ABSTRACT:

Racial humor has been a highly popular means for African Americans to address the racial inequality and racism that they have been facing in the United States. This thesis uncovers what makes humor so appealing a tool in the struggle for racial equality and lays bare how racial humor—as used in the works and performances of contemporary African American humorists Kara Walker, Dave Chappelle, and Jordan Peele—can intercede in the negotiation, contestation, and distribution of power to destabilize those conditions that perpetuate racism and sustain social inequality. I focus specifically on the absurdist qualities of Walker’s, Chappelle’s, and Peele’s racial humor as well as on the absurdity of the African American condition, which together comprise the overarching theme of this thesis. Via a close reading analysis of a selection of Walker’s visual art, Chappelle’s sketch comedy, and Peele’s films, I argue that racial humor may possess critical, oppositional, and, above all, pedagogical qualities that may help audiences develop a deeper understanding of the ongoing racialization of American society.

I explore these qualities of racial humor via Henry Giroux’s notion of “critical public pedagogy,” which exposes how the racial humor of Walker, Chappelle, and Peele provides for ardent examples of how to critique the social conditions that perpetuate racial inequality in the United States and may stimulate public audiences to act upon the critical insights that these humorists provide. I illustrate how Walker’s, Chappelle’s, and Peele’s absurdist humor-as-pedagogies—found in seemingly incongruous visual juxtapositions, the topsy-turvy humor of inversion, and absurdist humorous narrative structures—have manifested as provocative and disruptive forces which produce innovative readings that destabilize racial certainties and emphasize the incongruity between the promise of the lofty ideals of equality, wealth, and prosperity in American culture and the failure of the United States to fulfill those promises, particularly for African Americans. While Walker, Chappelle, and Peele may not see
themselves as public educators, nor might they have created their works with the education of the general public in mind, their humorous and widely circulating works nonetheless have pedagogical qualities that may stimulate a critical engagement with the reproduction of today’s American racial society.

**KEY WORDS:**

new racism; racial humor; absurdist humor and absurdity; critical public pedagogy; Kara Walker; Dave Chappelle; Jordan Peele
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“Comedy has been a telling index of the American character since the beginning of the republic.”

—Mel Watkins, On the Real Side
INTRODUCTION

RACE IN AMERICA, A FUNNY MATTER?

On 11 June 2020, seventeen days after George Floyd’s life ended abruptly and violently at the hands of a police officer who had vowed to serve and protect the American people, comedian Dave Chappelle published a comedy special on YouTube entitled 8:46. The title of this short special is derived from the amount of time that police officer Derek Chauvin pressed his knees hard down onto Floyd’s neck when arresting Floyd for allegedly passing a counterfeit twenty dollar bill. Floyd died in the process. His murder has (re)ignited #BlackLivesMatter protests all over the world, from New York to Seoul and from Seattle to London, which call for racial equality and social justice for people of color. Chappelle’s short special was recorded in direct response to Floyd’s death and the events it has excited across the globe, and uses the platform of stand-up comedy to draw attention to the morbidity of the situation: “This man kneeled on a man’s neck for 8 minutes and 46 seconds. Can you imagine that?! This kid thought he was going to die, he knew he was going to die. He called for his dead mother” (8:46). Chappelle’s words strike a blow not only to the incredible discrimination and brutal violence that black people continue to face in the United States but also to the limits of stand-up comedy as a medium to address this violence: “This is not funny at all,” he concludes (8:46).¹ Indeed, one may wonder, how can something as humorous and trivializing as stand-up comedy—a medium intended to entertain—contribute to so serious a discussion as on systemic racism and the violence that it has brought along?

Despite comedy’s trivializing potential and entertainment function, African Americans have made extensive use of various forms of humor to confront the insidiousness of racism

¹ A recent article in The New Yorker went as far as to describe this part of Chappelle’s performance as “rough-cut humorlessness” (Jackson n.p.).
and the structural inequality that black people have faced in the United States. Consider, for example, the early trickster and folklore tales of the slave shanties and their signifying practices, the twentieth-century politically charged stand-up of Richard Pryor, or the ironic visual art of Betye Saar (Watkins 16-19). Chappelle’s short special, as well as his previous stand-up performances and his abruptly cancelled *Chappelle’s Show* (2003-2006), follow in a long tradition of presenting humor as oppositional discourse in which racial subject matter is unabashedly taken on, often in an absurdist way to mirror the absurdity of the African American condition. For the better part of the twentieth century, African American humorists—such as Robert Colescott, Ishmael Reed, and Whoopi Goldberg, among many others—have used various forms of cultural expression (e.g., literature, visual art, stand-up comedy, and televisions shows, etc.) to publicly address racial inequality and the direct, structural, and cultural violence it has gendered in American society. By delving into the politics and history that lie at the roots of racial discrimination, the goal of these humorists undoubtedly extended beyond merely entertaining their audiences with their critical observations. Racial humor, their collective repertoire demonstrates, has been a highly popular means for contributing to the sensitive and politically charged public discussion on the absurdity of racial inequality and the various forms of discrimination and violence against black Americans that it perpetuates.

It is the aim of this thesis to uncover what makes humor so appealing a tool in the struggle for racial equality in the United States and to lay bare what function racial humor serves in the public discussion on systemic racism at the current historical moment. I focus specifically on the absurdist qualities of racial humor, which function as popular and

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2 Signifying refers to a typically African American trope of humor. According to Henry L. Gates, Jr., the practice of signifying drains a given sign of meaning, which allows for the shift from a semantic signifatory practice to a rhetorical one (14). This shift illustrates the mutability of the sign as its denotation is unsettled through the acquisition of multiple meanings, which leads to a double-voicedness that characterizes signifying humor as a deliberate misdirection of its audience.
compelling tool for questioning conventional modes of thought about race in a persuasive manner. Absurdist humor as well as the absurdity of the African American condition run as overarching theme through this thesis as I answer the research question: How can racial humor—as used in the works and performances of contemporary African American artists Kara Walker, Jordan Peele, and the previously introduced Dave Chappelle—intercede in the negotiation, contestation, and distribution of power to destabilize those conditions that perpetuate racism and sustain social inequality? I approach this question via the scholarly discipline of public pedagogy to uncover how racial humor may serve a critical educational function in helping audiences create a deeper understanding of America’s systemic racial inequality. Humor has not only been a telling index of the American character, as the epigraph by Mel Watkins emphasizes, but may also serve a prescriptive function: it demonstrates what that American character could be. Humor is, moreover, well-established as a persuasive communicative tool for approaching contentious subject matter (Chattoo 503). As Cris Mayo argued in her study on pedagogy and racial humor, “humor is intentionally a vehicle for bending angry encounters into puzzlingly pleasurable encounters for [both] speaker and audience” (251). Given the current political climate in the United States—one of strong polarization in which societal issues are heavily politicized—the persuasive potential of humor is especially relevant when productive discourse becomes more challenging. In a time when art, literature, film, television, news media, and social media filled with racial humor continue to educate the general public on how black lives matter (or may not, as some oppressive cultural texts might argue), the study of humor as public pedagogy is not only a subject worthy of academic attention but, in light of the ongoing protests for racial equality globally, also a timely one.

Humor is, of course, not a homogeneous concept. So, to begin, it is useful to outline how it will be used in this thesis. The concept of “humor” can be regarded as an umbrella
term for many different forms and styles that are always culturally, historically, and contextually specific, and it is generally employed to various ends. In this sense, distinct forms of humor can be regarded as an aesthetic quality of a cultural text, which influences the text’s “multiple possible political trajectories” (Holm 13).³ Significant to note about humor is that it differs from comedy, the primary function of which is to entertain and the success of which is measured by the amount of laughter generated (Fox 5). Humor, on the other hand, does not depend on laughter. Some common forms of humor, such as irony, parody, or absurdist humor—while always subjective to medium and context—may not generate any laughter at all, yet are nonetheless unequivocally recognized as humor. Robert Mankoff perhaps said it best in an article for The New Yorker: “Strange as it may seem, there is actually a conflict between comedy and humor. All comedy has humor, but not all humor is comedy” (n.p.). The term “humorist,” then—which this thesis uses regularly to refer to its case studies—does not refer to a comedian who performs in showbusiness (although it can, too), but rather refers to public intellectuals, artists, and other cultural practitioners who employ humor as aesthetic strategy to manipulate the political meaning of their cultural texts. Separating humor from mirth helps explain, moreover, how even the most penetrating and intense tragicomedies that portray the devastating past of slavery, the divisive present of racial inequality, and the ongoing sorrow and anger they have elicited by those affected by them can be discussed with racial humor (Carpio, Laughing Fit 7). Humor, then, is a serious endeavor when taking on racial subject matter, as is illustrated by the opening example of Chappelle’s recent performance.

This thesis focuses on the oppositional potential of racial humor as tool for critical public pedagogy via a discussion of the works and performances of three contemporary

³ My understanding of “aesthetic” is informed by Nicholas Holm’s interpretation of it, which stresses aesthetics not as “a concern with beauty, pleasure, or even necessarily art,” but as a more general engagement with the production of cultural texts based on sensory and cerebral perceptions, which lie at the heart of the “cultural and formal existence of any cultural object” (12).
humorists: visual artist Kara Walker, comedian and filmmaker/actor Jordan Peele, and the previously introduced stand-up comedian and television show producer/actor Dave Chappelle. I maintain that their works show a typically African American way of constructing humor about American life, which—without reducing the complex aesthetics of African American humor to a cultural essentialism—illustrates a larger trend that has developed homogeneously over the past few centuries of (African) American history: African American humor has manifested itself as a disruptive force which produces innovative readings that destabilize racial certainties. As this thesis shows, the works of Walker, Chappelle, and Peele possess a critical and often absurdist strain that emphasizes the incongruity between the promise of the lofty ideals of equality, wealth, and prosperity in American culture and the failure of the United States to fulfill those promises. Their absurdist style of humor can be interpreted as an aesthetic strategy that disrupts the passive spectatorship of their works as it provokes the destabilization of normalized representations of reality. It does so by juxtaposing these representations with absurdist alternatives, which have the potential to function as powerful counternarratives to the racial reality we have come to accept.

I argue that these qualities of Walker’s, Chappelle’s, and Peele’s humorous works and performances prove to be of critical value in educating the larger American public on the discrepancy between the democratic ideals and practices with which they engage. More specifically, following Jonathan Rossing, the pedagogical potential of racial humor can be found in its contribution to helping audiences develop “the capacity to critique conditions that sustain social inequalities,” as well as by their potential to “animate social transformation,” meaning that it may increase and strengthen sociopolitical agency on the account of helping audiences gain a deeper understanding of racialization and its effects on society (“Emancipatory Racial Humor” 617). While Walker, Chappelle, and Peele may not see themselves as public educators, nor might they have created their works with the education of
the general public in mind, their humorous and widely (re)circulating works—via social media (e.g., YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, etc.), news media (e.g., newspaper reviews), internet blogs, network television, art forums, and gallery and museum exhibitions, among others—nonetheless possess pedagogical qualities that have the potential to stimulate a critical engagement with the reproduction of racial society.

The choice for selecting these three artists is threefold. To begin with, all three have been actively producing humorous works that engage with racial subject matter since the 1990s—a time during which the critique on the supposedly non-racist discourse of “colorblindness” proliferated (Mazzocco 39), which may partially account for the provocative nature of their works. Secondly, they utilize different cultural platforms to bring their humorous works to contemporary audiences, which covers the broad spectrum of African American cultural productions in a more expansive way. Focusing on only one part (e.g., on only visual art or film) will provide for a limited approach to the extensive and complex potential of racial humor and its multiple forms. Every form of cultural expression allows for a typical, idiosyncratic use of humor while using various well-known forms such as irony, parody, or absurdist humor, whose subtle aesthetic distinctions would be partially lost in a restricted disciplinary approach to the study of humor as public pedagogy.

Then again, Walker, Chappelle, and Peele are far from sufficiently representative for the broad range of humorists who have attempted to tackle America’s ongoing racial sins through their respective forms of cultural expression. Numerous visual artists, such as Betye Saar, Robert Colescott, and Faith Ringgold, have attempted to expose racial inequality in far less controversial ways than Walker has. Comedians such as Richard Pryor, Whoopie

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4 All three humorists began in the 1990s, starting out as aspiring artists in small settings. Walker and Chappelle rose to fame during this decade and had become well-known names in their respective fields by the early 2000s. Jordan Peele’s rise to fame happened slowly over the 2000s, with his big break-through in 2012 with the sketch comedy show *Key & Peele* (2012-2015).

5 See Chapter 1 for a more detailed link between colorblindness and the provocative humor of these artists.
Goldberg, and Chris Rock have operated across multiple popular cultural outlets, including stand-up comedy, late-night television, sitcoms, and movies, to stab away at systemic racism just as daringly as Chappelle. And plenty of film makers, such as Spike Lee and Ava DuVernay, have used their films to expose to the larger public the pervasiveness of racism and the racial realities that this has created for African Americans in the twenty-first century. What binds these three humorists together, then, is not that they serve as representatives of their respective forms of cultural expression most adequately, but rather that they show a similar talent for using racial humor in an exceptionally absurdist and provocative way. As the following chapters demonstrate, Walker, Chappelle, and Peele have a particular knack for using absurdist humor in discomforting and even shocking ways that facilitate the demythologization of American life. The study of the works and performances of Walker, Chappelle, and Peele thus holds the promise of exposing some of the most curious sensibilities of American racialized society.

By approaching Walker’s, Chappelle’s, and Peele’s absurdist, racial humor as pedagogical, I aim to contribute to the growing body of scholarship on African American cultural studies and humor studies by offering insights into the educational potential of humor and culture when it comes to matters of racial inequality. I draw specific attention to culture as a political and pedagogical site of struggle for the (re)production of identity and meaning, because the potential of culture to influence the negotiation, contestation, and distribution of power is frequently criticized. Culture, and in particular popular culture, is often treated as something which cultivates and reproduces culturally dominant values and practices, particularly in relation to racism, sexism, homophobia, and violence (Sandlin, O’Malley, and Burdick 345). In their extensive review of scholarship on public pedagogy (1894-2010), Sandlin, O’Malley, and Burdick have shown that “much of the literature examining popular culture as public pedagogy focuses more on the reproduction of inequality than on how
political resistance might be engaged” (346). While this thesis recognizes the contested nature of culture and its political embeddedness within institutional and organizational structures, it follows educational scholar Henry Giroux in foregrounding the possibilities that the inquiry into culture provides for locating political, social, and cultural agency within oppressive institutional structures. Giroux’s “politics of articulation,” as this Gramscian approach is frequently referred to (Barker 484), recognizes and engages with the potential of culture as a dynamic site for public pedagogy, which may help understand how and why African American humorists use (popular) culture so prolifically in the fight for a more equal American society.

Racial Humor and Power: Literature Review

Both humor and race are inextricably intertwined with power (Barker 253; J. R. Gilbert xv). While Chapter 1 addresses in more detail the link between humor, absurdity, and critical public pedagogy—which together comprise the innovative contribution of this thesis to the scholarly discussion on humor and race—some words need to be said about the potential of racial humor to influence the negotiation, contestation, and distribution of power more generally. This study is, after all, not the first to address how humor may function in American society, and certainly is not the first to argue for the constructive potential of humor in exposing the ongoing racialization of American society.

Racial humor is ambiguous by nature (Miller et al. 28), which has fostered an impressive body of scholarship that investigates both the critical and the conservative potential of humor in relation to power. While this thesis makes an argument for the subversive, liberating, and, above all, the pedagogical qualities of humor, it also takes into account that humor may not always fully succeed in bringing its subversive message across,

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6 Chapter 1 engages with the works of Giroux and my argument more elaborately.
or that some audiences may disagree with or interpret humorous messages differently. Moreover, humor that addresses the contentious topic of race can easily backfire. What one person may find cathartic or liberating could deeply offend another. This is particularly the case for stereotypes, attitudes, and behaviors that are critiqued and challenged by racial humor, as they may be solidified in the process (Timmerman, Gussman and King 169).

These conservative effects of humor are expressed particularly strongly in the work of Paul Lewis, who argues that humor in popular culture, such as in the films *Nightmare on Elm Street* and *Batman* (with a focus on the Joker character), situates amusement in insensitive violence against racial minorities and other disenfranchised groups of people. Yet, rather than explicitly arguing for the conservative implications of humor, Lewis denies the political function of humor altogether. Humor, in Lewis’s opinion, may foster cynicism and apathy regarding the discrimination of and violence against minorities (189-195). This intellectual and emphatic detachment that Lewis identifies as intrinsic to humor aligns with Michael Billig’s study on the sociological function of humor, which emphasizes its disciplinary and repressive force. Informed by Henri Bergson’s influential theory on humor as social corrective (*cf*. Bergson’s *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*), Billig maintains that “ridicule lies at the core of social life, for the possibility of ridicule ensures that members of society routinely comply with the customs and habits of their social milieu” (2). Humor, then, may operate as that which strengthens racial boundaries instead of breaking them down. It serves, so Billig argues, as a disciplinary force that does not subvert the power status quo but affirms it instead.

Sharon Lockyer and Michael Pickering share this critical vision of humor-as-liberating. In the introduction to their anthology, *Beyond a Joke: The Limits of Humour*, they make a case for setting limits upon humor to impede unethical laughter that reinforces (racial) prejudice and oppression of disenfranchised groups of society. Yet, as this thesis has already
emphasized, humor does not always depend on laughter, which therefore cannot serve as the primary qualification for its sociopolitical effects. Comic amusement situated in ethically transgressive material may, moreover, push racial boundaries in provocative ways, precisely because of the discomfort it imposes on audiences. This ambiguous potential of humor to simultaneously unite and divide audiences has led communications scholar John Meyer to describe racial humor as a “double-edged sword” (329). Moira Smith agrees that humor may unite people, but “when laughter is not shared, it constructs exclusion as much as inclusion” (15). Particularly in relation to African American humor, what “may have started out as in-group humor becomes tainted, distorted, and significantly weakened when adopted by mainstream audiences,” as Constance Bailey adds to Smith’s argument (253).

One study that is particularly interesting to note with regard to the ambiguous implications of racial humor is Bambi Haggins’ *Laughing Mad: The Black Comic Persona in Post-Soul America*. This study maps the development of black humor during the twentieth century as increasingly “crossover,” but offers a somewhat paradoxical argument. Haggins argues that black humor’s “pedagogical and ideological imperatives” remain “for the most part unfulfilled as the performance of blackness continues to be made more culturally digestible for mass consumption” (2-6). While Haggins emphasizes racial humor as educational, as this thesis does, she leaves her argument about its pedagogical potential undertheorized. She simply calls it a “teaching tool” that in its restrictive form functions “either as an ideological refresher course or as a primer on the African American condition” (80). The unclear approach to pedagogy as well as the focus on the restrictive effects of crossover begs the question as to who or which audiences African American humor and comedy would aim to educate, if not crossover audiences?

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7 “Black humor,” as used in this thesis, does not refer to a style of gallows humor as identified by surrealist theorist André Breton in his *Anthologie de l’humour noir*. Rather, it refers to African American humor more generally, which may include gallows humor among many other forms. My doing so is purely for editorial reasons.
A focus on the regressive social and political functions of humor, as well as on the disciplinary contribution of unethical laughter, does not explain why or how African Americans continue to use racial humor as a tool in the public discussion on race so prolifically. It does not fully explain the complexities of the relation between racial humor and the negotiation, contestation, and distribution of power, nor does it provide for a framework that helps understand how racial humor may serve as a carrier of cultural meaning for African Americans. Both humor’s ambiguous nature and the incomplete picture that conservative interpretations of humor tend to paint have elicited a large body of scholarship that emphasizes the subversive potential of humor as well. Those who argue for humor’s critical, subversive, or liberating qualities have long recognized humor as a persuasive tool that chips away at social status, from the medieval European traditions of the court jester to various practices of carnival and sly trickster figures (Morreall 46-47).

In relation to racial humor in particular, Mel Watkins’s comprehensive sociological history on African American humor, entitled On the Real Side: A History of African American Comedy from Slavery to Chris Rock,\(^8\) shows how black humor finds subversive roots in the early days of chattel slavery. His study draws long parallels between the slave humor that was employed to outsmart white masters, to secure food or other rewards, or to avoid punishment for an indiscretion, on the one hand, and the rhetorical devices of more contemporary black humor, which depend heavily on “misdirection, pretense, cryptic speech [and] a kind of homespun Socratic irony,” on the other hand (67). Watkins exposes how these subversive aspects have come to constitute an “integral part of the entire stylistic and substantive nature of black humor” (68). Glenda Carpio’s seminal book, Laughing Fit to Kill: Black Humor in

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\(^8\) For my study, I made use of the second edition of this well-known book, published in 1999. The first edition, published five years earlier, has a different and more often cited title: On the Real Side: Laughing, Lying, and Signifying; the Underground Tradition of African-American Humor that Transformed American Culture, from Slavery to Richard Pryor. The later version used for this study includes revised material as well as an added chapter on comedian Chris Rock, but otherwise contains the same material.
the Fictions of Slavery, builds on Watkins’s argument by emphasizing the cathartic qualities of black humor and focuses on the subversive potential of racial stereotypes in particular. Following Freud’s ideas that humor relieves the human body of pent-up aggression, generally referred to as the relief theory of humor (cf. Freud’s The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious), she argues that “by most accounts, African American humor, like other humor that arises from oppression, has provided a balm, a release of anger and aggression, a way of coping with the painful consequences of racism” (5). While recognizing the trivializing and regressive qualities that racial humor may also possess—particularly in reference to the tradition of blackface minstrelsy—both these studies heavily emphasize the constructive effects of contemporary racial humor in exposing and coping with the ongoing racialization of American society.

In a few instances, the subversive potential of racial humor has been studied as public pedagogy specifically, as in Jonathan Rossing’s contemporary interpretation of the Athenian democratic practice of parrhesia. Rossing argues that the politically-charged stand-up comedy of Richard Pryor can be categorized as frank “racial truth-telling” that serves as an educational antidote to colorblindness and post-racialism (“Critical Race Humor” 17). Rossing maintains that this form of truth-telling, which is rooted in personal experiences of oppressive power relations, “might provide people with the skills and habits of thought necessary to think critically about racial knowledge and realities.” (“Critical Race Humor” 30). Rossing emphasizes the transgressive nature of Pryor’s comedy as well as his crossover to mainstream audiences as essential to public pedagogy and the subversive potential of humor. Crossover is also explicitly identified as a necessary component for racial humor as public pedagogy by Cris Mayo, who looks into the educational possibilities of black queer drag and camp humor. Her analysis shows how drag and camp humor disrupts passive white spectatorship through “the discourse of insult” that engages white audiences in provocative
ways (248). This “antiracist pedagogy,” according to Mayo, serves “as strategy for intervening in the stalled earnestness of social justice and antiracist education” while constantly seeking to “widen its audience” (251).

The present study is informed by and builds on these works. The innovative contribution of this thesis lies in its specific focus on a particular form of humor—that is, absurdist humor—as well as its possibilities for a public pedagogy that engages with the absurdity of American race relations. While absurdist humor has received quite some attention in some of the previously mentioned works (particularly in Glenda Carpio’s study), it has never been studied systematically. This is somewhat surprising, because absurdist humor shows idiosyncratic qualities that may serve the public discussion on race in the United States in a uniquely fitting way. More specifically, the incongruity between expectation and reality that lies at the heart of much absurdist humor, also known as the incongruity theory of humor,9 aptly reflects the absurdity of the African American condition. For the better part of the nation’s existence, the United States has advertised itself as—to borrow from both Leonard Cohen and Wim Wenders—the “land of plenty,” in which all people are supposedly created equal, old European systems of class are left behind, and prosperity is achievable through hard work. African Americans in particular have learned that the United States is not what it preaches, as these promises have remained largely unfilled for them. The parallels of the incongruity between the expectation and reality of absurdist humor, on the one hand, and the incongruity between the democratic ideals and practices of the United States, on the other, render absurdist humor an exceptionally auspicious tool for demythologizing American life and breaking down some of the repressive racial barriers that impede the promise of equality for all Americans alike.

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9 Absurdist humor and its idiosyncrasies are explained in more detail in the following chapter.
Research Method and Chapter Outline

The four chapters that make up this thesis offer a qualitative analysis in the form of close readings of a selection of the works and performances of Kara Walker, Dave Chappelle, and Jordan Peele to expose how racial humor, with a particular focus on absurdist humor and absurdity, may contribute to the public discussion on race in the United States in a constructive and pedagogical way. Chapter 1 discusses in more detail the theoretical framework that underlies my examination of the critical public pedagogical qualities that the racial humor of Walker, Chappelle, and Peele may possess. It also sheds light on how the racial realities that are typical of early twenty-first-century American society are kept on a firm footing by hegemonic racial practices, which Eduardo Bonilla-Silva has defined as the “new racism” (18). In general terms, these practices qualify as that which the works and performances of Walker, Chappelle, and Peele engage with critically and subversively.

The three chapters that follow discuss in more detail how cultural texts infused with absurdist, racial humor may function as critical public pedagogy, even when the artists may not view themselves as public educators. These chapters locate the pedagogical potential of these humorous works in their aesthetic qualities as well as each artist’s idiosyncratic strategies of destabilizing racial certainties. Chapter 2 focuses on the visual humor of Kara Walker, which presents a circus of absurdity that constructs a counterhegemonic pedagogy via the visual and provocative juxtapositions of grotesque stereotypes, puzzling incongruities, and temporal anachronisms to make explicit the ongoing racialization of American life. Her idiosyncratic style of absurdist humor is constructed by placing anachronisms in visual conversation with one another to connect anachronistic people and events as well as by using rhetorical “what if” games to conjure powerful alternative imaginations. Chapter 3 investigates Dave Chappelle’s sketch comedy, which presents a topsy-turvydom of inversions that reveal race as a social, conditional, and linguistic construct. Chappelle’s absurdist
humorous inversions of racial categories and the stereotypical patterns of behavior associated with them complicate whiteness as the invisible norm and provide for a critical interrogation of new racism and the regressive racial practices it harbors. Chapter 4 addresses the refreshing racial humor of Jordan Peele’s films, which present absurdist humorous narratives that question inflexible representations of blackness and the new racist practice of homogenizing the black experience to a one-dimensional, monolithic one. Peele also explicitly engages with the increasingly covert nature of new racism and, through his films, provides for a daring, unflinching anti-racist pedagogy that provocatively exemplifies the necessity for the reinscription of race as visual marker in the allegedly post-racial, colorblind United States.

While each of these artists approaches race and its contemporary reverberations in a unique and idiosyncratic fashion, the common threat of absurdist humor and its engagement with the absurdity of the African American condition that runs through these chapters demonstrates how their works and performances disrupt passive spectatorship, question normalized representations of racial reality, and infuse those realities with alternative, counterhegemonic ones that destabilize racial certainties. Above all, these humorists provide for ardent and potent examples of how to critique the conditions that perpetuate racial inequality and may inspire audiences to act upon the critical insights that they offer regarding the racial realities of today’s United States.
CHAPTER 1: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

ABSURDIST HUMOR AS CRITICAL PUBLIC PEDAGOGY

The aim of this theoretical chapter is threefold. Firstly, by following the pioneering ideas on critical public pedagogy by scholar and cultural critic Henry Giroux, the chapter situates its interpretation of absurdist humor in a Gramscian framework of (popular) culture as a contested site for identity formation, knowledge production, and meaning making. Secondly, the chapter explains in more detail the necessity for “public” education in today’s neoliberal, allegedly post-racial society that is dominated by a hegemonic discourse of what Eduardo Bonilla-Silva has termed the “new racism” (18). Finally, the chapter delves into the specifics of absurdist humor by explaining absurdism as both a form of humor and that which humor can address. It builds on communications scholar Jonathan Rossing’s understanding of racial humor by focusing on how the distinct formal characteristics of absurdist humor contribute to its public pedagogical potential regarding dominant racial realities in the United States. While Rossing comes to similar conclusions about the potential of humor to function as a pedagogical tool, his analysis focuses predominantly on the oppositional discourse of political satire and stand-up comedy. This chapter aims to expand this framework by more explicitly taking the formal characteristics of absurdist humor into account, which can then be applied to humor in visual art, television shows, and film as well.

CRITICAL PUBLIC PEDAGOGY AND “NEW RACISM”

From the onset, it should be acknowledged that by treating the works of the humorists in this thesis as pedagogical in the public sphere, this thesis positions itself firmly in a Gramscian tradition of cultural studies. Antonio Gramsci’s often-cited observation that “every relationship of ‘hegemony’ is an educational relationship” provides the basis of the scholarly
tradition to approach culture as pedagogical (350). This tradition identifies culture as a disputed site for meaning-making that is bestowed with political agency in the struggle over power distribution, knowledge production, and identity formation (Sandlin, O’Malley and Burdick 343). The political is hereby not limited to the separate social sphere of governance and state power, but follows Jeremy Gilbert’s expansion of politics as “involving all those processes whereby power relationships are implemented, maintained, challenged, or altered in any sphere of activity whatsoever” (7). In this view, artists as well as entertainers and other cultural practitioners may be perceived as critical public pedagogues, whose acts of “strategic performances” can “serve as critical intervention, as rite of resistance” against oppressive hegemonic culture (hooks, “Performance Practice” 211). These critical interventions, according to bell hooks, have the potential to transform material realities and power structures (re)shaped by that hegemonic culture (“Performance Practice” 216). This is not to say that all cultural practitioners consciously or willingly take on the role of pedagogue—although some do—but rather that their works have the potential to contribute to public discussions in a critical, educational way.

Public cultural sites of oppositional education can be categorized, following Henry Giroux’s influential body of work, as “critical public pedagogy,” in which “public” refers to an educational space that moves beyond the institution of schools into the public sphere (“Cultural Politics” 355). The need for the involvement of the public sphere in education stems, according to Giroux, from the increasing corporatization of the educational system, in which neoliberal forms of global capitalism heavily influence the goals of education (“Politics of Resistance” 7). Giroux maintains that the public sphere plays an increasingly important role in balancing the “identities founded on democratic principles and identities steeped in forms of competitive, self-interested individualism that celebrate selfishness, profit-making, and greed” (“Politics of Resistance” 10). The “critical” aspect refers to the inquiry into “how
certain meanings under particular historical conditions become more legitimate as representations of reality and take on the force of common sense assumptions shaping a broader set of discourses and social configurations at work in the dominant social order” (Giroux, “Cultural Politics” 355). Following Giroux’s line of thought, the works of the humorists discussed in this thesis can be regarded as concrete ways of articulating knowledge to practical effects. More precisely, these works have the potential to “deepen and expand sociopolitical agency by developing the capacity to critique conditions that sustain social inequities” by bringing their critical inquiries to audiences beyond educational institutions (Rossing, “Emancipatory Racial Humor” 617). Their greatest pedagogical quality lies in the transfer of knowledge, which may help audiences generate a deeper understanding of racial realities in the United States and stimulate them to act upon those understandings.

What these racial truths and dominant public pedagogies are that Walker, Chappelle, and Peele engage with is probably best defined by sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva. In his widely circulated book *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America*, he has argued extensively that the racial truths American society currently copes with, which he defines as the “new racism,” are characterized by the following aspects:

the increasingly *covert* nature of racial discourse and racial practices; the avoidance of racial terminology and the ever-growing claim by whites that they experience “reverse racism”; the elaboration of a racial agenda over political matters that eschew direct racial references; the invisibility of most mechanisms to reproduce racial inequality; and, finally, the rearticulation of some racial practices characteristic of the Jim Crow period of race relations (20).
These racial truths facilitate a dominant public pedagogy that “enables, legitimizes, and reinforces the devaluing of people of color, condones acts of violence against racial minority groups, renders this violence invisible and creates sanctuary for White privilege” (Rossing, “Emancipatory Racial Humor” 616). This dominant public pedagogy, which is exemplified by what Paul Gilroy has identified as a “post-race paradigm,” does not eliminate systemic racism and institutional racial inequality, but merely suppresses discussion and openness (14). The prevailing wisdom of post-racialism has it that we live in a society in which the declining significance of race has led to the renunciation of the very idea of race (Giroux, “Spectacles of Race” 192; Wilson 144). The fact that we have exposed race as an illusion or a social construct would supposedly mean that we are, or at least should be, “colorblind” and neglect any discernible traces of racial difference. As Bonilla-Silva has shown, telling the truth about racism in a post-racial setting invites resistance and opposition. White Americans especially believe that an ongoing conversation about racism is outdated and only perpetuates issues that, according to them, were laid to rest with the end of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s (Bonilla-Silva 208; Giroux, “Spectacles of Race” 192). The absurdist humor of Walker, Chappelle, and Peele persuasively critiques such dominant public pedagogy by critically engaging with how past racial realities have slipped into the twenty-first century in transformed and covert ways.

One example that more clearly demonstrates the societal effects of the increased covertness and institutionalization of new racism can be found in the denial to reverse legislation that disproportionally affects African Americans (as well as other ethnic minorities) in a negative way, as seen in the racial profiling and the brutal violence against African Americans by the police, which was touched upon in the introduction of this thesis. While racial profiling has been proven to influence police officers’ behavior—such as stop-
and-frisk practices, pulling over African Americans in fancy cars without probable cause ("driving while black"), or arresting people in their own homes (see Harvard professor and public intellectual Henry L. Gates, Jr.’s arrest for a very public example)—all too frequently the response to wrongful arrests, unwarranted violence, and the killing of innocent blacks has been that the police officers acted “within the limits of their power” (Oliver n.p.). Michelle Alexander brings forth a very specific example, one that was not mediatized as strongly as the cases that resulted in the deaths of African Americans but should be noted precisely because of its aftermath: the 1983 case of Adolph Lyons (128-130). Lyons was stopped for a burned-out taillight and was choked by an aggressive police officer for no clearly identifiable reason. Lyons survived the chokehold and proceeded to sue for emotional damages and future security. The case made it all the way to the United States Supreme Court (City of Los Angeles v. Lyons, 461 U.S. 95), which agreed to financial compensation for emotional damages but declined to implement a rule that would prevent LAPD officers from using chokeholds unless they were in direct deadly danger. The Court reasoned that Lyons could not prove he would be harmed again in the future and his lawsuit could therefore not function as a precedent for systemic legal reform (Rahman and Barr n.p.).

Yet, what the Court denied in its ruling is that racial profiling lies at the root of the disproportionally large number of blacks that are killed at the hands of the police: “Black people have been 28% of those killed by police since 2013 despite being only 13% of the population” (mappingpoliceviolence.org n.p.). The Supreme Court’s “colorblind” ruling illustrates how matters of race are

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10 The NYCLU Stop-and-Frisk report of 2011 showed that of the over 700,000 people stopped and frisked 52.9% were black, 33.7% Latino, and only 9.3% were white. In 2011, blacks made up only 23% of the city’s population, Hispanics 29% and whites 33% (2010 Census). See: www.nyclu.org/en/publications/report-nypd-stop-and-frisk-activity-2011-2012#:~:text=In%20this%20report%20the%20NYCLU,innocent%20people%20stopped%20year.

11 The court reasoned that Lyons lacked “standing”: “Lyons would have had not only to allege that he would have another encounter with the police but also to make the incredible assertion either (1) that all police officers in Los Angeles always choke any citizen with whom they have an encounter, whether for the purpose of arrest, issuing a citation or for questioning, or (2) that the City ordered or authorized the police to act in such a manner” (City of Los Angeles v. Lyons, 461 U.S. at 105).
systematically and deliberately ignored, which results in further racial inequality. As legal scholar David Cole has highlighted, “the Court has imposed nearly insurmountable barriers to persons challenging race discrimination at all stages of the criminal justice system” (161). The Court’s neglect to take racial factors into account demonstrates the increasing covertness of racial matters as well as the ongoing process of the institutionalization of colorblind racism. One might even observe that if the Supreme Court had granted Lyons’ request, George Floyd, Manuel Ellis, Elijah McClain, and Eric Garner, among many others, might still be alive today.

**ABSURDIST HUMOR AS CRITICAL PEDAGOGY**

In a society characterized by the systemic and violent contradictions of race, humor may serve as a persuasive and instructive tool for approaching the contentious topics of racism and the violence it induces. This section further investigates this claim and focuses specifically on absurdist humor, which is interpreted as both a form of humor and a way of addressing the absurd through humor, as well as highlights its idiosyncratic potential for critical public pedagogy. Humor and the absurd, this section shows, are closely connected as both are characterized by incongruity. Absurdity and absurdist humor function as theme for this thesis, as they run through the multiplicity of forms of humor—such as satire and signifying, wit and wordplay, and mock-seriousness and morbid humor—to illustrate how the humorists discussed in the following chapters address race, racism, and the ongoing racialization of American life in a critical and constructive way.

Absurdist humor as humor can be defined as comic amusement that arises out of the absence of logical meaning, which provides for a “temporary release from rational thought” (Weller, Amitsour, and Pazzi 159). The lack of logic originates in the deliberate violations of causal reasoning caused by an incongruous juxtaposition of images, ideas, and/or texts. These could be as small as word swaps, puzzling visual juxtapositions, or inversion, as is seen in the
works of Kara Walker and Dave Chappelle, but can also, as my discussion of Jordan Peele’s films demonstrates, be found in the overarching narrative structure. Absurdist humor is inextricably intertwined with nonsense, but, unlike nonsense, it possess a concomitant element of sense (Palmer 34)—a combination most famously seen in Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) in which Alice discovers an absurd nonsense world that is tethered to the historical context of Victorian England nonetheless (Lecercle 162). Absurdist humor, then, far from being detached from “any semblance of surrounding reality, as may be commonly thought, […] does tend to interact with society or civilisation, whether as an expression of cultural or political alienation, or of other forms of oblique comment” (Cornwell 19). Absurdist humor, particularly in its visual form, is closely related to the comic grotesque, which Glenda Carpio (quoting Frances Connely) describes as “images that deform or decompose ideals and conventions or morph ‘unlike things in order to challenge established realities or construct new ones’” (*Laughing Fit* 145), and the topsy-turvy logic of inversion, which Will Noonan defines as “a range of processes involving the reversal of normal expectations and conventions” (“Inversion, Topsy-Turvy” 394). Like the comic grotesque and the logic of inversion, absurdist humor holds the possibility of constructing new, alternate realities that confront institutional truths and the symbolic order associated with those truths.

The potential of absurdist humor to expose the covertness of the ongoing racialization of American society stems from its heavy dependence on incongruity, an approach well-known within the field of humor studies. As Noël Carroll has argued, comic amusement may arise out of the incongruity between expectation and reality, which rests “upon subverting

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12 Jean-Jacques Lecercle points out the educational function of Carroll’s *Alice* novels by arguing that Alice, in the end, “becomes a philosophical figure” and observes that there is a general connection between Victorian narratives (nonsense included) and the contemporary educational system of both schools and the governesses (which he calls “the School”)—which in itself holds “an absurdity which nonsense barely exaggerates” (162, 215).
standing views of how the world is or ought to be” (1). With regard to absurdist humor, incongruity refers to a specific type—that is, an incongruity that cannot be solved, one that deliberately produces events that lack obvious logical meaning (Couder 2). Yet, underneath the obvious may lurk an inverted, wacky-mirror-style of logic, which “may introduce new incongruities” (Attardo, Hempelmann and Di Maio 27). This is particularly interesting to note in relation to my earlier observation that the parallels of the incongruity in absurdist humor, on the one hand, and the incongruity between the democratic ideals and actual practices of the United States, on the other, render absurdist humor an exceptionally auspicious tool to expose discursive, structural, and institutional mechanisms that keep the United States’ hegemonic racial realities on a firm footing. The formal characteristics of absurdist humor uniquely mirror the absurdity of the African American condition, as black Americans continue to hold out for the fulfillment of the promise of democracy, equality, and prosperity. Their expectations have been incongruous with reality time and again, from the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 and the overturning of de jure segregation by Brown v. Board of Education in 1954 to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the ascension of the first African American to the presidency in 2008 (Green and Linders 242). Each time, progress was met with backlash and new ways were found to keep the racial status quo in place, often through keeping in place enduring stereotypes (Carpio, Laughing Fit 3). The wacky-mirror, inverted logic of absurdist humor and the new incongruities it may produce imply a particularly informative way of presenting alternate realities to these ever-disappointing ones.

Ralph Ellison eloquently describes this sentiment in his insightful essay “An Extravagance of Laughter,” in which he draws attention to humor that addresses the absurdity of African Americans’ status in American society. He maintains that absurdist humor can be regarded as a powerful tool that allows us to find humor in that which is “normally unlaughable” (Ellison, “An Extravagance” 146). He contends that “comedy provides an
otherwise unavailable clarification of vision that calms the clammy trembling which ensues whenever we pierce the veil of conventions that guard us from the basic absurdity of the human condition” (146). Ellison’s essay was written in the context of what he feared had been an improperly loud outburst of laughter when attending the comedy play *Tobacco Road* by Erskine Caldwell on Broadway in 1936. Ellison had arrived in New York only a short time before, fresh out of the segregated state of Alabama and free from the daunting stereotypes that haunted his life in the South—or so he thought, for these stereotypes returned to him by way of Caldwell’s play in an uncanny way. They appeared in the play as if seen through glasses that show a wacky-mirror, inverted representation of the world. The effect of this rupture of “the veil of conventions,” according to Ellison, not only offered “a disguised form of philosophical instruction” but also “a wave of cathartic laughter” which left him not in a state of despair, as American racial realities so often can do, but rather in an “optimistic” one (146, 184). Ellison thus identifies two prime functions of humor. On the one hand, he regards humor as that which offers catharsis in the form of comic relief for living in a continuous state of subjugation under white supremacy, while, on the other hand, humor allowed him to take a plunge into the illogical in order to reemerge a wiser, philosophically instructed man. As he describes when reflecting upon the incident that occurred when attending Caldwell’s play, “comedy plunged me quite unexpectedly into the deepest levels of a most American realm of the absurd while providing me with the magical wings with which to ascend back to a world, which, for all his having knocked it quite out of kilter, I then found more rational” (146).

Evidently, for Ellison also, humor can serve an educational function.

This educational function, particularly in relation to the absurdist, racial humor employed by the humorists discussed in this thesis, relies strongly on the suspension of normativity that is produced by what Glenda Carpio refers to as “‘what if’ games” (*Laughing Fit* 6). The metaphorical fantasies that “what if” questions conjure in the form of an inverted
worldview—which in Ellison’s case, one might argue, are comprised of the uncanny return of racial stereotypes—offer a valuable teaching moment for those who experience the humor. “What if” questions may conjure imaginative alternatives to normalized representations of reality, which, by their nature of being alternates, are juxtaposed to “real” racial realities. “What if” juxtapositions therefore place the real and the imagined in a trialectic by (1) “exposing dominant public pedagogies,” (2) “foregrounding counternarratives” and (3) “subverting the ‘natural,’” (Rossing, “Emancipatory Racial Humor” 620-25). As Ellison stresses in his discussion of this “perspective by incongruity,” humor is more powerful if the incongruity trigger is stronger (“An Extravagance” 194): the more absurdist the alternate reality, the more it may contribute to the critical questioning of the actual racial realities with which the United States finds itself.

Therefore, the humorists and their works selected for this thesis are chosen not only because they take on the heavily loaded subject matter of slavery, racial stereotypes, and their racial repercussions in contemporary American society but also because they are paradigmatic examples of the potential of absurdist humor when the incongruity-trigger is particularly strong. The works discussed in the following chapters have the potential to evoke a compelling affective response that amplifies the pedagogical moment by way of shock. At this point, a certain bravery may be acknowledged on behalf of the humorists, who boldly engage with the shocking ugliness of slavery, racial stereotypes, and outright racism, which are too often soothed by arguments of temporal distance (e.g., “this is all in the past, why do we bother with it?”) and historical normativity (e.g., “that is just the way things were back then”). Walker, for instance, has been criticized by fellow African American artists for trivializing the suffering of black Americans and catering to white fantasies (Wall 279). Chappelle, on the other hand, notoriously walked away from a multimillion-dollar contract with Comedy Central, allegedly because during the shooting of his television show, crew
members repeatedly laughed at the wrong (racist) parts of the jokes. The bravery of Walker, Chappelle, and Peele to tackle racial subject matter head-on can, in today’s United States, be characterized as an exercise in Foucauldian *parrhesia*.\textsuperscript{13} Particularly in an era in which colorblindness and the ideal of a post-racial society continue to dominate the public discourse, the unsettling power of absurdist humor to provoke and shock renders the works and performances of Walker, Chappelle, and Peele relevant public pedagogical sites of counterhegemonic resistance. By pulling their audiences out of the post-racial, colorblind here and now, out of the illogic of the new racism that Bonilla-Silva identifies, and then comically letting them plunge back into the harsh, absurd realities of the continuing persistence of the racialization of American society, Walker, Chappelle, and Peele may knock the world, even if just for a small bit, back into quilter.

\textsuperscript{13} See Foucault’s 1983 lectures on *Discourse and Truth* at the University of California at Berkeley: foucault.info/parrhesia. As was discussed in my literature review, my understanding of *parrhesia* is also informed by Jonathan Rossing’s interpretation of contemporary parrhesia as a form of racial truth-telling—a case he argues convincingly by analyzing the stand-up comedy of Richard Pryor (“Critical Race Humor” 18).
CHAPTER 2—KARA WALKER

A CIRCUS OF ABSURDITY

Visual artist Kara Walker has gained a reputation as one of the most transgressive and provocative artists of the African American art scene. This chapter explores how her absurdist humorous works critically confront racial hegemony and offer pedagogical possibilities that have the potential to transform material realities and power structures shaped by that hegemony. It locates absurdity in the idiosyncratic ways in which Walker uses humor to examine grotesque stereotypes and puzzling anachronisms to provoke a critical reflection on the callous racialization of black people throughout American history. By making explicit the murderous, sexual, and even scatological subtexts of stereotypes via absurdist exaggerations and visual juxtapositions, Walker’s works form a pedagogical example for how to question and confront the covertness of the new racism of contemporary American society in a critical way.

The chapter begins with a brief introduction to Kara Walker and her idiosyncratic use of humor. Next, it offers a close reading analysis of Walker’s 2017 exhibition at Sikkema Jenkins and Co. art gallery, which I visited during a research internship at Harvard University in the fall semester of that year. This exhibition shows a variety of works that may be called a “circus of absurdity,” from Walker’s signature silhouette cut-outs to oil paintings and sketch collages. What sets this exhibition apart is not only that it contains a combination of Walker’s multitude of art styles but also that the implicit parallels between past and present, which her previous works have drawn, are engaged with more explicitly by depicting and alluding to contemporary figures and events as well. Ultimately, the pedagogical potential of Walker’s work, this chapter shows, is found in Walker’s strategy of using absurdist humor to delegitimize oppressive narratives and their representational codes and by enriching these, in
turn, with alternative narratives and representations that chip away at new racism and the symbolic order associated with it.

**KARA WALKER AND HUMOR: A BRIEF INTRODUCTION**

Kara Walker’s transgressive and provocative art has raised the objection and suspicion of many a viewer and art critic alike since she first brought her enormous black-and-white paper cut-out silhouette installations to the American art scene in the mid-1990s (Wickham 335). Calling her works humorous has invoked equally disagreeable responses. Humor and the unsettling visual depictions of race, gender, sex, identity, abjection, slavery, and violence that Walker employs in ways that transgress “some of the most sensitive social and cultural sensibilities of late-twentieth-century America” may seem like an unlikely combination (Wall 279). Not surprisingly, “derogatory and racist” are the labels that one of her fiercest critics, fellow African-American artist Betye Saar, attached to Walker when she received a MacArthur “genius” grant in 1997 (qtd. in Wall 279). Saar famously began a letter campaign in which she criticized Walker for lacking integrity with what Saar and others considered sick and cartoonish jokes that parodied the suffering of black Americans in demeaning ways. Another critic and fellow black artist, Howardena Pindell, claimed that Walker’s art “consciously or unconsciously seems to be catering to the bestial fantasies about blacks created by white supremacy and racism” (qtd. in Mzezewa n.p.). The recognition of humor in Walker’s transgressive and seemingly disturbing art hardly seems in place. Yet, it is precisely upon humor that Walker’s work depends and, as this chapter maintains, through absurdist humor specifically that it may offer a critical, educational contribution to the public discussion on race in the United States.

Admittedly, Walker’s brand of humor is an acquired taste and is certainly not the type that will leave audiences roaring with laughter. Instead, Walker’s humor is best explained as
an aesthetic property of her work. More specifically, Walker’s art makes extensive use of incongruous juxtapositions that emphasize the gap between the lofty ideals of freedom, equality, and democracy so vehemently advocated throughout American history, and the harshly disappointing reality of that promise for so many African Americans. For instance, from afar, Walker’s black and white silhouette installations—which in some exhibitions have been complemented with beautiful, brightly colored lights shining over them—have a fairy-tale like allure to them, making it seem as if the viewer is entering a fantastic, southern plantation dream. However, when examined up close, the figures show stereotypes configured in absurd and grotesque ways that are incongruous with the romantic and mysterious allure that the works seem to emit from afar. From up close, they appear to come from a gothic nightmare as they draw attention to the absurdity of racism by laying bare the incredible distortions that take shape in stereotypes. The absurdist incongruity at the core of such humor offers an inverted world view that builds upon and transforms the harsh racial history and reality that African Americans continue to experience. The aesthetic of this incongruity between what one expects from afar and what one experiences from up close generates a humor that disrupts the passive spectatorship of Walker’s works, which opens up space for the critical inquiry into the configuration of racial stereotypes and the dominant public discourse of new racism.

Approaching Kara Walker’s art through the lens of humor is not new. Glenda Carpio and Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw have written extensively on how Walker employs humor to expose the violent “continuity of conflict”—as Walker herself called the ongoing struggle for blacks to be treated equally in American society (qtd. in Halbreich 2). For instance, both scholars have drawn parallels between Walker’s work and Francisco Goya’s Los Caprichos (1799) by showing how they fuse the real and the fantastic in grotesque ways and push the boundaries of what Baudelaire called the “possible absurd” (qtd. in Carpio, Laughing Fit
Both studies have emphasized the significance of Walker’s usage of signifying to invert perspective “on the predictable horrors of historicized, fictionalized, and mythologized slavery in a uniquely African American way” (Shaw 5). Yet, whereas Shaw in particular has emphasized Walker’s uncanny ability to expose to audiences “the unspeakable” horrors of the past in a carnivalesque way (6), Carpio has made a case for the cathartic qualities of Walker’s humor for dealing with that past as well as with the legacy of absurd racial realities that African Americans are left to cope with. In addition, Carpio has suggested that “Walker is also signifying on the ways that our own ‘overzealous’ imaginations fill in [the] blanks” of the past (Laughing Fit 172). Rebecca Peabody comes to similar conclusions in her study informed by a literary approach, in which she traces Walker’s “literal and literary engagement” with “narrative fiction” in ways that expose “the complicated aesthetics of critically an economically powerful stories about race” (2).

These insightful studies foreground Walker’s humorous and artistic expression as a public engagement with the African-American experience and pay ample attention to the public reception of Walker’s art. This is significant to note because art—particularly in comparison to the popular, more publicly accessible works of Dave Chappelle and Jordan Peele discussed in later chapters—is generally not known for reaching a larger public and is more often than not argued to be confined to exclusive galleries, museums, and private collections. The “public” aspect of Walker’s art, therefore, is perhaps not found in its institutional display per se (although her private exhibitions at Sikkema Jenkins and Co. are freely accessible for the general public). Rather, the provocative nature of her works has elicited extended discussions well beyond the semi-public institutions of art galleries and museums into the public domain in the form of newspaper articles, social media websites, and art forums. Shaw illustrates the extent of Walker’s reach into the public domain by devoting an entire chapter of her book to “Censorship and Reception” (cf. Chapter 4), in which she
points to several controversies, such as a work by Walker being pulled from an exhibition at the Detroit Institute of Art in 1999 for being too racially and sexually controversial (105) and the public disagreement between Walker and Betye Saar (115), as discussed in the opening of this section.

Walker herself has, moreover, demonstrated a strong commitment to making art more public, which exemplifies Giroux’s idea that both artists and teachers are united in a common purpose as “cultural workers” to put theory into practice (Border Crossings, 155). For example, during her four-year term as Tepper Chair in Visual Arts at Mason Gross School of Arts at Rutgers University, Walker created a graduate think tank on the theme of “Memory, Monuments and Memorials” in which her cohorts “hosted public events featuring exhibitions and performances open to all,” as the Rutgers University Website states. The purpose of this think tank and its public events was to stimulate the interaction between educators, students, and the general public via (performance) art and to facilitate the public discussion on societal issues of race, gender, and identity, among others. In another example, Walker erected an enormous sugar sphinx, entitled “A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby” at the site of the former Domino Sugar Refinery in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, which attracted thousands of visitors. As she transformed the old factory into a de facto gallery space, she “ensured that the consumption of the installation would become part of the artwork, extending its reach well beyond its site specificity, while giving it a kind of permanency denied it by its physical destruction” (Carpio, “On the Whiteness” 556). Walker’s ardent commitment to education as well as her public engagement with art further legitimize my reading of her artistic work as critical public pedagogy.
MISS K. E. B. WALKER: SPECTACULAR HUMORIST OF NOTEWORTHY TALENT

This section analyzes in more detail the specific features and counternarrative strategies that Walker employs in her art, which open up space for a pedagogical reading. I discuss Walker’s use of stereotypes and anachronisms, in particular, as these features not only engage with the absurdity of the racialization of American society strongly but also because they are the most provocative aspects of her work as they invite both subversive and regressive readings. I focus on Walker’s 2017 exhibition, Sikkema Jenkins and Co. is Compelled to present/ The most Astounding and Important Painting show of the fall Art Show viewing season! (...),¹⁴ which offers something of a break from her previous works. While some of the artworks from this exhibition continue to focus on the past and its pervading presence in the here and now, others explicitly engage with contemporary political figures and events alongside historical ones. This feature of Walker’s 2017 exhibition makes it not only a paradigmatic example of how absurdist humor can offer a counterhegemonic voice in the ongoing debate on contemporary American racial practices but also stands out for its subject matter and contemporary political engagement. By juxtaposing historical figures with contemporary ones—as I show below—Walker depicts a renewed urgency for critically engaging with a past that, as William Faulkner would have it, is “never dead” (85). It simply refuses to pass.

Walker’s counternarrative begins with the exhibition’s long and eccentric title, which during the time of the exhibition (7 Sept.–14 Oct. 2017) hung printed in a steel-colored frame outside the exhibition venue next to the entrance of the gallery, inviting passersby to come marvel at her works. In a tone reminiscent of nineteenth-century books and broadsides, its full 198 words read:

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¹⁴ For the full title, see below.
Sikkema Jenkins and Co. is Compelled to present/The most Astounding and Important Painting show of the fall Art Show viewing season!/Collectors of Fine Art will Flock to see the latest Kara Walker offerings, and what is she offering but the Finest Selection of artworks by an African-American Living Woman Artist this side of the Mississippi. Modest collectors will find her prices reasonable, those of a heartier disposition will recognize Bargains! Scholars will study and debate the Historical Value and Intellectual Merits of Miss Walker’s Diversionary Tactics. Art Historians will wonder whether the work represents a Departure or a Continuum. Students of Color will eye her work suspiciously and exercise their free right to Culturally Annihilate her on social media. Parents will cover the eyes of innocent children. School Teachers will reexamine their art history curricula. Prestigious Academic Societies will withdraw their support, former husbands and former lovers will recoil in abject terror. Critics will shake their heads in bemused silence. Gallery Directors will wring their hands at the sight of throngs of the gallery-curious flooding the pavement outside. The Final President of the United States will visibly wince. Empires will fall, although which ones, only time will tell.

In a way—as Walker had already predicted art historians would ponder—the title (as well as the exhibition itself) represents a continuum with her previous works. Walker is known for giving her artworks and exhibitions titles that evoke nineteenth-century racial practices, which frequently include a self-constructed persona of “free negress,” or a variation thereof, as she does when she refers to herself as “an African-American Living Woman Artist this side of the Mississippi.” Perhaps, more obvious examples are a 2003 solo exhibition which was titled Kara Walker: Narratives of a Free Negress as well as earlier, longer titles such as Kara Walker: No Mere Words can Adequately reflect the Remorse this Negress feels at having been
Cast into such a lowly state by her former Masters and so it is with a Humble heart that she brings about their physical Ruin and earthly Demise (1999) or Presenting Negro Scenes Drawn Upon My Passage Through the South and Reconfigured for the Benefit of Enlightened Audiences Wherever Such May Be Found, by Myself, Missus K.E.B. Walker, Colored (1997). Titles such as these blur the line between past and present as Walker “signifies on nineteenth-century visual, literary, and scientific culture” (Carpio, Laughing Fit 170). Yet, her 2017 title also somewhat departs from these titles by explicitly referring to herself as “African American,” a term which did not enter popular use until the second half of the twentieth century. Walker’s usage of multiple variations of “free negress,” or “African American” while still implying a north free from slavery (“this side of the Mississippi”), construct the persona of a nineteenth-century black female that stands in stark contrast with the historical reality of that figure. Most significantly, Walker conjures a historical persona from the era when black women were not educated, could not read, and had very limited possibilities for artistic expression, while her titles emphasize her own highly educated intellect and artistic capabilities (“The most Astounding and Important Painting show” and “the Finest Selection of artworks,” [emphasis added]). Cleverly utilizing the inversive potential of such an anachronism, Walker draws attention to the stereotypes of nineteenth-century blacks as dimwitted and in need of patriarchy by offering herself as the absurd opposite, as if she is a character straight out of Ishmael Reed’s Flight to Canada, while implicitly also drawing attention to the emancipatory quality of education so desperately required to counter the dominant public pedagogy of new racism.

Walker’s carefully constructed titles forebode artworks with equally absurd stereotypes, anachronisms, and racial practices. Although all twenty-two artworks that comprise the exhibition—which is a diverse mixture of oil paintings, ink drawings, black and white silhouettes, and other paper cut-outs and collages—lend themselves well to the
argument for absurdist humor and its public pedagogical potential, two pieces in particular stand out. One, arguably the centerpiece of the exhibition titled *Christ’s Entry into Journalism* (see Figure 1), is a massive 3.5-by-5-meter collage of over eighty ink drawings of heads and figures cut from paper and configured in what from a distance somewhat resembles the shape of a pyramid, which is perhaps emphasized by the Ku Klux Klan-style hooded figure at the center-top position and the diagonal trail of hands, arms, and bodies on both sides. The other is *Slaughter of the Innocents (They Might be Guilty of Something)* (see Figure 2), a black and white paper cut-out silhouette piece of 2 by 5.5 meters, reminiscent of and yet different from Walker’s previous silhouette works. Both pieces stand out because of the absurd mishmash of figures depicted in them, to which gravitational pull seems to come from all sides. Particularly the silhouette piece does not follow the narrative style of Walker’s previous deliberately composed silhouette figures. Rather, it appears as if random figures, although some are
interrelated, are placed haphazardly onto the canvas, some even hanging upside down from the top. More so, in both works nature is absent, which is significant because, for example, water—offering a paradoxical, double meaning as a Freudian reference to birth as well as a reference to the Atlantic Ocean, the original site of loss of life in slavery—and trees—often creating a mystical or secretive allure of an impenetrable swamp—are recurring symbolisms in Walker’s works (Raymond 354). Yet, these two artworks, by comparison, depict predominantly human figures, sometimes only head and shoulders, sometimes full bodies either dead or alive, sometimes with attributes such as shovels, chains, knives, and flags. As one New York Times reviewer wrote, “[m]ore than ever, Ms. Walker’s work piles personages, events, and possible interpretations before us” (R. Smith n.p.), collapsing time by challenging her viewers to connect historical figures with contemporary events and historical events with contemporary figures as she turns the naturalness of new racism upside down.

Christ’s Entry into Journalism in particular offers an absurd array of anachronisms and stereotypes that blur past and present, and it opens up space for counterhegemonic narratives. The artwork demands focus not at a single place or detail but rather everywhere at once as the amalgamation of absurd, grotesque, and obscene images seem to be placed randomly onto the paper background. At the bottom of the left corner of the piece (see Figure 3), for example, we see clustered together three figures and four heads. The head in the center
offers a hopeless facial expression, which is amplified by a pair of hands grabbing it as if forcing it down into an unwanted situation. This head, highly resembling President Donald Trump, is white, round-shaped with open round lips, and stamped on the forehead with a swastika that connotes Nazism (among other things). On its right is a black head bound in a neck chain that might resemble an imprisoned slave (or is it an S&M fetish mask?) and on its left are drawn into the stripy design of a pullover worn by an African American figure in hat and sunglasses, two fists in black power salute. Finally, on the far-left corner is depicted the abolitionist Frederick Douglas and on the far right, two more heads, one wearing a turban with the Ankh symbol and the other scruffy and savage-looking, topped by the naked upper-body of a woman who appears to be shrugging carelessly. The absurd ensemble of historical and contemporary figures, stereotypes, and symbolisms, spanning some five millennia of history and bringing together three continents interconnected by the slave trade—all within a single corner of the artwork—fuse past and present in a seemingly absurdist, non-sensical way.

Yet, absurdity becomes logic when one remembers that in early 2017, at a breakfast event attended by Trump and African-American supporters which kicked off African-
American History Month, Trump called Frederick Douglass “an example of somebody who’s done an amazing job and is being recognized more and more,” showing complete ignorance to the fact that Douglass had been dead for far over a century or who he even was and what he means to African Americans (qtd. in Merica n.p.). Absurdity also becomes logic when one remembers Trump’s remarks in the summer of 2017, when speaking to a group of law enforcement officers that there was no need to be “too nice,” “like when you guys put somebody in the car, and you’re protecting their head, you know, the way you put your hand over their head, you can take the hand away, OK” (qtd. in Carlson n.p.). Walker’s array of figures and heads expose this dominant and violent public pedagogy offered by Trump and his constituents—dominance that was reaffirmed publicly when former Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders said Trump was just “making a joke,” foregrounding the trivializing aspect of humor while downplaying the extreme insensitivity to the highly sensitive matter of police brutality against African Americans. By depicting Trump’s Nazi-marked head being pushed down by a hand and forced to face the black power salute of the two arms in front of it as well as Douglass’ calm posture, by literally forcing Trump’s head to feel police brutality and to pay attention to the call by African Americans that black lives matter, Walker’s no-longer-absurdist juxtapositions encourage a strong counternarrative that exposes covert racial and material realities and calls for normalized post-racial and post-truth pedagogies advocated by the current administration to be subverted.

Such a pedagogical reading is strengthened by the artwork’s title. Christ’s Entry into Journalism is a word play of the much-depicted event Christ’s Entry into Jerusalem, the biblical event preceding the betrayal of Christ, his subsequent trial and death, and finally his resurrection. By changing only a single word in the title borne by many historical paintings depicting the event, a word that is very similar in terms of phonetics and leaves syntax and rhythm of syllables intact, Walker employs a mode of humor that builds “upon the absurdity
of deadpan slippages, misreadings and substitutions,” as Nicholas Holm has referred to such
absurdist humor when discussing *The Onion* titles that similarly make use of word-swaps
(70–71). The absurdist humor in these titles relies upon an illogical, unresolvable incongruity
that evokes expectation (“Jerusalem”) but delivers a completely different reality
(“Journalism”), inducing an absurd “what if” game of the imagination of Christ actually
entering into American journalism. What would such a biblical event look like in twenty-first
century America? Would Christ, similar to when he entered Jerusalem, perform various acts
of healing and teaching, miraculously fixing the fallacies of post-truth journalism or post-
racial America? Who would he heal? What would he teach? By conjuring such “what if”
games, the title opens up space for critical inquiry into why such a *deus ex machina* into
twenty-first century America would be necessary in the first place. More so, the imaginations
that the “what if” games conjure offer a strong counternarrative—for, what is stronger than
the biblical?—to what, after nearly four years of a Trump presidency, has become more
normalized and natural than ever: false or ideologically charged stories parading as factual
and ethical journalism.

Walker’s figures “piss over” such absurd dominant public pedagogies—quite literally,
in fact. As Figure 4 shows, which is a detail of the top center of *Christ’s Entry into
Journalism*, the figure earlier identified as Ku Klux Klan member, opens its robes and
releases urine onto a circle of masturbating men. Upon closer inspection, the KKK-like figure
rather appears to be a child’s game of playing grown-up, with two pairs of eyes in two hats
stacked onto each other, in turn stacked onto the third child-like figure that is urinating.
Rather a parody than the actual symbol of white supremacy—a parody that Walker places
center and above the culmination of the beautiful and the barbaric, of lynching and laughing,
of rape and pleasure, and of past and present—the urinating figure suggests an infantile lack
of restraint, as if it simply cannot help itself releasing urine into the obscene scenario below it,
just like how it cannot help be white or be at the supreme position of the pyramid collage of racial distortions and sexual bestiality. More so, the absurdity of the scene is amplified by the grotesque distortions of the male genitals below the urinating child—small penises for white men fully clothed, an abnormally large one for the naked and muscular African American male to the right who is getting ready to penetrate a white woman (i.e., straight hair and small buttocks) who is about the same size as his distorted member. That this male is African American is not entirely clear—some African American figures are colored darker in the collage and some show only a hint of shade but are recognizable through other features—but certainly is suggested by his darkened, obscured face, the exaggeration of his muscular physique, and his baboon-like posture. The obscene distortions that Walker juxtaposes in this part of the collage allude to the proliferation of stereotypically racialized images that objectify “physical blackness in ridiculous, condescending, and outright hateful ways” (Raymond 361).
Walker’s absurd distortions expose stereotypes of black male hypersexuality and genital superiority in grotesque ways and offer a counterhegemonic narrative through exaggeration and amplification of the gross disparities between these stereotypes’ imagined and actual realities. More so, the imagery disrupts and challenges the simultaneous dehumanization of the black body and apotheosis of the white body crystallized in white supremacist thinking (the hooded figure is depicted at the top of the pyramid, after all). The visual humor of absurdity and incongruity that Walker offers here, encourage a critical reflection on the dominant cultural representations of both black Americans and white Americans that keep pejorative stereotypes in place.

Although Christ's Entry into Journalism contains many more absurdist anachronisms, incongruities, and stereotypes—faces and bodies of, for instance, Martin Luther King, Jr., Trayvon Martin, John the Baptist, a mummified Emmett Till possibly carried by Batman, as well as lynched bodies, Confederate flags, American flags, Nazi symbolism, and buttocks the size of which evoke Saartje Baartman—space does not permit me to discuss them all here. Instead, I continue the argument of public pedagogy through absurdist humor by focusing on a second piece of the exhibition, Slaughter of the Innocents (They Might be Guilty of Something) (see Figure 2).

The difference between the two works is quite obvious. The latter is a collage of silhouettes, not of ink drawings. Moreover, almost all the figures depicted in this piece are stereotypically African American, which, although obscured by the very nature of the silhouette, is suggested by exaggerated characteristics such as hair texture, facial features (lips, nose), body parts (head, hips), and sometimes posture or configuration. Walker’s silhouettes reduce “visual information to the bare minimum, and [collapse] space into a flat plane, a single dimension” (Felsenthal n.p.). Indeed, as Walker herself thinks of the medium, “the silhouette says a lot with very little information, but that’s also what the stereotype does.
So I saw the silhouette and the stereotype as interlinked” (qtd. in Alberro 25). The “tremendous history lesson,” as Vergne calls Walker’s early, mural-like silhouette installations (8), offers a counterhegemonic visual narrative to the fictions of slavery rooted in the public sphere through works such as Uncle Tom’s Cabin, Gone with the Wind, and Roots. They read as alternative illustrations to these works, ones that do not romanticize the past but instead show the obscene, cruel, and abject aspects of humans owning humans and, as one New York Times reviewer wrote, “implied a country still shaped by the original sin of slavery” (R. Smith n.p.). Although Slaughter of the Innocents differs from these previous silhouette installations—mostly in terms of size, placement of figures, and visual narrative potential, which includes the romanticizing, alluring storytelling technique that is highly incongruous with the grotesque depictions of the obscene, the scatological, and the violence portrayed in the images—it does continue Walker’s brand of absurdist humor by depicting stereotypes and figures in incongruous and puzzling configurations that draw attention to the absurdity of American new racist practices. Yet, as I show below, rather than offering a counternarrative, as Christ’s Entry into Journalism so strongly does, Slaughter of the Innocents disrupts oppressive narratives by exposing their covert nature.

On the whole, Slaughter of the Innocents exposes and disrupts a dominant racial hegemony that prescribes slavery as a relic of the past. The logic of this dominant racial hegemony, epitomized in new racism, relegates slavery and its aftermath to something that ostensibly has seen closure from fighting a civil war as well as electing an African American to the presidency. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell’s recent remarks in light of possible reparations for slavery illustrate this new racism when he said that “reparations for something that happened 150 years ago” is not a “good idea,” flat-out denying any lasting effects of slavery in today’s United States by referring to temporal distance (qtd. in Cummings n.p.). Countering such oppressive public pedagogy, Walker’s piece, which in itself
can be regarded as a disruption of narrative by abandoning storytelling configurations for chaotic ones, implies that no reparations, no matter what or how much is offered, can redress the lasting effects of slavery or the forced family disruption and broken family lines that resulted from it. Walker does so not by straight-out depicting the horrors of slavery—for culture is flooded with attempts to illustrate this crime—but rather uses humor to suggest the absurdity of the task of depicting persons, figures, and events of slavery. The absurdity of *Slaughter of the Innocents* deliberately pushes the limits of the representation of what Stephen Best and Saidiya Hartman have called the “limited scope of the possible in the face of the irreparable” (1) in ways that provoke “the deconstruction of legitimizing narratives and their representational codes” (Vergne 12). Several parts of this work suggest this reading, but none so clearly as the absurd scene in the middle (see Figure 5).

Here, our attention is immediately drawn to a distorted, female figure recognizable by her hooped skirt, who holds a child upside down while her other arm is raised and holds a
knife, as if ready to cut out a piece of the child. It would not be the first piece cut out of its body. A large chunk has already been removed from its back, which in the form of a fish is finding its way into the mouth of a second, older child. This child is possibly the only non-African American figure of the collage, suggested by his well-fed, rounded body and, notably, his boots, which according to Raymond, Walker frequently uses “to differentiate nonslaves from slaves” (350). A third child, or rather the limp, dead body of a third child, is placed to the right of this scene in the hands of a woman who might be panicking, suggested by the flame above her head (or is Walker, in line with her religious title, referring to the Pentecostal flame?). The figure of this woman also contains traces of the nonslave child. His figure was cut from her body, suggesting some form of maternal connection between the two, perhaps in the form of a slave nurse to the boy. Yet, whereas this boy looks well-fed and healthy, the two slave children are broken, quite literally, and with that breakage, any family that could have been—should have been—is forcibly disrupted. The absurdity of this scene, epitomized in a grotesque distortion of bodies and body parts cut out from each other and configured in a violently shocking way, draws attention to the traumas of child loss and family disruption that went hand in hand with slavery—a trauma that many African Americans deal with today in the form of absent family lines and a denial of family history. The torn, ripped figures of slavery allude to the forever torn and ripped family lines, disrupting the oppressive myth that slavery has no continuity in the here and now. Walker’s absurdist, torn figures offer an enlightening counternarrative to the naturalness of new racism, found in remarks such as those by McConnell, by disrupting the suspension of normativity by offering the unimaginable as alternative.

Walker, moreover, knocks her audience out of kilter with an absurd suffix to her title. The first part, *Slaughter of the Innocents*, similar to *Christ’s Entry into Journalism*, signals a biblical event, but the second part, *(They Might Be Guilty of Something)*, delivers that event in
a way completely incongruous with what the first part evokes. Whereas Christ’s Entry into Journalism’s absurdist humor depends on word swaps and deadpan slippages, this title’s absurdity depends on a suffix that is insolvably incongruous with both the first half of the title’s text and the biblical event it alludes to. This invites two separate but interrelated readings. On the one hand, in a reading that connects Walker’s work to the canon of white, male, European art, the title raises the question as to how innocents can be guilty. In what world would male babies under the age of two—which served as qualification for them to be slaughtered, a cruel crime ordered by King Herod out of jealousy of a newborn King of all Jews—need to be massacred? This reading would render the incongruity that Walker offers here truly unsolvable; any possible answer one might come up with would stretch the imagination beyond the absurd, especially within a biblical context. And perhaps that is part of the title’s power. The historical records of slavery can only estimate how many babies, children, and other innocents were killed by King Cotton, how many families were torn apart, and how many slaves, both child and adult, were mutilated for the sake of material gain. By depicting the incongruous absurd in allusion to the biblical, Walker again evokes a “what if” question of the imagination, this time in the form of “What if babies were guilty of slavery?”, or “What if their babies, and their babies’ babies were guilty?”—the latter question bringing us eerily close to a family generation that has yet to pass from living memory.

Given the centuries-long accusations that European Christianity has placed upon the black race, however, it is not surprising that Walker has built a reputation of confronting the religious (as well as the non-religious) white, male, European art canon. She does so not only through her choice of medium, which for Slaughter of the Innocents differs in obvious ways from those used by European masters (painting versus silhouettes, color versus black and white, paper versus canvas, etc.) but also through her use of peculiar titles. When taking Walker’s defiance to the art canon into account, the title invites a reading that omits the
biblical altogether. More specifically, the “what if” questions evoked by the second half of the title (i.e., “what if innocents were guilty?”) confront the line between innocence and guilt, which is illustrated by the use of the dubious words “might” and “something.” These words imply the allegedly guilty, those accused in times of slavery and the Jim Crow period, but not of the sins of this violent era. Rather, during Jim Crow, quite a number of extrajudicial killings of unarmed blacks took place, which were justified by cooked-up and truth-twisting accusations against black victims (Wood 117). The narrative of victimization of whites, mostly of women whose innocence supposedly needed to be protected, was often twisted to fit a white version of events, as these accusations “typically represented virtuous and innocent victims under assault from rapacious, cruel, and often dark-skinned villains” (Wood 117). In a number of cases, matters were taken into white hands as angry mobs lynched blacks, not only disregarding the presumption of innocence and denying them due process entirely but also turning their deaths into horrid spectacles that drew crowds of implicated white southerners.15 Walker’s title draws attention to the absurdity of how allegedly nefarious aspects of blacks’ personal lives were dug up, and often made up, to warrant unjustifiable murders, while also highlighting the continuity between the angry white mobs then and the unwarranted violence against black people today, in which lynch mobs are replaced by police officers and implicated bystanders. The absurd “what if” question that the title thus raises is an unfathomably complex, yet simultaneously a plain and simple one: What if blacks were innocent?

15 The NAACP reports that between 1882 and 1968, a total of 4,743 lynchings were documented in the United States, of which approximately 72.7% were black victims. Of the whites who were lynched, most of them were accused of aiding blacks or being anti-lynching. This number includes only the documented cases and may be much higher. See www.naacp.org/history-of-lynchings/.
CONCLUSION

Walker’s idiosyncratic brand of absurdist humor, particularly in the form of grotesque stereotypes and visual anachronisms, provoke a critical reflection on the callous racialization of black people throughout American history. By offering absurd incongruities that provide a wacky-mirror-style logic, by placing anachronisms in conversation with one another, and by using rhetorical “what if” games to conjure powerful alternatives, Walker sets an ardent, pedagogical example of how to critique conditions that sustain social inequality. Moreover, she provokes the American public to follow her example, as she persuasively delegitimizes oppressive narratives and their representational codes, and infuses them with alternatives that chip away at new racism and the symbolic order associated with it in an edifying way.

Through the use of absurdist humor, Walker compels her audiences to comically plunge into a distorted and grotesque absurd that mirrors the absurdity of the African American condition, only to let those audiences resurface as more philosophically instructed. As Walker herself has asked in the artist statement accompanying her 2017 exhibition: “How many ways can a person say racism is the real bread and butter of our American mythology?” The absurd answer to this question is “umpteen zillion,” but each time Walker and others do so, we have the opportunity to learn a little bit more about those racial truths that hegemonic cultural practices aim to conceal.
CHAPTER 3—DAVE CHAPPELLE

A TOPSY-TURVYDOM OF ABSURDITY IN CHAPPELLE’S SHOW

Stand-up comedian, actor, and producer Dave Chappelle has provided for some of the most absurdist racial comedy ever to appear on American network television and is one of today’s most well-known, influential artists of the American comedy scene (Gillota 33; Haggings 178). Both his insightful stand-up comedy and his comically genius, yet discomfiting and aggravating sketch comedy program *Chappelle’s Show* (2003-2006)\(^{16}\) have unnerved the discourse on racism and other societal issues across the political spectrum (Holm 1).\(^{17}\) *Chappelle’s Show*, in particular, has been widely discussed for its ability to render visible the ongoing racialization of American life (Carpio, *Laughing Fit* 81; Haggings 178) and for astutely transmitting Chappelle’s version of the black experience (Mayo 244; Rossing, “Emancipatory Racial Humor” 620). This chapter builds on these discussions, but focuses specifically on the absurdist humor that underlies much of this sophisticated, subversive show to demonstrate how Chappelle fabricates a “topsy-turvydom” of alternate realities\(^{18}\)—that is, “a range of processes involving the reversal of normal expectations and conventions” (Noonan, “Inversion, Topsy-Turvy” 394)—in which racial stereotypes, racial inversion, and racial parody may expose race as a social, conditional, and linguistic construct. I argue that similarly to how the grotesque visual juxtapositions of Kara Walker provide for ardent examples of how to expose and critique conditions that sustain racial inequality, the sagacious

\(^{16}\) The show is co-created by Neal Brennan, who also co-wrote the 1998 film *Half Baked* with Chappelle.

\(^{17}\) See Graham’s article “Reductio ad Absurdum: The Comedy of Dave Chappelle” for an overview of recent media attention to Chappelle’s stand-up performances from both the political left and the right.

\(^{18}\) I borrow this word from the 1874 operetta “Topsyturvydom” by William Gilbert and Alfred Cellier, which is a satirical one-act musical extravaganza that pictures a utopian world in which all normal conventions are reversed. Inversion in this operetta serves as humor mechanism for exposing the absurdity of a number of contemporary British societal issues and political practices. Some of the episodes of *Chappelle’s Show*, discussed below, reflect such use of inversion and expose the absurdity of contemporary racial practices and the dominant public pedagogy associated with it.
and vexing racial comedy of Chappelle’s Show produces potent counternarratives to the hegemonic public pedagogy of new racism in ways that may help audiences generate a deeper awareness of American racial realities and the absurdity of the African American condition.

The chapter first gives a brief introduction to the comedy and humor of Dave Chappelle more generally, while emphasizing Chappelle’s comedy as a public engagement with the mobilization of knowledge that results in a form of dynamic learning for and by audiences. Next, it focuses on Chappelle’s Show to illustrate how Chappelle edifies his audiences with his absurdist, racial humor. My discussion of two sketches of the show illustrates how Chappelle takes his audiences on a voyage of discovery across the absurdity of the American racial landscape to facilitate their education on the black experience—as well as on race as a social, conditional, and linguistic construct—while the discussion of a third sketch highlights the ambiguity and complexity of racial humor and demonstrates how easily it can backfire. Yet, all three examples are thought-provoking and raise questions as to how to criticize the conditions that perpetuate new racism within the conventions of sketch comedy in a meaningful way. In the end, the three sketches illustrate how Chappelle’s Show foregrounds a complex, dynamic, and provocative counternarrative to the ongoing racialization and subsequent hierarchization of American life.

DAVE CHAPPELLE: PROVOCATEUR EXTRAORDINAIRE

Dave Chappelle’s expansive comedic oeuvre cannot be reduced to Chappelle’s Show alone. Indeed, he has been successful as stand-up comedian and film actor both before and after the success of this popular program and his perceptive humor has been widely acknowledged, which is illustrated by Chappelle being the recipient of the prestigious Mark Twain Prize for American Humor in 2019. Chappelle entered the comedy scene in the early 1990s, gradually gaining notoriety for his stand-up performances on Def Comedy Jam (1992), his recurring appearances on late-night television (e.g., The Late Show With David Letterman and Late
Night With Conan O’Brien) and his acting performances in popular comedy films such as The Nutty Professor (1996) with Eddie Murphy and Blue Streak (1999) with Martin Lawrence. In 2000, he released his first feature-length stand-up comedy special entitled Dave Chappelle: Killin’ Them Softly, in which he takes on a variety of political topics and social taboos from police brutality to race and gender issues in a thought-provoking way.\(^{19}\) The title of this special alludes to the violence African Americans may face at the hands of the police—a topic Chappelle has repeatedly taken on in his comedy, right until his last stand-up special entitled 8:46, as discussed in the opening of this thesis. In 2015, Rolling Stone magazine noted of Chappelle’s first special that “the comic’s routines about police brutality are even more painfully prescient today than they were in 2000,” while ranking the special sixth among twenty-five best comedy specials and movies to date (Ciabattoni et al. n.p.). Although his later stand-up shows, such as Equanimity (2017) and Sticks & Stones (2019), earned Chappelle two Primetime Emmy Awards and three Grammy Awards, it was with his earlier comedy material that he gained the reputation of “provocateur extraordinaire” in the landscape of “popular culture mainstream” (Haggins 12, 180). As Haggins points out, Chappelle’s “comic articulation of his African American experience, and its relationship to the popular notion of blackness at this historical moment, his relationship to the entertainment industry across media, and the tone, style, and content of his comedy [are] always about keeping it real,” about transmitting the black experience “across the American racial and sociopolitical spectrum” in a candid way (180). The study of Chappelle’s “realness” and his

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\(^{19}\) Chappelle’s treatment of gender issues is, regrettably, somewhat less nuanced than his critical race humor, particularly in relation to his treatment of the LGBTQ+ community in his recent stand-up specials. This has led one scholar to argue that Chappelle’s childish gender jokes “devalue the significance of his more relevant material” (Lawrence 32). While I acknowledge this regressive side of Chappelle’s humor, which may be considered a retaliation against political correctness, I am more interested in Chappelle’s racial humor and its relevance for public pedagogy. In the conclusion of this thesis, I point to gender and intersectionality as direction for future research in the public pedagogical potential of racial humor.
candid articulation of American racial realities holds the promise, then, of unearthing some of the most peculiar aspects of the black experience in the United States.

Chappelle’s popularity as stand-up comedian and television actor and producer as well as the profoundly provocative nature of his racial humor have awarded him with a level of critical recognition and academic attention that is seldom afforded to contemporary comedians and that, as David Gillota notes, has him well underway “to canonization” (33). Bambi Haggins, for instance, reads Chappelle as a crossover comedian who follows in the footsteps of Richard Pryor and Dick Gregory, among others, to continue comedy as oppositional discourse while inspired by hip-hop culture and its defiant nature (180). Glenda Carpio holds Chappelle in equally high esteem as she places his provocative comedy alongside not only Pryor but also revered African American humorists such as novelist Ishmael Reed, painter Robert Colescott, and—as I do in this thesis as well—visual artist Kara Walker (cf. Laughing Fit to Kill). Regarding the nature of Chappelle’s humor, David Gillota has drawn attention to Chappelle’s ability to cross ethnic boundaries with his racial humor well beyond a black and white binary. Gillota goes as far as singling Chappelle out as “unique in his willingness and ability to place blackness within a larger multiethnic context” (31).

K.A. Wisniewski, as final example, praises Chappelle in the introduction to the edited volume, The Comedy of Dave Chappelle: Critical Essays, for the manner in which his humor utilizes a “shared experience to challenge the rigidity of social reality” regarding race (8). According to Wisniewski, Chappelle’s inquiry into race is part of a more general quest to examine the “American paradox” of representation—that is, the question as to who is allowed to speak about race and in what context (9). The essays collected in this anthology provide various answers to this question, ranging from subversive and liberating interpretations of his racial humor (Yates 139) to more critical ones that highlight the subversion of “racial authenticity” in Chappelle’s use of stereotypes (Lee 127) and question his abundant use of
racial slurs (Gray and Putnam 15). This chapter builds on the insightful observations by these scholars by focusing specifically on the absurdist aspects of Chappelle’s provocative racial humor and their idiosyncratic potential for a critical public pedagogy as oppositional discourse to new racism.

Chappelle’s absurdist humor-as-pedagogy may operate as edifying practice in public spaces where, as Giroux maintains, “culture works to secure identities [and] does its bridging work negotiating the relationship between knowledge, pleasure, and values” (“Cultural Politics” 354). Compared to Kara Walker’s semi-public art, there is no doubt that Dave Chappelle’s humorous works and performances can be classified as “public.” Comedy Central has made a large part of the popular Chappelle’s Show freely accessible via its website as well as via YouTube, and many of the clips have been viewed by millions. Clips of Chappelle’s older stand-up material are also freely accessible via YouTube and it was the primary medium for releasing his latest special 8:46, which has been watched by over 27 million unique viewers at the time of this writing.20 Chappelle makes regular public appearances at popular comedy clubs, comedy shows, and late night television,21 and his recent feature-length stand-up specials are released via the widely socially-shared platform Netflix. All of these highly public performances are further distributed, moreover, via various forms of social media, which ensure the reach of an audience well beyond the United States alone.

More similarly to Walker’s art, the “pedagogical” aspect of Chappelle’s racial humor derives from its ability to render authority “problematic in legitimizing particular social practices, communities, and forms of power” (Giroux, “Cultural Politics” 354). Chappelle’s humorous jabs may not completely undo “entrenched systems of racism,” As Jonathan

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20 The special was released by the account “Netflix is a Joke,” which, ironically, is the official YouTube account of Netflix. See: www.youtube.com/watch?v=3tR6mKcBbT4&t=2s.

21 See, for instance, Chappelle’s highly popular and politically critical Saturday Night Live monologue on the day after the 2016 presidential elections, viewed by nearly 20 million unique viewers: www.youtube.com/watch?v=-I5OXiNdpk
Rossing notes, but his racial humor may help audiences generate a deeper understanding of American racial realities by explicitly engaging with the dominant pedagogy of “new racism” and other social practices regarding race, as well as stimulate audiences to act upon the insightful understandings that he provides (“Emancipatory Racial Humor” 614). Absurdist stereotypes play an important role in Chappelle’s humor-as-pedagogy as well, but unlike Walker who relies on the grotesque, Chappelle’s stereotypes expose absurdity through the topsy-turvy logic of inversion, which is made possible by the narrative potential of sketch comedy, as is discussed in more detail in the section below. A pedagogical reading of Chappelle’s humor is supported, moreover, by the public recognition Chappelle receives for his ability to provoke a critical reflection on the ongoing racialization of American society: “His critical thinking is his art,” Sarah Silverman said of Chappelle, “He lets himself be surprised by what he learns and he takes us with him as he looks at it from every angle. You know, angles that most of us don’t even see” (Dave Chappelle: The Kennedy Center n.p.). Chappelle’s ability to help audiences discover the obscure angles of American racial realities as well as the shrewd insights that he provides regarding blackness in the American context exemplify Giroux’s ideas of a critical public pedagogy as articulating knowledge to practical effects in educational spaces well beyond the established institution of schools.

CHAPPELLE’S SHOW: ABSURDITY PAR EXCELLENCE

Nowhere is Chappelle’s candid engagement with blackness and his version of the African American experience more salient than in the television show Chappelle’s Show, which was co-created with Neal Brennan and aired on Comedy Central between 2003 and 2006.22 Via this infamous sketch comedy show, Chappelle implicitly inquires, among other things, what is

22 According to the well-known review-aggregation website Rotten Tomatoes, Chappelle’s Show is the second most popular sketch comedy program of all time—after the British cult favorite Monty Python’s Flying Circus (1969-1974). See: editorial.rottentomatoes.com/guide/40-best-sketch-comedy-shows-of-all-time/.
perhaps one of the biggest “what if” questions of them all: “What if American racial realities were inversed?” In this section, I perform a close reading analysis of three of the most absurdist humorous imaginations that he conjures in answer to this question. My analysis of two of these demonstrates how *Chappelle’s Show* constructs a “topsy-turvydom” of racial inversions to encourage his audiences to critically reflect on the absurdity of racial stereotypes, the perpetuation of white hegemony, and the social, conditional, and linguistic construction of race, whereas the analysis of a third sketch problematizes Chappelle’s racial humor. Noonan describes the nonce word “topsy-turvydom” as “a range of processes involving the reversal of normal expectations and conventions,” (“Inversion, Topsy-Turvy” 394), which, I argue, accurately describes some of Chappelle’s most provocative humor, even (or perhaps precisely) Chappelle’s less subversive puns. Ultimately, this section argues that both Chappelle’s more sophisticated and his less nuanced sketches provide for an ardent counterhegemonic pedagogy that facilitates discussions of race and racism among mainstream audiences.

*Chappelle’s Show* consists of a collection of sketches that take on a multiplicity of topics, ranging from celebrity culture and gender issues to drug use and, most importantly to my argument here, racial issues. The show is known for pushing the boundaries of what has been permissible on television and has stretched the limits of racial humor to such an extent that it generated quite some controversy regarding its absurdist use of racial stereotypes. The infamous episode involving “stereotype pixies,” in particular—discussed in more detail in the final part of this chapter—is remarkable regarding controversy and illustrates how Chappelle’s absurdist humor and abundance of racial stereotypes may also backfire. One of the sketches of this episode shows Chappelle playing a magical pixie in blackface who tries to convince the only African American on an airplane full of whites to act in a stereotypical way. The absurdist humor of the sketch—visible in a miniaturized version of Chappelle as a
minstrel pixie who vigorously tries to influence Chappelle’s in-flight meal choice (i.e., chicken, which Chappelle prefers but would affirm the black stereotype in the eyes of the white passengers, or fish, which he dislikes but would subvert it)—pushes the boundaries of racial humor and the absurdity of racial stereotypes to such an extent that even Chappelle himself began fearing that instead of subverting these stereotypes, he was actually solidifying them. Popular rumor has it, moreover, that the improperly loud outbursts of laughter from a white crew member during the shooting of this sketch drove Chappelle to walk away from a fifty-million-dollar contract with Comedy Central (Holm 129). As Chappelle himself said of the matter, “When he laughed, it made me uncomfortable. […] As a matter of fact, that was the last thing I shot before I told myself I gotta take f___ time out after this. Because my head almost exploded” (qtd. in Farley n.p.). Chappelle had questioned the direction of his racial humor for some time, he later admitted, which eventually led to a decade-long hiatus from comedy altogether (Atwater n.p.). Chappelle’s own acknowledgment of the ambiguity of his racial humor as well as the provocative nature and absurdist idiosyncrasies of Chappelle’s Show invite a closer look at Chappelle’s interpretation of racial stereotypes and his take on race in the American context.

“Clayton Bigsby, the World’s Only Black White Supremacist”

Henry Bergson wrote in his often-cited essay, Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic: “Picture to yourself certain characters in a certain situation: if you reverse the situation and invert the roles, you obtain a comic scene” (43). The final comedy sketch of the opening episode of Chappelle’s Show, entitled “Frontline: Clayton Bigsby,” reads as a page taken directly from Bergson’s essay. This nine-minute sketch, which Chappelle and co-writer Neal Brennan explicitly single out as general comedic direction for Chappelle’s Show in the commentary of the DVD-version, takes racial stereotypes and white supremacy to their absurd
extremes as Chappelle plays a *black* white supremacist. The sketch reveals an “authentic albeit unsavory white identity” in a blind, black body to expose the performativity of racial categories (Holm 125) and is full of inversions of whiteness and blackness as well as their *pre/ascribed* sociocultural patterns of behavior, which educate the viewer on the “learned” construction of these categories. Ultimately, the sketch highlights not only the constructedness of race but also exposes the absurdity of whiteness as the invisible norm.

Before any performativity of race is engaged with, however, the opening of the sketch provides a textual trigger warning: “For viewers sensitive to issues of race, be advised that the following piece contains gratuitous use of the ‘N’ word.” Yet, instead of keeping the language polite, as would be expected by the abbreviation of the well-known racial slur to its euphemism, the white male voiceover subverts all expectation by continuing, “And by the ‘N’ word, I mean Nigger. There, I said it,” not only defying the logic of using a euphemism altogether but also unsettling the audience by the self-reflective acknowledgement of the use of the racial slur in a humorous way (0:00-0:15). The sketch continues by framing what is about to come as a PBS *Frontline* documentary, which sets the premise for the big joke, presenting the white male voice as a television host and investigative reporter. The reporter introduces the story he is about to tell by speaking directly into the camera—the word “nigger” is repeated no less than four times in this brief introduction and over a total of twenty times (including visual usage) in the entire sketch, which is highly remarkable for broadcast television—while a black background shows nothing but the text “Frontline” to remind the viewers that this supposedly is a documentary, not a piece of sketch comedy (00:16-1:00).

These first stages that include the trigger warning and reporter-style introduction frame the sketch as an allegedly objective documentary, rooted in the convention of professional

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23 I use the mix-word “pre/ascribe” to indicate both the *descriptive* and *prescriptive* role of sociocultural patterns of behavior to racial stereotypes.
reporting, and thus premise the absurdist humor of the sketch in everyday normal expectations and conventions.

The second stage that builds up the humor of this sketch shows the reporter on a perilous journey through a land of angry-faced whites, hateful signs, and “back-country hollows” (1:04), in search of the obscure white supremacist leader and prolific racial hate-speech author Clayton Bigsby. The images of woods, swamp-like waters, and a KKK-style hooded figure are meant to evoke the American south, the area most commonly associated with white supremacy. As the reporter walks up to an elderly mixed-race couple seated on the porch in front of their home—both blind by the looks of their walking aids and sunglasses—and asks where he might find Clayton Bigsby, to his surprise the elderly black man answers in a southern accent: “Well, look no further, fella, you found him” (1:15). After the reporter is reassured that he is in the right place, the image of Clayton Bigsby is frozen—as seen in Figure 6—and slowly zoomed in on, while dramatic music plays in the background, to emphasize the absurd incongruity of the situation. “How could this have happened?” the reporter asks. The laughter from the live studio audience supports that the pun of the joke has

*Figure 6: Clayton Bigsby is black. Still from Chappelle’s Show, “Frontline: Clayton Bigsby.” YouTube, www.youtube.com/watch?v=BLNDqxrUUwQ.*
been delivered: The obscure white supremacist and prolific hate-speech author Clayton Bigsby is black. As the joke confronts the viewer with an absurd incongruity that is found in the discrepancy between the expected stereotype of the white supremacist and the delivery of a black version of that stereotype, it strongly suggests that “whiteness” is, quite literally, performed.

The humor of the sketch does not end here, however. The absurdist humor of racial inversion, constructed as much via the (visual) narrative technique of the sketch as objective documentary as by Bigsby’s unexpected blackness, has created a topsy-turvydom of possibilities that sets the stage for an entirely different sequence of narrative connections than those evoked by the anticipated story of the reporter in search of a white white supremacist. Whereas this first incongruity, Bigsby’s unexpected blackness, highlights the social and conditional construction of racial categories, the subsequent incongruities highlight the absurdity and illogic of such constructedness and expose whiteness as the dominant, natural norm. For instance, as the reporter searches for an answer to the question as to how a white supremacist can be black, the sketch takes its viewers to the Wexler Home for the Blind, in which Bigsby grew up. The headmistress of the home explains that Bigsby “was the only negro we’d ever had around here, so we figured we’d make it easier on Clayton by just telling him and all the other blind kids that he was white” (1:49). A literal take on “colorblindness” as racial ideology, the headmistress’s absurd logic highlights precisely that which so many white Americans continue to deny: that being white is “easier” and a privilege. Her remarks elicit a critical reflection on the absurdity and illogic of whiteness as hegemonic racial category and as the norm against which other categories are measured.

The headmistress’s remarks, moreover, anticipate the absurd ending of the sketch, which problematizes stereotypes for their ability to facilitate the internalization of stereotypical and/or racist behavior. As the reporter follows Bigsby on an excursion of hate-
mongering, racial slurs, and white supremacist intimidation—ironically both by Bigsby and against Bigsby—he ventures into the wider world to attend a KKK-style white power rally where Bigsby discovers the absurd truth about his racial identity. When at the rally white supremacists repeatedly shout for their hero to take off his hood so they can see his face (see Figure 7), Bigsby himself finally learns that he is, in fact, black. The shock of this absurd revelation to those embodying white supremacy is visually highlighted by a white attendee’s head literally exploding into a red gooey substance. As the sketch returns to “the studio,” the reporter concludes the story with a final blow of absurdist humor and topsy-turvy logic by announcing that after nineteen years of marriage, Bigsby has filed for divorce from his wife because, as Bigsby reasons, “she’s a nigger lover” (8:42). Bigsby’s divorce from his blind wife as an epitome of absurdity illustrates how racial humor in the form of the topsy-turvy logic of inversion, constructed through a simple technical inversion of blackness and whiteness, renders visible one of the most rigid conventions of the ongoing racialization of

Figure 7: White power! Still from Chappelle’s Show, “Frontline: Clayton Bigsby.” YouTube, www.youtube.com/watch?v=BLNDqxrUUwQ.
American society: that whiteness is predominantly seen as the norm, regardless of one’s own skin color. The absurd ending of the sketch edifies its audience on the damaging effects of stereotypes by suggesting that, while they may be largely erroneous, they still hold power for those who have internalized them.

“The Niggar Family”

This line of thought can be further developed by analyzing a second sketch from *Chappelle’s Show* entitled “The Niggar Family,” which is a part of the second episode of the second season. This four-minute sketch framed in black and white—simulating the “restrictive visual lens through which African Americans are viewed” (Bradbury 83)—functions as a parody of the 1950s domestic sitcom genre and presents a picture-perfect, suburban home and family reminiscent of shows like *Father Knows Best* (1954-1960) and *Leave it to Beaver* (1957-1963). The sketch depends on the logic of inversion as well, but, unlike the Clayton Bigsby sketch, the inversion is of a linguistic nature rather than of a performed, bodily one. The white family’s peculiar last name “Niggar” is an absurd wordplay of the racial epithet “nigger,” in which only one letter is swapped while the original pronunciation is left intact. This simple joke gives way to an absurdist sequence of events that present a topsy-turvydom of inversions, such as son Tim having to negotiate his racial identity as a white person and whites repeatedly saying the word “nigger” in an oblivious way while alluding to nearly every pejorative African American stereotype imaginable. Similar to the Bigsby sketch, the absurdist humor of “The Niggar Family” brings to light the social and conditional constructedness of these stereotypes and of race more generally while, in contrast to the previous sketch, it also highlights the linguistic construction of race. Moreover, the absurdist humorous inversion of sociocultural patterns of behavior pre/ascribed to the stereotypical performance of race
provocatively comments on how the obliviousness to these demeaning practices may perpetuate white hegemony.

The sketch opens by introducing a smiling, happy white family of three waving at the camera in front of their home, as their eccentric last name appears in a decorative script across the screen (see Figure 8). A catchy tune plays in the background as father Fred is shown collecting the mail and mother Emily dutifully presents their teenage son Tim with a children’s lunchbox. “Teaching Tim how to ride a bike, these are the Niggars that we like,” the tune cheerfully sings, as it clearly delineates between the likeable, white family and the allegedly dislikeable, “other” group of people implied by the family’s name (00:14, emphasis added). The absurdity of this opening sequence is not only found in the incongruity between the Niggar family’s introduction via the catchy tune and the repeated sound of the racial slur in that tune, or even in the treatment of the nearly adult Tim as if he were a young child, but also in the incongruity between the family’s happy obliviousness to the dual meaning of their family name and the topsy-turvydom of racial stereotypes it evokes. For instance, in the next sequence—set in the family’s kitchen, which would be the indispensable choice of space for a

Figure 8: The Niggar Family. Still from Chappelle’s Show, “The Niggar Family,” YouTube, www.youtube.com/watch?v=hLOw_SzRQ8.
segregationist-era sitcom—a conversation between Mr. and Mrs. Niggar about their newborn niece ("She’s got those Niggar lips"; "I know, so thick" [0:42]) and their still asleep son ("He sure is one lazy Niggar"[0:49]) reduces white people to two of the most common African American stereotypes to have survived the dehumanizing eras of chattel slavery and Jim Crow. The repeated utterance of the word “nigger” as well as the allusions to the pejorative stereotypes that are associated with blackness, but which are in this case used to describe white Americans, create an absurd scene that, through the humor of inversion, renders visible the absurdity of racial stereotypes and the false distortions that crystalize in them, as well as the linguistic construction of racial categories more generally.

The linguistic wordplay of “Niggar” versus “nigger” continues as the family’s “colored milkman,” Clifton (see Figure 9), enters their kitchen and is introduced precisely so (1:26-2:30). The explicit announcement of Clifton’s “colored” status is meant not only to mirror the racial practices that were typical of the 1950s but also the “tacit acceptance of normative whiteness as the invisible marker” against which other races are measured (Jacobson 134). Upon his entry, Clifton—played by Chappelle—launches into a litany of “nigger” stereotypes, from his polite rejection of left-over bacon offered by Mrs. Niggar (“I know better than to get between a Niggar and their pork”) and supposed financial ineptness (“I know how forgetful you Niggars are when it comes to paying bills”) to brotherly reassurances (“Oh, Niggar please, Niggar please!”) and his farewell greeting (“Peace, Niggar”). Clifton, so far, seems to be the only one aware of the dual meaning of the family’s name as he refers to Mr. Niggar as “Mr. N-word,” which, as Haggins notes, “sits in the center of the sketch like the elephant in the living room—spoken but unacknowledged” (Haggins 225). Visual signifiers, as seen in Figure 9, further emphasize the sketch’s humor of inversion, such as the white milk that Clifton delivers in a white uniform as well as the all-white dress worn by Mrs. Niggar. These visual signifiers draw attention to the performativity of whiteness.
(worn as a second skin via clothing), which like any other commodity (such as milk) is consumable. Clifton’s conscious mobilization of the word “nigger” in relation to these white signifiers reads not only as a humorous answer to the public scrutiny of the show regarding its prolific use of the racial slur but also as a potent counternarrative to what Janine Bradbury describes as “the paradox of white invisibility and black hypervisibility” (83).

The racial humor of “The Niggar Family” that exposes this paradox is not only embodied in the character of Clifton and his unique awareness of the derogatory connotations raised by the unusual family name but also by the character of Tim Niggar who, ironically, also has to deal with the effects of racism by whites. This is most clear in the restaurant scene of the sketch, where the host, after seating “Stevenson, party of four,” calls for “Niggar, party of two” (2:31-3:26). As Clifton and his wife indignantly step forward (“Just because we’re colored doesn’t mean we came out here to be disrespected”), Tim sorts out the confusion as he identifies himself and his date to the host as “the Niggar family.” This part of the sketch shows that, in addition to Clifton, Tim “must negotiate the binary opposition between blackness and whiteness” as well (Bradbury 83), while the absurdist humor that it is set in—a
topsy-turvy situation in which a white person is mistaken for a black one—disrupts whiteness as the norm. It does so by rendering visible the constant requirement imposed on blacks to negotiate their racial identity by inverting the situation and asking a white male to do the exact same. The topsy-turvy humor of inversion in which racism is directed at whites, both in this scene and throughout the sketch more generally, edify the audience on the reproduction of hegemonic racial and institutional truths while the absurdity of the sketch simultaneously subverts the symbolic order associated with those truths. Above all, “The Niggar Family” provides for a sharp example of how to expose the naturalness of whiteness as the norm—a practice deeply ingrained in contemporary new racism—and educates its audiences on the social, conditional, and linguistic constructedness of racial categories, while chipping away critically at the absurd conditions that sustain the inequality that flows from the hierarchization of those categories.

“Stereotype Pixies”
Whereas the previous two sketches appear to be quite clear in their subversive and liberatory message, which for the larger part is generated by its exaggerated and absurdist humorous inversion between blackness and whiteness as well as the accompanied inversion of their respective sociocultural behavior patterns, the sketches involving racial pixies—the ones that allegedly caused the abrupt cancelation of Chappelle’s Show—take the representation of racial stereotypes to such an absurd extreme that, as I noted above, even Chappelle himself began doubting the effects of his racial humor. The “Stereotype Pixies” sketches are a collection of very short sketches that present not only a number of over-the-top black and white racial caricatures but also of Asian and Hispanic ones. Yet, even these sketches were meant to be subversive, according to Chappelle. In an interview as part of the Sundance Institute’s Iconoclast series, Chappelle, in conversation with Maya Angelou, said of the
controversial “Nigger Pixie” sketch, “I knew what I intended but somebody laughs differently than I intended—and I caught it. It was painful” (Iconoclast n.p.). Chappelle’s words emphasize the discrepancy between intent and reception of his humor, the interplay of which, according to Brandon Manning, is key in contemporary exchanges of African American humor (154). Although Chappelle’s brand of absurdist humor through topsy-turvy inversions continues in these sketches, the accompanying sociocultural practices are not inversed, which may lie at the root of the discrepancy between intent and reception.

The “Asian Pixie” sketch, for example, demonstrates how racial humor may solidify and reinforce demeaning racial practices, as the stereotype—played by Chappelle—does not question the pre/ascribed sociocultural norms associated with it.24 The sketch shows Chappelle playing a miniature Japanese stereotype in traditional clothing, a wig of hair pulled into a bun by chopsticks, and an long, thin mustache.25 He stands on the shoulders of MTV star La La, who is introduced to an Asian man, Yoshi, by recurring performer Charlie Murphy (see Figure 10). While performing several supposedly stereotypical Asian acts, such as eating food from a box with chopsticks, waving a samurai sword, and massaging La La’s shoulders, Chappelle encourages the Asian man to greet La La with the words “Hello, La La.” Chappelle’s pronunciation of the letter L as a mixture of L and R, however, distinctly pokes fun at the linguistic predisposition of many people whose first language is of Asian origin. After a few nervous attempts Yoshi finally greets La La, but the words that come out of his mouth are, shockingly to the pixie, “Hello, gorgeous.” As Yoshi’s greeting does not conform

24 While the pixie in blackface does so neither, it at least stays within the safe limits of Chappelle’s own racial identity, and thus can be seen as a form of self-deprecation. The “white pixie” sketch mocks the hegemonic racial category of whiteness. As I have argued elsewhere, the “comedic license” associated with self-deprecatory humor or humor that mocks the hegemony is less problematic and more easily accepted by audiences than humor that sidesteps to other racial minorities (Van der Elsen 37-38).

25 The reduction of the general racial marker “Asian” to a Japanese stereotype may in itself be regarded as a demeaning practice. However, this is in line with Chappelle’s racial approach to humor, as opposed to an ethnic one, which mirrors his treatment of blackness and whiteness as racial categories. For a more nuanced discussion on the interrelations between race and ethnicity, see for instance Werner Sollors’ foreword to the insightful reader Theories of Ethnicity: A Classical Reader.
to the pixie’s urge to act stereotypically, the pixie acts humiliated by Yoshi’s sexualized greeting—Asian stereotypes are asexual, after all—and commits seppuku, which is a ritualistic Japanese practice of committing suicide by cutting open one’s abdomen to restore honor to one’s family. As the dead, Japanese pixie slowly slides down La La’s shoulder in between her breasts, the laugh tracks imply the funniness of the joke and the sketch ends.

Although the absurdist humor of this sketch may be found in the inversion created by a black American playing an Asian pixie, nothing in this scene indicates a critique of the stereotypical behavior adhered to by the pixie. Whereas the Bigsby and Niggar sketches incongruously placed stereotypes in a topsy-turvydom of inverted roles (i.e., a black white supremacist or a white “Niggar” boy), no such incongruity is presented in the Asian pixie sketch and Chappelle’s dress-up as Japanese stereotype is nothing more than just that. Although Chappelle’s intent may have been to jab away at hyperbolic racial caricatures, the discrepancy between intent and reception of these sketches asks audiences to laugh at racial stereotypes in ways that make “viewers aware of their momentary indulgence in the guilty
pleasures of bigotry” (O’Rourke 288). In the end, Chappelle does not interrogate the dominant public pedagogy that underlies the construction of these stereotypes, but rather reinforces the misguided idea that stereotypes capture “at least a grain of something that is real and authentic” (Green and Linders 246).

While a similar line of thought can be derived from analyzing the “Hispanic Pixie,” the “White Pixie,” and the much-discussed “Nigger Pixie” sketches—each of which present Chappelle-as-pixie as an absurdist exaggeration of a racial stereotypes that acts in a conforming, non-subversive manner—taken as a collection, as a topsy-turvydom of exaggerations, Chappelle’s subversive and anti-racist intent may become a little clearer. Indeed, David Gillota redeems Chappelle’s pixie sketches by emphasizing that the most significant part of this episode is not Chappelle’s attempt to overthrow each stereotype individually, but rather the way in which Chappelle treats every racial group in the same manner (45). Whereas the brevity of each individual sketch shortens its ability to frame its subversive message, taken as a collection, as a single episode to be viewed as one, the pixie sketches may be read as a departure from the “sanctimonious images of racial uplift and shift toward irreverence about racially sensitive material” (Manning 153). This irreverence may “[displace] whiteness as an unmarked given and [dislodge] blackness as the primary marker of ‘otherness’” (Gillota 45). Indeed, what sets Chappelle apart from his predecessors, such as Richard Pryor and Eddie Murphy, may well be his idiosyncratic way of producing humorous comparisons beyond the black and white binary to which racial humor has been limited so often. It should be noted, however, that such a nuanced, scholarly reading does not align with the dominant, public interpretations of these sketches (Kyles n.p.), meaning that what can be taken away from them is that the precarious, multivalent, and duplicitous nature of racial humor-as-pedagogy—no matter how subversive or liberating the intent—can easily backfire,
particularly when it is directed at audiences who approach racial humor with varying degrees of cultural, historical, and political knowledge.

As final remark on these sketches, it can be pointed out that the endless discussions of Chappelle’s pixie stereotypes, and Chappelle’s Show more generally—by Chappelle himself on, for instance, The Oprah Winfrey Show (2006), in discussion with Maya Angelou on Iconoclast (2006), and, even after his comeback to comedy, on Jimmy Kimmel Live (2017) and USA Today’s CBS This Morning (2017) as well as by others who have made both public (Barshad n.p.; Kyles n.p.; Morris and Wortham n.p.) and academic arguments (Gogan 72; Haggins 235; Holm 129; Manning 152) about Chappelle’s sketches—situate Chappelle’s absurdist humor of inversion in a highly public debate on the potential of racial humor as a critical anti-racist, counterhegemonic tool. Even though the direction of Chappelle’s racial humor may be put into question by some of his more provocative material such as the pixie sketches, they still facilitate the extended discussion of racial stereotypes and racism in the public domain. The DVD-version of the pixie sketches, for instance, presents an extended Q&A-discussion with the studio audience about the sensitivity of the episode regarding race while, as a second example, Chappelle’s discussion of the death of George Floyd in 8:46 has evoked public responses such as “it’s reached a time where we listen to comedians and laugh at politicians” (Harib n.p.). In its most public form, Chappelle’s racial humor contributes to the negotiation of the relationship between knowledge, pleasure, and values, which, as Brian Gogan points out, “reveals the relationship between people, practices, and race to be conditional” (75)—no matter how discomforting the humor may be.

CONCLUSION

Chappelle’s comedy sketches as discussed in this chapter contain some of Chappelle’s most absurdist answers to the “what if” question: “What if American racial realities were
inversed?” Rather than reimagining a theatrically inverted world, Chappelle creates his unusual topsy-turvy effects by inverting racial categories and the stereotypical patterns of behavior associated with them, while situating them in normal, everyday conventions. Part of the counterhegemonic potential of Chappelle’s absurdist humor thus lies in the use of the simple technical inversion of blackness and whiteness to generate new meanings from previously existing racial realities. As inflexible representations of blackness as well as whiteness as the invisible norm are complicated, and as race is exposed for the social, conditional, and linguistic construct that it is understood to be today, Chappelle presents his audiences with a critical interrogation of the dominant public hegemony of new racism that harbors regressive racial practices. The exceptionally provocative ways in which Chappelle’s public and popular interrogations of race and racial stereotypes are carried out, the topsy-turvydom of alternate realities that Chappelle’s Show presents, and the absurdist undertones of much of the show’s humor that addresses race in a wider multiracial context provide for an exemplary counterhegemonic pedagogy that facilitates the public discussion on race and racism in a critical manner—even if in Chappelle’s less nuanced racial humor this is done only through extended public discussions. Chappelle’s Show as pedagogical text, therefore, provides for exemplary “emancipatory lessons” that possess the ability to “empower questioning agents capable of identifying problems, analyzing their cultural roots, and discovering strategies to dissent against dominant racial ideologies” (Rossing, “Emancipatory Racial Humor” 621). Ultimately, it may be said that Chappelle embodies the hybrid artist/educator that Giroux may have had in mind when he wrote his impassioned works on critical public pedagogy.
CHAPTER 4—JORDAN PEELE

A Narrative of Absurdity in *Keanu* and *Get Out*

Comedian, filmmaker, and newly arisen master of horror Jordan Peele has presented contemporary audiences with some of the most invigorating and thought-provoking racial narratives of the twenty-first century. As one half of the comic duo behind Comedy Central’s popular sketch comedy show *Key & Peele* (2012-2015), Peele has refreshingly and provocatively reinscribed race as visual marker in the allegedly post-racial, colorblind United States while challenging deeply pervasive aspects of new racism, for instance by countering claims that Barack Obama is not “black enough” (*cf.* “Obama’s Anger Translator”) or by parodying the outmoded trope of racial passing (*cf.* “Das Negros”) (Bradbury 85). His idiosyncratic use of absurdist humor in his feature length films, moreover, sets him apart from other popular African American filmmakers—such as Ryan Coogler and Ava DuVernay—as he constructs absurdist, yet unequivocally counterhegemonic narratives that engage with a highly complex aspect of new racism: its increasingly covert nature. This aspect is found in both white liberals’ self-proclaimed non-racist, colorblind treatment of blacks—in the entertainment industry exemplified by “blindcasting” (i.e., colorblind casting)—and in the homogenizing treatment of the black experience as a one-dimensional, monolithic one. This chapter discusses two of Peele’s films—the action-comedy *Keanu* (2016), which he co-wrote, co-starred in, and produced, and his recent horror film and directorial debut *Get Out* (2017), which Peele wrote and produced as well—to illustrate how Peele constructs counterhegemonic narratives that are absurdist in nature, anti-racist in message, and, above

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26 Keegan-Michael Key makes up the other half of this duo, who Peele met while working for the comedy show *MADtv* in 2003.
all, pedagogical in how to critique the social conditions that sustain racial inequality in both the entertainment industry and the United States more generally.

Before delving into the analysis of Peele’s films, the chapter offers a brief introduction to Peele’s broad artistic oeuvre and identifies the medium of film as particularly fruitful pedagogical tool for engaging with the ongoing racialization of American society. In line with Giroux’s ideas, the narrative structure of film singles out this medium as more potent than any other form of visual culture in edifying audiences on the contentious topic of race. Moreover, Giroux’s emphasis on the unique potential of narrative film to foster “critical agents capable of understanding, engaging and transforming those discourses and institutional contexts” that perpetuate new racism mirrors Peele’s idiosyncratic use of absurdist humor-as-pedagogy, which this chapter locates specifically in the narrative structure of his films (Giroux, “Breaking into the Movies” 689). Whereas Kara Walker and Dave Chappelle have predominantly used absurdist humor in static or short art works—such as in the provocative visual juxtapositions of ink drawings and the topsy-turvy humor of inversion in short comedy sketches—this chapter illustrates how absurdist humor can also be found in the less directly “pun-delivered” narrative structure of a cultural text. Ultimately, the chapter argues that Peele’s absurdist humor in Keanu and Get Out subverts the new racist belief that blackness is a monolithic, one-dimensional experience and purposefully counters the increasingly covert nature of new racism, particularly of the self-proclaimed, non-racist kind.

**JORDAN PEELE: HUMOR AND PEDAGOGY IN FILM**

While Jordan Peele began as improv performer in places known for harvesting raw talent, such as Boom Chicago in Amsterdam and The Second City in Chicago, and rose to fame with

27 Dave Chappelle’s stand-up comedy may be regarded as a narrative form of public pedagogy. However, while stand-up comedy does indeed present oral narratives, these performances usually do not consist of a single, coherent narrative. Rather, not unlike sketch comedy, they are comprised of several contracted, stand-alone narratives that may be completely unrelated to one another or only loosely connected via single-pun jokes.
*Key & Peele* (2012-2015), his artistic reach and provocative racial humor expand far beyond the comedy scene alone. Via his production company Monkeypaw Productions—which, according to its website, “challenges the conventional architecture of genre storytelling from horror to science fiction to social satire, while balancing avant garde visual language with undeniably contagious fun”28—Peele has collaborated with the well-known filmmaker Spike Lee (*BlacKkKlansman*, 2018) and the up-and-coming talent Nia DaCosta (*Candyman*, 2020) to produce feature-length drama and horror films. Peele has also recently gained critical acclaim for his widely popular and high-grossing directorial debut, the satirical horror film *Get Out* (2017), which places him in a broader, more complex position regarding the landscape of popular culture mainstream. *Get Out*—which won six major awards, including the 2018 Academy Award for Best Original Screenplay, and received several more nominations—as well as his second, near-equally successful directorial film *Us* (2019) not only escape a clear-cut genre categorization as horror—both being a sophisticated mixture of horror, thriller, and comedy infused with absurdity, irony, and, above all, satire—but also situate his expanding body of work in a complicated history of the representation of African Americans in horror and suspense films. As the documentary *Horror Noire: A History of Black Horror* illustrates, black people have conventionally played particular roles in these films, which evolved from no actual black presence—that is, blacks were represented by whites in blackface, often as comic ridicule (e.g., *Hallowe’en in Coontown* [1897])—and blacks being the focal point of fear in the early twentieth century (e.g., *The Birth of a Nation* [1915]), to blacks being sacrificed for the white protagonist (e.g., *The Shining* [1980]) and, slowly over the century, towards more refined representations in which blacks were cast as main characters or protagonists (e.g., *Night of the Living Dead* [1968] and *Snakes on a Plane* [2006]). Peele’s films read as the next logical step in the evolution of blacks’ representation in

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28 See: www.monkeypawproductions.com/about.
horror and suspense films, as he has made the conscious choice to cast only black people in the leading roles.\textsuperscript{29} Peele’s use of racial humor in his broad body of work, moreover, as well as his jostling of the conventions of white Hollywood certainly invite a closer look at his critical take on race in the United States.

A specific focus on Peele’s films and their potential for racial humor as counterhegemonic, anti-racist strategy follows Henry Giroux’s contention that film may serve as a particularly auspicious tool for public pedagogy:

Deeply imbricated within material and symbolic relations of power, movies produce and incorporate ideologies that represent the outcome of struggles marked by the historical realities of power and the deep anxieties of the times; they also deploy power through the important role they play in connecting the production of pleasure and meaning with the mechanisms and practices of powerful teaching machines. Put simply, films both entertain and educate (“Breaking into the Movies” 687).

As briefly touched upon in the previous chapter, the brevity of sketch comedy, as well as the predominantly static nature of visual art, limit the potential of these media to frame a subversive or liberating message.\textsuperscript{30} The length of films, on the other hand, provides for “a deeper pedagogical register for producing particular narratives, subject positions and ideologies,” which, according to Giroux, render them more potent and pedagogical than any other medium of popular culture in fostering “critical agents capable of understanding,

\textsuperscript{29} Jordan Peele has explicitly expressed himself about race and casting. In a much quoted conversation session at the Upright Citizens Brigade Theatre in East Hollywood on 25 March 2019, Peele said: “I don’t see myself casting a white dude as the lead in my movie. Not that I don’t like white dudes, but I’ve seen that movie” (qtd. in Gardner and Abramovitch n.p.).

\textsuperscript{30} Visual art does have the power to evoke complex narratives within a single image, such as Walker has done, for instance, with her silhouette installations. Its potential for narrative structure, however, is severely limited by its static, non-sequential nature, particularly in comparison to film.
engaging and transforming those discourses and institutional contexts that closed down
democratic public life” (“Breaking into the Movies” 688-89). As Peele himself has said of his
films, they have the ability to “ask a white person to see the world through the eyes of a black
person for an hour and a half” (qtd. in Zinoman n.p.), implying the power of film to immerse
audiences in experiences that may be unknown to them and edifying them about someone
else’s perspective in the process.

In Peele’s case, film provides for a highly public pedagogy as well, as the successes of
his films have assured the reach of a broad audience. Get Out, for instance, has grossed a
surprising $272.5 million on a budget of only $4.5 million, making it one of the most
profitable and thus highly watched films of 2017.31 The similar success of his second film Us
and the high anticipation of the upcoming tv series reboot Twilight Zone, which Peele co-
created, produced, and narrated, as well as the extended public discussions that Peele’s
sudden popularity and critical success in the horror film genre has generated (Anthony n.p.;
Landsberg 629; Marasabessy and Handayani 70), render Peele’s artistic oeuvre not only
deeply compelling but also a highly public one.

The argument of the unique potential of film as pedagogical tool is, moreover,
particularly relevant to matters of race, as the public discussion on this subject is frequently
impeded by the dominant public pedagogy of new racism. Peele’s films Keanu and Get Out
both explicitly take on the topics of race and racism in the United States, although each in its
own idiosyncratic way, and—as my discussion of these films below shows—provide for a
valuable contribution to the public discourse on the connection between politics, personal
experience, and public life, on the one hand, and the larger social issues surrounding race in
the United States, on the other. Moreover, Peele’s deliberate casting of exclusively black
protagonists as well as his inversion of the filmic tradition of blacks dying for white

protagonists—for example, in his latest film *Us*, whites are slaughtered swiftly as the black protagonists survive against all odds—engage with the increasingly covert forms of racism in the film and television industries, exemplified by practices such as “blindcasting,” (i.e., colorblind casting) and the neoliberal “illusion that under liberal individualism, the marketplace will do right by historically marginalized individuals” (Warner 645). Kristen Warner’s analysis of the racial dynamic in the highly popular and successful television series *Grey’s Anatomy*, which casts a large number of black actors but adheres to a colorblind ideology (i.e., characters have been written without predetermining their race), shows that a racially diverse cast alone does not provide for a sufficient representation of people of color and challenges neither white hegemony nor new racism. Peele’s explicit defiance of such practices as well as the idiosyncratic potential of narrative film as counterhegemonic tool render his films a compelling public pedagogy against new racism and its increasingly covert manifestations.

The potential of Peele’s films as counterhegemonic pedagogy is, moreover, buttressed by a racial humor that simultaneously connects him to and sets him apart from the absurdist humor of Kara Walker and Dave Chappelle. Whereas Walker’s and Chappelle’s humor has been overtly absurdist in nature—from the incongruous, visual juxtapositions of the grotesque in Walker’s art to the topsy-turvy inversion of racial stereotypes in Chappelle’s sketch comedy—Peele’s filmic oeuvre relegates absurdist humor and absurdity to a more implicit form that can be found in the films’ narrative structures. This is significant to note, because Giroux singled out the narrative structure of film as precisely that aspect of the medium that renders it as highly capable for critical pedagogy. Jerry Palmer’s *The Logic of the Absurd* initiates a connection between absurdity and narrative structure, as he locates absurdist humor and its potential for comedic success in feature film (as well as in longer television episodes) in “the balance between plausibility and implausibility” (34). Olivier Couder also draws
attention to the possibility for absurdist humor in the narrative structure and emphasizes the quality of absurdist humor to differentiate between “the joke world” and “the world as we know it” as one of its essential characteristics, along with its dependence on incongruity (2). Absurdist humor, Couder reasons, is “instrumental in defining [the] context” in which it is situated, as “humorous passages are never read nor understood in isolation” (2-3). This idea has been touched upon in the chapter on Kara Walker, as I linked her incongruous juxtapositions of the images of a figure in black power salute, Frederick Douglass, and Donald Trump’s swastika-stamped head to Trump’s regressive remarks on police brutality and his ignorance of Douglass’s significance to African American history, and thus offered an incongruity-resolution situated in the humor’s context. The following sections that analyze Peele’s action-comedy film Keanu and his horror film Get Out develop this argument further to demonstrate how absurdist humor embedded in the narrative structure of film has significant influence on both the viewing process and the interpretative process of audiences, and may thus significantly influence a film’s strategy for a critical, anti-racist pedagogy.

PLAUSIBILITY AND IMPLAUSIBILITY IN KEANU

This section analyzes how the narrative of Keanu (2016), an action-comedy film written by Jordan Peele and Alex Rubens and directed by Peter Atencio, can be regarded as a public pedagogical tool that questions and counters one-dimensional representations of black masculinity in the action and crime film genres. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva specifies the “broad inclusiveness of an array of black identities”—that is, the explicit acknowledgement of intersectional experiences—as a crucial feature in the ongoing struggle against racism, particularly when new racism homogenizes the multiplicity of black identities and relegates black experiences to a single, monolithic one (132). Keanu not only culminates into a narrative of absurdity that carefully balances the plausible and the implausible within the diegetic story world but also questions the entertainment industry’s inflexible take on black
masculinity by presenting nerdy, middle-class, suburbanites as action heroes and thugs as sensitive pet-lovers who would go to any length to protect a cute kitten. Ultimately, the film edifies its audience on the oppressiveness of new racism by countering the pervasive treatment of the black experience as an obstinately homogeneous one.

The basic plot of *Keanu* revolves around Rell’s (Jordan Peele) and Clarence’s (Keegan-Michael Key) search for the titular character, a tiny, adorable kitten that is beloved by drug lords and doofuses alike. The opening scene shows the innocent kitten as sole escapee from an extremely violent drug scene in which every on-screen character is brutally murdered by the “Allentown niggers.” This scene places the film in direct conversation with the action and crime genres by evoking the expectation of a genre-conventional approach. The sinister “Allentown niggers,” for instance, are extremely capable shooters and perform amazing acrobatics to eliminate their targets, which are portrayed on-screen in a *Matrix*-style slow-motion as bullets zoom by (see Figure 11). These acrobatics are mirrored by Keanu the kitten—the name is no coincidence—who miraculously escapes from the scene. The kitten ultimately finds its way to Rell’s house and immediately wins the love of both Rell and his

![Figure 11: The acrobatics of one of the “Allentown Niggers.” Still from *Keanu*, directed by Peter Atencio, performances by Jordan Peele, Keegan-Michael Key, Method Man, and others, Monkeypaw Productions, 2016.](image-url)
cousin Clarence. During a break-in at Rell’s house, however, Keanu is stolen by the “17th Street Blips,” a gang of castaways from the infamous, rivalling Los Angeles gangs “the Bloods” and “the Crips.” Upon encountering the Blips’ leader, Cheddar (Method Man), who has rechristened the kitten “New Jack” and inaugurated him into the gang with a stereotypical black do-rag and golden necklace, Rell and Clarence are mistaken for the violent “Allentown niggers” and, as they go along with the case of mistaken identity to retrieve Keanu, dub themselves with the improvised gangster names “Techtonic” and “Shark Tank.” The absurdist humorous narrative of two suburban, middle-class, nerdy men heroically infiltrating a violent drug gang, all for the love of a tiny, innocent kitten, places the film in a critical dialogue with the conventional heroes of action and crime films as well as opens up space for an absurdist characterization of Rell and Clarence, who are required to switch between the normal, sensitive, and scared versions of themselves and the stereotypical and tough underground gangsters that they are mistaken for.

The absurdity of the narrative is emphasized by several signifiers throughout the film that place the characters of Rell and Clarence more directly within the larger context of filmic action heroes and engages with the multiplicity of masculinities that may come with that category. The film’s plot and title, for instance, evoke Keanu Reeves’ popular action film 
John Wick (2014), which is also about a man’s undying love for his pet. In another scene and direct reference to the Matrix trilogy, the actual voice of Keanu Reeves as Keanu the kitten wakes up Clarence from a particularly absurdist drug-induced fantasy world, which Clarence had entered to maintain their cover. Rell’s house is, moreover, covered in film posters, such as those of Mario van Peebles’ New Jack City (1991) and Michael Mann’s Heat (1995) and the movie theater they attend during the burglary of Rell’s home, during which Keanu is taken, shows posters of a fictional Liam Neeson action film, entitled Substitute Teacher, which alludes to one of Key & Peele’s most absurdist, fish-out-of-the-water sketches of the same
name, foreboding the absurdist adventure Rell and Clarence are about to embark on to save Keanu. These visual signifiers and allusions to action heroes serve, according to Peele, as provocative questioning of the stereotypical roles that African American men have predominantly been confined to in action and crime films. As he reflects in a Q&A session at the Tree House Humane Society—a cat shelter in Chicago that served as venue for a promotion interview ahead of the release of *Keanu*—“why is that how we’ve told the story of the African American experience almost exclusively?” (qtd. in Koske n.p.). Peele refers to the narrow, inflexible, and unrealistic characterization of African Americans in such films:

I’ve never seen a movie that centers around guys quite like us and there are a lot of dudes like us. I think most people in the country are like us, we’re nerds. We love content, we love watching movies, and we’re also softies. I think there’s this idea that masculinity, [that] being a man means you have to be some kind of tough guy. That’s just not us, and that’s not a lot of people (qtd. in Koske n.p.).

*Keanu’s* absurdist narrative, buttressed by the visual and textual signifiers that link it to the action and crime genres, transforms the classical, masculine Hollywood action hero into an everyday, nerdy version of that hero—which is, according to Peele, far more realistic—and edifies the film’s audience not only on the one-dimensional and inaccurate representation of black men in these film genres but also on black masculinity as fluid identity marker more generally.

This argument can be developed further by analyzing the character progression of

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32 “Substitute Teacher” shows Key playing an inner city school teacher, whose take on the pronunciation of typically American names deviates from the white norm, as he gives traditional names a “black” pronunciation. For example, Jacquelin becomes Jaykweeklin and Blake becomes Balakay. This typical “fish out of the water” type of comedy derives its humor from the absurdist inversion of expected patterns of behavior that come with blackness and whiteness and the subsequent subversion of those expected patterns of behavior (“Substitute Teacher” n.p.).
Clarence throughout the plot. Olivier Couder suggests that absurdist humor premised on incongruities “impacts characterization,” which, in turn, may significantly affect how audiences interpret the narrative of the film (3). At the beginning of Rell’s and Clarence’s search for Keanu, the duo finds itself in a gangster-controlled strip club called Hot Party Vixens—traditionally a male-dominated space associated with hegemonic (and also toxic) forms of masculinity (Frank 61)—in which they not only look out of place in their suburban, nerdy clothing (see Figure 12), but also act out of place, as Clarence, according to Rell, “[sounds] like Richard Pryor doing an impression of a white guy” (Keanu 0:22:07).

Clarence’s remarks on a man’s tattooed face (“God gave you one face. Why would you change it?”), his ordering of the feminine drink of “white wine,” and his high-voiced, sensitive (read: feminine) discussions with Rell on the use of the N-word (“People understand the historical significance of that word and you can’t just say it, shiftlessly with no responsibility whatsoever”) unnerve Rell because, according to him, they signify atypical behavior for the social setting that are in. Yet, when they are approached by Hi-C, one of Cheddar’s Blips (“You niggas in the right place?”), Clarence abruptly and unexpectedly shifts
from his high-pitched, feminized voice to a deep and unambiguously black, masculine one (“Yeah, we in the right place, nigga!”). Clarence’s unexpected and striking navigation of the binary oppositions between what is regarded as both stereotypically white and feminine behavior, on the one hand, and stereotypically black and masculine behavior, on the other, as well as between the nerdy, suburban, family-loving corporate teambuilder that he is and the attitude-filled, gang-infiltrating action hero that he becomes by the end of the film, sets the premise for the complex development of his character as a multidimensional, non-monolithic one in ways that contributes to the absurdity of the narrative.

For instance, to keep their cover intact, Clarence utilizes his corporate teambuilding skills to help improve the gang’s drug-selling skills (“We gonna go in a circle, first of all, and everyone gonna say their name and then two things about yo’self” [0:32:30]), he edifies the Blips on how to avoid the police (“You wanna never get pulled over again, you drive a inconspicuous family vehicle” [0:37:10]), and he has them abandon their stereotypical taste for hip-hop and rap music in favor of George Michael’s music (“This the real OG up in here” [0:41:34]). These scenes create a humorous tension by evoking the plausible expectation of Clarence being exposed for the nerdy, suburban family man he is and the subsequent, nearly implausible delivery of an incongruous reality to that expectation as the viewer sees how the gangsters hang onto Clarence’s every word. The character development of Clarence thus contributes to the absurdity of the narrative by balancing the plausible (e.g., his job as corporate teambuilder) and the implausible (e.g., seeing gangsters effectively apply the practical communication skills he has taught them), and ultimately illustrates how black masculinity is, in line with Peele’s perspective, a fluid, constantly negotiated one.

Eventually, the narrative of the film climaxes into a final sequence of absurdist humor, which counters obstinate representations of blackness by driving home the point of the nerdy, suburban black man as plausible action hero. The viewer first encounters a murderous
shootout initiated by Cheddar because he refuses to give up the kitten—for even violent drug lords may fall in love with innocent animals—while next, the film shows a dangerous car chase as Rell attempts to escape from a second drug lord with Keanu, and finally, as Hi-C reveals herself as undercover police officer and kills Cheddar in self-defense, Rell is reunited with Keanu and is subsequently arrested, together with Clarence, for their committed crimes. In a final stretch of the plausible absurd, as the film closes, Rell is seen in prison talking to his visitor Keanu (see Figure 13), telling the kitten that prison “hasn’t even been that bad, really”—an absurdity in and of itself regarding most blacks’ actual experience in (and after) prison—and that due to their newly acquired heroic status, caused by their killing of the actual “Allentown niggers” in self-defense, they “don’t even have to change [their] voice or anything” (1:32:40). As Rell and Clarence make their exit with the remaining members of the 17th Street Blips, now their close friends, the film ends on a somewhat heartfelt note that seems to edify its audience on the various kinds and makes that action heroes may come in.

Ultimately, the absurdist narrative of the film of two middle class, nerdy suburbanites infiltrating a violent drug gang to rescue a cute, beloved kitten as well as the complex, multi-
layered, and humorous character construction that contributes to the absurdity of the narrative complicate monolithic, non-fluid representations of black masculinity as they have traditionally been presented in action and crime films. By emphasizing non-hegemonic forms of black masculinity and by presenting these as plausible action heroes, the film’s absurdist humor edifies its audience on the plethora of possible experiences that come with blackness, as well as provides for a potent example of how to expose and counter new racism’s homogeneous treatment of black identities in American society.

**BLACK HORROR AND ABSURDITY IN *GET OUT***

“The horror genre is daring, unflinching pedagogy,” maintains Robin Means Coleman, author of *Horror Noire: Blacks in American Horror Films from the 1890s to Present* and executive producer of the previously referenced documentary *Horror Noire*. “It is a syllabus of our social, political and racial world” (*Horror Noire* n.p.). Jordan Peele’s critically acclaimed directorial debut *Get Out* (2017)—a subtle mixture of horror, thriller, and comedy infused with absurdity and sharp social satire—reads as mandatory literature for Coleman’s hypothetical syllabus, as it sets out to expose “the lie” of a post-racial American society purported by Barack Obama’s ascendancy to the presidency (Peele qtd. in Zinoman n.p.). As Peele said in a 2017 interview with *The New York Times*, “this movie is about the lack of acknowledgment that racism exists,” a statement that holds true even after Donald Trump was elected to the presidency and racism once again became overt (qtd. in Zinoman n.p.). More open forms of racism, according to Peele, serve as cornerstone for the white “liberal elite” to communicate that they are “not racist in any way,” which “is as much [part] of the problem as anything else” (qtd. in Zinoman n.p.). This section locates the absurdist humor of *Get Out* in

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33 The film, although categorized as horror, eludes an exact classification. Peele himself has called the film a “documentary,” because, according to him, it accurately documents black people’s experience in the United States (@JordanPeele). Universal Studios, in collaboration with which Peele produced the film, submitted it as “comedy” for the purpose of the Academy Awards in 2018.
the film’s anti-racist narrative, which appears to be set in “our” world, but with a single “what if” element of the manifestly absurd, found in the film’s depiction of whites actually inhabiting black bodies (as opposed to the material, economic possession of slavery). Ultimately, like *Keanu*, the film presents a counterhegemonic pedagogy that is highly critical of new racist practices, but, unlike *Keanu*, *Get Out* places the focus on the increasingly covert nature of new racism.

*Get Out* focuses on the interracial couple of Chris Washington (Daniel Kaluuya), a young African American man who lives in Brooklyn, and Rose Armitage, a white woman who grew up in the suburbs (Allison Williams). Before their narrative begins, however, the film opens with the brief interlude of a typical horror trope (0:00:51-0:03:34)—that of “an individual walking alone in an unfamiliar dark space” (Patton 351). An African American man is seen navigating a “creepy, confusing-ass” suburb and—unlike the typical horror trope—he comments ironically on his precarious situation (“I feel like a sore thumb out here”). The man’s utterances imply how the American suburbs can be regarded as a “spatial metaphor for whiteness itself,” which blacks may experience as highly discomforting (Wiese 109) and foreshadow what is about to happen (“not today, not me. You know how they like to do motherfuckers out here, man, I’m gone”) as the man is abducted by an unknown figure.

The film then progresses to the Brooklyn apartment of Chris, where he and Rose prepare for a trip to meet Rose’s liberal elite family, who live in an affluent New York City suburb. Chris expresses anxiety about the fact that Rose has not told her parents that he is black, which, buttressed by the eerie opening scene, provides for “a glimpse into the subtle fear of being black in predominantly whites spaces” (Prokopy n.p.). These early stages of the plot illustrate how “whiteness in the black imagination is often a representation of terror” (hooks,

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34 Cammie Sublette reads Peele’s film next to Colson Whitehead’s novel *The Underground Railroad* to highlight its neo-slave narrative characteristics (233).
“Representing Whiteness” 342) and emphasize the horror that black Americans may feel in the face of such a “rigidly controlled place” as the suburbs (Beuka 220).

As Chris and Rose embark on their trip, the plot builds up towards the ultimate incongruity of the film’s narrative, which is found in Peele’s unconventional portrayal of white liberals as the monstrous antagonists—who the viewer comes to learn possess black bodies in a haunting and absurdist way—and which deliberately contrasts with “the more common ‘racist archetype’ of the conservative Southerner” (Tkach 20). The film sets the viewer up for this incongruity in multiple stages, the first of which each adhere to what can be defined as “benign” forms of racism. First, as Chris and Rose hit a deer with their car, a police officer asks Chris to identify himself, even though he was not driving (0:11:50). In a “white savior” moment, Rose jumps to his defense and talks the police officer down. Next, when Chris is introduced to Rose’s family, he is hit with a discomforting wave of “benign” racism, such as Rose’s father’s black slang greeting and his remarks that that he “would have voted for Obama a third time” if he could, or Rose’s brother Jeremy’s awkward admiration of Chris’s athletic build. This absurd propagation of implicit racism, “either obscene or comical, depending on one’s perspective” (Nichols 224), peaks when at a garden party guests make all sorts of ignorant remarks, such as the question “is it true, is it better?” evoking the stereotype of black men’s sexual and genital superiority, and the absurd claim that “black is in fashion” (0:41:00). These initial portrayals of underlying racial attitudes invoke the assertion made by Bonilla-Silva that while “blacks face discriminatory practices that range from overt and violent to covert and gentle, the latter seem to be prevalent” (25).35 Yet, the viewer soon learns that these absurd incidents of benign, unconscious racism have set them up for a deliberate misdirection and forebode something far more consciously evil and monstrous.

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35 Banaji and Greenwald maintain that a staggering 75 percent of white Americans may be implicitly biased against black Americans because they hold prejudicial beliefs (47).
As the plot thickens and Chris increasingly begins to sense that something is more seriously wrong, in the most absurdist scene of the film, Rose’s mother, Missy, a hypnotherapist, traps Chris’s mind in an unsolicited therapy session, allegedly to help him quit smoking. Missy taps into Chris’s vulnerability—literally, by tapping a tea cup to hypnotize Chris—and retrieves from Chris’s subconscious a childhood memory of his mother’s death. Chris’s mother was mortally injured in a car accident and, several hours later still undiscovered, died. As time passed, Chris, who was at home watching tv at the time, became increasingly paralyzed by fear, which has resulted in his adult self harvesting a “perpetual guilt about his inability to overcome his emotional paralysis” (226). Missy exploits this guilt and casts Chris into “the sunken place,” which Peele describes as “a metaphor for [Chris’s] inaction” (qtd. in Zinoman (n.p), but more than that, may be regarded as a metaphor for the “subconscious prison borne of toxic white liberalism” that blacks experience in the face of “benign” racism (Yamato n.p.). The sunken place (see Figure 14) is depicted as a massive, cold black void in which Chris slowly sinks deeper and deeper, as the image of Missy in her comfortable, warm study transforms into the television screen in front of which

![Figure 14: The sunken place. Still from Get Out, directed by Jordan Peele, performances by Daniel Kaluuya, Allison Williams, Catherine Keener, and Bradley Whitford, Monkeypaw Productions, 2018.](Image)
Chris sat paralyzed in fear as a child. From the moment Chris is plunged into the sunken place, his body begins to escape his control and the fight to “get out”—as his friend Rod, a Transportation Security Administration (TSA) officer, has repeatedly warned him to do—becomes more difficult. The absurdity of the scene epitomizes Peele’s vision of the film as acknowledgment of the “neglect and inaction in the face of the real race monster” (Peele qtd. in Zinoman n.p.)—here depicted as the liberal, supposedly non-racist Missy, whose game of mind control allows her to possess Chris’s body.

The absurdist incongruity of the narrative climaxes as the liberal elite family of Rose, and Rose herself, are exposed for the “real race monsters” that they are and the absurdist question of “what if whites could actually inhabit, could fully possess black bodies?” becomes explicit. Rose’s family’s cult called “the Order of the Coagula” intend to transplant the mind of one of their own into Chris’s body to prolong life—which the viewer now learns has also been the faith of the lone individual who was abducted in the interlude of the film. In a fashion similar to how blacks have been psychologically controlled and dehumanized throughout slavery and Jim Crow, the sunken place relegates Chris’s actions to what Frantz Fanon has described as “destined for ‘the other,’ (in the guise of the white man), since only the other can enhance his status” (132). Finally being in on the joke—or the horror, depending on one’s perspective—the viewer learns that all the seemingly benign instances of racism against Chris can also be read in a different light: Rose’s “white savior” moment with the police prevented the authorities from linking her to Chris and thus from being able to locate him if he was reported as missing; the remarks about Chris’s body at the garden party were not unconscious stereotyping, but a conscious assessment of Chris’s body for physical possession; and the innocent garden party rather becomes a “human flesh market”—not unlike an eighteenth-century slave auction—in which a particularly absurdist game of bingo decides who will come to possess Chris’s body. Instead of being the tale of the unconscious,
benign racism that the viewer was set up for, the film climaxes into an absurdist incongruity that influences the audience’s interpretative process as the focus of the narrative shifts from benign to evil and from unconscious to deliberate.

The film’s absurdist humorous narrative that daringly casts white liberals as “race monsters” culminates into an unflinching anti-racist pedagogy, exposing the harm that seemingly innocent racism may cause. This film’s ending buttresses this contention, which reads as if taken from the opening page of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (Nichols 233), as it draws attention to the pint-up anger blacks may feel in the face of seemingly benign racism:

… you often doubt if you really exist. You wonder whether you aren’t simply a phantom in other people’s mind. Say, a figure in a nightmare which the sleeper tries with all his might to destroy. It’s when you feel like this that, out of resentment, you begin to bump people back. And, let me confess, you feel that way most of the time. You ache with the need to convince yourself that you do exist in the real world, that you’re a part of all the sound and anguish, and you strike out with your fists, you curse and you swear to make them recognize you. And, alas, it’s seldom successful (3-4).

Ellison’s words foreshadow what awaits Chris: a body controlled by a white man while his latent mind is relegated to passive inaction. The film’s ending begins with Chris finding himself strapped to an armchair to await the transplant of the white man’s brain into his body. In what is perhaps the grandest irony of the film (see Figure 15), Chris manages to break free using cotton from the chair’s upholstery, covering his ears to resist the hypnotizing taps that would cast him back into the sunken place. As Chris escapes the premises and kills Rose and her entire family in the process—in a final bolt of deliberate misdirection—sirens and black and red flashing lights approach, signaling the police coming to arrest the black man who has
murdered a white family. In the original ending of the film, Chris is indeed arrested and put in prison (“Alternate Ending” n.p.), but (fortunately) this ending was replaced by a far bolder one. Chris’s friend Rod has used his TSA training—an agency that, according to Nichols, “appears to employ a disproportionately large percentage of African Americans” and predominantly “labors under public contempt” (234)—to alter himself into a crafty detective and heroically saves the day (“I am T-S-motherfuckin’-A. I can handle shit”). The violence that this heroic, yet horrid ending condones provides for a relief-valve for the anger that blacks may feel in the face of the “benign,” “well-intentioned” white liberals’ treatment of them. Yet, above all, it shows the power of absurdist humor—situated in the structure of the narrative, which is full of deliberate misdirection and offers incongruity-resolution via in the context of new racism—to transform film into a critical, counterhegemonic pedagogy that edifies its audience on the black experience in the face of new racism and its increasingly covert nature.
CONCLUSION

Jordan Peele’s films *Keanu* and *Get Out* provoke a critical reflection on the callous racialization of American life. The films’ idiosyncratic potential for creating a deeper pedagogical register that produces complex character positions and an explicitly anti-racist message, which this chapter has located in the absurdist humorous narrative structure of Peele’s films, render them a provocative and sharp counterhegemonic pedagogical tool in the face of new racism. *Keanu* has been shown to engage with the new racist practice of homogenizing black people’s experiences in the United States and its shameless reduction of the multiplicity of black identities to a single, monolithic one. The film’s careful balancing act between the plausible and the implausible and its provocative juxtapositions of a multiplicity of black masculinities as well as the main characters’ fluent navigation of those identities exemplify how absurdist humor situated in the narrative structure of a cultural text may contribute to the public discussion on race in an edifying way. The underlying message of *Keanu*—that black identities are fluent and come in a multiplicity of forms—provides for an instructive, counterhegemonic example of how to critique the homogeneous treatment of the black experience inherent to new racism.

*Get Out* similarly exemplifies how absurdist humor that can be found in the narrative structure of the film may present a compelling anti-racist argument. The absurdist humor of the film in the form of a narrative that appears to be set in “our” world, but with a single “what if” element of the manifestly absurd (i.e., “what if whites can inhabit, can actually possess black bodies?”) provides for a counterhegemonic pedagogy that is highly critical of new racism and, in particular, its increasingly covert nature. *Get Out* provocatively exemplifies the necessity for the reinscription of race as visual marker in the allegedly post-racial, colorblind United States by transforming seemingly “benign,” unconscious forms of
racism into a frightening racial monster, in the face of which audiences are forced to acknowledge that racism is still very much alive today.
CONCLUSION

Humor is fundamentally about reassessing and reembodying one’s critical position to the subjects and issues that it raises. This thesis has sought to uncover what makes humor so appealing a tool in the struggle for racial equality in the United States and to bring to light what function racial humor may serve in the public discussion on systemic racism at the current historical moment. It set out to answer the following research question: How can racial humor as used in the works and performances of Kara Walker, Dave Chappelle, and Jordan Peele intercede in the negotiation, contestation, and distribution of power to destabilize those conditions that perpetuate racism and sustain social inequality? I approached this research question via the scholarly discipline of public pedagogy and, in particular, applied the ideas of Henry Giroux on “critical public pedagogy” to racial humor. This approach has shown that humor bears the ability to increase and strengthen public audiences’ sociopolitical agency on the account of helping them generate a deeper understanding of the conditions that perpetuate racial inequality and their detrimental effects on society, which may, in turn, stimulate audiences to act upon the critical insights that humor provides.

My close reading analyses of a selection of the works and performances of Walker, Chappelle, and Peele have emphasized how these edifying qualities of racial humor as well as humor’s unique, idiosyncratic potential for approaching contentious subject matter in a persuasive manner render it an exceptionally auspicious tool for contributing to the public discussion on race and racism, particularly in a political climate of new racism in which the discussion on race is deemed outdated (particularly by white Americans), public opinion is strongly polarized, and societal issues are heavily politicized. As productive discourse becomes more challenging and racism becomes increasingly more covert, racial humor may offer a critical, oppositional, and, above all, a pedagogical perspective that challenges
commonsense worldviews that perpetuate racial inequality and discrimination. My close readings have illustrated how humor may function as a disruptive force which produces innovative readings that destabilize racial certainties and emphasize the incongruity between the promise of the lofty ideals of equality, wealth, and prosperity in American culture and the failure of the United States to fulfill those promises, particularly for African Americans. Walker, Chappelle, and Peele render visible the politics of representation and other meaning-making processes that underlie both hegemonic and counterhegemonic discourses that (re)produce racial knowledge, while their racial humor opens up space within public discourse for critical and counterhegemonic narratives that disarticulate the prevalent public pedagogy of new racism. In short, it may be said that racial humor bears the potential to undermine power relations and structures that perpetuate racial inequality and incite racism.

My focus on absurdist humor and the absurdity of the African American condition has illustrated that humor is never just a joke. Rather, humor consists of complex aesthetics and is covered in multiple conceptual layers that each influence the “multiple possible political trajectories” of an image or text (Holm 13). I have emphasized that the formal characteristics of absurdist humor uniquely mirror the absurdity of the African American condition, as black Americans continue to hold out for the fulfillment of the promise of democracy, equality, and prosperity. In the process, it has been shown that Walker, Chappelle, and Peele each provide for a counterhegemonic pedagogy that is critical of new racism via different media in a distinct, idiosyncratic way. Kara Walker, for instance, uses the medium of visual art in the form of silhouette and ink drawing collages to present a circus of absurdity, which culminates into a counterhegemonic narrative via the provocative juxtapositions of grotesque stereotypes and temporal anachronisms to make explicit the continuity between the sin of slavery and the ongoing racialization of American life. Her wacky-mirror-style logic, constructed by placing anachronisms in visual conversation with one another to connect anachronistic people and
events as well as by using rhetorical “what if” games to conjure powerful alternative imaginations, illustrate how absurdist humor in visual art may provoke and provide suggestions for critique and engagement.

Dave Chappelle, on the other hand, has been shown to utilize the medium of sketch comedy to produce a topsy-turvydom of inversions, both of racial categories and the stereotypical patterns of behavior associated with those categories, to question inflexible representations of blackness and to reveal race as social, conditional, and linguistic construct. Chappelle’s absurdist humor of inversion, construed and constructed as much by the narrative technique of sketch comedy as by the medium’s visual aspects, complicates whiteness as the invisible norm and provides for a critical interrogation of new racism and the regressive racial practices that it harbors. Yet, my analysis of Chappelle’s Show has illustrated how the multivalent and duplicitous nature of racial humor—no matter how subversive or liberating the intent—may easily cause it to backfire as well. The discrepancy between intent and reception may result from the ambiguous nature of racial humor and the varying degrees of knowledge with which it is approached by contemporary audiences but may also result from the short nature of comedy sketches. The brevity of comedy sketches, as well as the predominantly static nature of visual art, one might add, limit these media’s potential to frame a subversive or liberatory message.

The feature-length films of Jordan Peele, by contrast, illustrate how absurdity and absurdist humor that is situated in the narrative structure of a cultural text may provide for “a deeper pedagogical register for producing particular narratives, subject positions and ideologies” (Giroux, “Breaking into the Movies” 688-89). Peele’s absurdist humor—which in Keanu is found in a careful balancing act between the plausible and implausible and in Get Out is produced via a single, “what if” element of the manifestly absurd—produces complex character positions and an explicitly anti-racist message that engages with the increasingly
covert nature of new racism, which is exemplified by the homogenizing treatment of the black experience as a single, monolithic one as well as by the self-proclaimed non-racist attitudes of white liberals. The deeper pedagogical registers that Peele’s films provide not only provocatively exemplify the necessity for the reinscription of race as visual marker in the allegedly post-racial, colorblind United States but also illustrate how the medium of film may be more potently pedagogical than any other medium in fostering “critical agents capable of understanding, engaging and transforming those discourses and institutional contexts” that harbor new racist practices (Giroux, “Breaking into the Movies” 688-89).

To be clear, racial humor is no panacea to new racism and absurdist humor does not have the power to subvert entrenched racist attitudes nor can it undo institutional racism. Moreover, the absurdist humor of Walker, Chappelle, and Peele is transmitted to audiences who approach their works with varying degrees of cultural, historical, and political knowledge, which influences strongly how a humorous message may be interpreted. In addition, the audiences that these humorists reach may be limited to those who have already implicitly agreed with their critical, anti-racist ideology—for instance, by visiting an exhibition or by purchasing a performance ticket or film DVD. In such a limited capacity, racial humor can be regarded as “preaching to the choir,” which begs the question as to how much the humorists can still do. However, as I have emphasized in this thesis, Walker, Chappelle, and Peele provide for highly public examples of critical pedagogy as well, as they reach audiences far beyond the primary media in which they produce their works. Social media (e.g., YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, etc.), news media (e.g., newspaper reviews), internet blogs, network television, art forums, and gallery and museum exhibitions, among others, widely circulate and recirculate their critical, humorous works and performances. These spaces provide for “those intersections where people actually live their lives and where meaning is produced, assumed, and contested in the unequal relations of power that construct
the mundane acts of everyday relations,” according to Giroux (“Cultural Politics” 355). While these media environments “are not uniformly a space of activism,” as Sophia McClennen notes (172), and despite the complexities of “competing interpretive communities” (Rossing, “Emancipatory Racial Humor” 627), they nonetheless facilitate extended public discussions and place the works of these humorists in a larger, networked media environment that ensures the reach of their potentially subversive and liberatory messages to audiences large and wide. Indeed, racial humor’s strength may be found in numbers and each person influenced by Walker’s, Chappelle’s, and Peele’s anti-racist ideas adds to that number.

As a final note, it should be pointed out that whereas I have focused on the potential of absurdist humor, in particular, to contribute to the public discussion on race and racism, future research may delve deeper into other forms of racial humor and their idiosyncratic potential for creating a counterhegemonic, anti-racist pedagogy. Some of the preliminary research done for this thesis has implied that parody—for instance, as used in Chappelle’s Show and Key & Peele—may be a fruitful tool for providing audiences with a more nuanced understanding of the underlying ideological registers that perpetuate racial categories such as blackness and whiteness as binary oppositions (Bradbury 79). The African American trope of signifying and its nonreciprocity—as present in the works of Kara Walker, for example—indicated to be a particularly provocative strategy for inviting passive audiences to engage with the production of certain forms of knowledge, particularly in relation to a diverse array of black identities (Mayo 244). The diverse array of black experiences that racial humor engages with provides for another, much-needed direction for future research. This thesis has touched upon concepts such as intersectionality when it discussed black masculinity in Peele’s Keanu, but has predominantly limited its analyses to black experiences relating to only race. The homogenizing effects of new racism which relegate the black experience to a one-dimensional
one signal the need for a more critical approach to how gender, sexuality, religion, class, age, and other factors intersect with race.

Racism as the articulation of power has come in many forms and meanings under distinct historical conditions (Giroux, “Spectacles of Race” 209). The contemporary historical moment characterized by new racism, in which the increasingly covert nature of racial attitudes, practices, and policies may well be the largest impediment to a more equal and more just American society, invites anti-racist stances that are not only highly critical but also deeply provocative and deliberately unsettling of the current social conditions. The works and performances of Walker, Chappelle, and Peele exemplify the power of racial humor to pull audiences out of the post-racial, colorblind here and now, out of the absurdity of the new racism, by letting them experience alternative realities that may, no matter how absurdist the perspective, knock the world quite back into quilter, even if but for a brief moment.
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Walker, Kara. *Sikkema Jenkins and Co. is Compelled to present/The most Astounding and Important Painting show of the fall Art Show viewing season!/Collectors of Fine Art will Flock to see the latest Kara Walker offerings, and what is she offering but the Finest Selection of artworks by an African-American Living Woman Artist this side of the Mississippi. Modest collectors will find her prices reasonable, those of a heartier disposition will recognize Bargains! Scholars will study and debate the Historical Value and Intellectual Merits of Miss Walker’s Diversionary Tactics. Art Historians will wonder whether the work represents a Departure or a Continuum. Students of Color will eye her work suspiciously and exercise their free right to Culturally Annihilate her on social media. Parents will cover the eyes of innocent children. School Teachers will reexamine their art history curricula. Prestigious Academic Societies will withdraw their support, former husbands and former lovers will recoil in abject terror. Critics will shake their heads in bemused silence. Gallery Directors will wring their hands at the sight of throngs of the gallery-curious flooding the pavement outside. The Final President of the United States will visibly wince. Empires will fall,
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