, Beatty positions men at the nexus of the Kaufman family lineage. In this gendered Kaufman family history, we see the results of racism and inequality overflow into what could be described as absurd behavior acted out by the victims of racial oppression, but I suggest that the Kaufman men's antics are both the result of racial oppression and a protest against racial oppression.

As this story of Kaufman men unfolds, it is necessary to remember that the story is passed on to Gunnar and is essentially made sacred by his mother whose persistent oral repetitions of the Kaufman family myth give it a near religious undertone.²¹ Because Brenda Kaufman is an orphan who never knew her own family, she engrafts as her own

²⁰ In this seminal essay, Spillers theorizes about the names, myths and racial stereotypes used to define Black people (Black women in particular) that grew out of the history of slavery. In this initial section of *The White Boy Shuffle*, Beatty, on one hand acknowledges the veracity of Spillers' argument regarding the power of the "American Grammar of description" to make racial meanings whose layers must be stripped down, before the stereotyped individual(s) can speak any truth about him or herself. On the other hand however, Beatty's representation of Kaufman family history diverges from Spillers' historical claim that the Negro family has no father to speak of. Though Beatty does not disregard the history of slavery and its impact upon Gunnar's ancestors, he takes a very different approach to narrating this history. Rather than giving Gunnar a family that is dominated by the typical, powerful matriarch and void of male figures, Gunnar's family history is instead littered with fore-fathers.

²¹ Beatty's decision to make Brenda Kaufman the central storyteller of this male-dominated family history is somewhat perplexing. Brenda has a voice, but she tells a story that does not include her or any other women for that matter. In this way, Beatty positions her to play the role of what feminist theorist Trinh T. Minh-ha describes as a conduit through whom historical memory is conveyed. In the person of Gunnar Kaufman however, this trend of woman as storyteller and keeper of collective memory is transformed because in this narrative, he becomes the storyteller (memoir writer.) The narrative actually ends with Gunnar telling the Kaufman family history to his infant daughter as he gives her a bath. One might imagine that with a Grandfather (Rolf Kaufman) who kills himself because his life and work robs him of his dreams and with a father (Gunnar) who leads a revolutionary suicide movement to agitate against blatant and ongoing inequality perhaps Gunnar's daughter will add a different branch to the Kaufman family tree.

the family story of her abusive ex-husband and transmits it to her children, because she believes that it is important for them to have knowledge of what she describes as “the first of a legacy of colored men who forged their own way in the world” (*TWBS* 8). Brenda’s characterization of the Kaufman men does not mesh with Gunnar’s understanding of them as “a long cowardly queue of coons and Uncle Toms” (*TWBS* 5). This raises a crucial question regarding how we are to read the Kaufman family history (*WBS* 5). Is theirs’ a story of people who acquiesced to the bondage of the racial status quo? Is the Kaufman family story one of tempered resistance? Is it a series of absurd stories about how racial oppression shapes individual’s life chances? Or is theirs’ a story that vividly illustrates the paradoxes that arise when individuals try to live amid the complex dichotomous concepts of bondage and freedom or submission and rebellion?

A cursory exploration of the primary players in the Kaufman family lineage reveals that they are all very peculiar and troubling individuals who present us with complicated visions of captivity and equally messy definitions of liberty. At the top of the family tree sits Euripides Kaufman, reportedly “the youngest slave in history to buy his freedom” (*TWBS* 8). He achieved this feat by saving money given to him by superstitious slave holding whites who paid to rub his blackened head or pinch his lamp-oiled faced for good luck. Following Euripides is his son Swen Kaufman who in a weird twist of fate ran away into slavery. A devoted dancer, who “unintentionally [became] the only person ever to run away into slavery,” Swen chose to venture south because he did not want to participate in the minstrel productions so popular in the theatres of the north (*TWBS* 12). Swen lands on a tobacco farm in North Carolina and made himself “an unindentured servant” (*TWBS* 13). Then there was Wolfgang Kaufman a painter

employed by the “Department of Visual Segregation” and given the duty of “painting and hanging the FOR WHITES ONLY and FOR COLORED ONLY signs that hung over quasi-public places” (*TWBS* 18). Finally emerges Gunnar’s father, Rolf Kaufman. Described as a “docile and meek nonthreat,” Rolf was a sketch artist for the Los Angeles Police Department, who laughs at the racist jokes of his fellow cops and who beat his own son into a comma during the LA riots.

To say the least, there does not seem to be too much to sing praises about in this family tree. One might wonder whether or not Brenda Kaufman passes this story of her former husband’s family lineage along as a vicious joke intended to lampoon his family rather than hold them up as examples of men who forged a way for themselves. Whatever Brenda’s intentions amid these men’s awkward behavior they do raise some intriguing concerns regarding how one survives a hostile environment and how one manages to engage in subversive acts in the context of racial hostility. Does Euripides’ purchase of his freedom, lend credence to an institution that places a price on his body, his labor, and his humanity? Or do his actions signal that he used his intellect to perform the role of superstitious darkie so that the white slave holder would purchase his freedom for him? Does Wolfgang’s decision to be gainfully employed by painting the signage of segregation necessarily make him a sell-out and an Uncle Tom or does the fact that he is run out of the South for using a white only restroom because he is illiterate signify the arbitrariness of those sorts of color lines? Does Swen Kaufman’s decision to run from freedom into slavery “seeking artistic freedom” signify a completely ludicrous act, or does his choice to embrace literal slavery indicate that nominal-freedom (demonstrated by Swen being barred from respectable dance productions) really is not freedom at all?

In each case, these men's actions could be read as very troublesome means of negotiating racial bondage, but embedded in this family history is a seed of rebellion that bears much fruit in the life of young Gunnar Kaufman, who would soon write himself into his family history by performing the role of Negro messiah and Uncle Tom—two figures who embody rebellion via submission to death, which is preceded by writing poetry or in Gunnar's case a memoir and poetry.

Gunnar's decision to find freedom in the grave is foreshadowed most explicitly in the life and artistry of Swen Kaufman, the dancer who chose life among the slaves in the tobacco farming Carolinas rather than endure segregation of the North. Swen explains that he decides to cast his lot among the slaves because he is "entranced [by] the possibilities" of composing a "groundbreaking" and "renegade" "dance opera" that "intertwined the stoic movement of forced labor with the casual assuredness of the aristocratic lyric" (*TWBS* 13). Like the other slaves, Swen is whipped and forced to work long hours in the field. Essentially then Swen Kaufman chooses to place himself under the same suffering as the slaves in order to be a part of the slave system and therefore illustrate the irony of a system of human bondage he enters into by simply being black and jumping over a fence—a move that instantly made him a slave.

Swen's understanding of his work as renegade and groundbreaking alerts us to the fact that even as he chooses to suffer with the slaves, what he plans to produce as a result of his experience of suffering is a work with undercurrents of rebellion. The evidence of Swen's intentions is manifested when he completes his dance opera and performs it on the plantation. The renegade dance incorporated both slaves and slave owners. As they all pranced to Swen's orchestration, the music and the deliberately designed dances

carried the slaves to the boundaries separating bondage from freedom. In rapt by the dance, they “tight roped the tops of fences many had never even dared to look at, much less touch” (*TWBS* 15). While the slaves engaged in activities that would on any other day be grounds for severe whippings or death, the slave owners followed along cheering, convinced that the dance was nothing more than an elaborate and joyous slave wedding ceremony.

In the final movement, Swen’s dance opera takes a decidedly rebellious turn away from dancing along fences and ventures into the graveyard. The adult slaves “passed unlit torches to the children, then they [the adults] lay in the slaves’ graveyard...” (*TWBS* 15). Carrying the torches given to them by their parents who had chosen the grave, the children -- also actors in the renegade dance performance – walked to the big-house and “peered into the windows” (*TWBS* 15). A move signifying that if the torches were lit they would burn down the slave master’s house along with those inside it. After this performance of rebellion, the children with the “still unlit torches resting on their bony shoulders” returned to the slave graveyard where they “lay down next to their parents” (*TWBS* 15).

This dance opera sends a vivid message about freedom from bondage. Perhaps most significant is the illustration of methods of liberation being passed down from one generation to the next. In the dance the adults passed the torches to the children and went to their graves. Their children followed them there. Swen’s dance performance offers two opposing possibilities for freedom. It begins by suggesting that if it is possible to tightrope on the fence that separates liberty from captivity then it is also possible to jump over that fence and make oneself free. A jump over a fence in fact is what transformed

Swen from a free man into a slave. Though escaping bondage is one option, the way that Swen opts to end this groundbreaking performance is what really matters. Though the torches that the slave parents and slave children handle in this dance opera are unlit, the sentiment behind their performance of burning down the slave master's house and therefore willingly laying down their own lives to be free speaks volumes. Though Gunnar's repetition of this story does not indicate that life changed in any significant way, except that each year the slaves returned to the graveyard to remember Swen's performance, what matters most is that in the midst of the Kaufman's absurd family tree that has since its beginning been impacted by the pernicious hand of racism and oppression there is sown a seed of rebellion that provides foreshadows the revolutionary suicides to come. Although Swen's escape into slavery is very problematic, his renegade opera at least partially redeems him, because it provides at least one example within Gunnar's caricatured family history in which individuals – though only through performance²² – are willing to die to be free rather than sell their souls and continue to endure the living hell of racial oppression. Swen's performance of freedom through death then becomes an explicit foreshadowing of Gunnar's own recycling of a messiah who likewise ushers in freedom through death.

Section IV: New Black Messiah Redefines Death

The concept of freedom in death (or life in death) appears again in *TWBS*'s final section aptly titled "...Stay Black and Die." Here the idea that one finds the cost of

²² I do not mean to discredit the power of performance in any way. Rather I hope to show that by reading Swen's dance opera as a purposeful performative act we are able to see in his actions a foreshadowing of how Gunnar is able to manifest the rebellious undercurrents of Swen's performance. The relatively recent emergence of Performance Studies as an academic field speaks to the abundant power of artistic events, theatrical or music performances, speech-acts, etc. to help us more fully understand how individuals and groups craft and perform their different identities. We might also come to see in performances an artist depiction of the type of resistance, freedom, healing, etc. can be life-sustaining events that serve as precursors for real actions.

freedom buried in the ground takes shape when Gunnar, by now in his first year as an undergraduate at Boston University, literally writes himself into the family history of absurdity by becoming the new leader of Black America – or to use his terminology the savior of the blacks. In this position, Gunnar uses his artistry performance poetry and his politico-religious position as messiah to promote freedom through suicide. The build up to Gunnar’s mass suicide movement, particularly the countless stereotypes and clichés of the personalities and situations that are so often associated with urban nihilism – an obsession with sports, thug or gang activity, broken families, profane language, and segregated neighborhoods just to name a few – that saturate the middle sections of *TWBS* might lead some to posit that Gunnar’s turn to suicide grows out of a belief that continued struggle is pointless and hopeless.²³ It is in fact quite easy to see Gunnar’s unintentional public suicide pact as a sign of resignation or submission, but a close reading of his actions and the movement that grows out of them reveals a very compelling commitment to recognizing the readiness to suffer and die as a powerful form of resistance and defiance in and of itself.

Gunnar’s decision to take his own life is made public during a speech he delivers to a group of student demonstrators in Martin Luther King, Jr. Plaza. He has been asked to speak because a volume of his poetry *Watermelanin* has been published and it has gained a considerable readership. While contemplating what he will say to the audience, Gunnar decides that if he were down there, he would “want to hear candor” (*TWBS* 199).

²³ Cornel West for example reads suicide in this way. In his essay “Nihilism in Black America,” West suggests that increased rates of suicides among young black people is a symptom of the disease of the soul—nihilism. Nihilism, West posits is a disease because it leads people to believe that there is no hope, that life is purposeless, and that there is no real meaning to continued black struggles for equality. Paul Beatty positions Gunnar Kaufman as a stereotypical urban nihilist, but his actions simply do not fit the nihilistic definition that West sets up.

In a nod to Martin Luther King, Jr. “who received his doctorate in theology from Boston University,” Gunnar begins his speech by quoting the inscription from a plaque in the plaza (*TWBS 199*). The inscription, taken from one of Dr. King’s speeches reads, “If a man hasn’t discovered something he will die for, he isn’t fit to live” (*TWBS 200*).

Repeating this statement to the demonstrators, Gunnar asks them if they were ready to die for their cause. A few people insist that they are, but Gunnar perhaps shocks everyone when he admits that he simply is not willing to die for any cause. Leaning into the microphone he says:

So I ask myself, what am I willing to die for? The day when white people treat me with respect and see my life as equally valuable to theirs? No, I ain’t willing to die for that, because if they don’t know that by now, then they ain’t never going to know it. Matter of fact, I ain’t ready to die for anything, so I guess I’m just not fit to live. In other words, I’m just ready to die. I’m just ready do die (200).

Somewhat surprised by his own words, Gunnar nevertheless continues and explains that, “today’s black leadership isn’t worth shit” because “these...niggers not willing to die. Back in the old days” he reminisces “if someone spoke up against the white man, he or she was willing to die.... What we need is some new leaders.... Some niggers who are ready to die” (*TWBS 200*)! With that said, the crowd nominates and votes in Gunnar Kaufman as the new leader of Black America. Because he has said he is ready to die, they assume he means he wants to be their new leader and they eagerly follow him like faithful disciples.

As good sheep, Black people across the nation who hear Gunnar’s speech follow the directive of their shepherd. They commence to respond to the absurdity of racism not by attempting to convince white people that they are worthy of equality, but rather by

writing their death poems (suicide notes) and taking their own lives using methods that mirror and parody the absurdity of racism. Some of the most colorful and relevant examples of suicide as a response to racism are the stories of Ms. Merva Kilgore, and Carlton Malthus. Ms. Kilgore “a prolific writer” who had “published seventeen volumes of poetry,” was reading some of her poetry to schoolchildren “when the white principal asked if she’d mind singing ‘one of those old Negro spiritual’” (*TWBS* 213).

Dumbfounding by the ridiculous request, Ms. Kilgore responds with an equally ludicrous act. She calmly recites her death poem, puts “her hand in the water pitcher, [bites] through the microphone cord, electrocuting herself” (*TWBS* 213). In like fashion, “Carlton Malthus a thirty-one-year-old brewmeister...drank himself to death” after being refused service in a tavern because he was reportedly “too black to appreciate ‘the Blue,’” a beer Malthus created (*TWBS* 212). After having been turned away, Malthus drank for hours but was still refused service. The poem he left behind read: “This drunken belch/ leaves the last bitter/ taste of life in my mouth” (*TWBS* 212). Ms. Kilgore and Mr. Malthus are only two of the many people who have had enough of the racism and finally respond to it through proactive strokes of self-destruction.

But what really do these suicides mean? What do they achieve, if anything? And if Gunnar Kaufman really is not willing to die for anything, what are we to make of the fact that his suicide pact – initially intended only as his personal commitment to die -- grows into a mass movement of people who are willing to embrace death if they are not allowed to live in the fullness of their humanity and enjoy a modicum of equality?

The answers to these questions lie hidden in Gunnar’s unique understanding of what suicide means. During an interview following his infamous speech, Gunnar is

asked the following question: “Isn’t suicide a way of saying that you’ve—that black people have given up? Surrendered unconditionally to the racial status quo” (*TWBS* 202)? In response Gunnar explains that he believes this is “the Western idea of suicide—the sense of the defeated self. ‘Oh, the dysfunctional people couldn’t adjust to our great system, so they killed themselves.’ Now when a patriotic American – a soldier, for example—jumps on a grenade to save his buddies, that’s the ultimate sacrifice” (*TWBS* 202). Setting up this example, of suicide as a form of sacrifice, Gunnar presents a different understanding of what it may mean to take one’s own life. He continues to explain that in Eastern philosophy “hara-kiri makes you win” and he “just want[s] to win one time” (*TWBS* 202). Though Gunnar is vocal in his determination not to die just so that white people will realize his self-worth as a human being, this does not mean that he does not think that he deserves to be able to live a life that is unencumbered by inequality and racism. His death then is not intended as another attempt at moral suasion designed to persuade white people. It is instead his personal demonstration of his commitment to not have his life chances and his identity bound by racist stereotypes and definitions of black authenticity. This is his priority—liberty from racial absurdity or death!

Taking this sort of stand is significant because it demonstrates that although Gunnar is not capable of controlling other people’s behavior and beliefs he does have the power to exert control over himself. When he commits to suicide as the pathway to this type of identity freedom, Gunnar becomes what sociologist of religion Hans Mol describes as an individual who “has found their self-identity in self denying acts” (Mol 228). Essentially Gunnar lives out the belief that “the giving of oneself proves that one possesses oneself” (Mol 228). Mol’s constructions work for Gunnar because he is

determined not to have his life dictated by outside sources. He will play the role of basketball star or even black messiah for a season but in the end because Gunnar knows who he is and who he is not. Because he has this knowledge he has enough of an understanding of himself to know that he does not want to submit to someone else dictating how he will live or die. Situated in this frame of reference, Gunnar's decision to embrace suicide seems much less absurd than deciding to submit to the racial status quo in which blackness for all intents and purposes equates to various forms of slow deaths.

Gunnar's close friend Nick Scoby perhaps summarizes their lives and their deaths best when he laments that he "know[s] what it feels like to live in world where you can't live your dreams. I'd rather die too" (*TWBS* 194). Rather than live lives in which their dreams are destroyed, they choose to die on their own terms instead. These young black men's sentiments about dreams and death thus provides a visceral answer to the question poet Langston Hughes poses when he asks:

What Happens to a dream deferred?
Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore—
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over—
like a syrupy sweet?
Maybe it just sags
Like a heavy load.
*Or does it explode?*²⁴

Gunnar's answer is unequivocally that the dream explodes. He in fact chooses to die by way of a "victim precipitated suicide," a "demand to be killed" by the US government

²⁴ This poem by Langston Hughes is titled "Harlem," and it is part of a larger work -- *Montage of a Dream Deferred* (1951).

who would carry out the “Emancipation Disintegration,” “the ultimate death penalty” by dropping an atomic bomb on Hillside (*Davis* 226, *TWBS* 2, 223).

Despite the unconventional nature of Gunnar’s mass suicide plan in a contemporary context, it must not go unacknowledged that his suicidal exodus plan mimics the actions of many Africans brought across the Atlantic who retreated to watery graves rather than live as slaves. It is not coincidental that Gunnar’s forefather, Swen Kaufman, performs his renegade suicide dance opera on a tobacco plantation in the Carolinas the region in which occurred one of the most legendary and mythologized displays of resistance to the oppression of slavery—Ibo Landing. According to the folklore of Craig Dominey, the legend of Ibo Landing began with a man named Oba from the southeastern part of Nigeria. One day prior to leaving home to go hunting, Oba heard the voice of his unborn child whisper to him “the waters will bring you back to us” (Dominey). While out hunting Oba is captured by slavers, marched to the ocean, crammed into the hold of a ship, and brought to a new land where he knows he will be used as a slave. During the long journey some Ibos committed suicide by rubbing their wrists against their shackles until they bled to death. For Oba however, his exit from the humiliation of perpetual bondage would not be a solitary act. Exiting the ship, Oba sees the white men bartering and discreetly whispers to the person chained next to him “the waters brought us, the waters will take us away” (Dominey). Down the line this message went and without hesitation, this group of men, women and children walked into the waters whispering the refrain “the waters brought us, the waters will take us away” until the water filling their lungs silenced them (Dominey). Fortunately, the quiet that follows

death did not last. For those left behind the liberating actions of the Ibo was passed on and gave hope to those who heard about them.²⁵

In “White Cannibals, Black Martyrs: Fear, Depression, and Religious Faith as Causes of Suicide Among New Slaves,” historian William D. Piersen confirms the sentiments of the story of Ibo landing when he explains that the “numerous instances of mass suicide throughout the Americas” are likely explained by the belief “generally accepted in the Afro-American subcultures that suicides would return to Africa after death, possessions and all” (Piersen 151). Coupled to the expectation that death would return them to their homelands was a staunch belief that “death [was] better than harsh or undeserved punishment” (Piersen 152). The sense that death was better than a lifetime in slavery, however, did not always play out in self-inflicted bodily harm. It was not uncommon for slaves to “attempt suicidally desperate escapes and uprisings whose purpose was, literally, liberty or death” (Piersen 150). For these men and women who refused to be made slaves, the route to escape was paved by death, but for these historical actors, death did not equate to an end. It was instead a purposeful and intentional separation from their lives of suffering and bondage.

These suicides were disturbing and obviously interpreted as gross destructions of property by the slave traders and slave owners “who could catch most runaways, but were helpless to retrieve the dead” (Piersen 154). Part of what made these slave suicides so troublesome for slave owners and traders was the fact that in the minds and belief systems of many of the African slaves suicide was not a cardinal sin; it was primarily a

²⁵ For more information on Ibo Landing see *The Legacy of Ibo Landing: Gullah Roots of African American Culture* by Marquetta L. Goodwine or the folklore of Craig Dominey on The Moonlit Road website where you can read about the cultural background of Ibo Landing in the Georgia/South Carolina coastal regions. <www.themoonlitroad.com>

personal decision that did not alter one's status in the afterlife. These Africans not only believed that "suicide was a feasible method of escape from bondage," but some ethnic groups particularly West Africans considered this form of self-destruction to be "an admirable act" (Piersen 151). Piersen explains that "for those who willingly ended their lives to escape American slavery, suicide was a reaffirmation of faith – a form of religious martyrdom" because they were choosing to die rather than be forced to submit to life under "an alien faith and culture" (151). Perhaps one of the most profound points Piersen makes in his analysis of suicide among new (first generation) African slaves is that the powerful, often spiritual and soul preserving decision that slave suicides made was denied classification as religious martyrdom because Africans were considered heathens—without souls. Viewed in this way their self-destructions were read in much the same way that the interviewer interpreted Gunnar's suicide plan -- as a sign of weakness and as evidence that he and other black people simply did not have what it takes to adapt to the American way of life. If the affinities between Gunnar's contemporary suicide movement and the historical suicides of African slaves are not yet clear, then the final poem Gunnar reads before the people of Hillside promote him to the position of Negro demagogue makes the connections quite explicit. Titled "Give Me Liberty or Give Me Crib Death" the poem reads as follows:

Remorse lies
not in the consciousness
of a murderous parent
who rocks a child born into slavery

to divine sleep
with jugular lullaby
sung by sharp blade

and suffocating love
applied with pillow and pressure

Remorse lies
in the slave owner's anguished cries
upon discovering
his property permanently damaged;
a bloody hieroglyph carved into flesh
the smiling lips swollen and blue with asphyxiation

after he calculates his losses
forecasts the impact on this year's crop
he will notice the textual eyes of murder/suicide
read "caveat emptor"
let the buyer beware (*TWBS* 221-222).

The images conjured in Gunnar's poem challenges us to read his suicidal posture as an overt act of defiance and an explicit and personal display of social disturbance against the slave owners (who represent white America). Invoking the memory of slaves who out of love either killed themselves or their children to protect them from a life of misery in slavery and proudly proclaiming that their actions did not produce feelings of remorse quite profoundly illustrates that Gunnar Kaufman does not view his suicide movement as something reactive. Suicide at least as the persona in Gunnar's poem describes it is a proactive choice designed to facilitate freedom. His life experiences demonstrate to him that white people will never see him without applying various racist stereotypes to his identity. He also recognizes that the definitions that constitute authentic blackness are equally suffocating. He therefore embraces death as his alternative when faced with two equally damning options of life in a living hell.

Though Gunnar in the end tries several times to kill himself he is unsuccessful. This fact however does not diminish his resolute determination to go forth with his revolutionary suicide. Though his method of death is somewhat atypical (demanding to

be decimated by an atomic bomb) it is no less revolutionary. It is clear that he firmly believes, as did Black Panther Huey P. Newton, that “life won’t change without a direct assault on the Establishment” and that “oppressive forces must be opposed rather than endured” (Newton 4-5). Gunnar alerts us to this fact through a dream he has just prior to delivering the speech that sparks the suicide movement. In this dream, Gunnar sees himself, “Nat Turner, Gabriel Prosser, Cinque and Didi Lancaster”²⁶ engaged in a ferocious battle against some “British troops” (*TWBS* 188-89). This gang of revolutionaries are fighting and singing “F-i-ind the c-o-o-st o-o-f fr-e-e-e-dom buried in the gr-ound.” During the battle, the British troops killed everyone except Gunnar. When asked by a friend who Didi Lancaster was, Gunnar explained that she was a girl he knew in middle school. “One day in front of the whole class” their teacher “said [Didi] was stupid and would never amount to anything” (*TWBS* 189). Irate and fed-up with her teacher’s put downs, “Didi beat Ms. Hanger to a pulp and threw her out a window” (*TWBS* 189). Ironically after the beat down, “Didi’s grades improved” (*TWBS* 189). Her rebellion, the insurrections of the other revolutionaries in the dream, as well as Gunnar’s own suicidal exodus plans were necessary to effect change, even if the rebellions meant their lives would be endangered. Like Didi Lancaster, Gunnar’s resistance to racial absurdity, does not set in motion major shifts in America’s racial consciousness, but the act of fighting back has positive effects on Didi as well as on the people associated with the mass suicide movement. In this fundamental way, Gunnar’s salvation plan is a fictional enactment of Derrick Bell’s racial realism, which according to Bell is a

²⁶ A group of historical and contemporary revolutionaries/insurrectionists. Nat Turner was a slave preacher who believed that God had given him a divine calling to enact judgment on white slave holders. He therefore led a band of rebels who killed 55 white men, women and children before being captured and lynched in Southhampton, VA in 1831. Gabriel Prosser was the leader of a thwarted slave revolt in Richmond, Virginia in 1800. Cinque leader of a slave rebellion on board the *Amistad*.

philosophy premised on the belief that despite the permanent status of racism the determination to fight against it is what produces hope.

The hope Gunnar's suicidal revolution instigates is manifested through the fact that other victims of racism write poems and finally begin to speak out in protest against the racial absurdity permeating their lives. That something so productive proceeds forth out of Gunnar's movement, lends substantial support to the suggestion that his turn to suicide is not the result of fatalism or an act of nihilism. Rather than being indicative of resignation, his plan for how to lead Black Americans to the Promised Land is instead figured as an act of ultimate defiance against an American system that would bind them in a yoke of bondage to racism and dangerous notions of racial authenticity. What is yet to be explicitly clarified is how the textual evidence regarding *TWBS*'s suicide motif signifies Beatty's engagement with the rhetoric and narratives of black messianic salvation. Identifying textual evidence to support the claim that Gunnar's choice of death as the way to freedom from racial absurdity is premised on the rhetoric of sacrificial or redemptive suffering in Christian theology is complicated precisely because *TWBS* is saturated with satire.

Section V -- Seeing Religious Meaning through the Veil of Racial Absurdity

The satire permeating *TWBS* perhaps more than anything else in the novel obscures the vision of how religion functions as part of the narrative strategy, because the satire creates a tone that makes it appear as if everything is being held up to scorn. When Beatty employs satire to paint the cultural scene of American racial absurdity, religious discourse and figures become cogs in the machine of absurd human behavior, which has led many reviewers and critics to content that there is very little in *TWBS* to suggest any

meaningful engagement with or concern for Afro-Christian religious thought and culture. A cursory read of the novel might in fact lead one to assert that religious meaning is limited to the realm of rather colorful, often crude and irreverent parodies of Black faith. This assertion erroneously leads to the conclusion that, in *TWBS*, religion as a whole, and Gunnar Kaufman's messianic labors, in particular, serve only as sources of slap-stick humor. Rather than relegating religious meaning to the margins of the analysis I want to place it at the center and posit that there are specific points in the novel at which racial absurdity and religious irreverence intersect to demonstrate the myriad ways in which the rhetoric of Christian salvation may be manipulated and rearticulated to meet specific personal and communal needs.

These sites of intersection occur when Gunnar's experiences of the absurdity of racism and black in-authenticity are contested through nontraditional uses of Afro-Christian religious spaces, words, and/or figures. Consider for instance that soon after Gunnar arrives in Hillside, he is greeted by daily beatings from Hillside residents who used violence to guard the boundaries of their particular brand of authentic blackness. Gunnar and the other neighborhood outcasts respond by fleeing to the neighborhood church. The "basement of the Canaan Church of Christ Almighty God Our Savior You Betcha Inc." according to Gunnar was the most secure of all the "safe houses on the ghetto geeks underground railroad" (*TWBS* 64). The absurdly long name of the church along with the fact that Gunnar and his friends use this sanctuary as a hideout to exchange pornography significantly obscures the fact that this sacred space is a safe place for them. Until he learns to navigate the violent Hillside terrain, this church provides him with what he needs—sanctuary from physical violence.

Afro-Christian religious rhetoric, sex, violence, and Gunnar's status as a racial outsider collide once again later in the novel when two neighborhood bullies—Veronica and Betty—force Gunnar to play a sexually infused game of hide-and-go-seek. Cornered in a vacant laundry room Gunnar stands helpless as “the girls [break] into a dueling chorus of gospel double-entendre. Veronica opened with ‘go down, Moses, waaaay down in Egypt’s land’” as she forced Gunnar’s face between her legs (*TWBS* 82). Betty rams Gunnar’s hand into her crotch and countered Veronica with an “Easter Sunday vibrato of ‘Touch me, Lord Jesus, mmmmmmm, with thy hand of mercy...’” (*TWBS* 83). This forced sexual exchange acted out to the soundtrack of gospel music, created a strange sensation in Gunnar and he left the scene of his attack not crying as one might expect—since he learns early on that crying wasn’t allowed in the hood—but rather singing the only religious song he knew: “Oh Happy Day.”²⁷

When asked by his neighbor Psycho Loco to explain what he is singing Gunnar merely says that it’s just some song. Psycho Loco informs Gunnar of the power of the lyrics when he reveals that “that song got [him] through four years in the Oliver Twist Institute for Little Wanderers and Wayward Minority Males” (*TWBS* 84). Psycho Loco tells Gunnar that he “sang that shit from lights on to lights out. Oh happy day, oh happy day, when Jesus washed, when Jesus washed, he washed my sins away” (*TWBS* 84). Because Gunnar could not glean from “Oh Happy Day” the same spiritually sustaining power Psycho Loco did, he takes this opportunity to write his first poem, which he titled *Negro Misappropriation of Greek Mythology or, I know Niggers That’ll Kick Hercules’s Ass*. In this poem the persona is “searching for ghetto muses,” but finds that none of the

²⁷ Oh Happy Day was one of the first songs to gain widespread commercial success in the genre of contemporary gospel music.

traditional muses: Calliope, the leaves, and the birds respond to his call. Incapable of receiving inspiration from nature or from his surroundings, the poem ends with the following stanza: “late last night my man picked up a jailhouse phone/ ‘Yo, nigger, you got to come down and get me out.’/ and I was inspired” (TWBS 86). That Gunnar’s first poem is written when he is incapable of using traditional religious sentiments to meet his needs and that this poem concludes with a persona who is inspired by the call of a friend in jail—in bondage—gives further credence to the fact that although Beatty seems to simply mock gospel music by fusing it into a highly sexualized situation, he uses this scene to set the stage for Gunnar to be challenged to craft his own sacred poetic words. In this way, Gunnar follows in the footsteps of the other Kaufman’s all of whom wielded some type of artistic talent.

The necessity of poetry is further highlighted in a scene during which Gunnar attends the funeral of a member of Psycho Loco’s gang. At Pumpkin’s funeral Gunnar explains that as he sat through his first “young-black-man-done-gone sermon,” he realizes that Scoby and Psycho Loco have heard the message so much that they have managed to memorize and “call out the biblical passages before the reverend: Corinthians 7:13, Leviticus 2:10, Peter 4:25, Book of Job 1:17” (TWBS 103). Unlike his friends who have heard this message before, Gunnar “picked up a Bible and attempted to follow along with the reverend’s eschatological harangue, but [he] didn’t know where the books of Corinthians, Peter and Job were” (TWBS 103). Exasperated, Gunnar admits that his “flipping back and forth between Old and New Testaments” caused him to rip the Bible’s onionskin “thin pages to shreds” (TWBS 103). In Gunnar’s hands these sacred words and the pages on which they are written are too fragile to even be handled without being torn

asunder, which certainly speaks volumes regarding the traditional use of the sacred Word to meet the needs of young men like Gunnar and his friends. Since these traditional sacred spaces and sacred words fail to meet his needs Gunnar takes it upon himself to write his own sacred story—his memoir.

Since traditional religious outlets, such as those represented in Psycho Loco's singing of Oh Happy Day, do not work for Gunnar, he turns to poetry as the words from which his washing arises. When faced with the tragedy of the 1992 L.A. riots and the acquittal of the police officers whose brutality sponsored it, Gunnar realizes that "even at its most reflective or its angriest, [his] poetry was little more than an opiate devoted to pacifying [his] cynicism" (*TWBS* 132). He lamentably acknowledges that his poetry was just "a sixteen-year-old's Valium" (*TWBS* 132). Here Gunnar describe his poetry as something that functions like religion can. As Karl Marx contends, "religion [or poetry] is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of a soulless condition. Religion is the opium of the people." Religion and poetry serve a function. They fill a need for stress and pain relief. However with this understanding that poetry had indeed become an opiate in his life, Gunnar comes to the conclusion that "it meant nothing to be a poet. One had to be a poet and a farmer, a poet and a roustabout, a poet and a soon-to-be revolutionary" (*TWBS* 132). With this mindset, Gunnar attempts to revolt and join in the rioting. The best act of violence he can muster however is to beat a white truck driver with a loaf of soft white bread. Though his initial attempt at rebellion, is laughable, Gunnar becomes increasingly purposeful in his actions. He seems to understand the truth of Chester Himes' claim that riots and revolutions are not synonymous.

Riots [Himes explains] are tumultuous disturbances of the public peace by unlawful assemblies of three or more persons in the execution of private objects—such as race hatreds. No matter who passes the first blow or fires the first shot, riots between white and black occur for only one reason: *Negro Americans are firmly convinced that they have no access to any physical protection which they do not provide for themselves* (Himes 309).

In the quest to move toward racial justice, “the first step backward is riots” (Himes 309). To move forward, the people must engage in revolutions, which according to Himes “in the best sense...are the renunciation of the existing evils of government by the governed” (309). These “revolutions are not necessarily brought about by force of arms...[and] in the event of a Negro American revolution it is to be hoped there will be no shooting” (Himes 309). For this type of revolution to happen, Himes is convinced that a Negro martyr must arise, take a stand, and create an incident that will set in motion a meaningful revolution. Almost in spite of himself, Gunnar becomes this martyr for Hillside when he inspires Black people to write death poems and commit suicide as a means of escaping American racism. He frames his martyrdom and his suicidal revolution by taking on the persona of a Black messiah who witnesses about his life of racial absurdity by writing a poetry-infused memoir that functions as a book-length suicide note.

Section VI -- Conclusion: Gunnar Kaufman as Messianic Martyr

Gunnar’s status as black messiah stands out as perhaps the most troubling intersection of racial absurdity and religious rhetoric because Beatty presents Gunnar’s and his messiah gig using lacerating satire. However as the aforementioned episodes indicate, when racism and religion collide in *TWBS* the tension creates narrative opportunities for racism to be lampooned and for new methods of combating racial absurdity to be imagined. This does not at all suggest that Beatty’s use of religious

language, a Christ-figure, and sacred biblical narratives to negotiate and contest racial injustice is novel. African American artists, political and spiritual leaders, and intellectuals have a rather extensive history of applying the principles and language from faith traditions to their daily-lived experiences and using that faith to explain, negotiate, or contest what are generally experiences of oppression. What differentiates *TWBS*, from much of the other African American prose writing that is generally discussed in the context of Afro-Christian religious thought and culture, is its irreverence and gross parodies of the traditions of black messianic salvation, which have been so prevalent in African American freedom struggles of the past. On the surface, the novel goes to such great lengths to parody the belief that some anointed political leader ever could speak for *Black America* that it seems ludicrous to even contend that Gunnar Kaufman should be taken seriously as a fictional messiah. Does he send forth a prophetic voice to an American populace desperately in need of salvation from racial absurdity, or is this novel Paul Beatty's way of exposing the limited effectiveness of messianic salvation rhetoric in increasingly complex racial climates such as that which arose in the aftermath of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements?

In answer to these questions, literary critic Darryl Dickson-Carr, posits that like other contemporary African American satirist, Paul Beatty does use his satire to attempt to "[articulate] a new meaning for the social category of 'race'" in the "post-Civil Rights era" (166). Dickson-Carr argues that "Beatty directs his satire toward a cultural scene that...is enthralled with nihilism" (205). Quoting philosopher Cornel West, Dickson-Carr posits that in *TWBS*, "Beatty seems to be allied with West, to the extent that West calls for African Americans to adopt a 'politics of conversion' in which people learn to

‘believe that there is hope for the future and a meaning to struggle’... despite the fact that all of the promises of both the Civil Rights movement and American democracy have not been fulfilled” (205-06). I wholeheartedly agree with Dickson-Carr’s assessment of how Beatty’s satire functions. But, where I differ from him is in my understanding of how Gunnar’s status as Negro Demagogue fits into the novel’s commitment to a politics of conversion in the post-Civil Rights era. Dickson-Carr believes that Gunnar’s status as new Negro leader is Beatty’s cynical way of critiquing Civil Rights and Black Nationalist modes of leadership which identify individuals such as Martin Luther King, Jr. and Louis Farrakhan, who are supposed to be able to represent the concerns of Black Americans. This Dickson-Carr contends is problematic for Beatty, who laments “the lack of viable [leadership] alternatives in a post-Civil Rights, postmodern landscape made up of enough economic chaos, rampant classism, and cultural confusion” to immediately discredit any leader claiming to speak for Black Americans. Once again on this point I concur with Dickson-Carr’s assessment of Beatty’s approach to the crisis in black political leadership. However, when he argues that Beatty illustrates the problematic nature of Civil Rights and Black Nationalists leadership by allowing Gunnar to ascend to what Dickson-Carr describes as the “dubious high mark” of Negro demagogue, I have to protest. To characterize Gunnar’s black savior status as dubious, which carries the connotation that it is suspicious and not to be trusted, means that we must also read his plan of messianic salvation as dubious. This reading would negate the novel’s very powerful suicide motif, which I contend is TWBS’s power source. Essentially because Gunnar opts to promote death as an act of revolution, he uses his messianic status to inject hope for a different

type of future--even if that meant a future in the grave--to people, who according to Dickson-Carr, had “become cynical almost to the point of complete despair” (206).

Though Dickson-Carr finds Gunnar’s black messiah status dubious, the idea that conquering the fear of death is indeed the key to a liberated life and hope is not uncommon, particularly in Protestant Christian faith. If we can come to an understanding of how death is a fundamental component of eternal life and salvation in Christian thought, then it is much more plausible to suggest that Gunnar’s suicidal salvation plan may be taken seriously as a means of liberation. The body of scholarship that deals with Christianity, sin, suffering, and freedom is quite extensive ranging from the theologies of Reinhold Niebuhr and Howard Thurman to those of womanist theologians Delores S. Williams and Kelly Brown Douglass. These scholars’ interpretations of the Bible in the context of American racism and Black sexism are important because in each case they attempt to identify racism and sexism as sins which lead to suffering among those who are oppressed by it. How these theologians make sense of Jesus’s conquering of sin through sacrificial suffering directly impacts how they interpret suffering, death, and salvation in a contemporary context, which is exactly what I am attempting to do with Gunnar Kaufman’s suicidal liberation plan.

Rather than delve into the specifics of how different theologians interpret the connections between the sin of racism and the suffering it generates, I want to begin instead with one possible interpretation of Christ’s sacrificial suffering and how it relates to human salvation. Theologian Paul Tillich offers an enlightening resuscitation of what it means to be saved in a sermon titled “Salvation.” Tillich commences his exposition of this foundational element of Christian faith by explaining that “Christianity has rightly

been called a religion of salvation, and the ‘Christ’ is another word for Him who brings salvation” (112). Typically when one speaks of salvation we are referring to the redemption of one’s soul from an eternity of damnation and sin. The Apostle Paul, for example, records in his letter to the Romans that “the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life [salvation] through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Romans 6:23). Paul’s New Testament articulation of the connection between sin and death and life and Christ is significant because a cornerstone of Protestant Christianity is the believer’s conviction that Jesus’ crucifixion on the cross atoned for, or rather paid the penalty for human sin, and paved the way for humanity to be reconciled back into right spiritual relationship with God and earthly relationship with our fellow human beings. In this explanation of Christianity, God sent his son Jesus to earth in the form of a man for the expressed purpose of dying on the cross to serve as the perfect sacrificial offering who suffering and death would settle the sin issue once for all.²⁸ Christ would bring a new way of relating to God. In the Old Testament, sin was atoned for via a litany of blood sacrifices, which are recorded in the Levitical Codes, but the New Testament brought with it a new gospel of grace, whereby Christ’s sacrificial suffering ushered in humanity’s redemption from damnation and granted those who believed the covering of grace, which is the righteousness of Christ. The believer’s soul was “saved by grace through faith” in Christ atoning death (Ephesians 2:8).

²⁸ This interpretation of Christianity and atonement has been vehemently contested by some Black Liberation and Womanist theologians, who tend not to believe that God required Jesus’ death as a prerequisite for human salvation. These alternate perspectives of Jesus’s ministry on earth and his death on the cross, are explored in detail in chapter two, but some of the theologians who voice very strong opposition to this reading of Christ’s death include Kelly Brown Douglas, *What’s Faith God to do With It?*; JoAnne Marie Terrell, *Power in the Blood: The Cross in the African American Experience*; and Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* and “A Womanist Perspective on Sin,” in Emily Townes, ed., *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering*.

In the context of this hermeneutic of the cross, Paul Tillich raises an important question. How does the eternal soul salvation Christ's redemptive suffering makes possible translate into humanity's experiences of salvation in the eternal now? The answer Tillich offers is instructive because it helps clarify why Gunnar Kaufman's plan of salvation via suicide ought be considered as much more than a stroke of slapstick humor. After acknowledging that Christianity is a religion of salvation and that Christ is the Savior of humanity, Tillich goes on to suggest that because sin and evil continue to be present in the world, individual human beings are also called upon to participate in the work of society's salvation. This work of national redemption is possible if those who are committed to serving as saviors will confront the evil in the world. Tillich surmises that:

In the ancient world, great political leaders were called saviours. They liberated nations and groups within them from misery, enslavement, and war.... [But] how can nations be healed? One may say: They can be liberated from external conquerors or internal oppressors. But can they be healed? Can they be saved? The prophets give the answer: Nations are saved if there is a small minority, a group of people, who represent what the nation is called to be. They may be defeated, but their spirit will be a power of resistance against the evil spirits who are detrimental to the nation. The question of saving power in the nation is the question of whether there is a minority, even a small one, which is willing to resist the anxiety produced by propaganda, the conformity enforced by threat, the hatred stimulated by ignorance. The future of this country and its spiritual values is not dependent as much on atomic defense as on the influence such groups will have on the spirit in which the nation will think and act.... There is no divine promise that humanity will survive this or the next year.... Unless many of us say to ourselves: Through the saving power working in me, mankind may be saved or lost—it will be lost (119-120).

If nothing else, Tillich's understanding of what it means to be saved and what it means to function as a savior, certainly further illuminates the validity of Gunnar Kaufman's

messianic salvation plan. Tillich's conception of a remnant of people who are willing to have an influence on how the nation thinks bears some similarities to Wilson Jeremiah Moses' assertion that Black America could fulfill Dr. King's dream of them being America's conscious and soul.

Though Gunnar Kaufman defines himself as the savior of the blacks and though he recognizes that the entire nation is suffering as a consequence of racial absurdity, he does not at all position himself to engage in traditional versions of messianic or redemptive suffering. Instead he offers a reconfiguration of messianic suffering. Gunnar understands that he and Americans are "concatenate" meaning "together...not like all-in-the-same-boat together, but like connected," and as such his fate is intimately tied up with theirs' (*TWBS* 129). As novelist Ralph Ellison's invisible narrator explains in the epilogue to the monumental *Invisible Man* (1952), Gunnar likewise recognizes that "we [are] *part of them* as well as apart from them and subject to die when they died" (Ellison 575). Gunnar alerts his reader to this realization in the metaphor at the end of his memoir when he attempts to explain to Psycho Loco why he is demanding the American government kill him. Gunnar says: "I'm the horse pulling the stagecoach, the donkey in the levee who's stumbled in the mud and come up lame...I'm tired of thrashing around in the muck and not getting anywhere, so put a nigger out of his misery" (226). In Gunnar's horse-stagecoach metaphor it is clear that the stagecoach cannot move without its beast of burden the donkey that has come up lame.

History not only reinforces Gunnar's assessment of Black America's lamentable predicament but in Gunnar's mind, history also concretizes his belief that suffering for the cause of moral suasion is ineffective. In an essay titled "Remembrances of Racism

Past” Derrick Bell suggest that although whites and blacks share some basic needs including “more comprehensive health care, better schools, and more affordable housing...achieving unity on these common interests is as difficult...precisely because so many whites who share with blacks a whole range of social needs are willing to sacrifice their real interests to satisfy their psychic need to maintain a status superior to that of black people (Bell 80-81). It is this fact, which convinces Gunnar that no amount of moral suasion and suffering will entice the American government and its people to surrender their hold on the belief that blackness is somehow innately inferior. He knows that since white America’s definition of itself as superior is dependant upon the racist stereotypes, which define him as inferior and which reconcile Black Americans to fates that are perhaps worse than physical death—social death—he must find a different way to rebel. History has taught him that suffering and dying to convince America of one’s humanity is not particularly effective. Gunnar posits that “6 million gassed Jews” and “15 million dead Africans, their lungs filled with saltwater” prove that “pain and suffering” do not “have much value on the open market” (*TWBS* 192). His knowledge of a history of intense human suffering proves to him that if white people do not already know that his life is equally valuable to theirs by now “then they ain’t never going to know it” (*TWBS* 200). With that in mind then he simply refuses to die for the cause of moral suasion or to function as America’s conscience.²⁹ This is not his mission!

His messianic mission is to identify the power and hope to be derived from a steadfast commitment to surrendering one’s physical self rather than being relegated to a

²⁹ Though it is clear that Gunnar makes distinctions between a certain brand of Civil Rights era suffering and sacrifice it should be remembered that prior to every major organizing push or significant triumph in the Civil Rights movement there was a tragic loss of life. Emmett Till’s lynching, 16th St. Ave. Baptist Church bombing that killed 4-little girls, Bloody Sunday, etc. are all examples of losses of life that set in motion significant legal victories in the Civil Rights Movement.

racial status quo that dictates a racial identity which does not leave room for individual and group subjectivity. Gunnar would rather die than be defined according to racist stereotypes and notions of black authenticity. He and those who follow his messianic lead would rather march toward their graves than just submit to racial injustice. The commitment they exhibit to liberty or death shares strong affinities to Christian theology and the fundamental aspects of Critical Race theory. For example Gunnar's suicidal salvation plan, Tillich's message on salvation, and Derrick Bell's philosophy of racial realism, all acknowledge that although actions meant to remedy social and racial injustice "are not likely to lead to transcendent change," the actions are nevertheless necessary because they "remind those in power that imaginative, unabashed risk-takers refuse to be trampled upon" (Bell 76). This refusal to be trampled upon is what fuels Gunnar's messianic martyrdom, and I contend that more than anything else the Afro-Christian concept of Jesus Christ as a liberator and deliver, anointed by God to sacrifice himself in the struggle to save others is what allows us to see Gunnar's plan of salvation in new light. Like the Biblical Christ, Gunnar Kaufman is a messianic martyr who understands that taking a stand against racial absurdity may mean a loss of life. Gunnar's suicidal movement also borrows from the ministry of the Biblical Christ in that even in the midst of his own martyrdom, Gunnar recognizes that any real or lasting transformation must arise from a group effort and a group commitment to sacrifice in protest of racial injustice. The New Testament epistles affirm the call to sacrifice and suffer in several different ways. The Apostle Paul's letter to the Philippians reads:

Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: who thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And

being found and fashioned as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross (Phil. 2: 5-8).

Paul extends this call in the second epistle to Timothy when he explains how Christ's suffering relates to believers:

Remember that Jesus Christ of the see of David was raised from the dead according to my gospel.... Therefore I endure all things for the elect's sakes, that they may also obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory. It is a faithful saying: For if we be dead with him, we shall also live with him; If we suffer, we shall also reign with him (II Tim. 2: 8-12).

Paul's understanding of the role of suffering in Christian dogma is significant because it echoes what Paul Tillich, Derrick Bell, and Gunnar Kaufman have to say about the necessity of human suffering and the conquering of the fear of death. If we take the narrative of the Biblical Christ as a point of departure for understanding Gunnar Kaufman's narrative of liberty via suicide it becomes abundantly clear that more than anything else, Gunnar's commitment to find the cost of freedom buried in the ground shares undeniable commonalities with the element of Christ's message to his disciples when he informs them of the cost of discipleship. "Then said Jesus unto his disciples, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross, and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it; and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it" (Matt. 16: 24-26).

The sentiment of finding life only after one submits to losing his/her life is echoed throughout *The White Boy Shuffle* particularly in the context of Gunnar's messianic martyrdom, which translates into the novel's extensive suicide motif. When he promotes death as a means of escape, Gunnar contests racial inequality. He simultaneously avoids the trap of having his death be interpreted as submission or resignation because the

poems he instructs the suicides to write as well as the writing of his memoir (his suicide note) function within the novel as evidence of their most enduring act of defiance. In the novel, Beatty fuses satirical humor and religious rhetoric to expose the absurdity that racism produces in the racist as well as in the victims of racism. The intersection of race, religion, and irreverence allows Beatty to construct a protagonist who can play the role of Negro messiah and thus instruct Black Americans in a new way of finding freedom in death and attaining resurrection life through writing.

Though Gunnar's commitment to messianic martyrdom is effective in the context of Beatty's literary representation of black identity, this is not the only way to interpret black messianism. Yes, Gunnar Kaufman finds the strain of messianic salvation that privileges death as an evocative rhetorical tool to contest racial absurdity, but there are numerous scholars who find this reading of Christ's earthly ministry and his sacrificial death extremely problematic. The following chapter "Not Yo' Mama's Black Christ" offers an analysis of this scholarship and uses it to frame a reading of Renee Cox's photography, which like Paul Beatty's fiction fuses religion and satire for the purpose of interrogating and representing black identity.

Chapter Two

Not Yo' Mama's Black Christ: Visualizing Race, Gender, and Salvation in Renee Cox's Photography

Appropriation, as I cast it, is more about taking over a painting and putting it to a very different use or giving it a very different meaning than the original artist has done. It may even be contrary to the thread of meaning in that original work. In a sense, I would steal the painting—the idea and the look of it—and put it to my own use.... I undermined that [high] art.... I made it low.... It was a subversive act. In order to do that to its maximum, I had to pick out artworks that were accepted as important politically or artistically. They represented a certain kind of artwork that we were supposed to admire.... What I did was take something that is admirable, mess it up, and make you question everything that the artwork stood for.

Robert Colescott³⁰

Photographer and mixed media artist Renee Cox entered the discourse on messianic salvation and racial formation in 1996 with a satirical reinterpretation of Leonardo da Vinci's famous painting *The Last Supper* (c. 1495-1498). She did so by literally stealing da Vinci's depiction of the biblical scene and bringing to it reflections on race, gender, sexuality, and freedom. To achieve this visual heist Cox replaces da Vinci's white male Christ with her alter ego, Yo' Mama, a nude black woman Christ-figure. Yo' Mama's presence at the last supper challenges viewers to rethink the racial and gender

³⁰ In an interview with Sharon Fitzgerald, Robert Colescott used these words to describe his famous painting "George Washington Carver Crossing the Delaware: Page From an American History Textbook" (1975). Fitzgerald had occasion to interview Colescott when the then 71-year-old painter became the first African American to represent the United States at the 47th Venice Biennale International Festival in 1997. In Colescott's controversial painting, he reinterpretes Emanuel Leutze's *Washington Crossing the Delaware* (1851), which replaces Leutze's heroic new settlers with stereotypical black minstrel caricatures.

norms implied in the original work.³¹ Cox's appropriation of da Vinci's painting finds its way into this study of contemporary black messianic figures for several reasons. First, it depicts another unorthodox black messiah. Second it positions Cox within a long tradition of Black artists who have used black subjects in classical art scenes to expose religious and artistic institutions' complicity in reinforcing racial and gender hierarchies. Finally Cox's work warrants inclusion in this study because she also employs what she describes as a tongue-in-cheek type of humor to engage in a dual critique of racist stereotypes as well as black intra-racial misogyny.

Consider the title Cox chooses for this photograph—*Yo Mama's Last Supper* (1996). She derives her title from those familiar yo' mama jokes that make women, specifically mothers, the targets of derision. Just as she steals da Vinci's painting to critique racism in society at large, Cox likewise appropriates those offensive jokes (so common in the African American tradition of playing the dozens) and redefines yo' mama through a new visual language. The artistic work Cox achieves extends beyond her work with Yo Mama as black savior and continues to include her second savior—Raje who is a black woman superhero. Cox's decision to recreate herself as a superhero after having depicted herself as a black savior, conjures a satirical mental image in which Jesus is at once savior and superhero. He (or in Cox's visual lexicon she) is the one called on in times of trouble and distress. These element of satiric humor in Cox's

³¹ Cox is among a cohort of artists who have taken purposeful strides to study the black female nude. Lisa E. Farrington examines Cox along with artists including Prudence Heward (*Dark Girl*, 1935), Marie-Guillemine Benoist (*Portrait of a Negress*), Faith Ringgold (*Slave Rape*, 1972), and Archibald J. Motley, Jr. (*Brown Girl After the Bath*, 1931), all of whom have created art featuring black women's nude bodies. In "Reinventing Herself: The Black Female Nude, which appeared in the *Women's Art Journal* volume 24, number 2 (*Fall 2003-Winter 2004*), Farrington argues that these artists' studies of the black female nude part of the objective is to recreate new meanings for the black woman's nude body: to show these women's bodies as something other than passive objects on display and to infuse into the common stereotypes depictions of black women's "integrity, wit, and dynamism" as well as their strength and vulnerability in the face of racial and gender oppression.

cultural productions will be analyzed in greater detail later, but they are worth mentioning at the outset because this conflation of saviors and superheroes in Cox's visual productions inform my sense that her photography extends the black artistic tradition of depicting Christ as black.

To expose how Cox participates in the production of new millennium black messiahs, this chapter explores the visual representational practices Cox uses along with the particular historical and cultural context in which she was working—the early to mid nineties in a racially hostile New York City. The analysis commences with an explanation of the public controversy *Yo Mama's Last Supper* ignited, when Rudolph Giuliani, then New York City's mayor, took offense to Cox's irreverence toward religion. Giuliani's angst with Cox's depiction of Christ as black, female, and nude was an artistic move Giuliani reportedly described as a desecration of religion. The visual culture battle that ensued helps clarify why I contend Yo Mama is a non-traditional black messiah who simultaneously participates in and radically revises a long history of black artists figuring Christ as black for the purpose of social critique. The most obvious change to the tradition is Cox's construction of a woman Christ-figure who is alive rather than crucified and suffering as so many other black artists' Christ-figures are.

This very significant transformation in the visual legacy of black artistic messianism makes it necessary to consider to what extent Yo Mama is a womanist black Christ. In Yo Mama's lexicon of knowledge is Jesus one who is preeminently concerned with securing freedom and salvation through martyrdom and redemptive suffering? Or does Yo Mama's interpretation of the biblical Messiah align with that espoused by black liberation and womanist theologians who contend that the most significant characteristic

of the Christ of history was his life of liberating acts, not his violent death? Although *Yo Mama's Last Supper* depicts the scene prior to the biblical Christ's crucifixion, when analyzed in the context of Cox's complete body of work, particularly her collection of superheroes, it seems more likely than not that Yo Mama revels in the promise of liberation and abundant life rather than in the call to endure redemptive suffering.

Guiding this examination of Cox's visual intersection of race, gender, sexuality, and Christian iconography are several central questions. What does the very public controversy that surrounded *Yo Mama's Last Supper* reveal about race, racism, and sexism in America at the end of the twentieth-century? How does Cox's depiction of Christ as a black woman revise existing artistic expressions of black messianic salvation? How do Cox's fusions of religion and satiric humor allow her to reconfigure black messianism, offer a double critique of racism and sexism, and construct her own visual theories of race?

Section I -- *Yo Mama's* Artistic and Cultural Context

To get at these issues it is useful to reexamine the visual culture war-of-words *Yo Mama's Last Supper* sparked when it was selected for inclusion in the Brooklyn Museum of Art's *Committed to the Image: Contemporary Black Photographers* exhibit in 2001. Organized by Barbara Head Millstein—curator of photography at the Brooklyn Museum—this exhibit featured “the work of ninety-four artists who live and work in the United States,” during the last decade of the twentieth century (Lehman 10). In the preface and acknowledgements to the *Committed to the Image* book, Millstein explains that she along with three professional photographers, Anthony Barboza, Beuford Smith,

and Orville Robertson, selected pieces for inclusion in the exhibit by spending “more than two years reviewing hundreds of slides and prints,” which they “evaluated with regard to originality, standard of printing, and social or historical significance” (12). They agonized over these pieces because they want to identify those artists whose work represented “the strongest and most challenging ideas as well as the most moving, beautiful, or, in some cases, amusing images” (Millstein 12). Extending Millstein’s explanation, Clyde Taylor’s introductory essay “Empowering the Eye” posits that the photographs included in *Committed to the Image* achieve two primary feats. They “unsettle the comfort zone of idealized [and racialized] American society,” and they “testify to the liberation of the Black gaze” (15). The photographs achieve these tasks by engaging in often very subtle ironies through what Taylor describes as “the play of ploy and the ploy of play” (17).

Taylor’s and Millstein’s description of the photographs and the selection process provides context for how *Yo Mama’s Last Supper* was initially understood as work of art rather than an object of public controversy. Prior to the opening exhibit, *Yo Mama’s Last Supper* was a work of art deemed worthy of inclusion among a body of Black photography that used “parody, irony, and subversion” among other techniques to represent and critique America’s racialized society. After the exhibit however, much of the attention directed to *Yo Mama’s Last Supper* focused on the public controversy the photograph sparked. What caused this shift? The answer is former New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani. Picking up where he left off just two years prior, Giuliani once again took the Brooklyn Museum of Art to task for displaying works of art he deemed

outrageous and disgusting desecrations of religion.³² Obviously unfamiliar with African American artists' tradition of depicting biblical scenes with black subjects, Giuliani proceeded to react to *Yo Mama's Last Supper* based exclusively on having heard that the Brooklyn Museum of Art had exhibited a rendition of Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper* featuring Christ as a nude black woman. Giuliani was so disturbed by the mental image that the words created in his mind that he chose to address the issue in his radio program. He reportedly sent the following message to the Brooklyn Museum: "If you want to desecrate religion in a disgusting way, if you want to promote racism, if you want to promote anti-Semitism, if you want to promote anti-Catholicism..., then do it on your own money.... Do not use the taxpayers' money to do that...." (Christian). Giuliani was so disgruntled with the museum's decision to display *Yo Mama's Last Supper* that he threatened to form a decency panel to oversee how public funds directed to museums were spent because, according to him, including Cox's *desecration of religion* in the exhibit was merely a ploy "to get more attention" for the museum and the artist (Bumiller).

In response to Giuliani's comments and his threats to take this Decency Panel idea all the way to the Supreme Court if necessary, countless journalists, art critics, and scholars joined in a war of words with *Yo Mama's Last Supper* serving as the battleground. The articles printed in *The New York Times*, *The Nation*, and in various on-line journals during the weeks following Giuliani's comments tell an intriguing story.

³² In 1999, Giuliani along with others protested the Brooklyn Museum of Arts decision to display a work of art by Chris Ofili titled *The Holy Virgin Mary*, which featured Mary surrounded by "magazine cutouts of female genitalia" and one of her breasts "fashioned out of elephant dung." Giuliani cut funding to the museum because of the exhibit, but after a rather lengthy legal battle an agreement was reached and the museum received their funding once again. See S. Brent Plate's "The Cultural Relativity of Dung" in *Religion, Art, and Visual Culture: A Cross-Cultural Reader* (2002) for a more in-depth analysis of this incident.

Some journalist and art critics came to Cox's and the Brooklyn Museum's defense. Other respondents sided with Giuliani. But, the most potent aspects of these public conversations were the things that went unsaid. For example very few of those who responded felt compelled to ask the question Katha Pollitt poses in an article for *The Nation*. She writes that "it would be interesting to know where the offense lies: Is it that Cox as Christ is naked, black, or female? All three? [Or] two out of three..." (Pollitt 10). Rather than asking this very basic question, an overwhelming majority of those who entered the conversation on *Yo Mama's Last Supper* ignored serious analysis of the composition as a work of art. Instead they argued that the shock of Cox's nudity and Giuliani's thoughtless words had gained *Yo Mama's Last Supper* a level of critical attention that it perhaps did not merit artistically. An excellent opportunity to converse publicly about racial representations in the high art, sexism in religious institutions and within black popular culture, as well as racism in Giuliani's New York was missed because critics focused their attention on the mayor's attack on artistic freedom rather than on his coded verbal attack on an artist who depicted Christ as black, woman, and nude and a museum that dared give the public an opportunity to see it.³³

Giuliani's concerns that Cox's photography desecrates religion, his determination to protect the boundaries of how the sacred may be represented, and his problematic conflation of religion with what in the end is itself a work of artistic expression, speaks to

³³ During Giuliani's tenure as New York City's mayor (from Jan. 1994 - Dec. 2001), he and his administration had numerous lawsuits filed against them for blocking free speech. By the end of 2002 the courts found Giuliani to have violated the First Amendment to the Constitution more than 27 times. In an article highlighting his public policy record prior to becoming "America's mayor," former governor Eliot Spitzer is reported to have gone on the record to say that "the current mayor thinks he's a dictator, and does not have sufficient respect not only for other branches of government, but also for the citizenry and its opportunity to speak out and be heard." Essentially Giuliani amassed a reputation for being "a mean-spirited thug" rather an American hero. See "All About Giuliani" in the on-line version of *Calhoun Underground* for complete analysis of the former mayors record.
<<http://calhoununderground.wordpress.com/2007/11/07/all-about-rudy-giuliani/>>

the fact that religious symbols (icons and images) continue to wield a tremendous amount of ideological and representational power in American culture. That Giuliani was offended by a Black nude woman as Christ but not upset by Anthony Barboza's photograph— also featured in the *Committed to the Image* exhibit – which depicts a murdered young black boy wrapped in white sheets with a black cross representing his body, exposes the fact that there is perhaps more at issue here than Giuliani's concern over the supposed desecration of religion. Cox's use of Christian symbols to promote self-confidence and affirm Black pride gained Giuliani's ire, but an image in the same exhibit using similar Christian symbols to represent a dead black boy is ignored. It seems that religious desecration promoting black suffering is allowed while religious desecration affirming black life is not.³⁴

It could certainly be argued that Giuliani's perspectives on Cox's vision of Christ has more to do with sexism and gender bias than with race prejudice. By putting a woman in the place of Christ, Cox explicitly challenges the practice of a male-only priesthood within the Catholic faith. She further rejects strict gender roles in the photograph when she dresses one of the disciples in a nun's habit and coif. It would be fair to say that at least part of Giuliani's opposition to Cox's photography might be his alignment with the gender-roles adhered to within the Catholic church. But a more likely rational for his strong stance against the photograph is Cox's unapologetic critique of racist and sexist stereotypes within American culture and Black popular culture and her

³⁴ The fact that Giuliani did not attack Barboza's photograph can be explained in several ways. First Barboza's deceased young black boy's body is covered in white sheets. There is no nudity as there is in Cox's piece. An alternate explanation could be that it is by now much for common to see black male bodies depicted as lynched and or crucified in black art. The controversy *Yo Mama's Last Supper* created signals that Cox does something so different with the visual representations of black messiahs that it has the potential to shock and confound and in the case of Giuliani elicit anger in those who see it.

equally poignant visual assertion that powerful religious and governing institutions often reinforce these racist and sexist representations.

Giuliani's mayoral record supports this position. In addition to repeated infringements upon New York City's citizen's first amendment rights to free speech, Giuliani built a reputation for himself as one whose political career was characterized by a "cunning opportunism and personal brutality" (Newfield). Switching from a Democrat to an Independent and finally to a member of the Republican party in the 1980s when Ronald Reagan took over the nation's most powerful political position, Giuliani unabashedly aligned himself with the political tone of the 1980s and early 1990s, which included a near disdain for the poor and homeless, a zero-tolerance approach to law enforcement, and a thinly veiled callousness toward race relations in the city. For example even after repeated charges of brutality by New York City Police officers Giuliani remained staunch in his support of them. The sexual violence endured by Abner Louima and the nationally publicized murder of unarmed Amadou Diallo did not deter Giuliani's support of the NYPD. In fact one of the many lawsuits filed against his administration was for refusing to grant a permit to an organization that wanted to protest police brutality and racial profiling on the steps of city hall. Similar controversial decisions exacerbated the city's racial tensions under Giuliani's leadership, and led Reverend Calvin Butts to go on record with the following assessment of the mayor. Using very unambiguous language Butts (a former Giuliani supporter) told a *New York Times* journalist: "I don't believe he likes black people. And I believe there's something fundamentally wrong in the way we are disregarded, the way we are mistreated, the way

our communities are being devastated. I had some hope that he would be the kind of person you could deal with. I've just about lost that hope" (Halbfinger).

All of these factors must be taken into consideration as part of the historical and cultural environment in which Renee Cox was producing her black messiahs and superheroes. In a city that was anything but "post-race" in the mid-1990s, Cox had the challenge of visually critiquing and theorizing race and gender. She chose to begin her artistic journey with a series of striking photographs in which she places black subjects in spaces traditionally occupied by white bodies, but she does not stop there. In *Yo Mama's Last Supper* she inserts a black, female subject in a position of power and authority normally reserved for a white man. Unfortunately many of the artistic interventions and cultural critiques she sought to make were often misunderstood. Many viewers who ventured through the crowds to see the photograph at the Brooklyn Museum during the whirlwind of debate were left somewhat puzzled by Yo Mama's unorthodox dinner party. *New York Times* columnist Nichole M. Christian observed and interviewed museum visitors and concluded that "most visitors took a couple of glances, then moved on, partly to avoid the television cameras but also, some admitted, because the Last Supper photograph had failed to satisfy. Many people," Christian reported, "said it was more confusing than provocative" (Christian). Fashion photographer Christ Cypert admitted to Christian: "I don't get it.... Is she saying that we worship women more than God or that God was a black woman? I don't think this is something I'll remember" (Christian).

Though it may have been confusing to some viewers, those with a knowledge of African American art history, especially the tradition of recasting well-respected works of art with Black characters would certainly have been much more apt to get an

understanding of Cox's photograph. Art historian, Kymberly N. Pinder discusses this tradition of images of Christ in African American art in "Our Father God; Our Brother, Christ: Or are We Bastard Kin?" Pinder posits that "many black artists, such as Archibald Motley, Jr., William H. Johnson, Romare Bearden, Henry Ossawa Tanner, Aaron Douglas and others" have "attempted to recycle and remake white Christianity" through their artistic productions. They approach this re-making of Christianity by "depict racialized biblical subjects or by including religious imagery in black genre scenes" (Pinder). Some of the most common scenes depicted these artists' works are of Christ as a "man of sorrows" and the "conflation of the crucified Christ and the lynched black man" (Pinder). "The motif of the suffering Christ in their paintings" Pinder believes demonstrates an engagement with using "Christ as a symbolic device charged with racial/religious meaning" that can be used to interrogate "issues of African American cultural identity" that were relevant in the past and that continue to be relevant today. The seriousness of black (human) suffering that characterized the historical moments in which these artist were working warranted a reliance on perhaps the most visceral biblical example of suffering--Christ's crucifixion experience.³⁵

Renee Cox along with a number of other Black artists participated in this artistic tradition in the 1990s. Cox's *It Shall Be Named* (1995) for instance was included as part of an exhibit on "Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art" at the

³⁵ According to Kymberlyn Pinder, William H. Johnson produced his religious themed paintings in the context of the New Negro Movement—a historical and artistic moment during which people like "W.E.B. DuBois, Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, and others were laden with the nagging problem of the white God of black Christianity." To combat the practice of black Christians praying to and depending on a white God to be their Savior, these men encourage young artists to "establish a new and racially expressive art." Johnson took up this task beautifully if only for a season. By the end of his career he had left American many times to travel and work abroad. .

Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. In this composition Cox used a series of photographs of a nude young black man and constructs them in the shape of a cross. His disjointed body gives the appearance of a crucified or lynched Christ in the foreground of an urban building (Figure 2.1).



Figure 2.1 *It Shall Be Named* (1995)

In another piece from the “Flippin the Script”³⁶ collection she includes a reinterpretation of Michealangelo’s *Pieta*, which depicts a nude black woman holding a recently crucified Black Christ. In this photograph Cox figures herself as Mary.

³⁶ Flippin the Script is in fact the title of one of Cox’s other photographic series. It was this series in which *Yo Mama’s Last Supper* as well as most of Cox’s other reinterpretations of classic Western religious art appeared. Flipping the Script is comprised of photos taken from 1992-1996, and Yo Mama is comprised of photos taken from (1992-1997). The Yo Mama Series features several pictures of Cox posing nude with her young children. To view the photographs visit the online gallery – <http://www.reneecox.net/gallery.html>.



Figure 2.2 *Yo Mama's Pieta* (1996)

Here Cox visually demonstrates Yo Mama's inability to protect her son's life. She inscribes race into another classical work of art and by doing so Cox not only critiques the normalcy and hegemony of whiteness in these Western biblical scenes but she also critiques the very real dilemma of pain black mothers endured because of the destruction (sometimes self-destruction) of their children due to gang violence, drugs and police brutality during the Reagan era 1980s and continuing into the early-1990s. This historical moment is captured in films like *Boyz in the Hood* and *New Jack City* (both released in 1991) and certainly in the music (gangsta rap) of the late-1980s and 1990s.³⁷ But the historical and cultural moment is perhaps best understood by linking these violent times to the very real threat of racial profiling and charges of police brutality that were so prevalent in New York City in the early 1990s. Part of the problem began when Giuliani took office and instituted the CompStat (Comparative Statistical) approach to mapping and controlling crime in the city in 1994. This program and Giuliani's "quality of life"

³⁷ Rap and Hip-Hop is another genre in which Black artist frequently figure themselves as crucified Christ figures. It is now almost understood that any significant musician will at some point see himself as a superior rapper or performer who because of this status is unwarrantedly persecuted by "haters."

policing “radically increased the presence of the police in everyday life of New York City and [it] unleashed a systematic assault on communities of color” (Wharton). The aggressive policing tactics Giuliani instituted lowered crime rates in the city, but they also resulted in increased numbers of charges of police brutality. Statistics have shown for example that although few police officers were actually convicted, from 2000-2004 the city spent over \$224 million in tax funds to cover damages in brutality cases.³⁸ The racial tensions in the city during Giuliani’s tenure as mayor were clear, and the artistic depictions of black young men as deceased seemed to foreshadow the very real and highly publicized deaths and brutalization of Amadou Diallo and Abner Louima at the hands of NYC police officers.

Given this social context it certainly seems understandable that young black artists would use crucifixion imagery to represent their particular historical moment. One of the more haunting contemporary visual representations of the black man as crucified is a composition by Anthony Barboza. His photograph offers an additional example of black artists using crucifixion imagery in the closing decade of the twentieth century to critique racism and the violence captured on and circulated through television. Barboza’s use of crucifixion imagery to identify the life-threatening images being disseminated in the media can quite easily be likened to the types of critiques Aaron McGruder makes when his lead character Huey Freeman attempts his brother Riley from believing and thus performing the popular media generated definitions of authentic blackness or realness. Riley’s determination to keep it real is “cute” in the context of *The Boondocks*, but in the real world the demand to keeping it real can have deadly consequences, which Barboza

³⁸ Wharton, Billy. “Civil Liberties Union Report Highlights NYPD Racism.” http://www.worldproutassembley.org/archives/2008/05/civil_liberties_2.html

captures in this composition. Here a young black boy's face is shown on a television set. What would be his body is wrapped in white sheets—a move that conflates the young boy's fate to that of a victim of the Ku Klux Klan. On top of the white sheets is a black cross, which is synonymous with black suffering. His dream has become a nightmare.



Figure 2.3 *Untitled Black Dreams/White Sheets Series (1996)*

Barboza and Cox participate in the artistic tradition of conflating Christian symbolism, particularly the crucifixion of Christ, with Black human suffering and despair. What is unique about Cox's work is that even in her study of the black male as crucified or sacrificed Christ, she begins to infuse this tradition with a concern for the plight of those women left behind.³⁹ Although Renee Cox participates in this tradition of

³⁹ In this way, Cox borrows from William H. Johnson's famous crucifixion scene *Jesus and the Three Mary's* (ca.) which features mourning black women at the crucifixion.

representing Christ as a crucified black messiah, *Yo Mama's Last Supper*, drastically diverges from the previously discussed artistic trend, and it challenges us to examine what happens to the black messiah's artistic, cultural, historical, and religious representation and narrative when He is made in the image of a black woman? Does the need for Negro martyrs (ie. crucified saviors, redemptive sufferers) remain the same in black women's cultural representations of Christ-figures? How does Cox's reconfiguration of Christ as a black woman function as a tool through which she critiques the misogyny present in black popular culture?

The artistic tradition to which the aforementioned photographs contribute suggest that Cox's depictions of Christ as a black woman would engage in critiques similar to her depictions of Christ as a crucified black man. Though the art history provides insights into the artistic discourse on black messianism, an initial viewing of *Yo Mama's Last Supper* with its glossy, cosmetic splendor would likely not lead one to place this photograph in the same category as paintings like Glanton Dowdell's *Black Madonna and Child* (1967) or DeVon Cunningham's *The Black Christ* (1969).⁴⁰ The racial discourse with in which Cox's photograph enters is much less explicit than the work of someone like Janet McKenzie who beautifully depicted an androgynous and multi-ethnic

⁴⁰ Glanton Dowdell's *Black Madonna* (1967) and Devon Cunningham's *The Black Christ* (1969) are both works closely connected to the growing demands for Black Power and unrest in urban communities in the late-1960s. Both painting were commissioned as art that would be displayed in churches for the purpose of creating religious imagery that reflected congregants' racial identities. Dowdell's now iconic 18-foot mural was unveiled at the Shrine of the Black Madonna (founded by one of the fathers of Black Liberation Theology Rev. Albert Cleage) on Easter Sunday in 1967. Cunningham's dome painting was painted on the dome of St. Cecilia's Roman Catholic Church. Though the two works of art emerged in the same historical context and in the same city, Cleage's reasons for desiring art work with black subjects stemmed directly from his belief that Black people were being oppressed by white Christianity. More will be said about this element of Cleage's theology in the discussion of *Yo Mama* as a black womanist Christ-figure.

Christ in her award-winning piece *Jesus of the People* (2000).⁴¹ Rather than interpreting *Yo Mama's Last Supper* as having some innovative commentary on race or gender, it may initially seem more likely that the photograph is much like the Christian religious symbolism in hip-hop artists' visual music (music videos) and on their album covers.⁴² Instead of being cause for controversy, it occurred to me that perhaps *Yo Mama's Last Supper* along with the gratuitous replication of crucifixion symbolism in hip-hop and rap had finally pushed this artistic method of social critique past the point of usefulness. Had Cox's *Yo Mama* set in motion the visual demise of black artistic messianism as a tool of cultural and social critique? Had Cox and the hip-hop and rap artists in her generation caused this representational tool to slip into the realm of ridiculous if not laughable cliché?

⁴¹ Although Janet McKenzie is not African American she has devoted a considerable amount of her artistic production to creating black religious scenes. Her depiction of a multi-ethnic messiah "Jesus of the People" won the National Catholic Reporter Jesus 2000 competition. McKenzie explained her image of Jesus by saying at "although Jesus was designed as a man with a masculine presence, the model was a woman. The essence of the work is simply that Jesus is all of us." To see "Jesus of the People" on-line to go <<http://www.bridgebuilding.com/narr/jmjep.html>>

⁴² Two of the earliest examples of rappers using crucifixion symbolism on their album covers were Andre "Dre Dog" Nickatina and Tupac Shakur. The cover art for Nickatina's 1993 album "The New Jim Jones" was borrowed by the much more well known rapper Tupac in 1996, when Shakur placed himself on a cross on the cover of his "Makaveli: The Don Killuminati" album, which was released just a month prior to his death. More recently hip-hop artists Nasir "Nas" Jones used similar crucifixion imagery in his video "Hate Me Now," which was a hit from the artists "God's Son" album originally released in 2002. Nas uses this symbolism heavily in this cover art. In the cover art of his 2005 album "Street's Disciple" Nas not only plays the part of Jesus, he actually depicts himself as every figure at the Last Supper. Acknowledging that he was surrounded by Christians as a child but subsequently was drawn to the Five Percent Nation and then to Islam, Nas admits that he does not claim any particular "religion." Nevertheless he relies on biblical symbolism because the bible like an album tells stories. Perhaps one of the most recent and highly publicized examples of a hip-hop artist depicting himself as crucified is Kanye West's *Rolling Stones* cover which features the artist with a crown of thorns. With such excessive use of the symbol within the hip-hop and rap genre, it really seems to have taken on very different meanings. Rather than being used to offer social critique, these musicians generally depict themselves as a crucified savior to argue that other artists "hate-on" them because of their superior musical skills. In the case of Nas, he claimed that he was crucified by music critics from moving away from "gangsta rap." The distinctions in the function of the crucifixion imagery is clear, and it is a topic that warrants further study. For additional information on this topic see: Joe Carter's article *Pop Semiotics: The Passion of the Rappers*(2006) or "Nas: The Mature Voice of Hip-Hop Talks about God, Tupack, Russell Simmons, and Politics" <<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/6786474/>>

Section II – Yo Mama Visually Reconfigures The Black Messiah

The answer to these questions is both yes and no. On one hand the overuse of this symbolism in black cultural texts does do damage to the traditional ways black artists have used black messianism as a weapon of social critique. At the same time, contemporary manipulations of the tradition also bring a new realm of dual critique to the traditional representational tool. Whether these revisions of the tradition are intentional or not, what becomes clear particularly in relation to Cox's photography is that her appropriation of a famous painting from classical art along with her theft of a long standing black artistic method of critique allows her to make equally important statements on the sexism permeating American culture and black popular culture. Cox's methods of representing Christ as a black woman opens up space for her to comment on the intersecting issues of race and gender. In this way, her photographs especially those that figure black women as saviors (whether in the guise of black messiahs or black superheroes) participate in a racial discourse that uses visual representations to contest racist and sexist stereotypes of black women and simultaneously create new images and therefore new theories of race.

Cox reconfigures black messianism and contests racist and sexist visual representations through very strategic revisions to Leonardo da Vinci's rendition of the Last Supper. Depicted in Figure 2.4, da Vinci's artistic representation of this biblical scene has attained a near sacred aura. Cox uses the fact that da Vinci's work is "accepted as important...artistically" to her advantage. Its stature as an easily recognizable piece of high art, allows her to "steal the painting—the idea and look of it—and put it to [her] own use" (Colescott quoted in Fitzgerald). To use Colescott's language this becomes an act of

artistic subversion because it allows Cox to “take something that is admirable, mess it up, and make [us] question everything that the artwork stood for” (Colescott quoted in Fitzgerald). To expose the specific ways Cox messes up da Vinci’s painting and makes us rethink it, let us examine the painting and the photograph.



Figure 2.4 Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper* (1489)⁴³



Figure 2.5 Renee Cox *Yo Mama's Last Supper* (1996)⁴⁴

Both images depict the moment in scripture when Jesus tells the disciples that one of them will betray Him and deliver him to be crucified. The disciple’s reactions to these

⁴³ Art critics and art historians have gleaned from Leonardo da Vinci’s notebooks that the disciples appear in the painting in four groups of three. From left to right they are: Bartholomew, James the Lesser, Andrew, Judas Iscariot, Simon Peter, John, (Jesus) Thomas, James the Great, Phillip, Matthew, Jude Thaddeus, and Simon the Zealot. See <http://www.abcgallery.com/L/leonardo/leonardo4.html> for additional details about the paintings history.

⁴⁴ The model holding the position of Christ is Renee Cox. She features herself, or rather her alter ego “Yo Mama” in several of her photographic compositions an element of her artistry that will be discussed in greater detail later.

charges of betrayal as well as the announcement that the betrayal would lead to the Messiah's death are documented in scripture and they are captured in both the original as well as the contemporary version of the Last Supper. In da Vinci's painting the disciples seem shocked by Jesus' statement. The reactions da Vinci captures certainly make sense given that the disciples had forsaken everything to follow Jesus. They believed him to be the long awaited Messiah. They had witnessed him perform miraculous acts of healing and deliverance. And, they were poised to participate in the coming of a new kingdom. To hear their teacher say one of them would betray him and set in motion his march toward death would certainly have been disturbing. Da Vinci, captures the dismay as the disciples close to Jesus lean away from him almost as if to suggest that they simply cannot believe that such a thing could be true. This visual representation closely mirrors the tone used to describe the biblical disciples' responses in scripture. The gospel as recorded by Matthew reveals that after Jesus revealed to the disciples that one of them would betray him, "they were exceeding sorrowful, and began every one of them to say unto him, Lord is it I" (Matt. 26: 22)? Their past experience of Jesus knowing the thoughts of those around him before they ever gave voice to those thoughts gave them pause and let the biblical disciples know that perhaps even they—in their lack of understanding—might betray this leader whom they loved so much.

Cox's reinterpretation of the disciples' reactions to the announcement that one of them was a betrayer is strikingly different. In her photograph, the disciples are engrossed in their own conversations and concerns. If we imagine that Yo Mama, like Jesus, gathers the disciples (the people who should be her supporters) to inform them that they have betrayed her, they are not the least bit disturbed by the accusation. Only one of

them, the disciple to her immediate left, in the black and blue plaid shirt is even cognizant of Yo Mama's presence at the table. This nude woman standing in for Jesus does not take the men's attention away from what they are doing.

The disciples' vastly different responses are just one example of how Cox instigates a rethinking of messianism. When she replaces da Vinci's shocked and attentive disciples with a cohort of contemporary disinterested disciples, she visually critiques the sexism within African American culture. One hint that this is what Cox is up to visually comes in the title she chooses for this composition. As mentioned previously Yo Mama's Last Supper appropriates and revises the "yo mama" jokes that are such a common feature in African American humor. Some examples of these one-liners include the following: "Yo Mama's so fat when I tell her to haul ass she's gotta make two trips." "Yo mama's so ugly when she was born the doctor slapped her face." "Yo mama's so stupid she studied for a pregnancy test." Though these jokes are a part of the tradition of playing the dozens it is telling that the objects of ridicule in these jokes are with few exceptions Black women. This is intriguing because in this case as well as in many others in racial humor the racist and sexist stereotypes attributed to black women are perpetuated within African American culture. The prevalence and enduring place of the yo mama jokes in African American culture can be read as rather blatant examples of black self-deprecating humor. The joke teller attempts to re-appropriate the racist and derogatory stereotypes of black women and laugh at the absurdity of it. But the jokes must also be viewed as explicit examples of misogyny. In both instances, black women endure verbal abuses because of race and gender.

This troubling aspect of black humor, particularly the yo' mama jokes, is examined in *Honey, Hush! An Anthology of African American Women's Humor*. Editor Daryl Cumber Dance begins by explaining that humor has long been an avenue through which black people have negotiated injustices. Dance posits that, "if there is any one thing that has helped us to survive the broken promises, lies, betrayals, contempt, humiliations, and dehumanizations that have been our lot in this nation and often in our families, it is our humor" (xxi).

Humor [Dance proclaims] for us has rather been a means of surviving as we struggled. We haven't been laughing so much because things tickle us. We laugh, as the old blues line declares, to keep from crying. We laugh to keep from dying. We laugh to keep from killing. We laugh to hide our pain, to walk gently around the wound too painful to actually touch. We laugh to shield our shame. We use our humor to speak the unspeakable, to mask the attack, to get a tricky subject on the table, to warn of lines not to be crossed, to strike out at enemies...*to correct the lies people tell on us, to bring about change* (xxii, italics mine).

As Dance defines, it humor is used very strategically to undermine the lies perpetuated in stereotypes. The problem that arises when interpreting yo' mama based on this definition of humor is that the correctives for the lies being told must take into consideration the reality that there are multiple enemies—racism and sexism. Racism from without as well as intra-racial divides because of skin color and sexism from without as well as intra-racial misogyny must be critiqued. This need for a dual critique makes the task of using humor to "speak the unspeakable" and to "bring about change" that much more fraught with complexity. Cox's critique and appropriation of the yo' mama jokes is necessary because even if the argument is made that these jokes are a part of a Black oral tradition that is preeminently about providing a defense against racist attacks and lies, it cannot be denied that the jokes make black women, mothers in particular, objects of ridicule and

disrespect within African American culture. This fact alone undermines Dance's definition of how black humor functions to contest racist stereotypes.

Mel Watkins address some of the problems associated with racial humor in *On The Real Side: Laughing, Lying, and Signifying* (1994). Watkins historical study of African American comedy and humor acknowledges that Black humor can be both "self-effacing" and "self-deprecating," but he believes that Black Americans not only joke about themselves. They also "joke about the hypocrisy of American society as well as racism and the raft of outrageous stereotypes that racists have concocted" (26). The humor Black people create "satirizes the demeaning views of non-blacks, celebrates the unique attributes of black community life, or focuses on outwitting the oppressor – as it were 'getting over'" (Watkins 29). The Black laugher's ability to get over is heightened and made even more powerful because his or her "outsider...position...in mainstream American society has given [him or her] a unique perspective on themselves as well as on the dominant or majority culture (27-28). What this means in the end is that although American society is immersed in racism, the creators of Black humor are able to navigate that racism because they are keenly aware of the hypocrisy and stereotypes. Figured as such, Black humor functions as a sort of second-sight designed to give the victims of racism the ability to have a different perspective.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ It is important to note that although racial humor functions in this way, Watkins also acknowledges that the ability to see the hypocrisy in the stereotypes does not necessarily mean that laughing at the hypocrisy leads the victims of oppression to actively engage in adjusting the perspectives or the practices of the racists. He astutely observes that "since slavery, as they were realistically compelled to, blacks have recognized the lowly nature of their position in our society, and their humor has reflected that recognition" (30). This recognition fostered a theme of self-deprecation in their humor, which served as a sort of masochistic mask designed to "deflect danger and hostility away from the oppressor and onto himself" (30). During slavery and beyond these deflection would have been necessary because any act of overt hostility toward one's oppressor would have resulted in severe retaliations. However in a more contemporary context one must call into question the very conservative nature of laughing at one's self or situation rather than being outraged by it.

The definition of humor Watkins forwards is instructive in relation to Cox's photography because she sees clearly the hypocrisy, sexism, and danger implicit in the unchecked circulation of the yo' mama jokes. Cox makes Christ a black woman and uses that image as a way to represent her perspective on the yo mama jokes. She observes in them blatant attacks on black women and she uses her artwork to fight back. Cox re-creates Yo Mama and gives her name brand new visual meaning. Rather than laughing at how fat, black, stupid, or ugly Black women are, she instead depicts Yo Mama in positions of power and authority. She audaciously makes Yo Mama Jesus one of the most revered and respected figures in African American popular and religious culture.⁴⁶ This artistic move is an example of what Stuart Hall refers to as positive/negative substitution. In this counter-strategy "for contesting the racialized regime of representation" the artist "attempts to substitute a range of 'positive' images of black people, black life and culture for the 'negative' imagery which continues to dominate popular representation" (Hall 272). The objective of this representational counter-strategy is to "construct a positive identification with what has been abjected" and to bring a heightened level of "complexity to what it means to 'be black'" or in the case of Cox to bring complexity to what it means to be a Black woman (Hall 272-273). She achieves this feat by reinterpreting a religious image with a number of irreverent signs. One sign is represented in the title, with a redefinition of "yo mama" from an object of ridicule into a subject who connotes positive, empowered, and beautiful women who are

⁴⁶ In 2004 Jesus was named the greatest black icon of all time by the New Nation newspaper. In the article, black liberation theologian James Cone is quoted as having said the following when asked why it is important for black people to view Jesus as black: "It's very important because you've got a lot of white images of Christ. In reality, Christ was not white, not European. That's important to the psychic and to the spiritual consciousness of black people who live in a ghetto and in a white society in which their lord and savior looks just like people who victimize them. God is whatever color God needs to be in order to let people know they're not nobodies, they're somebodies."
<http://www.rejesus.co.uk/expressions/faces_jesus/gallery/black.html>

comfortable being in charge and who are thoroughly prepared to contest old stereotypes and create new meanings for what it means to be a Black woman.

The photograph's title is an overt textual element that prepares viewers for the visual intervention Cox's makes with her alter ego Yo Mama. But her efforts to mess up da Vinci's painting for the purpose of instigating a reconsideration of the original extends beyond the racism and sexism implied in the term yo mama jokes. She also stimulates a rethinking through her choice to make Judas the only white disciple in the group. Cox explains in an interview with journalist Karen Croft that her decision to make Judas white was intended as a "tongue-in-cheek" attempt to undermine the anti-Semitism permeating traditional religious arts which tends to apply stereotypical Jewish features to Judas while Jesus is depicted as having very white features. Cox's depiction of Judas as a white man is both ironic and subversive. Her choice is ironic because in a world where racism is defined as pandemic and where there is supposed to be some common-unity among black people, the black disciples are just as disinterested as the white betrayer. There is a unity of male disinterest that transcends racial solidarity. Only one of them even seems to notice this nude woman in the midst. Cox critiques them for their complicity in rendering her invisible, but even as she offers this critique she also engages in another act of subversion. Her choice to make Judas white may also be interpreted as an attempt to call into question the labeling of black men as Uncle Toms, when they choose to do as the disciples seem to have done and align themselves with white male patriarchal power. Though the act seems odious and warrants critique, Yo mama seems to recognize the temptation to take advantage of male privilege, particularly among those whose authority is circumscribed as a result of racial oppression.

Paul Beatty raises similar issues regarding black people being described as Uncle Toms beautifully in *The White Boy Shuffle*. Just before Gunnar delivers the speech that catapults him into the position of black messiah, a white student activist whose name is John Brown tried to ignite the crowd's emotions by referred to an African statesman as an "Uncle Tom." Perturbed by the statement, Gunnar reflects on what it really means to be an Uncle Tom:

There was that phrase again, "Uncle Tom,"—the white liberal euphemism for "nigger." No matter how apropos the label, I always wondered how come there are never any white Uncle Toms? How come the secretary of state is never an Uncle Tom? The director of the CIA is never a traitor to the white race or any other race? Only niggers can be subversives to the cause; everyone else is the "real enemy." As if white folks understand the pressures on the...American nigger to sell his soul in hopes of being untied from the whipping post (*TWBS* 197).

Gunnar's understanding of the problematic nature of only labeling black people as traitorous and Uncle Tomish is very insightful. The urge to engage in Tom-like acts, according to Gunnar stems from a desire to escape undeserved racial suffering. This explanation of what an Uncle Tom does is echoed in my interpretation of Cox's identification of the betrayer as someone other than a black man.

This critique of what it means to be an Uncle Tom and Cox's choice to make her betrayer white does not at all diminish the fact that the black male disciples are equally culpable in Yo Mama's betrayal. They too not only sell her out to take advantage of the privileges of their maleness, but across line of race, the disciples totally ignore her when they should have the posture of the biblical disciples who were sincerely asking "am I the betrayer?"⁴⁷ Rather than having this response to Yo Mama, the disciples completely

⁴⁷ Gunnar's description of an Uncle Tom as someone who will sell his or her soul to be untied from the whipping post is also useful because it brings to the table a different reading of an Uncle Tom. Rather than being viewed pejoratively, the individual defined as an Uncle Tom gains some sympathy because he simply

disregard this nude savior figure. They are not at all shocked in the same way that a viewer likely is by Cox's most powerful act of subversion and visual critique—her depiction of Christ as a nude black woman.

In a photograph Cox describes as intentionally visually seductive, we see this artist transform herself into a Christ-figure. She stands in the center panel of the five-panel composition, her nude Black body literally on display, as she positions herself in the place of Christ presiding at the Last Supper. With toned outstretched arms draped in a white cloth, Cox holds her head high and signifies self-assurance, physical confidence, and an exorcism of all racial shame. She visually ascribes to herself the power that the messiah's position carries by making Yo Mama the center of the composition.

Since Cox chooses this biblical scene to replicate, we must assume that she was fully aware that this event preceded the crucifixion of Christ. Yo Mama's attitude with respect to this fact replicates the way da Vinci's Christ responds. Although both da Vinci's and Cox's Christ-figures know that betrayal is inevitable, they are nevertheless unwavering in their commitment to speak the truth to those who are supposed to be their allies. Like the Christ of scripture these artistic Christ-figures express an assurance in knowing what is to come. Matthew writes that after the Passover feast, when Judas approaches Jesus with the multitude to take him away, Jesus did not attempt to defend himself against his captors. Instead scripture records that he said "all this was done, that the scriptures of the prophets might be fulfilled" that "the Son of Man" would be "betrayed to be crucified" (Matt. 26:56, 26:2). Da Vinci captures this submission to the

desires to do whatever it is that he must to escape undeserved racial abuses. The more sympathetic view of Uncle Toms Gunnar offers is instructive because it harkens back to the original construction of Uncle Tom in the novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Here Uncle Tom was portrayed as a Christ-figure who suffered on behalf of his loved ones.

coming betrayal and inevitable death when he paints Jesus with head and eyes cast downward and one hand outstretched, with his palm—where the nails would soon be—up in a show of acknowledgement that the hour of his death was near.

The Biblical Christ's submission to death captured at the Last Supper must be understood as intimately linked to an excruciating period of struggle and prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. All of the gospels record Jesus going into the Garden of Gethsemane after the Passover feast and telling the disciples who followed him, including Peter (who would soon deny him) that his "soul [was] exceeding sorrowful [and very heavy] even unto death" (Matt. 26:37-38). In the garden Jesus prays so intensely that his sweat was as blood, and he says to his father, "O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup [this death] pass from me: nevertheless not as I will but as thou wilt" (Matt. 26:39). Soon after praying this prayer, Jesus again goes to his father and says "O my Father, if this cup may not pass away from me, except I drink it, thy will be done" (Matt. 26:42). In these two prayers, Matthew records Jesus' submission to God's plan for salvation. His beloved Son would have to endure death—both a physical death and a period of spiritual death (a period of separation from the father during which Jesus was in the grave)—in order to pay the penalty for (or atone for) sin. Through the submission to death, Jesus positioned himself to experience resurrection. The Apostle Paul proclaims in his first epistle to the Corinthians that Jesus' death and resurrection are what gives believers the ability to say, "Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (I Cor. 15: 54-57). It is believed among some Christians that because Jesus loved

his Father and sought to obey Him and because he understood humans and their sinful natures, he submitted to the will of his Father, which dictated that the salvation of humanity would come only through Jesus' sacrificial suffering.⁴⁸

The previous chapter emphasized this reading of Christ's sacrificial suffering in the context of new millennium black messiah Gunnar Kaufman who picked up on this theme of submission to death as a pathway to freedom in his mass suicide salvation plan. Gunnar reads Christ's redemptive suffering as a suicidal act. But he reconfigures it in such a way that suicide becomes a strategic act of protest against a number of identity robbing racializations. Using a similar method of reinterpretation, Cox takes the biblical Christ's redemptive suffering and does something very different with it. *Yo Mama* is standing in a biblical and artistic scene that captures an event preceding the crucifixion, but Cox does not allow her black woman savior to suffer silently. She does not head toward the cross without first having her say. Though the disciples in the photograph do not hear or see *Yo Mama*, Cox's audience certainly does. Viewers of *Yo Mama's Last Supper* cannot ignore her or render her invisible, because of her nudity, which is Cox's most obvious and controversial artistic effort to mess up da Vinci's painting.

Cox's choice to craft her Christ as black and nude allows her to enter and offer commentary on the artistic and racial discourse on black women's sexuality. When Cox enters this discourse, she once again intersects the biblical scene with a strategic irreverence via her nudity. She engages in a sort of visual re-education through *Yo*

⁴⁸ This reading of the crucifixion is not at all uncontested. There are scholars who vehemently oppose the view that God required Jesus sacrificial death in order to atone of human sin. The scholarship of some of these people will be examined later, but it is important to note that the perspective of the crucifixion does not represent a consensus. Some theologians who disagree with this view are Delores Williams *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God Talk* and Kelly B. Douglas *What's Faith Got to Do With It* and *The Black Christ*.

Mama as black savior. The re-education is needed because as Hortense Spillers' indicates, black women have endured gross mis-namings. When they were not ignored all together, they suffered systematic depictions of themselves as Jezebels and Mammies. Professor of African American art history, Michael D. Harris explores this history in his book *Colored Pictures: Race and Visual Representation* (2003). Harris provides an instructive history of female nudes in classical art and how black subjects fit into this history. The way black women functioned as signs in the classical art discourse on race and gender helps to frame the interventions Cox's makes when she makes Christ a nude black woman. Harris begins his historical narrative of classical art by explaining that "the female nude, long a classical subject in Western art, can be interpreted as evidence of patriarchal structures, as assumptions of the universality of white male perspectives, and the appropriation of female bodies for male prerogatives" (126). Within this male centered artistic context, "the black female body in art [became] a signifier of sexuality, among other things, as myths of black lasciviousness became entwined with other sexist ideas" (126). "Women of color," Harris explains, "were associated with nature, uncontrolled passion, and promiscuity" (126). Without even being disrobed, the black female subject, though socially invisible, was still an artistic marker of aberrant sexuality.

Cox places Yo Mama at the center of this problematic classical art discourse on race and gender. Not only does she insert a black subject in a rendition of a classical biblical scene as did other black artists, but Cox goes a step further than do her predecessors and inserts a black subject who is female and nude. When she does this Cox, participates in what Lisa E. Farrington, describes as the reinvention of the black

female nude.⁴⁹ This remaking was necessary because the racial and sexual discourses in classical art were also prevalent in popular art. Farrington describes the intentions of this discourse in the following passage:

Images of African women as sexual animals, which first began to appear in scientific and popular journals in the 1700s, increased just prior to the Civil War when anti-abolitionist sentiment was at its strongest, and reached a fever pitch in the United States during post-Reconstruction. The degrading images of African Americans that proliferated beginning in the 1890s were intended to undermine the social status and mobility afforded to people of color after the Civil War (17).

One of the most enduring personalities created during this era was “mammy,” and in American visual culture, Aunt Jemima was the quintessential symbol of mammy. Imagined as an obedient servant, a happy cook, and devoted caretaker of white children, the stereotypical slave personality was transformed into a product trademark in the late nineteenth century and continues to appear on products in the twenty-first century.⁵⁰ But, the circulation of these demeaning images of black women has not gone uncontested. Lisa Farrington dates a consistent artistic challenge to the sexist ways in which women were depicted in high art and popular culture as having begun in the 1970s with the Women’s Art Movement. Since this time, “many women artists infuse the female nude [and black women artistic subjects] with integrity, wit, and dynamism” (15). The racist and sexist artistic representations of black woman began to be contested by artists like Faith Ringgold, Allison Saar, Kara Walker, and Renee Cox to name just a few.⁵¹ One

⁴⁹ Lisa E. Farrington teaches at Parsons School of Design in New York City. Some of her book length studies are *Art of Fire: The Politics of Race and Sex in the Paintings of Faith Ringgold* (1999) and *Creating Their Own Image: A History of African-American Women Artists*.

⁵⁰ Michael D. Harris provides a history of Aunt Jemima in *Colored Pictures: Race and Visual Representation*. See chapter three “Aunt Jemima, The Fantasy Black Mammy/Servant” (p. 124).

⁵¹ Faith Ringgold is a well-known African American artist who began using her talents in the mid-1960s to create works with a political message that coincided with the civil rights movement. In the 1970s, Ringgold challenged the Whitney Museum and Museum of Modern Art in New York for not including black and women artists in their exhibitions. Many of the objectives and themes Ringgold examines in her

method they used to critique these derogatory visual representations was to adapt and revise the “popular black stereotypes such as the Happy darkie and the Mammy” (15). One example from Cox’s photography that uses this method of critique is a composition from her superhero series, which features Cox’s other black woman savior-figure, Raje.



Figure 2.6 *The Liberation of UB and Lady J*⁵²

art are also ones that Renee Cox deals with. For more information on Ringgold, read her biography at the Guggenheim Museum Online Collection http://www.guggenheimcollection.org/site/artist_bio_137.html Allison Saar’s work with the black female body is also echoed in Renee Cox’s photography. Though Saar creates sculptures, she also uses her own body to create life sized sculptures of black women’s bodies for the purpose of examining themes of cultural identity, spirituality, and personal identity. Like Renee Cox and others who experimented with 19th century racist stereotypes, Kara Walker also explored these stereotypes in her silhouettes. Walker has gained considerable critical attention for her skillful use of the medium to create haunting and disturbing scenes of slavery. See Annette Dixon’s book *Kara Walker: Pictures from another Time* (2003) for interviews, articles and examples of Walker’s work.

⁵² Cox was not the first woman artist to grapple with the idea of redefining Aunt Jemima. In *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima* (1972), by mixed media artist Betye Saar the smiling Aunt Jemima serves as the background for another Aunt Jemima who wields a broom in one hand and a shotgun in the other. Art historian Michael Harris argues that in this image Saar “attempts to turn the Aunt Jemima/mammy construction on its head to make it an image of discomfort rather than one of comfort and service” (119). Though he recognizes this as a counter-hegemonic artistic commentary, Harris acknowledges that Saar’s replication of the original image prevents her art work from adequately twisting or revising it enough to undermine it. This element of repetition without adequate revision is also an aspect of Cox’s photography that is explored in the final section of this chapter.

In this photograph Raje rescues a young black man and a young black woman from giant labels featuring Uncle Ben's rice and Aunt Jemima's pancakes. Raje literally saves these two young people from the smiling, stereotypical, and very familiar product labels. Her liberating activities speak to the fact that Cox is interested in moving beyond dated visual representations and commodifications of black identity. In this series of photographs, Cox shifts her focus from a black woman messiah to a black woman superhero. In both cases the central concern is liberation from those people, things, or ways of thinking that thwart health and wholeness in black people. Both Yo Mama and Raje desire to save black people from whatever threatens their lives.

The salvation (freedom) Yo Mama and Raje seek goes far beyond simply liberating these young versions of historical figures from the product labels. Cox, as well as the other creator of new millennium black messiahs, was interested in a salvation that went deeper. For her characters being free (being saved) was about breaking free of "normalized and naturalized assumptions about blacks.... [Freedom was about being liberated from] the box of double consciousness and self-deprecation" (Harris 113). Though Cox's black women saviors are certainly humorous, they do not demean themselves. They are in fact quite serious about the labor that goes into salvation.

Having begun her cultural and artistic work of reconfiguring black messianic salvation by depicting Christ as a black woman, Cox continues this work with Raje—her interpretation of a superhero. In her superhero collection, aptly titled *Raje A Superhero: The Beginning of a Bold New Era* (1998), Cox signals that she has moved beyond her visual deconstruction of the Black Messiah. With Raje, she enters a new era of liberation through her superhero savior. Though Raje represents a significant shift characters, the

objectives remain the same. As art critic Michael Kimmelman explains in his summarization of Cox's work:

Raje emblemizes Cox's agenda, created in visually palatable terms. Subverting both race and gender stereotypes and battling patriarchy and social injustice the world over, RAJE is the quintessential superhero. Conceivably she has come at the end of the 20th century to save the world from such evils as imperialism, machismo, racism, Proposition 187-type ideology, government cuts in education and social programs and the end of affirmative action (Kimmelman).

Cox's critique of and subsequent movement away from the traditional visual representations of a black Christ and toward a new type of savior, signals that she recognizes the limits inherent in the social critiques that can be made through a black male savior. He leaves unanalyzed the issues of sexism and patriarch that assault black women.

Interestingly, the observations Cox makes in her visual reconfiguration of traditional black messianism are echoed in the work of womanist theologian Kelly Brown Douglas, who published her first book *The Black Christ* in 1995, just one year prior to the release of Cox's Yo Mama collection.⁵³ Like Cox, Douglas contends that although the black male Christ of liberation theology effectively critiques racism, he is eerily silent on sexism, particularly the gender bias within black communities and religious institutions. Because of this, Douglas urges those interested in using Christian rhetoric of liberation and prophecy, to create new symbols, new icons, and specifically new womanist black Christ figures who will "capture the significance of Christ for Black men and women as they fight for dignity and freedom" (107). These new images of what Christ looks like

⁵³ Kelly Brown Douglas analyzes the perspectives on the Black Christ of some of the most well-known black liberation theologians in her book. James H. Cone considered the father of academic black liberation theology in the United States, Albert Cleage, and J. Deotis Roberts are the primary subjects in her book *The Black Christ* (1995).

are necessary Douglas argues because, “symbols and icons are essential tools for pointing to the reality of Christ, and for helping people to see themselves in Christ and Christ in themselves” (107-108). According to Douglas,

A womanist portrayal of the Black Christ [must] avail itself of a diversity of symbols and icons. These symbols and icons are living symbols and icons because Christ is a living Christ.... Womanist portrayals of the Black Christ endeavor to lift up those persons, especially Black women, who are a part of the Black past and present, who have worked to move the Black community toward wholeness. These portrayals of Christ suggest, for instance, that Christ can be seen in the face of a Sojourner Truth, a Harriet Tubman, [a Yo Mama], or a Fannie Lou Hamer, as each one struggled to help the entire Black community survive and become whole. Seeing Christ in the faces of those who were and are actively committed to the “wholeness” of the Black community... challenges Black people to participate in activities that advance the unity and freedom of their community...[it also] signals that it was not who Jesus was, particularly as male, that made him Christ, but what he did...[which was to sustain, liberate, and speak a prophetic word] (108).

Based on Douglas’ definition of what a womanist black Christ would do, it would seem that Cox answers the call to create new Christ figures that will engage in multiple forms of social and cultural critique. Douglas’ recognition of the importance of images and symbols in altering people’s thinking about who Christ is and what it means to be Christ-like is powerful because it gets to the heart of Cox’s attempt to construct not just new millennium messiahs but also new theories of race through the tool of visual representation.

Section III – Saviors, Superheroes, and New Racial Theories

The extent to which Cox succeeds in constructing new ways of theorizing race and freedom is dependant upon how well her superhero-saviors are able to visually satisfy Cox’s definition of freedom and liberation. In an interview with journalist Karen Croft, immediately following the initial controversy over *Yo Mama’s Last Supper*, Cox

went on record to clarify the objectives of her art, which she describes as her cultural work. As her words indicate, Renee Cox sees in her artwork meanings that begin with her but that extend far beyond her. She summarizes this deeply personal and social element of her photography in the following terms:

The biggest thing is that people of color have learned, after years of oppression, to have self-hatred. I have tried to heal myself. I no longer suffer from self-hatred.... [My art is] about looking into who I am and being proud of who I am. That is key.... My intervention is to say to people of color to love yourselves, be proud of who we are.... It might be scary for many people that black people might start to like themselves. That needs to be changed. If I can make that change, I'll feel like I've done something important (Cox interview w/ Croft).

Cox's words as well as the examples from her body of photography analyzed in the previous section contain the essence of her definition of salvation. To be saved means to be free not only of racist and sexist oppression but also free of the internal mental, psychological, emotional, and spiritual pain and insecurities that the racism and sexism sponsor. Cox asserts that she has healed herself of these things and is now using her artwork to stimulate similar transformations and healings. Though she makes it quite clear what her objectives and intentions are the question that must be posed is whether or not Yo Mama and Raje effectively promote a means of defining race and contesting racism and sexism at the end of the twentieth century that fulfills the definition Cox sets up for them.

The visual and theoretical work Cox's superhero-saviors must complete was also work that Paul Beatty's black teen messiah had to grapple with. In the previous chapter, I argued that when confronted with the challenge of discerning how to define race, how to identify racism, and how to resist racial injustice, Gunnar Kaufman wore the mask of new millennium black messiah as promoted a plan of black salvation via mass suicide.

Believing freedom from racist stereotypes and from confining ideas of black authenticity would only be found in the grave, Gunnar encouraged those who were feed-up with the status quo to take their own lives—not as an act of defeat but rather as a show of defiance. In his reconfiguration of black messianism, Gunnar is a Christ figure who chooses death as the pathway to salvation.

Although there are examples within Cox's both of photography that also depict black Christ figures as deceased, the compositions in her collections that situate women as saviors do not embrace death as a prerequisite for salvation. Even in *Yo Mama's Last Supper*, Cox's reinterpretation of a biblical scene leading up to the crucifixion, there are signs within the composition connoting life, liberty and resistance. From left to right in the background of *Yo Mama's Last Supper* hang a solid green, a gold, and a red drape that are separated by solid white drapes with black crosses affixed to them. These colors, generally associated with Rastafarianism and with the legendary Jamaican born leader of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) Marcus Garvey, carry very significant meanings in this photograph. For the Jamaican born Cox, an association with the history of the Garvey Movement with its emphasis on black pride and self-determination is echoed throughout her work. These colors also reemerge in Raje's costume. In both instances, Cox's black superhero and her black savior, use these colors to further signify the fight for freedom. The affinities are strong in the context of Raje because she embodies the colors and gets busy with the work of liberating. In the case of *Yo Mama* the colors hang in the background signaling a different type of liberation. In *Yo Mama's Last Supper* unlike in *The Liberation of Lady J and Uncle B*, the liberation is not literal. *Yo Mama* strikes a blow at black and gendered bondage, but her attack and

method of setting in motion liberation is more subconscious and invisible because she is fighting a perversion of the mind that makes black women invisible. By using her nude black body in such an unexpected artistic space, Cox prompts viewers to see Yo Mama and the issues she exposes and critiques.

The cultural work of constructing race theories and methods of attaining salvation (freedom from externally imposed injustices and freedom from internalized racializations) must be considered with regard to how Cox's black female superhero saviors echo and or revise some element of the biblical Christ's character. As mentioned previously Gunnar Kaufman picks up on the thread of Christ's personality that led him to give his life for the sake of saving the lives of many. In the case of Yo Mama and Raje, death is not their chosen path to salvation and freedom. They instead choose the part of Christ's character that was engaged in the earthly ministry of saving through proactive healing and liberating of minds and bodies. The approach Cox's photography takes echoes the understanding of what it means for Jesus to be the Savior that is prominent among many liberation and womanist theologians—some of whom do not believe Jesus' sacrificial death (redemptive suffering) was ordained by God as a ransom for human sin. According to womanist theologian Delores Williams the crucifixion was above all else the result of an imperialistic government and a corrupt church. Hence,

The image of Jesus on the cross is the image of human sin in its most desecrated form.... The cross thus becomes an image of defilement, a gross manifestation of collective human sin. Jesus, then, does not conquer sin through death on the cross. Rather, Jesus conquers the sin of temptation in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1-11) by resistance—by resisting the temptation to value the material over the spiritual ("Man shall not live by bread alone); by resisting death (not attempting suicide that tests God...); by resisting the greedy urge of monopolistic ownership.... Jesus therefore conquered sin in life, not in death. In the wilderness he refused to allow evil forces to defile the balanced relation between the material

and the spiritual, between life and death, between power and the exertion of it.... Humankind is, then, redeemed through Jesus' ministerial vision of life and not through his death. There is nothing divine in the blood of the cross... (166).

Williams' articulation of the cross provides a nice context within which to think about what Cox achieves visually when she opts to portray her black woman savior at the Last Supper rather than on the cross as so many of her predecessors who produced black male Christ figures had. Part of what this shift in scene does is disconnect Cox's visual representation of a black Christ from the tradition, which has historically been used to represent black men as victims of racist violence and death. Situating Yo Mama at the Last Supper gives Cox's the space to make multiple critiques about who and what is responsible for Yo Mama's impending crucifixion. In *Yo Mama's Last Supper* as is the case in *The White Boy Shuffle*, although the new millennium black messiahs are alive, they are nevertheless on a path to the grave. Gunnar's march to death is an overt act of resistance and revision. Yo Mama's procession toward death is more of a result of negligence of her disciples to protect her. In both cases, the artists do something quite different from the norm with their black messiahs. An intriguing element of Cox's photography and of Beatty's novel is that in both texts, the authors are working with a biblical, social, and artistic narrative tradition, which demands that the Savior die. Beatty takes this dictate and runs to absurd and revolutionary lengths with it. Cox takes the death dictate and puts Yo Mama in a position to demand that her grievances be heard before her life ends. In the literary and the visual representations something is revised in this death dictate but the sacredness of the narrative means that neither new millennium black messiah can avoid dealing with it.

I believe this narrative constraint accounts for Cox's shift in focus from black saviors to black superheroes. Saviors die. Superheroes live, and above all else, Cox's cultural work is all about stimulating within people of color the will and desire to live liberated lives. Though Yo Mama is on her way to the cross, her underlying desire is to live free of racist and sexist oppression. Because traditional visual representations of black women, even black women as Christ, do not allow this life, Cox begins a bold new era in black women's salvation when she resurrects Yo Mama as Raje a black woman superhero intent on saving the day and living to tell about it. Though not a black Christ-figure in the traditional sense, Raje definitely fits womanist theologian Kelly B. Douglas' definitions of what a black womanist Christ ought to be and to do.

The womanist Christ [Douglas asserts] is seen not just as sustainer and liberator—as presented in Black theology—but also as a prophet. A womanist approach to the Black Christ...[would promote an understanding of Christ] as carrying forth the work of Moses and Amos. [In this womanist approach,] Christ is present in the Black community working to sustain as well as to deliver it from the multidimensional oppression that besets it. Christ is also present as a prophet, challenging the Black community to rid itself of anything that divides itself against itself and to renounce any way in which it oppresses others (Douglas 107).

Along with the literal liberations of young people, Cox's creation of a black woman superhero speaks volumes regarding what an effective savior must do to initiate change. Cox's body of photography demonstrates that the work of saviors includes exposing the truth as Yo Mama does at the Last Supper as well as getting busy doing the work of liberation as does Raje. At issue is how effectively Yo Mama and Raje visually satisfy the demand that salvation is possible through the sort of commitment to the part of the biblical Christ's character that emphasis his status as the bread of life and he who has been anointed and sent "to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives,

and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised” (Luke 4:18). In the focus on a savior as one who is preeminently interested in a ministry of earthly liberation of the mind and body from racializations and sexual stereotypes, do Cox’s representational practices deliver the salvation they promise?

Yo Mama and Raje make much needed visual critiques of racism and sexism, but these superhero saviors’ liberating powers are limited. They were created in Renee Cox’s own image to offer positive and empowering visions of what it means to be a black woman and to break down derogatory stereotypes. In *The Liberation of Lady J and Uncle B* although alternative images of black womanhood and black salvation are presented through the person of Raje, the alternative representation does not break down the original images. Instead Cox maps the new vision of black womanhood and black freedom on top of the old stereotype without actually changing the original at all. The complexity surrounding this aspect of Cox’s photography is her representational methodology can be read as both problematic and packed with potential. Cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall describes what is problematic about Cox’s positive-negative representational approach when he suggests that “adding positive images to the largely negative repertoire of the dominant regime of representation increases the diversity of the ways in which ‘being black’ [or being a black woman] is represented, but does not necessarily displace the negative. Since the binaries remain in place meaning continues to be framed by them. The strategy challenges the binaries—but it does not undermine them” (274). Art historian Michael Harris confirms Hall’s understanding of the limitations inherent in representational practices that leave the original racist/sexist images intact. Harris believes that the derogatory stereotypical images and objects like

Aunt Jemima formed such an integral “part of the racial discourse constructing general knowledge about [Black people] and justification for, the [historical and ongoing] violence of racial oppression” (205). Because of the pervasiveness of this historical legacy of visual racialization, Harris posits that “the totality of this discursive formation was suffocating for African Americans in many ways and distorted self-images and the process of identity formation” (205). Therefore, in Harris’ opinion replicating these old images, which represent “fragments of the discursive formation of race,” may function to document and thus prevent us from forgetting their historical existence, but the replication of the negative or stereotypical images “offer no redemption or salvation” because if the original image is not sufficiently revised it “continues to do its original work” (205-207). The only difference is that “the American social context that initially produced the objects has changed to the point of lessening the consequences of such imagery while allowing the growth of alternative, self-representational imagery created by African American artists” (207).

This view of how Renee Cox’s visual representation practices operate are enlightening because they get to the heart of the issue which is Cox’s use of satiric humor and irony in her work. She appropriates da Vinci’s painting, messes it up and offers scathing critiques of racism and sexism within both American culture and Black culture. She appropriates images of Aunt Jemima and Uncle Ben to show that there are other options for the next generation (the younger versions of the original stereotypes who Raje liberates). Cox’s photography works on one hand because even as she replicates the original visual representations she seeks to break down, she brings something new to the reproduction. Yo Mama in particular challenges viewers to see her and consider the

interventions and critiques she makes. Raje takes the critiques a step further and gets busy doing the work of putting Yo Mama's theories of race into practice. The main element of Cox's visual racial theory is the firm conviction that black women are not the stereotypes that have been ascribed to them, and because they are not they must be proactive in creating new images that tell a new story of black women's identity and freedom.

Cox's black women saviors and superheroes collaborate in this visual effort of redefinition and reconfiguration. Though there are some limits associated with Cox's tendency to replicate old images that re-inscribe the very stereotypes she hopes to breakdown, the cultural work she does remains worthwhile because she visually challenges if not totally undermines the original images she appropriates. Though the story of race and gender the original images invoke is unchanged, Yo Mama and Raje add a necessary epilogue to the visual narrative. Cox's new millennium black savior and black superhero have the final word. By reconfiguring her black saviors in such a way that they do not premise salvation on death, Cox creates space for Yo Mama and Raje to construct new ways of negotiating the problems of race and gender at the end of the twenty-first century. Their work brings to new millennium black messianism a devotion of liberty in life that is absent in Gunnar Kaufman's reconfiguration of the tradition. Gunnar represents a black messiah who acts out a revised version of redemptive suffering. Yo Mama and Raje represent a black messianism focused on the liberating activity of the biblical Christ. The following chapter explores a late twentieth century cultural text that intersects visibility and textuality in yet another reconfiguration of traditional black messianism.

Chapter Three

Saving the Next Generation: Reading *The Boondocks* as a Textual/Visual Salvation Parable

And the disciples came and said unto him, Why speakest thou unto them in parables? He answered and said unto them, Because it is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given.... Therefore I speak to them in parables: because they seeing see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand. And in them is fulfilled the prophecy of Esaias, which saith, By hearing ye shall hear, and shall not understand; and seeing ye shall see, and shall not perceive: For this people's heart is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes they have closed; lest at any time they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and should understand with their heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them. But blessed are your eyes, for they see: and your ears for they hear.

Matthew 13:10-11, 13-16

Thus far *Seeking Salvation* has examined two cultural text that use very different aspects of the biblical Christ's character to interrogate race, racism, and social justice in America. Paul Beatty's novel constructs a literary black messiah who grapples with the notion of black suffering as a means of securing America's national redemption. Beatty's central character encourages Black Americans to seek their social salvation through a Christ-like submission to death as a purposeful albeit absurd act of resistance. Renee Cox's photography captures a visual black messiah whose primary interest in not salvation via death but rather salvation through a tenacious investment in life and liberating activities. Cox's photographic representations of Christ as the arbiter of abundant life are crafted when she uses her own body to depict the biblical Christ as a woman, a savior, and a superhero. In both of the previous chapters, the artists

reconfigured traditional textual and visual representations of black messiahs and used their recreated Christ-figures to explore the meanings of race and the most expedient methods of social justice activism during the closing decade of the twentieth century.

Saving the Next Generation extends this line of inquiry by reading *The Boondocks* as a cultural text that mimics the biblical Christ's position as a teacher who relied heavily on parables as a mechanism of salvation. Rather than highlighting Christ's acts of saving via literal acts of physical healing and mental liberation as does Cox and instead of focusing on Christ's act of spiritual salvation via a submission to an atoning death as does Beatty, this chapter examines Christ's acts of saving through a pedagogy rooted in parables. I argue that in Christ's biblical teachings as well as in McGruder's comic strips elements of parables are used to reveal spiritual principles, or in the case of *The Boondocks*, social and racial realities. In much the same way the biblical Christ used parables to create mental images of God's Kingdom as a realm in which the believer saves his/her life by losing it, I suggest *The Boondocks* likewise captures the unity in contradictions that is a fundamental character of Christ-likeness.⁵⁴ McGruder's comic strip goes beyond the binary of Christ as giver of abundant life or Christ as crucified savior. It approaches salvation from a paradoxical perspective that acknowledges its both/and nature. As *The Boondocks* teaches via image-text parables, it illustrates the importance of life affirming and liberating activism. It also makes it clear that the commitment to engage in the aforementioned activities will only be possible when there

⁵⁴ In the sixteenth chapter of Matthew, just after Jesus announced to his disciples that he would go to Jerusalem and suffer many things and "be killed and be raised again the third day," he spoke the following words to them when Peter rebuked him for saying that he would die. Matthew records that Jesus said unto them "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it. For what is a man profited if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul" (Matt. 16: 24-26)?

is an exorcism of the fear of suffering and perhaps even death. This expulsion of the fear of death frees the would-be activist or liberator to do what they can to bring about social salvation and racial redemption.

The intersection between life and death and textual and visual becomes a space where very serious work of renegotiating the meaning of race and the means of achieving social justice takes place. But *The Boondocks* tempers the weightiness of the work by infusing the image-text parables with satiric humor, which allows the parables to reveal racial lessons and social critiques.⁵⁵ This artistic move brings to *The Boondocks*' parable-based pedagogy a spirit of playful irreverence, which can either expose injustices and damaging racial consciousness to those with eyes to see or veil those injustices in a cloak of irreverent humor for those who do not have eyes to see. In either scenario *The Boondocks*' fusion of serious racial issues with satirical humor offers instruction

⁵⁵ As is the case in the previous chapters, one of the tools *The Boondocks* uses to point the way toward social salvation is satirical humor—a term I use to capture the artists' dual use of racial humor and social satire. The Columbia Encyclopedia defines satire as “a term applied to any work of literature or art whose objective is ridicule...to expose foolishness in all its guises—vanity, hypocrisy, pedantry, idolatry, bigotry, sentimentality—and to effect reform through such exposure.” The satirist's aim then is to castigate anything he or she deems ludicrous or absurd. In *The Literature of Satire*, Charles Knight argues similarly that satire “poses questions and raises problems” (5). Although satire is “suspicious of conventionally moralistic conclusions and those who pronounce them,” Knight asserts that satire's purpose is a change in “perception rather than a changed behavior, although change in behavior may well result from change in perception” (5).⁵⁵ Based on these definitions one might conclude that satire is indeed a tool used to castigate for the purpose of effecting change, but literary critic, Daryl Dickson-Carr argues that particularly in regard to African American satire the tendency of satirists is to follow a degenerative rather than a generative model, which means that rather than giving us solutions the satirist is interested in “exposing and doing violence to cultural forms that are overtly or covert dedicated to terror” (17). *The Boondocks* uses satire as these critics define it but the strip also has elements of humor embedded within it. Scholars have acknowledged that humor achieves something quite distinct from satire particularly in the context of African American culture. Though the specific definitions of what black humor is are different, they each share a common thread which is the belief that humor and laughter in the life of African Americans functions like a balm, a therapy of some sort designed to combat inexplicable pain—generally pain inflicted upon them because of racism. In *Honey, Hush! An Anthology of African American Women's Humor* editor Daryl Cumber Dance begins by stating that “if there is any one thing that has helped us to survive the broken promises, lies, betrayals, contempt, humiliations, and dehumanizations that have been our lot in this nation and often in our families, it is our humor” (xxi). Another study that offers an excellent analysis of black humor is Mel Watkins' *On the Real Side (1994)* which explores the extent to which African American humor fosters social change.

regarding how to be saved. The challenge in *The Boondocks* is that the cast of supporting characters who are desperately in need of conversions of their racial consciousness neither have ears to hear, eyes to see, nor hearts to understand the way of redemption. Lead character, Huey Freeman, however is somewhat different. He recognizes the need for transformed ways of thinking about race and he is confident that he knows exactly how to save his people.

Huey provides the most convincing proof that *The Boondocks* functions as a satirical salvation parable and thereby enters the scholarly discourse on the meaning of race, black authenticity, and messianic salvation. Huey is described in both image and text on the cover of *The Boondocks* collection titled *Public Enemy #2* as a “Young, yet...old,” “angry kid with [an] Afro,” and “noticeably scornful” eyes who is racially “Black as the Ace of Spades” and profoundly “(Un) American.” These details which shed light on Huey’s personality and purpose and make it clear that this ten-year old boy takes very seriously his calling to follow in the footsteps of his namesake Huey P. Newton, co-founder and leader of the Black Panther Party. Like the historical Huey, the comic Huey has a strong desire to enlighten, educate, and liberate Black people through Black Nationalist revolutionary direct actions.⁵⁶ The young boys well-intentioned

⁵⁶ Huey P. Newton was born in Monroe, Louisiana in 1942. His family relocated to Oakland, California in 1945 where Newton grew up and eventually became active in community organizing. Bobby Seale and he worked together to co-found of the Black Panther Party for Self Defense in 1966. This civil rights organization was established with the intention of engaging in activities that would proactively address the concerns of the citizens in Oakland, California. Armed street patrols sought to protect the community’s citizens from police brutality. Funds were raised to set up free breakfast programs, sickle-cell disease testing, free clothing and shoes were made available to those who needed them. Much has been written about the decline experienced by the Black Panther Party due to infiltration by the Federal Bureau of Investigations and their counter-insurgency tactics as applied in COINTELPRO. In addition to borrowing Huey P. Newton’s name, Huey Freeman also adopts some of this historical figures politics as well as an adamant belief that the government is watching him. As will be explain in greater detail later, this becomes problematic for Huey because his dated (late 1960s early 1970s) politics are simply not suitable for the issues he faces in the current generation. Not only that but the interactions Huey Freeman has with the government speak to the fact that though they may watch him they really do not fear him because his rants

commitment to saving his people is captured in the following 2002 strip when the “small-talk” deficient Huey dumbfounds an unsuspecting caller with an unsolicited rant on all that is wrong with the world and what must be done to fix it. The phone rings. Huey answers:

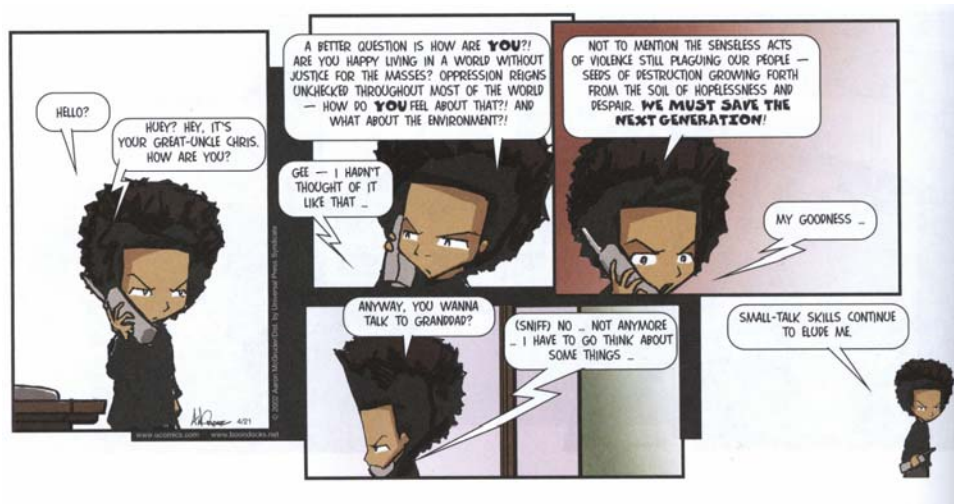


Figure 3.1 Huey Must Save the Next Generation⁵⁷

This sequence of panels uses the telephone dialogue to present some of the specific issues Huey believes are pertinent to the next generation, which technically is his generation—a post-baby boomer, post-Civil Rights, post-Black power, and post-race generation. The panels also illustrates that to some extent without Huey’s constant insistence on disseminating and exposing *truth*, people like his great-uncle Chris would never think about the looming hopelessness and despair threatening their continued existence.

The first panel depicts Huey answering the phone—a rather banal activity, which in this panel is reinforced by his “hello” and the typical question his uncle poses -- “how

generally do not extend beyond the limited readership of his “Free Huey” newspaper and his closest friends and family members. <http://www.africawithin.com/bios/huey_newton.html>

⁵⁷ McGruder, Aaron. *Right to be Hostile: The Boondocks Treasury*. New York: Three Rivers Press, 2003 (196).

are you?” Huey adheres to the basics of phone etiquette; however, his furrowed brows indicate something is amiss. This will not be a normal phone conversation. Huey’s facial expression coupled with his great-uncle’s question leads to the next two panels where Huey presents his unsolicited social commentary, which achieves two primary objectives. First and foremost, Huey’s rant gets his Uncle’s attention. Second and equally important, Huey’s excessive hostility brings some comic relief to the weighty issues of injustice, oppression, senseless violence, and seeds of destruction he discusses. The humor emerges because Huey’s all-consuming thoughts of revolution and injustice render him incapable of engaging in normal conversations. Readers laugh at Huey’s extreme militancy, but his antics also cause his Uncle Chris to forego conversing with Granddad and instead “go think about some things” (*Hostile* 196). Though it would seem on the surface that the primary objective of this strip is to expose and cause readers to laugh at a flaw in Huey’s approach, those with eyes to see will understand that Huey’s rant elicits the very outcome he hoped it would. It made is Uncle think. As far as Huey is concerned if he can do that, his job has been accomplished.

McGruder confirms this fact in a strip featuring Huey and his best-friend Caesar. The two boys converse on adult topics as they always do and happen to pick up on the theme of liberation. In the course of their discussion, Huey considers what is required to prevail against oppression, and he succinctly gives his definition of what it will take to save the next generation. This task, Huey assures Caesar, “does not require a majority to prevail, but rather an irate, tireless minority keen to set brushfires in people’s minds” (*Public Enemy* 59). Huey’s words construct a very specific definition of what constitutes the way to redemption and the meaning of salvation in the strip. Having one’s mind

purged, or purified, by fire from a damaging racial consciousness is *The Boondocks'* process of social salvation. Huey Freeman desires to be the arsonist. But his attempts to save his brother Riley Freeman, the neighborhood black racist Uncle Ruckus, and biracial Jazmine DuBois must be analyzed with his definition of salvation in mind because in some ways Huey is a savior in others he certainly is not.

Nevertheless, Huey's understanding of what it takes to resist injustice is significant because it aligns perfectly with Christian theologian Paul Tillich's understanding of what is required to save a nation—"a small minority...willing to resist the anxiety produced by propaganda, the conformity enforced by threat, [and] the hatred stimulated by ignorance" (Tillich 119-120). In the Old Testament, Tillich explains that prophets foretold of entire nations being saved by a small remnant of individuals who would be committed to representing all that the nation was called to be. Tillich's description of what this small minority would do speaks explicitly to the work Huey commits himself to in *The Boondocks*. Huey directs an overwhelming amount of energy to exposing ignorance, challenging mindless conformity, and undermining what he considers to be very dangerous popular media propaganda regarding black authenticity. In this way, Huey serves as a satirical savior; yet, his efforts to usher in his people's salvation are more often than not thwarted, which means that Huey must be understood as both a savior and one in need of saving. He is both a teacher and a perpetual pupil. This chapter therefore reads Huey as a new millennium black messiah whose saving work is most fully demonstrated when situated within the context of *The Boondocks* as textual and visual parable and instrument of satirical social critique. Guiding my reading of *The Boondocks* as parable are several central questions: What does Huey Freeman

teach us about race, freedom, identity and authenticity at the turn of the twenty-first century? Is Huey the revolutionary leader, superhero savior, and prophetic voice crying out in the wilderness that America and Black America needs to hear? Does McGruder's pre-teen black savior fall into the trap of purposeless Wilson J. Moses warned of when he projected that post-Civil Rights movement messiahs would suffer from a gross lack of commitment to any special national redemption mission? Or do Huey and *The Boondocks* represent a necessary artistic and intellectual reconsideration of black messianic salvation as a principle rhetorical tool and weapon through which social justice struggles are waged? To answer these questions and assess how *The Boondocks* functions as a satirical parable of salvation requires an interrogation of Jesus' use of parables as teaching tools.

Section I – Jesus' Parable Based Pedagogy

Some of Jesus most compelling parables are those that deal with the Kingdom of heaven (or the Kingdom of God). Recorded by Matthew, these parables were used by Jesus to fulfill the Old Testament prophecies and to reveal to the disciples the inner workings of the Kingdom of God, which some commentators describe as the sphere of salvation.⁵⁸ The dual purposes for which Jesus used these parables are important to an understanding of how *The Boondocks* likewise operates as a double-edge parabolic sword. Jesus used parables because he was instructing two very different groups of people—the multitudes and the disciples. Matthew explains that for Jesus it was

⁵⁸ The commentary in *The MacAuthor Study Bible* (New King James Version) describes verse 19 of Matthew chapter 13 as an example of one place in which the "word of the Kingdom" is synonymous with the word of reconciliation, or rather the gospel (the good news). This sense of the meaning of the Kingdom leads the commentator to suggest that the kingdom of God is the sphere or rather space of salvation. I agree that in some ways this conflation of terminology may be appropriate, but in general salvation is not synonymous with entrance into the Kingdom of God. Having the kingdom established within one's heart is achieved through the process of sanctification, which is made possible only after salvation has been received.

important that both groups understood that as the Christ of history he had come to fulfill the law and the words of the Old Testament prophets. In the process of fulfilling these prophecies of the promised Messiah, Jesus understood that not everyone would receive him. He was certainly aware of Isaiah's prophecy that the Messiah would be "despised and rejected of men: a man of sorrows," who, as John declared in the New Testament, "came unto his own, and his own received him not" (Isaiah 53:3, John 1:11). Knowing this, Jesus also understood that not everyone was equipped or open to receiving his message of salvation by grace through faith. Therefore he employed the parable in order to conceal from the unbelievers and reveal to the disciples the way of salvation.

If the gospel message espoused in the New Testament was intended to be a word of salvation and reconciliation, why would Jesus teach the multitudes in this manner, particularly when it was clear that even the disciples did not always understand his parables without having them explained? Religious studies scholars and Bible Scholars have offered vastly different explanations for Jesus use of parables. In an essay titled "The Basis Teachings of Jesus" Laura Wild argues that as a "master illustrator" Jesus used parables to help people "draw mental pictures of a heavenly Father of love divine" (28). This image of God and his Kingdom, Wild suggests, is where Jesus' social activism begins. When believers begin to see God as loving the stage is set for a revolution in the believer's way of seeing himself or herself as one who is loved and therefore as one called to love and serve others. Taking a slightly different approach, Stephen L. Harris argues that Jesus' parables are intended primarily to provoke thought and to coax listeners into active participation in the teaching and learning process.⁵⁹ The parables in

⁵⁹ Stephen Harris received his Ph.D. at Cornell University. He served as professor and Chair of the Department of Humanities and Religious Studies at California State University before retiring in 2000.

Harris's estimation are tools designed to challenge students to grapple with their ambiguous meanings and potentially unearth a greater understanding of Jesus' lessons as a result of having thought critically about them. Both of these views are insightful and are useful in framing *The Boondocks* as a contemporary image-text parable that promotes salvation and social critique by being though provoking. But, Jesus' articulation of why he used parables is also relevant to an understanding of how the comic strip functions.

In the epigraphic passage quoted at the beginning of this chapter, we see Jesus' rationale for teaching using parables he only explains when he is alone with the disciples. He used parables first because the prophecies of the Old Testament dictated that he would. Matthew writes that "Jesus [spake] thus unto the multitudes in parables: and without a parable spake he not unto them: That it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet saying: I will open my mouth in parables; I will utter things which have been kept secret from the foundation of the world" (Matt. 13: 34-35). Even in his method of teaching, Jesus was committed to fulfilling the word as God passed it down through the prophets. Closely connected to his need to obey the Father's word, is the second reason Jesus employed parables. As mentioned previously, he recognized that not everyone would have ears to hear his words of truth, so his parables—defined as long analogies in the form of a story used to illustrate a spiritual truth, doctrinal principle, or moral lesson—became the mechanism through which he could both do the work of uttering those things that had previously been kept secret and simultaneously keep those pearls of wisdom and salvation hidden from those not prepared to receive them. The parables also

Some of Harris' books include a textbook titled *Understanding the Bible* (2006), *The Old Testament: An Introduction to the Hebrew Bible* (2002), and *The New Testament: A Student's Introduction* (2005).
<<http://www.csus.edu/org/emeritus/WhatYouDoingFiles/SteveHarris-2005-12.html>>

allowed him to instruct his disciples in the mysteries and thereby prepare them for the work of discipleship—spreading the gospel.

At the heart of Jesus' rationale for teaching using parables is once again the Old Testament prophet Isaiah who foretold that the people (the multitudes) to whom the Messiah would be revealed would not be able to experience conversion because as Jesus reiterates their "heart is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes they have closed" so that they can not receive the words of the Kingdom and be healed" (Matthew 13:15). The disciples on the other hand are described as blessed because they have ears to hear and eyes to see and as a result it has "been given unto them to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 13: 11). John MacAuthor, general editor of the MacAuthor Study Bible offers a useful explanation of how Jesus' use of parables served another function. In his commentary on the Book of Matthew, MacAuthor writes that "Jesus' veiling of the truth from unbelievers this way [meaning through the parables] was both an act of judgment and an act of mercy. It was judgment because it kept them in the darkness that they loved, but it was mercy because they had already rejected the light, so any exposure to more truth would only increase their condemnation" (1416). On one hand storytelling allowed Jesus to instruct the disciples in the intimate truths of this new gospel of salvation. On the other hand his storytelling was a technique that allowed him to conceal these same truths from those who did not believe.

The dual function of parables in Jesus' teaching ministry mirrors what critical race theorists do when they use storytelling as an analytical tool through which they engage in critiques of race and the law. Though not parables, Derrick Bell's allegories function similarly to Jesus' use of storytelling. Having served as a Civil Rights attorney,

Bell had experience in and great knowledge of how the law was used to contest racial injustices. However after witnessing the slow pace at which transformations in racial thinking were happening despite landmark Civil Rights legislation, Bell began to offer revisionist critiques of civil rights methodologies. One of the primary tools he used in this scholarship is storytelling.⁶⁰ Bell's turn to narrative as a method of grappling with the nuances of race, racism and the law was sponsored by a sense that traditional legal scholarship's focus on "mastering legal doctrines and the literature" of a particular branch of the law, did not leave room to call into question the very principles on which the law is based. Critical race theorists for instance believe that because racism is such an ingrained and permanent part of American life, we must assume that there are also aspects of race and racism in the law. Therefore critical race theorists use narrative to contest traditional legal scholarship's claims that the law, particularly the constitution, is neutrality, objective, and colorblindness. To prove that it is not, critical race theorists employ narratives designed to intersect discourses on the law with the experiences of people of color.

Bell's legal allegories mirror Jesus' parables in that they both are crafted to teach important lessons, and they are both directed to two distinct audiences. Because he uses this narrative style, Bell's work is much more accessible to audiences beyond those who would read a traditional entry in a law review. In this way, Bell's use of storytelling plants seeds regarding what he perceives to be the realities of racial realism (the

⁶⁰ Critical race theory also known as minority voice scholarship was at its height in the 1980s and early 1990s. Since that time, Monica Bell argues that young black legal scholars have all but abandoned this approach to studying race and law, and have instead endeavored to deal with race and racism through more traditional approaches to legal scholarship. See Monica Bell's article for more information regard why she believes the current generation of African American legal scholars have gone not continued the narrative methods.

permanence of racism in America) in two types of soil. First he brings his insights into the law to a broader discourse on racial theory. Second he applies a rather radical racial discourse on legal scholarship. Because Bell's allegories were available to dual audiences the reception they received was also twofold. In some sectors his work is celebrated for bring attention to the ways in which the law and America's founding principles can support racial subordination. In other sectors, primarily among scholars who hold to the traditional approach to doing legal studies, Bell's work is criticized for its pessimistic view of the law to address racial inequality and especially for its tendency to rely on narrative and thereby "shy away from the hard, traditional work of scholarship" (Twyman).⁶¹

The drastic difference in how Bell's allegories were received echoes how Jesus' parables were received—some had ears to hear others did not. These examples of teachers and activists using storytelling to instruct and expose reinforce my sense that

⁶¹ Winkfield Twyman is an essayist and writer who is a graduate of Harvard Law School. His article "The Lightness of Critical Race Theory" makes the argument that among some white legal scholars critical race theorists are not taken seriously because they do not adhere to the traditional methods of their discipline. What critical race theorists viewed as a useful divergence from typical legal methodologies, scholars like Twyman viewed as mere intellectual reluctance to do the rigorous work of traditional scholarship. Critical race theorist do not privilege the same body of knowledge as does Twyman. As a result, Twyman contends that critical race theory really is not legal scholarship at all. It is he argues a brand of "pseudo-fiction where sophomoric stories are wheeled out to give voice to the voiceless." He believes that the work of people like Bell and Kimberle Crenshaw "spawned a lost generation" of legal scholars who "have become disillusioned with shortcomings in the law." Rather than focusing on narratives which only portray African Americans as victims of racism, Twyman suggests that Black scholars mimic their forefathers in the 1910s, 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s. During this time Twyman writes, "blacks who attended elite schools...were few but they were likely to be at the top of their class" unlike those blacks attending elite schools in the "Affirmative Action generation." The tone and content of Twyman's description of the remedy for the lost generation is telling. It seems to be totally lost on him that his words speak to the legitimacy of the arguments Bell and other critical race theorists make regarding the perception that policies designed to grant equitable access to "elite institutions" require a lowering of standards. Twyman fails to see in his analysis that during the historical period he references, only the absolute best and brightest black students were allowed admittance. They had to be exceptional just to get in the door. The same standards were likely not applied to every white student who could afford to attend an elite school. In spite of itself, Twyman's article speaks to the intellectual environment critical race theorist were working within. For more of Twyman's insights see the following site:
<<http://www.intellectualconservatives.com/article4783.html>>

The Boondocks likewise employs textual and visual storytelling to engage in the dual work of contesting racism and interrogating definitions of racial authenticity. As we will see in the examples from the comic strip that are analyzed below, Huey attempts to sow seeds of racial redemption into the soil of Woodcrest, but his seeds fall by the wayside and neither Riley, Ruckus, nor Jazmine are healed of their particular consciousness of race. Because Huey is a perpetual child we really cannot expect him to be successful at the work of salvation he engages, but as we shall see, Huey's humorous failures are themselves powerful teaching tools. *The Boondocks* as a whole uses Huey and the supporting characters to sow satirical seeds that fall on fertile ground and yield the fruit of social critique. As is the case in Christ's biblical parables, in *The Boondocks*, the work of social salvation the strip seeks to achieve can be read in multiple ways. It could be interpreted as a humorous cultural text intended to illicit laughter and entertain. It could be perceived as a cultural text that problematically replicates racist stereotypes without challenged or contesting them. The strip could also be read as a cultural text that takes quite seriously its work of intersecting racial stereotypes with satiric humor to teach valuable lessons about the meaning of race and the necessity of activism.

By framing *The Boondocks* as a new millennium parable it becomes possible to see how McGruder's strip fuses textuality and visuality to argue that popular culture racializations and stereotypes can be replicated and simultaneously undermined. The strip's ability to engage in this type of paradoxical representational work is facilitated by the dialogue between image and text, which allows McGruder to speak with a double tongue. Scholars who study comics have written extensively about this intriguing interplay and some of their insights help contextualize my analysis of *The Boondocks* as a

textual-visual parable, which serves a dual critical function—to contest racism and critique notions of black authenticity.

Because comics employ both textual and visual elements, comic scholars tend to agree on the necessity of reading comics as simultaneously visual and textual artistic products. The need to read through a dual analytical lens is articulated clearly in the introduction to the edited volume *Comics and Ideology* (2001), when editors, McAllister, Sewell, and Gordon explain that the ability to use both image and text simultaneously grants comic artists a significant amount of “flexibility in the manipulation of meaning” (3). The ability to manipulate meaning is facilitated precisely because image and text are in dialogue. To adequately discern the meaning the comic conveys requires a nuanced reading of both the visual elements of the strip as well as the textual ones. McAllister begins an exploration of why this dual interpretative lens is necessary as follows:

On the one hand, the communicative elements in comic art encourage the form to occasionally create a closed ideological text, imposing on the reader preferred meanings. The limited space in which the artists/writer has to work, for example, may entice the creator to use stereotypes to convey information quickly. Similarly, the use of storytelling devices such as captions and thought balloons can make the themes and values in a comic especially explicit. On the other hand, techniques—such as the ease of comics to visually change the point of view in a comic strip or book and the semantic space created by the sometimes ambiguous relationship between word and picture—make comics a potentially polysemic text, encouraging multiple interpretations, even ones completely oppositional to any specific artistic intent (3-4).

This passage gets to the heart of several issues relevant to a discussion of *The Boondocks* as an image-text teaching tool. Because the comic strip deals with issues of race it is inevitable that it will traffic in racial stereotypes, but the dialogue between image and text means that even as a racial stereotype is presented it could be undermined in the very same panel or sequence of panels using dialogue. Making sense of *The Boondocks*' use

of stereotypes to expose racism and construct alternate theories of race and racial identity, is predicated on how we read the strip. Taking into consideration the flexibility of meaning that the interplay of visual and textual allows, I read both dialogue and drawings and situate them within larger conversations on issues such as black authenticity, black internalized racism, and colorblindness. Putting the strip in conversation with other theories of race is instructive because it allows me to identify those places within McGruder's comic strip where when faced with the challenge of saving his people, particularly Riley, Ruckus, and Jazmine, Huey wears the mask of a savior with strong superhero tendencies. The following section therefore highlights those sites in the strip where Huey confronts damaging consciousnesses of race yet fails to usher in salvation—which as he defines it is essentially a conversion of consciousness or a renewed way of thinking about race.

Section II – The Boondocks' Image-Texts as Satirically Humorous Race Theory

Understanding how *The Boondocks* uses image-texts to engage in contemporary race theory discourses and reconfigure black messianism, requires that we identify the specific racial issues Huey perceives as direct threats to his people's well-being. These threats are illustrated textually and visually through supporting characters Riley Freeman, Uncle Ruckus, and Jazmine DuBois, whose understandings of blackness strike Huey as explicit evidence of erroneous ways of thinking about race from which they need to be set free. As the following examples indicate, the behaviors and consciousness of race Riley, Uncle Ruckus, Jazmine, and even Huey exhibit literally leave them in bondage to very problematic ways of interpreting race, racism and social justice.

Perhaps the most *real* character in *The Boondocks* is Riley “Escobar” Freeman. Riley is Huey’s younger brother but aside from a last name the two share very little in common. While Huey reads the newspaper, searches for the truth on the Internet, and writes his own radical newspaper, Riley watches music videos, visits his favorite online site “www.ThugNews.com,” and idolizes the gangster rappers and the thug life he see on television. Isolated in the whiteness of Woodcrest, Riley desires nothing more than to ensure that he establishes the appropriate reputation for himself in his new hood. Above all else Huey’s goal in life is to “keep it real.” Interestingly, for Riley, keeping it real does not come naturally. Being real is an intricate linguistic and attitudinal performance Riley must practice in order to perfect. McGruder alerts his readers to the performative nature of Riley’s in-authentic black identity in this sequence of panels:



Figure 3.2 Riley’s Thug Mug⁶²

The first frame shows Riley wearing the staple angry young black man grimace. With each successive headshot, Riley’s facial features become even more menacing, until the first frame of the second row reveals that rather than confronting some real enemy, Riley is in fact grimacing at himself in the mirror. None of the anger in his eyes is real. The

⁶² McGruder, Aaron. *The Boondocks*. New York: Three Rivers Press, (12).

aggression displayed in his cute face is feigned. In this sequence of frames it becomes quite clear that Riley's insistence on being "real" is not at all about his reality.

We know this to be true because Riley's own words suggest "keepin' it real is hard work." Playing the role of a thug, according to Huey's question really does require dedication and practice. But as a subsequent strip indicates, for Riley the task of being "real" also demands a significant amount of research. In a strip that initially appeared in early January of 2001, Riley informs Huey that he has "made a life-altering New Year's resolution" (*Hostile 99*). The brothers' exchange, which appears in the dialogue balloons reads as follows:

Riley: I'm rededicating myself to realness in 2001. Up til now I've been pretty real, sometimes even **EXTRA**-real but now I'm going to refocus...strive for new heights...you know?

Huey: And here I though you were as real as they come.

Riley: Easy mistake, but without a platinum chain, I'm 75, 80 percent real at most.... You see, Huey, realness is almost like a **SCIENCE**, right? Now you look at me and think, "he can't get no realer," Don't you?

Huey: Of course.

Riley: But I **CAN!!** I've been giving women way too much respect. That's got to stop. I don't have a gold tooth. I only have one alias... I know I can do better.

Huey: If only you could get the "explicit lyrics" sticker tattooed on your forehead.

Riley: **OHH!!** See? Now **YOUR** realness is comin' out!!

Embedded in Riley's words are several revealing facts about "realness." First it can be learned. If he is able to rededicate himself to the science (the study) of realness, then it is clear that there are elements of it that can be mastered by a willing student. In addition to being something that is learned and subsequently performed, realness is apparently also something that comes with a price tag attached. Realness as Riley understands it is marketed to hungry consumers who purchase it or in extreme cases steal and kill to

obtain it. Taken together the expensive platinum chains, gold teeth, disrespect of women, explicit language, the menacing scowl, and angry disposition all attest to the fact that realness is not something that is natural. Riley Freeman's realness is a performance of a performance of black masculinity.

Riley's performance of black authenticity or black realness echoes Gunnar Kaufman's process of learning to be Hillside black. By the end of the novel, Gunnar admits he has become so stereotypically and inauthentically black "it's a shame." Riley's attempts to be black by posing as a thug and Gunnar's near miraculous transformation from a surfer and skateboarder into a basketball player are both examples of problematic performances of black authenticity. Interestingly, the boys take very different paths to performance. Riley moves from the inner city to the suburbs. Gunnar moves in the opposite direction from a predominantly white suburb into an urban, multiethnic neighborhood. Riley strives to be different, to not have his blackness whitewashed in Woodcrest. Gunnar on the other hand puts on a particular brand of blackness for the expressed purpose of being incorporated into his new community. He makes a conscious choice to wear the mask of Hillside blackness and as a result of this choice he is able to reveal in his memoir not only the racist assumptions with which he is bombarded but his choice to perform blackness also illustrates that even those definitions of black authenticity are social constructions, which can be learned and therefore unlearned. Unlike Gunnar, Riley is much less strategic in his performances of black identity. Riley genuinely seems to believe that what he sees on television is what he must mimic in order to be "real." While Gunnar recognizes that the dictate to "stay black" can only mean to "be yourself," Riley does not share this revelation. In fact when Huey and Granddad

catch Riley listening to his favorite Lauren Hill compact disc, *The Mis-Education of Lauren Hill*, he is horrified that his secret has been exposed. And he is convinced that he is somehow inherently less real because he enjoys Hill's positive and uplifting lyrics. To counteract this perceived deficit Riley vows to recommit himself to heightening his realness.

Despite Riley's sincere dedication to perfecting his realness, Huey knows quite well that Riley's version of black realness is not natural. It is something that is the result of what his brother sees on television—a cultural tool Huey believes disseminates very dangerous definitions of what it means to really be black. These definitions, which Riley wholeheartedly buys into, and the television as racial mis-educator are often objects of critique in *The Boondocks*. When Huey seeks to challenge this pervasive and powerful tool, we see aspects of his black revolutionary identity emerge. That his revolutionary tactics are displayed in response to Riley's ideas about realness is understandable because Huey is convinced that there is a media conspiracy being perpetuated against Black America.⁶³ In another 2001 strip, Huey explains the problem to Caesar in these terms:

You see, Caesar, in the past ten years we've seen the near total disintegration of black political and social leadership. That means the single largest influence on Black America's self-image is popular culture: music, tv, and films. To ensure the ongoing mental enslavement of the Black man, Black TV and films must remain racially degrading, intellectually insulting, and creatively stagnant (*Hostile* 161).

⁶³ Cultural and media studies scholars have also examined this issue. Professor Robin Means Coleman for example has written extensively about the representations of African American in popular media. For more on the impact of gang violence as presented in black popular movies and music see Coleman's chapter in *Say It Loud* [insert the title and a brief summary of the chapter]. Though I don't mention it here Huey also thinks that much of what is packaged as black comedy is also extremely insulting and heavily based on stereotypes. Means Coleman examines this issue in *African American Viewers and the Black Situation Comedy: Situating Racial Humor* (1998). For a study that examines the media and race more broadly see Robert Ferguson's *Representing Race: Ideology, Identity and the Media* (1998).

These statements signal that Huey sees something nefarious and sinister in the media representations of Black culture, but he is careful to acknowledge that the media isn't totally to blame. In a later sequence, which again features Huey and Caesar discussing popular media, the conversation shifts to contemporary rap music. Huey says to Caesar:

Who cares about what hip-hop is **SUPPOSED** to be? I'm talking about what it **IS**. Most of rap music **IS** violent and stupid, and that ain't the media's fault.... Look, rap music, for the most part, has been stuck in the "gangsta rap" era for over ten years no – mostly because it sells so well to white kids. But rap doesn't clearly draw the line between fact and fiction. The whole point seems to be to make people believe that made-up gangster tales are true (*Hostile* 247).

In these two passages of dialogue, we see Huey identify two equally responsible culprits in the representations of blackness that have convinced Riley and others that being black means being (or rather pretending to be) a thug. Those culprits are both the media disseminators of these images as well as the black artists who help create them.⁶⁴ In both cases, the challenge is that those consuming the music (whether young white kids or African American youth like Riley) do not seem to fully understand that these

⁶⁴ The image of black popular culture that McGruder presents through Huey is one that has been the subject of much public and scholarly debate. One documentary on the topic that speaks directly to the ways in which black popular culture particularly as it is manifested in hip-hop and rap music is *Hip-Hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes*. This documentary features interviews with scholars as well as a number of very well-known musicians and rappers who acknowledge that much of the content of their music is indeed driven by what they believe will sell. Several up and coming artists even acknowledge that though the majority of their music is about the thug life of selling drugs, killing people, and going to jail that is not their reality. They love the music, and in order to be successful they rap about what the purchasing audience wants to hear. The documentary's director does something very interesting and rather than making the violence and misogyny in rap music solely a product of African American youth culture, he instead makes links to the American popular culture tradition of manhood being acted out in film and on television using very similar methods. The challenge identified in this documentary is that without this historical context and without a clear understanding that much of what is presented in this music is a performance, those who consume it come to think that this art form is a "real" representation of black life. Added to this misinterpretation is the fact that the scenes described in the music can also be seen on the evening news, which seems to support the validity of the assumption that rap music's posturing is real. What we miss of course is that even the evening news falls victim to participating in racial representations that too often depict African Americans in a very particular, criminalized perspective.

representations of blackness are carefully constructed and packaged to satisfy the consumers' desire for something dangerous and different.

The image of hip-hop and rap McGruder presents in *The Boondocks* differs significantly from the musical scene he recalls growing up with. In an interview with journalist Ben McGrath, McGruder reveals that as a tenth grader, when he began attending public school and started “to hang out with other black people,” “he listened to a lot of hip-hop music” particularly the “politically conscious rap” of “Public Enemy, KRS-One...” (McGrath 153). This music McGruder describes as “that sort of radical, pro-black-nationalist type of music” that was “just a fad” but which nevertheless left a considerable impression on his teenage mind. This period in the mid to late 1980s and moving into the 1990s McGruder reminisces was “one of the few times...in black history when as a young person you could be cool and intellectual at the same time” (McGrath 153). McGruder actually goes so far as to credit this time of hip-hop’s “political era,” which he dates from about 1987-1992, as the primary source of his “political perspectives as a young adult” (*All the Rage* 171). From the aforementioned hip-hop groups, McGruder was introduced to Black Nationalism and radical socialism, and he was “put on this path to become politically oriented, because of hip-hop” (*All the Rage* 171).

Unfortunately as McGruder makes clear in other interviews as well as in his strip, this trend of politically conscious hip-hop did not last. By 1995, McGruder posits that hip-hop had become “artistically stagnated” (*All the Rage* 171). This date at which hip-hop began to digress—in McGruder’s opinion—is significant because prior to this shift hip-hop music was the engine used to impart to young black people “political ideals” (*All the Rage* 171). “There was,” McGruder professes, “no black leadership supplying these

political ideals to the next generation,” so hip-hop was at this time a tool through which young black people growing up in the suburbs learned about people like Louis Farrakan. It should not be surprising then that since McGruder felt that hip-hop music was failing to issue forth serious and socially conscious messages, something else was needed to fill the gap. McGruder created *The Boondocks* to met this need. It was soon being published in the University of Maryland’s campus newspaper “The Diamondback.”⁶⁵ For McGruder his comic strip became a response to what he perceived as artistic and political stagnation within hip-hop culture, and when McGruder allows Huey to perform the role of black revolutionary he takes specific steps to attack the popular media representations of black identity that have Riley convinced that being real means being a thug.

One particularly powerful example of Huey’s wearing the mask of black revolutionary and racial savior appears when after becoming disgusted with the media representations of blackness, which fuel Riley’s desire to keep it real, Huey decides to conduct a black media study to get concrete data detailing how black people spend their time on television. In the interest of consciousness raising, Huey begins his “Black Media Study” which includes him watching all of the Black television shows. For the sake of informing the people Huey suffers through several excruciating days of watching nothing but BET, UPN, sports, and black television ministries. Huey shares the findings of his “Black Media Study” with Caesar. “I’ve finally sorted through all my research

⁶⁵ During the time the strip was being published in The Diamondback, Jayson Blair was the papers editor-in-chief. Blair was the *New York Times* journalist who resigned after errors and instances of plagiarism were found in several of his articles. The scandal sparked conversations on whether or not Affirmative Action was to blame for Blair being promoted to quickly despite what in hindsight were glaring irregularities in his articles and work ethic. After resigning, Blair wrote a memoir in which he claims that rather than being incompetent, his work problems were the result of past drug use and a bipolar disorder. Blair’s scandal and the connections that were made between him and the backlash against Affirmative Action made their way into McGruder’s strip when Huey and Caesar discuss Blair and Huey insists that Blair bolsters belief that Affirmative Action sponsors inferior work and that he will definitely “be getting a beat-down at the next Black Journalist convention.”

notes. This is how black people spend their time on television. Sweating and grimacing: 40%. Rapping: 30%. Eating fast food: 15%. Singing and/or dancing: 10%” (*All the Rage* 52). Caesar asks him “What about the positive black people? What about Oprah” (*All the Rage* 52)? Huey’s response: “Talking to white people about their problems: 5%” (*All the Rage* 52).

Huey’s media study is only one example of how he attempts to take direct action to combat the things he sees that are detrimental to Black people. His approach is significant because it directly address at least one of the sources of the problem that is identified through Riley’s media generated concept of realness that is completely disconnected from his reality. In this following sequence of panels we see how Huey’s approaches to the problem of black representation in the media is starkly different from the approaches of Tom DuBois and his wife.



Figure 3.3 Huey and Reactionary Protest Strategies

Huey’s position on how to address this problem goes far beyond the DuBois’ reactionary methods. Huey shares the DuBois’s concern, but when he offers different views on how they might go about addressing this problem the DuBois’s totally miss the point. Their

decision to take Huey's advise or not is contingent upon whether or not everything Huey has said will fit on a picket sign. Again, we see depicted in both image and text the satiric humor that emerges when Huey's attempts to enlighten the DuBois's, set their minds on fire, and give them alternate methods of protest fail miserably. The important aspect of Huey's suggestions is that he does not discredit the usefulness of the DuBois's plans: he merely points out a way to go beyond what he views as reactionary tactics. Huey wants to redefine the objectives of their protests. The DuBois's unfortunately are so focused on their "old fashioned nonviolent protests" that they simply cannot see how Huey's very logical suggestions will fit within their dated framework of activism. The satiric humor appears when Huey exposes the limits of their methods, but the revelation does not instigate any sort of change or alteration in their thinking. Neither Riley nor the DuBois's are saved by Huey's efforts at enlightenment; nevertheless, he forges on to fight another day and face another racial demon—the infamous Uncle Ruckus.

A staunch black racist, Uncle Ruckus hates Black people more than any white supremacist ever could. In many ways he is akin to comedian Dave Chappelle's character Clayton Bigsby—the blind black man who was raised to believe that he was white and became the leading voice of the Ku Klux Klan. After learning that he is what he hates most—a Black person—Clayton Bigsby retires from public life and promptly divorces his wife of over twenty years because according to him she was a "nigger lover." Like Clayton Bigsby, Uncle Ruckus despises all Black people including himself, but he loves considers white people God's special gift to the world. The extent of Ruckus's self-hatred is made known when Ruckus suggests that he too was once had

white skin, but he is now stained with blackness is a result of reverse vitiligo.⁶⁶ Although Uncle Ruckus did not officially appear in *The Boondocks* strip until several years after its syndication, creator Aaron McGruder explains that the character was “conceived of in the mid ‘90s” (*All the Rage* 242). “His debut in the strip,” according to McGruder, “was pushed off year after year,” “because even the most tame material [he] could come up with [for Uncle Ruckus] had folks up in arms” (*All the Rage* 242).

Part of the reason Uncle Ruckus causes such a ruckus stems from the fact that he like Riley has internalized racist stereotypes regarding what it means to be black. Riley’s antics are somewhat more understandable because his youth is to blame for an unquestioning acceptance of popular culture definitions of black authenticity (realness), but Uncle Ruckus is an adult, who seems to have totally embraced every possible negative stereotype ascribed to African Americans. Because Riley, Caesar, and Huey are the only black youth in Woodcrest, Ruckus sees them as dark blots on the neighborhood’s pristine whiteness, and they are special targets for his racist attacks. One vivid case in point is the following strip which features Uncle Ruckus as the bus driver, charged with transporting Woodcrest children to J. Edgar Hoover Elementary School. In this strip from September of 2005 Uncle Ruckus stands outside the big yellow bus welcoming the little white children. “Good Morning, childrens!” he says to them. “Don’t y’all look like some little angels. Hello there, Mista Timmy...Lovely day, Miss Daisy...” (*All the Rage* 250). His temperament is excessively congenial toward the little ones until he sees Riley and Huey approach the entrance to the bus at which point he

⁶⁶ Vitiligo or leukoderma is a chronic skin disease that causes loss of pigment resulting in light patches on the skin. The disease is perhaps most closely recognized with Michael Jackson, whose increasing depigmentation was captured in magazines and on the covers of tabloids.

proceeds to give an unsolicited rant on the young boys' need (or the lack thereof) for an education. "Whoa" Uncle Ruckus begins:

Where you two think you're goin'? You little Negro hooligans ain't gettin' on this bus! What you kids think you got, a **FUTURE**?! You gonna be a janitor?! **I'M** the janitor! You gonna be a bus driver?! **I'M** the bus driver! Why don't you two just become rappers and get into some beef and shoot each other! Go home...[Uncle Ruckus tells them as the bus speeds off leaving Huey and Riley in a cloud of dust]. You don't need no degree to go to jail (*All the Rage* 250)!

Uncle Ruckus' words are racist and offensive, particularly because they are directed to children who are just trying to get to school, but I image that a considerable amount of the controversy surrounding Ruckus arises from the fact that he gives voice to the racist things that too many people seem to think but who are politically correct enough not to verbalize. This attribute of his character is displayed most vividly when McGruder gives Ruckus another job and allows him to stand in as Santa Clause in a week-long series of strips in December 2004. I present the story line in its entirety because as McGruder acknowledges several papers pulled the strip and some elected to cut portions of it they deemed inappropriate.





Figure 3.4 Uncle Ruckus as Self-Loathing Santa⁶⁷

⁶⁷ McGruder, Aaron. *All the Rage*. (242-244).

The racist consciousness inherent not only in Ruckus's words but also in the disdainful attitude he takes toward Huey and Caesar is visceral in this sequence of panels. What is never made explicit in the strip is what if anything has happened to cause Ruckus to have such strong anti-black sentiments. The only explanation is that he simply buys wholesale the racist stereotypes of African Americans that have been used to justify social inequalities. Ruckus believes that all black people are like Riley and want nothing more than to keep it real.

It would seem that the satiric humor in Uncle Ruckus's expressions of racial damnation stem from the absurdity of his perspectives, but in fact a lot of what makes Uncle Ruckus so controversial and so humorous is the fact that he is not alone in his views. Though Uncle Ruckus is a very exaggerated figure, he brings to the discussion a significant issue of how Black people respond to and combat injustice and inequality when it seems that the racist justifications for the inequality are being reinforced by some peoples' real behavior. McGruder lets his audience know that although Ruckus is abrasive and blatantly racist, there are others who seem to concur that the current generation of black youth (the generation that even Huey acknowledges needs to be saved) are nappy headed, lazy, chimpanzees that do not want a job or an education. Ruckus views strike me as only mildly distinct from the community "call outs" sent forth by Dr. William Cosby. Cosby's calls for Black youth to take responsibility for themselves, get an education, speak proper English, stop having illegitimate children, and stop wearing their pants hanging off their butts, made their way into *The Boondocks* strip, when after seeing Cosby's comments on television, Granddad puts on his dark sunglasses and channels Cosby's spirit to correct his own wayward grandchildren. The dialogue

presented in the following strip is McGruder's interpretation of Bill Cosby's comments along with quotes from some of Cosby's words. Notice the similarities implicit in Cosby's words and those of Uncle Ruckus.

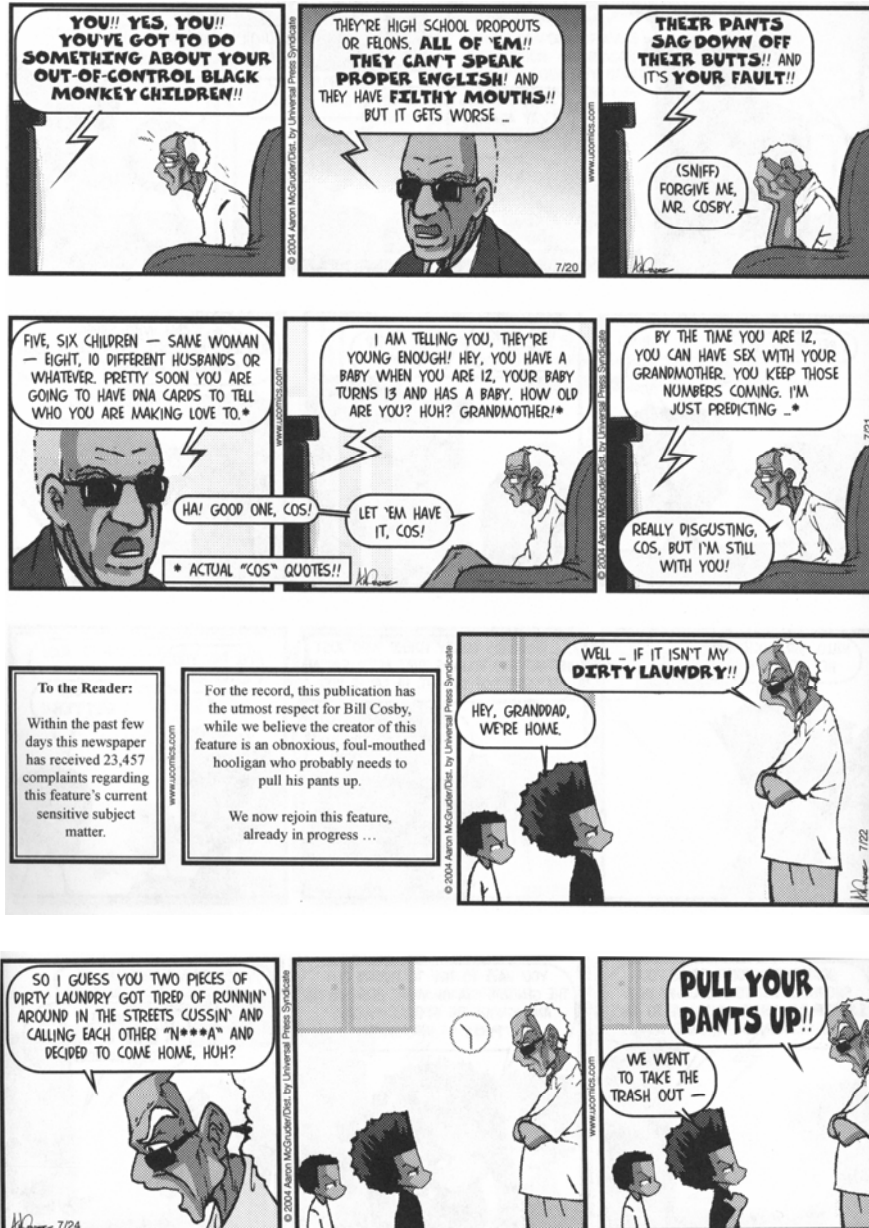


Figure 3.5 Granddad as Bill Cosby⁶⁸

⁶⁸ McGruder, Aaron. *Public Enemy #2* (148)

Though I certainly do not seek to argue that Bill Cosby is synonymous with Uncle Ruckus, I do contend that McGruder's representation of Cosby in the strip does share many of the same sentiments and much of the same language used in Ruckus depiction of black people. These similarities are not at all coincidental. It is quite telling that in the end both Uncle Ruckus and McGruder's characterization of Dr. Cosby are both used to expose an additional problem from which Black Americans need to be saved, which is the tendency to not see the complexities of race and racism. Huey attempts to clarify this problem and thus bring his Granddad out of his Cosby trance by explaining the racial situation and Cosby's approach to it. His attempt to purge his Granddad of Ruckus-Cosby inspired attitude begins with a few concessions, but ends with enlightenment on the big issue:

Granddad, let me start by saying I have tremendous respect for Bill Cosby... And I agree with Mr. Cosby that black people need to be more socially and politically active and more self-critical as well... [but] the problems of the black underclass are neither completely the fault of the white man nor of the black community itself. These issues are complicated...! Granddad I don't think you should listen to Bill Cosby in a **LITERAL** sense. You have to take his comments... thematically. You have to try to figure out the general idea of what he's saying and ignore the specific "words" or "pieces of information"... I'm not saying Bill Cosby's crazy. I don't know the man. I'm saying that he maybe **SOUNDS** a little frustrated and cantankerous...and a little out-of-touch. And he didn't always make complete sense, and maybe he was kinda self-righteous, but hey...what old person isn't? (Public Enemy 149-150).

When we compare Huey's textual description of Bill Cosby with the visual and the textual depiction of Uncle Ruckus it becomes apparent that perhaps Uncle Ruckus' explicit pessimism and hatred are at least partially what gets produced when people like Bill Cosby (well-intentioned and concerned for Black people's progress) lose all hope in Black folks and out of frustration allow their well-intentioned critiques to veer into the

realm of gross generalizations and thinly veiled disdain for those Black people who are not able to attain a certain standard or level of acceptable (respectable) blackness.

The difference between Ruckus and McGruder's depiction of Cosby is that Ruckus spouts black self-hatred. Cosby promotes black self-help. Ruckus does not believe there is any hope for black people to advance beyond their subordinate status, which is why he constantly reminds Huey, Riley and Caesar that they don't have a future. Cosby does believe there is hope for the future, which is why he so mercilessly admonishes black people to "come on" and work harder.⁶⁹ Ironically despite the differences in motivation, the rhetorical strategies underlying the self-hate and the self-help are often quite similar. In the end the victims of racist stereotypes and institutional racism are blamed for their status. It is believed that if black people were more responsible – not if America's institutions and racial formations were less biased – then their ability to partake of the American dream could be realized. If black people would be more responsible for themselves, their children, their educations, etc. then the assumption is that the negative racial stereotypes would diminish and the need to constantly express such a possessive investment in skin color would dissipate. This is an

⁶⁹ Bill Cosby's book *Come on People: A Path from Victim to Victor* (2007) is co-authored by his long time friend and psychiatrist Alvin F. Pouissant, is the outcome of a series of community call outs the comedian organized in cities throughout the country where he gave people an opportunity to vent and discuss solutions to their problems in the format of a town hall meeting. I had an opportunity to attend one such meeting in Detroit, MI held at Tried Stone Baptist Church in 2007. The church was packed and Dr. Cosby delivered a message about personal responsibility, a commitment to education, and building stronger families—all of the major (conservative) themes covered in his book. *Come on People* is in many ways an extension of Cosby's controversial 2004 remarks at the NAACP's gala commemorating the 50th Anniversary of Brown v Board of Education. What was deemed most controversial about Cosby's comments was his tendency to attack poor Black people for not holding up their end of the bargain in the struggle for racial uplift. In his opening comments at the Detroit town hall meeting, Cosby explained that he said the things he did, which McGruder captures in *The Boondocks*, to speak some truths that black academics tend not to voice in their works which black white people for all that is wrong in Black America. He went on to explain that the book's title is not intended to be perjorative—as in "get it together" all by yourself. It is an admonition for everyone to come on, collaborate, and let's all get to our destination together.

assumption Huey attempts to debunk because he knows that since the problems of race in America are not as simple and straightforward as personal responsibility, the solutions will not be that simple either. Though there is no help for Uncle Ruckus, at least Granddad seems to have been shocked into considering Huey's point of view regarding the complexities of race and the holes in Dr. Cosby's approach to racial redemption.⁷⁰ Here once again it is evident that even though there really is nothing Huey can do to save Uncle Ruckus, his ability to sit down with Granddad and discuss the Cosby controversy is instructive. Huey's words teach us that the struggle for social salvation must be waged from multiple vantage points—personal responsibility coupled with a tenacious commitment to challenging institutional racist practices.

Unfortunately neither of the approaches Huey advocates for is within Jazmine DuBois' lexicon of knowledge. Jazmine is the character in *The Boondocks* who staunchly believes in the power of colorblindness to reconcile division along racial lines. Jazmine's commitment to colorblindness coupled with her bi-racial background is effective because even as the strip challenges colorblindness, Jazmine's ignorance of black history and culture serves as an effective foil to Huey's problematic ideas of who is

⁷⁰ In an immediate response to Bill Cosby's initial 2004 comments, public intellectual Michael Eric Dyson published *Is Bill Cosby Right, Or Has the Black Middle Class Lost Its Mind?* (2005). In his book Dyson dissects Cosby's comments and points out the ways in which his words illustrate a very serious disjuncture between black elites and the black poor. Dyson argues that while it is certainly clear that socio-economically challenged African Americans do need to take responsibility for themselves and for their children's educations, there are nuances Cosby misses in his explanation of the connection between poverty and destructive behavior. Cosby's comments struck Dyson as another unfortunate moment in which racist stereotypes of under-privileged blacks as lazy, criminals, and hypersexual were further reinforced. Cosby's diatribe against low-income African Americans in Dyson's view simple did not take into consideration all of the social, political, and economic factors that contribute to the issues he raises. My sense is that where Cosby fails in his ability to offer nuanced articulations of institutional and systemic racism, scholars like Dyson and others step in to fill the gaps. Had not Cosby's so-called controversial comments, which resulted in a very culturally conservative book, made such a stir, it is unlikely that Dyson's book would have made it to the New York Times bestseller list. The critique McGruder makes in *The Boondocks* is that Huey finds a middle ground between Dyson and Cosby. It is in this way that *The Boondocks* takes on the task of offering two sets of cultural critiques at once.

black and who is not. From their initial meeting Huey is determined to convince Jazmine she is black, and she is equally committed to not allowing Huey to define her identity. In the midst of their often tense exchanges, the deficits in both Huey's and Jazmine's ways of thinking about race as a concept and blackness as an identifying marker are exposed. Because of her insistence on being defined as human rather than as either white or black, Jazmine is the character Huey feels most committed to enlightening.

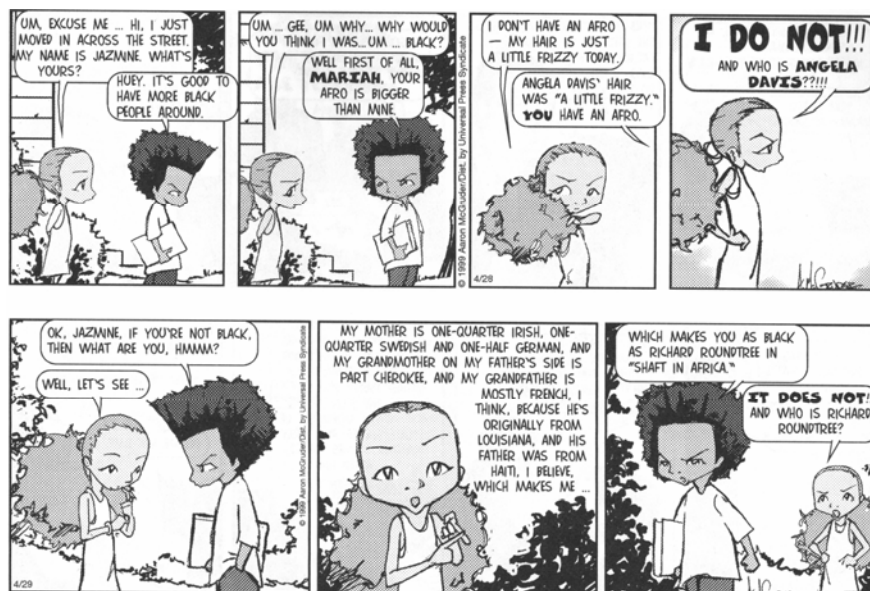


Figure 3.6 Jazmine and Huey Meet⁷¹

The story line for this strip first appeared at the end of April through early May of 1999, and it vividly demonstrates the critical lens *The Boondocks* applied to issues of race and racial identification from the very beginning of its tenure in syndication. Here we see the newest Woodcrest resident proactively seeking to meet her neighbors. Rather than making a new friend she instead receives one of Huey's unsolicited lessons in black

⁷¹ McGruder, Aaron. *Right to be Hostile*. (15).

identity. Though Jazmine desires to take into consideration all elements of her family heritage, once Huey hears her say that her grandfather is from Haiti, that is all he needs to know to conclude that she is Black. Huey follows the one-drop rule of old and does not allow Jazmine any flexibility or individuality in terms of how she wants to be identified racially. In this sense Huey looks at her hair and hears about her family history and ascribes a racial identity to her that is based on a biological conception of race. The intriguing component of Huey's perspective is that even as he seeks to stamp a black identity onto Jazmine, the cultural and historical references he makes to Angela Davis and Richard Roundtree⁷² speak to the fact that much of what Huey takes to be markers of authentic blackness are in fact cultural factors that are learned. If Huey's brand of blackness is so closely associated with one's knowledge of and claiming of black history and black culture, then Jazmine's utter lack of knowledge regarding this cultural history might suggest that despite her physical appearance she is not black in the context of Huey's definition.

Though Huey and Jazmine's exchange seems frivolous it is not. Their conflicting understandings of blackness gets to the heart of an important issue regarding whether or

⁷² Angela Davis is a scholar and activist and former member of the Black Panther Party. Since her involvement with the Panther's Davis has been very vocal in speaking out about the way in which this movement which was so important to her has now attained iconic status. What people remember are the afros, the clenched fists, and the leather jackets, not the community activism and the political practice of the Black Panthers. For more on Davis' position see "Black Nationalism: The Sixties and the Nineties" in *Black Popular Culture*, ed. Gina Dent. Richard Roundtree was the actor who played the title character in Gordon Parks' 1971 blaxploitation film *Shaft*. It is interesting that Huey uses Roundtree as an example here because at the time that the Shaft movies were at the height of their popularity, it was considered to be on the integrationist side of the fence in comparison to a film like Mario Van Peebles' *Sweet Sweetback's Baadass Song*, a film which Huey P. Newton is reported to have described SweetBack as "the first truly revolutionary black film ever made...[which] presents the need for unity among all the members and institutions within the community of victims" (Newton quoted in Brown 45). Another fascinating aspect of Huey's choice of Richard Roundtree is the fact that his character Shaft along with Van Peebles' SweetBack are considered to be the film precursors of the major black comic book superheroes. More will be said about this point later, but for in depth analysis of the connection between blaxploitation films, black superheroes and the Black Arts Movement see Jeffrey A. Brown's book *Black Superheroes, Milestone Comics, and Their Fans* (2001).

not African Americans constitute a race, an ethnic group, or some interesting co-mingling of the two. Huey's views on this issue vacillate. In reference to Jazmine, he espouses the belief that African Americans are a race because he is able to ascribe that label to her based on certain biological identifying markers. In reference to Jazmine's father Tom DuBois (who Huey often forgets is black despite his dark skin), Huey takes the stance that blackness is a set of political and cultural elements that one learns and chooses to embrace. Jazmine represents an interesting case because not only is she ignorant with respect to the cultural knowledge that for Huey constitutes blackness, but her bi-racial status also makes her blackness ambiguous. And as the following sequence of frames indicates this ambiguity is the tool through which McGruder exposes the problematic nature of colorblindness when Jazmine meets another Woodcrest resident, Cindy, a bubbly white girl who is overwhelmed with excitement because she has heard that black people have moved to the neighborhood.

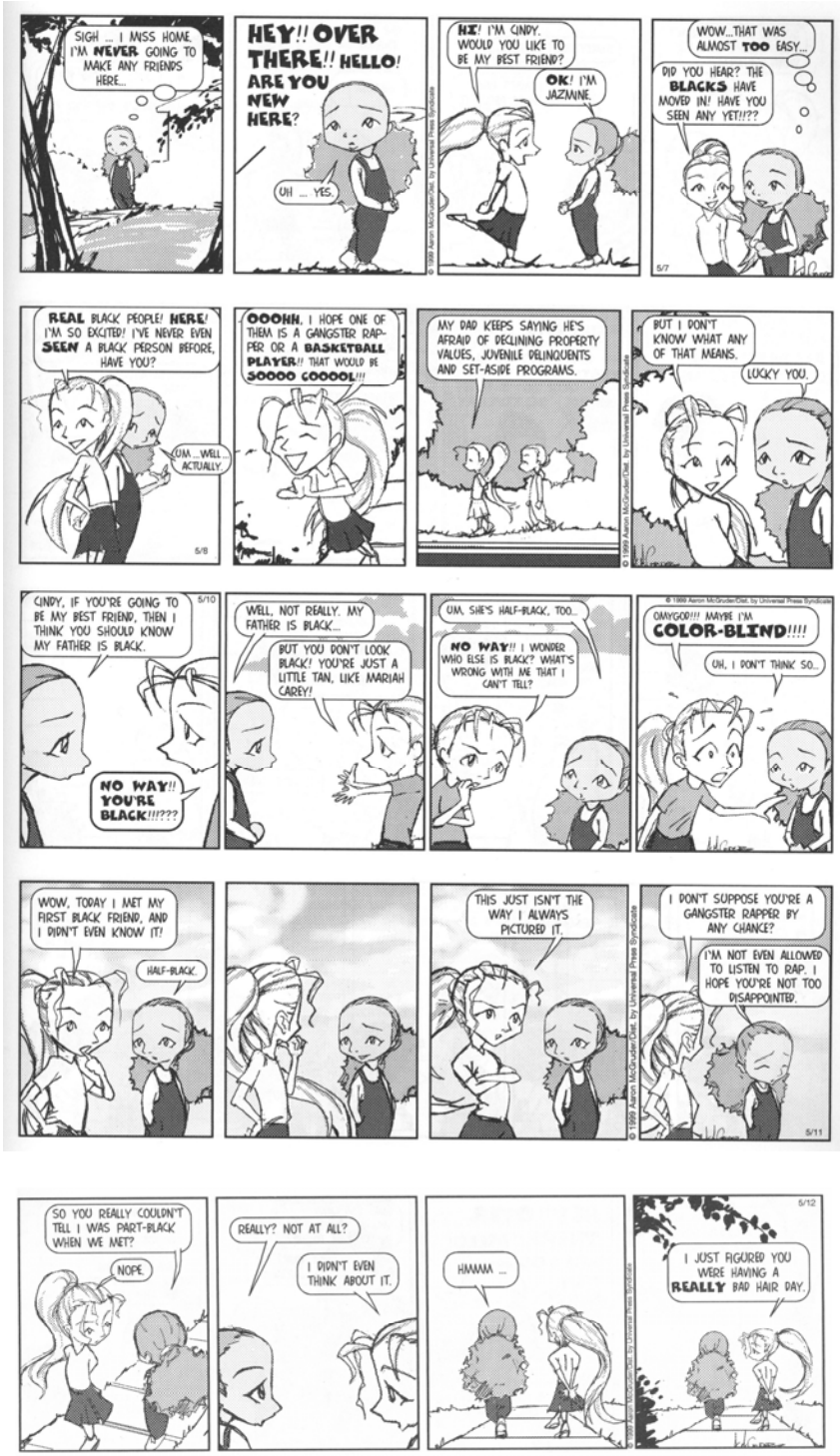


Figure 3.7 Jazmine, Cindy, and Colorblindness

When McGruder allows Jazmine’s ambiguous racial identity to collide with Cindy’s popular culture concepts of blackness, the stage is set for a revealing look at American racial ideologies, particularly that of colorblindness. Prior to the moment of racial recognition, in Cindy’s mind Jazmine is just another white girl with whom she can freely express her excitement about “the **BLACKS**” who have moved in. Safe in what Cindy perceives as their racial sameness, the young girl has no apprehensions about voicing her assumptions about what she hopes these new neighbors will be. Clearly, Cindy’s understanding of “real” black people is derived from the same sources as Riley’s conception of black realness. Both assume black people are in fact what they see on television—gangster rappers, basketball players, and juvenile delinquents whose mere presence, according to Cindy’s father, lowers property values. The impossibility of Jazmine’s colorblind racial ideology in a nation built on racial distinctions is exposed when after hearing all that Cindy has to say, a somewhat guilt ridden Jazmine feels compelled to reveal her dark-secret to her new friend. The first frame of the third row captures the shock of racial recognition on Cindy’s face and in her words “No Way!! You’re Black!!!???” Despite Jazmine’s attempts to explain that her father is black and she is only “half-black,” Cindy ascribes to the same one-drop rule as Huey.

Perhaps the most insightful frames in the sequence are the one which feature Cindy’s understanding of what it means to be colorblind. The dreads not being able to identify who is black and who is not, primarily because before she ever met a black person in real life, she already has preconceived notions about who and how they would be, and she does not want to miss the opportunity to experience personal contact with her popular culture vision of blackness. While Cindy dreads the thought of being colorblind,

her behavior with Jazmine in the first two rows of panels puts on display how colorblindness might manifest itself. As Cindy explains in the final row of frames, when she was not able to categorize Jazmine as black with her physical eye, she did not even think about applying her racial assumptions to her new friend. To use Cindy's words, she "didn't even think about" Jazmine being part-black. What complicates this unknowingness is the fact that when Cindy does interact with Jazmine in a way that does not recognize her blackness (part-blackness), Jazmine is unsettled enough to want to clarify Cindy's misunderstanding of her as white.

Jazmine's revelation of her racial status and Cindy's response echoes what critical race theorist Neil Gotanda describes in his critique of colorblindness and racial classification in America. Gotanda argues that because of America's way of classifying people along racial lines and then ascribing historical and cultural meanings to those classifications, colorblind racial ideologies and racial equality virtual impossibilities. Gotanda writes that: "American racial classifications follow two formal rules: The *rule of recognition* holds that any person whose black-African ancestry is visible is black. The *rule of descent* holds that any person with a known trace of African ancestry is black, notwithstanding that person's visual appearance, or stated differently, that the offspring of a black and a white is black" (258). Embedded within these rules, particularly the rule of descent, are various elements of built in racial subordination. The rule of descent Gotanda argues suggests that there are metaphors of purity and contamination. The purity of one's whiteness is contaminated by even one drop of "black" blood; this system or racial categorization lends itself to the belief that because whiteness equates to purity and normalcy then it is would certainly also be considered dominant and therefore

superior. Gotanda's understanding of race and racial categorizations makes perfect sense when we align it with what happens between Jazmine and Cindy. Gotanda posits that:

The moment of racial recognition is the moment in which is reproduced the inherent asymmetry of the metaphor of contamination and the inherent impossibility of racial equality. The situation that bares most fully the subordinating aspect of the moment of racial classification arises when a black person is at first mistaken for white and then recognized as black. Before the moment of recognition, white acquaintance may let down their guard, betraying attitudes consistent with racial subordination, but which whites have learned to hide in the presence of nonwhites. Their meeting and initial conversation were based on the unsubordinated equality of a white-white relationship, but at the moment of racial recognition the exchange is transformed into a white-black relationship of subordination (259).

The only difference in Gotanda's explanation of the moment of racial recognition and that illustrated in *The Boondocks* is that even after racial recognition has happened, Cindy has not yet learned to not say things that are insensitive or racist. For instance, she quite innocently admits that she just thought Jazmine, her perceived white friend, was have a "really bad hair day." Her uncensored comment is humorous because she unknowingly enters a very controversial issue concerning black women, their hair, and American standards of beauty. It is on this very issue that we see hints of self-hatred buried beneath Jazmine's adamant demand to not be defined as black. Though she claims to want to only be seen as human and neither white nor black, Jazmine and her parents are obsessed with straightening her Angela Davis like Afro, into a sleek and flowing ponytail like Cindy's. Though McGruder has been criticized for drawing a strip that features a bi-racial girl being told that she has "bad hair," the point he attempts to make is that there are all sorts of problems lurking beneath Jazmine's colorblind consciousness. As is so often the case, Jazmine's understanding of colorblindness seems to "devalue black culture" or more precisely those aspects of her physical appearance such as her hair,

which denote blackness, “and unjustifiably assume the social superiority of mainstream white culture” and white standards of beauty (Gotanda 269). This is evidence of racial damnation to which Huey does not want to see Jazmine subjected, so he takes matters into his own hands and visits her parents to inform them of their daughter’s “Afro-denial” and “Ethno-ambiguo hostility syndrome.” He talks with her father in hopes that he will be able to instill some black pride into Jazmine’s consciousness, but even this effort fails because Tom’s only concern is whether or not Huey thinks they should try using “lye” to straighten Jazmine’s curly hair.

Again, Huey’s efforts to transform a wrong-headed consciousness of race are thwarted. Neither Jazmine, Uncle Ruckus, nor Riley is converted to Huey’s way of thinking about race and black identity. What becomes quite apparent however is that where Huey fails individually, *The Boondocks* succeeds as a source of social critique and racial redemption. In what remains of this chapter, I highlight some aspects of the strip as a whole and of Huey’s particular role within it that I find useful in understanding how this cultural product helps to reconfigure black messianic salvation and as a consequence rearticulate how social injustices are contested.

Section III – Huey as Black Savior and Superhero

One possible way to reveal how McGruder reconfigures black messianism through his lead character is to situate Huey Freeman’s efforts to save his people as the purposeful though no less incomplete works of a childlike savior who possesses superhero type qualities. Consider the intervention and the critique of black messianic traditions the strips makes if we read Huey as a contemporary savior and Jesus as a superhero. Just the thought of Jesus draped in a cape rather than bearing the cross seems like something that

would appear in one of McGruder's comics. Now add to that mental image a ten-year old boy trying to lead black people (a job with which adults have struggled) to a promised land in which everyone has a revived racial consciousness. In this way, Huey is much like Renee Cox's savior and superhero figures, Yo Mama and Raje, who are at once outrageous in the humor and very serious in the work of salvation they do. Though Huey is equally concerned with the work of salvation, it certainly does not seem feasible to expect Huey to succeed. Even in the midst of failing at his individual efforts of salvation, the work he does achieve as a black superhero-savior (or rather as a new millennium black messiah) highlights some of the limitations in traditional manifestations of black messianism as a rhetorical and artistic tool in a post-race historical and cultural moment.

One of the most instructive collections of essays to address the topic of comics and theology, specifically superheroes as saviors is B. J. Oropeza's *The Gospel According to Superheroes* (2005). This collection examines superheroes in the context of mythology and spirituality.⁷³ Though Oropeza acknowledges that the spiritual dimensions of comic books are varied, he brings together scholars who believe that American superheroes share characteristics with the Christian Savior. Rather than argue that comics books are to be understood as texts designed to impart a thinly veiled religious message to readers, the contributors to the collection instead posit that the goals and purposes of superhero myths frequently aligns with the ultimate goals of Christianity, which are to secure humanity's salvation and to usher in a restoration of paradise. Oropeza borrows this understanding of Christianity's ultimate goal from historian of

⁷³ *The Gospel According to Superheroes* is significant because it contains essays that deal not only with superheroes in comic books but also with the recent explosion of television shows and movies based on superhero comic book characters: Spiderman, Batman, X-men, Fantastic Four, etc. These essays offer insights into what this resurgence in popular and mass culture interests in superheroes reveals about American culture.

religion and philosopher Mircea Eliade who argued that most world religions are based on very similar creation myths and primal archetypes, one of which is the desire among humans to regain their lost place in Paradise.⁷⁴ Eliade's understanding of this yearning for Paradise and Oropeza's application of that yearning to be saved from the present wilderness that is life outside of paradise, to superheroes who come to function as the figures who show the way to Paradise is instructive to my reading of *The Boondocks* because Huey Freeman wants nothing more than to transform the Un-holy land of Woodcrest into a more perfect racial homeland.

The challenge with Huey is that he is not a perfect savior. Though his is the authoritative voice in the strip, his views and approaches are often didactic, offensive, and sometimes misguided. Though he bears the responsibility of trying to save Riley, Ruckus, and Jazmine, Huey also requires salvation from his own rigid definitions of blackness and from his dated revolutionary politics. He could be described as a post-utopian superhero-savior. He functions as the savior in the comic strip but Huey's inability to mature (he will always be 10-years old) means that he will not have the benefit of learning important life lessons. He requires salvation too. Another way of seeing Huey's failure to learn important lessons is to argue that this is a necessary element of the strips satiric humor. I concede that a fundamental part of the genre dictates that Huey remain in a childlike state of innocence, which excuses his

⁷⁴ Mircea Eliade was a philosopher and historian of religion who produced fiction as well as scholarly works that grappled with the sacred and the profane and religious myths. He was considered "one of the most influential scholars of the 20th century" particularly with regard to his "interpretations of religious symbolism and myths." Eliade's assessments of the similarities that exist among world religions is useful in the context of understanding new millennium black messiahs because they too are a type of socio-religious creation. In them it is possible to see expressed the complex dialectic of the sacred and the profane which Eliade explores in his work. See for instance *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (1959) and *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (1958).

ineffectiveness as a savior. But it is necessary to also consider that his childlikeness does much more.

In Christianity childlikeness is synonymous with humility and teach-ability. Christ in fact gives instructions on salvation and entrance into the Kingdom by using a child as an example. When the disciples came to him to enquire about who would be the greatest when his kingdom was established, Jesus “called a little child unto him, and set him in the midst of them, and said, Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven. Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 18: 3-4). The disciples were expecting their Messiah to be the traditional King who would establish an earthly kingdom in which they could be assigned positions of authority. Jesus used a child to alter them to the fact that in his kingdom greatness would be defined much differently. This biblical vision of childlikeness as a central element in salvation and in the kingdom of heaven sheds new light on Huey Freeman’s childlikeness, particularly as it relates to seeing him as a superhero savior. Though Huey is a child, his childlikeness grants him a sphere of critical distance. This distance allows him to see the limitations in previous social justice efforts, as is evidence in his exchange with the DuBois’ over reactionary protest strategies. The distance afforded him as a result of his childlikeness also gives him the boldness he needs to critique his people’s flaws as well as those of American society at large. Like the biblical Christ, Huey is no respecter of persons. Because he is not his childlikeness also makes it possible for him to sincerely believe that all of his work will make a difference, despite his persistent failures. Even if he learns something one day, the nature of the genre ensures that Huey

will not mature and grow. He will return in the next day's strip just as devoted to his work of salvation as he was the day before. In this way, Huey's identity as black America's savior emulates a fundamental characteristic of superheroes. They always come back to fight another day.

This however is not the only characteristic Huey as savior shares with other superheroes. Oropeza created a list of seven basic characteristics of superheroes, and it becomes quite clear that Huey's work of racial redemption echoes Christianity's work of soul salvation. According to Oropeza:

1. Most superheroes have super powers.
2. Many superheroes received their powers by accident or chance, often related to scientific misgivings.
3. Many superheroes wear costumes and take on a change of identity or transformation when doing so.
4. Many superheroes either have no parents or their parents are not present.
5. Many superheroes experience some great tragedy, challenge, or responsibility that functions as the incentive for their commission to become a hero.
6. Many superheroes have an uneasy relationship with law authorities; they often will uphold justice before the law.
7. Many superhero myths mimic the language of god-man mythology with traits such as noble origins, god-like powers, and savior capabilities (Oropeza 5).

Huey lacks the first three traits. He does not have supernatural strengths or scientifically sponsored powers. And he certainly does not wear a costume or even attempt to disguise his identity. The fact that Huey does not possess what some might consider the most obvious characteristics of a superhero does not mean that he is not a viable superhero. Though Huey lacks the outward identifying markers of a superhero the last four traits are definitely ones that he possesses, and I think these are the ones that matter the most in

terms of understanding Huey's complex role as a superhero and a messianic savior-figure.

Like many other superheroes, Huey's parents are not present. Caesar often tells off-color jokes about the fatness and ugliness of Huey's Mama, but we never learn what happened to Riley and Huey's parents that would have made it necessary for them to leave Chicago to live with their retired Granddad in suburban Woodcrest. We are not told why this move was made without the boys' parents and definitely without the boys' consent. They are not at all pleased with their new surroundings, except for Riley who relishes the opportunity to be the "realest" thug in the neighborhood. The only real explanation given within the context of the strip for the relocation to Woodcrest is that Granddad wanted to retire to a place that was peaceful and quiet. During their "family talk time" Granddad tells the boys:

Fellas, I know you've both been wondering why I moved us halfway across the country to Woodcrest. Well boys, your grandfather has survived nearly seventy years on this earth as a black man, and you know that ain't easy.... I always dreamed of owning a house someplace like this. A nice quiet place which I can retire and live the rest of my life away from the problems of the city. With really big oak trees in the yard and lakes nearby to go fishing. I don't have to like any of these people here, and they don't have to like me (*All the Rage 160*).

Granddad's explanation exposes both the lure of the suburbs as well as the underlying issues of race and racism, which exist in these sanctuaries from the problems (poverty, crime, violence, etc.) and by extension the people present in the city.

Although Riley and Granddad are quite content in Woodcrest, in Huey's mind the move represents a life altering and catastrophic tragedy. In one of the very first strips to appear in syndication in April 1999 strip, for example we see Riley and Huey walking

through their new neighborhood and in disbelief Riley exclaims: “we’ve been walking for ten minutes and haven’t passed **ONE** subway stop, ball court, Chinese carry-out place or rib shack!” Huey responds “Riley we are pilgrims in an UNHOLY LAND...” (Hostile 33). Forced to live in the quiet seclusion of suburban America, Huey needs something to occupy his time. He begins a neighborhood Klan watch and goes about disseminating his revolutionary writings to Woodcrest’s other black residents. The migration to the comfortable bastion of whiteness becomes Huey’s clarion call to become an American hero and Black savior. He desires to bring light to his white and black neighbors who are in his opinion “ignorant” or unconcerned about race and racism, and he plans to work tirelessly to save his fellow black people from being deluded by media and popular culture depictions of what it means to be black. Huey’s rescuing and saving initiatives are clear as are his enemies—anyone who does not agree with him. This of course means that Huey’s commitment to revolution time will often place him in direct opposition with legal and government authorities whose primary interests are to maintain the status quo.

Huey wants nothing more than to disturb the peace that is American racial unconsciousness. As he seeks to do this, we see him fulfill the final characteristic of a superhero. He attempts to use the saving power he has to transform minds. He has some limited success with Granddad, but for the most part his individual efforts to plant seeds of racial redemption in the minds of Riley, Ruckus, and Jazmine yield no fruit. The blessing in Huey’s thwarted efforts to be a successful black savior is that his shortcomings (whether the result of age, his dated politics, or his belief that messianic saviors are still viable alternatives in black social salvation struggles) fuel the strip’s satiric humor. The satiric humor in turn intersects with very serious issues of race and

race theory to create image-text narratives that quite effectively teach us lessons about race. Therefore although Huey is not the most productive individual superhero-savior, when situated within the strip as a whole, he fulfills his purpose beautifully. He is the satirical weapon through which *The Boondocks* engages in pertinent social and cultural critiques. Huey's failures function as the strip's most effective teachers.

Section IV – *The Boondocks* as Parable of Social Salvation

Throughout this analysis, I have identified several different aspects of *The Boondocks* that lead me to believe that it is intellectually productive to read this cultural text as one that reconfigures traditional black messianism. Reading McGruder's comic strip as one that constructs a new millennium black messiah in the person of superhero and savior Huey Freeman makes it possible to see more clearly how concepts of black messianic salvation must be reinvented in order to fully capture and critique the historical, cultural, and racial moment the artist seeks to represent. In my analysis of the strip I identified those sites where Huey's attempts to save his people though not completely successful, nevertheless manage to engage in a dual critique. At times Huey's efforts demonstrate a purposeful resistance to racist stereotypes. At other times his target of criticism are intra-racial notions of black authenticity. Both critiques are equally important in *The Boondocks*, if for no other reason than because these are issues that any new millennium black messiah would have to negotiate. A central theme running through this analysis has been the argument that part of what allows *The Boondocks* to engage in this sort of dual critique so effectively is its medium, which is premised on a dialogue between images and texts. As the visual and the textual co-mingle, very serious racial issues are intersected with strategic strokes of satirical humor.

The results of this mixture of images and texts is a comic strip that has the power to replicate racist stereotypes and problematic notions of black authenticity while simultaneously using satire and humor to undermine and to destabilize them.

The Boondocks' use of image-texts narration as an artistic tool through which the mechanisms of black salvation and therefore national redemption are redefined leads me to conclude that this text takes an approach to social salvation in the 21st century that is intriguingly similar to that attributed to Christ in his New Testament parable based teaching ministry. When Jesus used parables to teach he did so because he was instructing two very different audiences—the multitudes and the disciples. In much the same way, McGruder uses different characters to speak to a host of different audiences in *The Boondocks*. Like the Christ of history, who functioned as a very effective teacher, McGruder uses the tools of his chosen genre to narrate stories and theories of race that go forth into the homes of people who have an ear to hear as well as to those who do not. For those whose ears are dull of hearing and whose eyes are blind *The Boondocks* offered a daily dose of comic relief in the form of racial humor. For those blessed with eyes to see and hearts to understand, *The Boondocks'* powerful image-texts told stories of satirical social critique. Far from being purposeless this comic strip and its lead character demonstrate a unique commitment to redefining black messianism and thereby engaging in the Christ-like work of saving through the ministry of teaching.⁷⁵

⁷⁵ Interestingly now that McGruder has chosen to shift genres to produce *The Boondocks* as an animated television series rather than as a daily comic strip subtle changes in the method of teaching are discernable. A careful reading of the television series is work for a later date, but McGruder's own explanation of why he desired to make the transition from print to television is telling. In very straightforward words, he explains that he had simply grown tired of the limitations of the medium. He has explained in numerous interviews that he had always wanted to produce the strip as a television show, but the opportunities to do so fell through year after year. When a space opened up for *The Boondocks* on Cartoon Networks Adult Swim, McGruder made the shift partially because he wanted more space to tell stories about his characters. His desire to write a weekly script rather than a daily strip makes sense because he admits that he always

believed he was a better writer than drawer. In fact several years prior to officially ending the strip, McGruder handed over much of the responsibility for drawing the strip to another artist. Rather than finding something provocative or controversial to say in a single strip every day, McGruder admits to enjoying having the freedom to develop his characters more fully. Some critics believed that this emphasis on storytelling in the television show would inevitably diminish some of the more overt political and social commentary characteristic of the strip. This concern is certainly apparent in some episodes, but as a whole the television series has continued to offer up biting critiques and cause controversy. There are several “banned episodes” of the show that were not aired on television. Instead they circulated through on-line sources. Here again is another shift in mode of presentation for the strip that will warrant further study. See McGruder’s collection *The Boondocks Past and Present: All the Rage (2007)* for a series of articles and interviews which support the aforementioned material.

Conclusion

Black Messiahs in a “*Post-Race*” America

As a study of black messianism at the turn of a new millennium *Seeking Salvation* had two central goals—to reconsider the effectiveness of messianic salvation as a tool through which African American struggles for social and racial equality are represented artistically and to posit that an effective way of evaluating contemporary black messiah figures is by reading them through the lens of Christian thought. The initial goal was achieved by analyzing three new millennium black messiahs (Paul Beatty’s Gunnar Kaufman, Renee Cox’s Yo Mama, and Aaron McGruder’s Huey Freeman), who were intent on exposing racism and saving a lost group of people. Their efforts to seek salvation employed elements of messianic discourse, which made it possible to discern affinities between these characters and the biblical Christ. However, because their plans of salvation were couched in satirical humor, the essence of the characters’ artistic and cultural work must be understood as grounded in their reconfigurations of traditional forms of black messianism. These reconfigurations allowed the authors to represent race and Black identity in a historical and cultural moment marked by the emergence of what race theory scholar Eduardo Bonilla-Silva refers to as a “post-civil rights [color-blind] racial ideology,” or rather a “post-race” myth (120).⁷⁶

⁷⁶ In *White Supremacy & Racism in the Post-Civil Rights Era*, Silva posits that this new racial structure is made necessary because of the emergence of new forms of racism. The specific elements of this new structure include the following: “(1) the increasingly covert nature of racial discourse and practice; (2) the avoidance of racial terminology and the ever growing claim by whites that they experience ‘reverse racism’;

Working in this cultural moment Beatty, Cox, and McGruder demonstrate that there are many ways to use the concept of black messianism to grapple with issues of race, racism and identity. Whether in the form of charismatic leaders, superheroes, or satirical saviors, these artists use unorthodox black messiahs and often absurd plans of salvation to argue that while black messianism does remain a useful representational tool it is insufficient in its traditional form to address the issues facing a cohort of post-Civil Rights, post-Black Power, post-baby boomers Black artists. Consider for instance that when Gunnar Kaufman ascends the thrown of black messiah, or savior of the Blacks, he is only able to lead his people on the path of death (freedom via suicide) after he has relinquished his personal subjectivity to wear the mask of black authenticity. Gunnar's performance of black authentic identity causes him to lament that he has become so black it's a shame. This example is just one of many in which the artists examined in *Seeking Salvation* prove that Wilson J. Moses conclusions regarding the future of black messianic traditions were not entirely accurate.

This study commenced by positing that Moses' contention that black messianic traditions would continue well into the 21st century was correct. It also conceded that Moses was on point in his assertion that these new messiahs would veer from the traditional Civil Rights era black messiah figures. The point of diversion between this study and Moses' conclusions begin with his fear that these new messianic traditions would reflect a loss of some distinctively black quality and the absence of special purpose

(3) the elaboration of a racial agenda over political matters that eschews direct racial references; (4) the invisibility of most mechanisms to reproduce racial inequality; and, finally, (5) the rearticulation of some racial practices characteristic of the Jim Crow period of racial relations" (90). These elements are significant because they speak to the fact that since the means by which racism is expressed and used to reinforce structures of inequality are changed, the methods used to contest it must change as well. For more on Silva's explanation of the new racism see "The New Racism: The Post-Civil Rights Racial Structure in the United States" in *White Supremacy and Racism*.

and mission in the black messiahs who would arise in the aftermath of the successful Civil Rights Movement. Moses lamented the day when gains sponsored by the social and political movements of the past would yield a generation of Black Americans who would be less concerned with the mission of transforming American society. He lamented the day when the loss of the distinctively black quality that often informed movements for racial justice would give way to a moment in which Black politics would meld into American politics. Moses feared that this sort of situation would leave those in the post-Civil Rights era in a bleak situation wherein they could neither go on bearing the cross of being America's racial conscious nor exhibit any hope or optimism that full equality could be attained.

Gunnar Kaufman, Yo Mama, and Huey Freeman demonstrate that Moses' very reasonable concerns and fears can be readily reconciled by acknowledging as so many scholars already have that race has a history, that the dynamics of racism change and that a society's dominant racial ideologies transform. As such the tools used to represent racism and racial identity must transform as well. The previous chapters illustrate this point by analyzing the ways artists working in very different genres (fiction, photography, and comics) manage to use different techniques to articulate how their generation's Black American experiences warrant a new breed of Black messiahs who recognize, as do their creators, the need for dual modes of critiquing the new more covert versions of racism as well as the elements of Black culture which promote narrow definitions of authentic identity and thereby contribute to self-destructive behaviors which facilitate and foster inequality along lines of race. Aaron McGruder and Renee Cox illustrate this quite convincingly in their artistic productions. McGruder gives

considerable attention to the underlying racial ideologies at play in Huey's pristine suburban neighborhood, which is why his lead character establishes a neighborhood Klan watch. Yet McGruder also uses Huey to critique the stereotypes bred with black popular culture. Huey's critical eye exposes the problematic nature of Riley's problematic commitment to being the realest thug in Woodcrest, which means disrespecting women, keeping detention on lock and being upset when he makes good grades.

The need for representational tools equipped to handle critiques of this new color blind racism as well as critiques of the elements of Black culture which foster misogyny and anti-intellectualism helps to explain why the black messianic figures who arise in the aftermath of the Civil Rights movement are so unorthodox. Renee Cox's nude black woman messiah, discussed in Chapter Two, likely seemed the most exaggerated of the new millennium black messiahs analyzed, but her superhero-like saviors have the arduous task of contesting both racism and sexism that emerges directly out of American consumer culture and Black popular culture. Whereas Beatty and McGruder limit their analysis of race and identity to constructions of black male experiences, Cox attempts to tackle the assumption that Black identity is synonymous with male identity. Though there are certainly limitations to what Cox's nudity achieves, because her body is not physically akin to the "fat," "black," or "ugly" bodies stigmatized in the yo mama jokes or on the product labels she reproduces, her attempt to use the discourse of salvation into the conversation on race and gender is admirable, particularly given the treatment of gender or rather the lack there of in *The White Boy Shuffle* and *The Boondocks*.

In these texts, authentic Black identity is synonymous with Black male identity. When Beatty attempts to narrate Gunnar's distance from this ideal of black realness he

does so by repeatedly placing Gunnar in situations where he is feminized and/or sexualized. One particularly disturbing example of this problematic use of gender occurs upon Gunnar's arrival in Hillside. After receiving a beating from the Hillside natives, Gunnar dreams that he is in a museum diorama with Sara Bartmann a Black slave girl whose nude body was put on display and dissected after her death because of scientists' fascination with her large buttock and genitalia. The sign on the display described Gunnar as "the whitest Negro in captivity." This dream scene likens Gunnar's status as not quite black enough to be incorporated into the Hillside community to the status of a powerless and abused slave girl whose body made her the epitome of a racialized and sexualized other. Though intended to be a satirical scene it is nevertheless problematic because the example of a slave girl being forcibly put on display and dissected because of problematic definitions of biological differences among different races is not comparable to a boy from the suburbs relocating to an inner-city neighborhood.

McGruder's strip also has troubling approaches to gender. He constructs blackness as synonymous with maleness so much so that there are no black women or girls represented in the strip. Jazmine DuBois the bi-racial character in fact vehemently and appropriately resists Huey's attempts to define her as black. She claims to value both parts of her racial background equally, but both Jazmine and her father are obsessed with erasing from existence those parts of her that mark her as black—namely her afro-like curly hair. The absence of black female characters in *The Boondocks* is interesting because one of McGruder's main objects of ridicule throughout the comic strip is Black popular culture and media representations of Black people (particularly on Black Entertainment Television, which he represents in the strip with an image of a black

woman's large gyrating buttock). Though he finds those representations problematic, he opts not to write a black woman or black girl character into the strip. Black female experiences are absent from *The Boondocks* in much the same way that Black women's stories are purposefully missing from Gunnar Kaufman's absurd family history. While Beatty and McGruder tend to make Black women invisible, except when using them to illustrate one's distance from ideal black manhood, Cox at least uses her black superhero-saviors to make Black women visible and bring to the discussion of race a concern for gender. Having come to the conclusion of this study of new millennium black messiahs it is apparent that one area of this research requiring greater critical attention is the question of gender's role in the construction and artistic use of black messiahs. In subsequent research and revisions to the dissertation this is a theme that will be highlighted in each chapter.

My specific focus in the preceding chapters was on what these artists and their late-20th century characters portend for black messianism's future with regard to the representation of race, racism, and black identity. These black messiah figures prove that black messianic traditions only retain their vibrancy and relevance when the artists working with them have the freedom to extend the tradition, reconfigure the messiahs, and when necessary redefine salvation in such a way that these elements sufficiently critique the particular historical moment the artists seek to represent. The enduring challenges these artists faced and continue to face is captured vividly in Senator Barack Obama's forward to the 2007 edition of the National Urban League's publication *The State of Black America*. (Interestingly, this edition included essays and statistics focused solely on painting a "Portrait of the Black Male" and his status.) Senator Obama began

his opening commentary by explaining that “there are at least two stories to tell about the state of Black America in 2007” (9).

One story celebrates the extraordinary fact that some of this country’s top financial institutions have black chief executives, that a black woman is president of an Ivy League university..., that the college graduation rate of black women has never been higher..., and that blacks have penetrated nearly every barrier in law, business, medicine, sports, education, politics and public service (9).

Success stories such as these signal that the seeds of sacrifice sowed by those in previous generations are reaping a harvest of individual and collective levels of accomplishment that, to use Senator Obama’s words, “perhaps [go] beyond even the imagination of the millions of black Americans who labored without reward or compensation to help build this country despite being denied its rights, privileges, and opportunities” (9). However Obama is quite clear in his position that this represents only one side of the story of the state of Black America. The other story, significantly more bleak than the first one is a narrative in which “a quarter of all black Americans live below the federal poverty level, a poverty rate about twice the national rate” (9). Beyond this fact, the darker side of the state of black America reveals that “more than a third of all black children live in poverty and almost two-thirds grow up in a home without both parents.... Half of all black men in their 20s are jobless.... The HIV/AIDS rate is highest for black Americans, and blacks are more often the victims of inadequate healthcare and preventable health maladies” (9-10). These bleak observations positioned alongside the shining stories of success paint a complex picture of what the future portends for Black America. As Senator Obama indicates the former story builds hope in the very real potential for change and progress while the latter rather painfully affirms that the “march toward true and meaningful equality in America” is not yet complete (10).

These two very different stories of the state of Black America in 2007 help to explain what happen to black messianism in the closing decade of the twentieth century. The two stories--one of filled with optimism and hope the other cloaked in pessimism and despair--speak to a central feature in Paul Beatty's, Renee Cox's and Aaron McGruder's artistic productions, which is their recognition of the need to engage in dual critiques. Because these creative artists (and Senator Obama) are part of a post-Civil Rights generation, they have experienced the hard-won benefits of Civil Rights legislation, and they have witnessed African Americans make considerable progress as a result of hard work and a commitment to excellence. In many ways Beatty, Cox, and McGruder are part of this African American success story, yet their artistic productions are permeated with a focus on acknowledging and exposing the continued existence of racism in its many forms: subtle, overt, institutional, structural, and internal.

Because these artists did not come of age during the historical moment when Black religious, social, and political leaders were lauded and expected to represent their race, they do not share the same sort of reverence for this concept of messianic salvation. They certainly employ black messiahs creatively but they do so satirically. This fact however does not diminish their very real concern and commitment to using their art to engage in meaningful dialogues about racism and racial identity. To disregard the new millennium black messiahs examined here because their satirical humor goes against the tradition of the 1960s and 1970s means that we miss what this generation of Black artist have to say about the future or race relations and theories of race. Beatty, Cox, and McGruder create a colorful cohort of Christ-figures who at times seem purposeless because their plans of salvation are rather non-traditional and often un-desirable, but

these new millennium black messiahs have a purpose. They embrace the challenges of engaging in dual critiques and in the process they use both narratives and images to represent a post-utopian cultural moment. A moment characterized by rather drastic shifts in public opinion with regard to the significance of race in contemporary American culture. At a time when the color-blind, “post-race” ideology was emerging, Paul Beatty, Renee Cox, and Aaron McGruder were busy construction black messiah figures whose efforts to secure racial salvation artistically exposed the enduring nature of racism, refuted the color-blind myth, and perhaps most important demonstrated the challenges of representing Black identity and Black American experiences within the confines of traditional black messianic frameworks.

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