

Fall 11-20-2014

LIMINALITY AND USING COMEDY TO CRITIQUE THE POLITICALLY CORRECT GENERATION

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KEY AND PEELE: LIMINALITY AND USING COMEDY TO CRITIQUE THE
POLITICALLY CORRECT GENERATION

by

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B.S., Southern Illinois University, 2012

A Research Paper
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Master of Arts

Department of Communication Studies
in the Graduate School
Southern Illinois University Carbondale
May 2015

RESEARCH REPORT APPROVAL

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A Research Paper Submitted in Partial

Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Arts
in the field of Speech Communication

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November 17, 2014

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Introduction

Comedy is subjective. It can be many things to many people. The way that we laugh is not standard, and the things that we laugh at cannot be fixed. It is as ever changing as our identity, being informed from one experience to another, changing the way that we look at life and laugh at life. When someone tells a joke, or puts on a comedy sketch, there can never be a set formula for getting someone to laugh. This is because there is no universal thing that causes laughter. Our sense of comedy, and of self, are so closely intertwined that many people can become easily offended if you do not laugh at something that others are laughing at. In our national political climate, many people are easily offended by something that is meant to be funny. Comedy is changing. Ten years ago many people were capable of saying and doing things in the name of comedy that now seem brash or crude to us; we have developed a sense of awareness of ourselves, and the people around us. No longer do we simply speak without acknowledging who or what is the butt of our joke. We are a culture infused with a sense of political correctness, much more aware of people's feelings.

This research report will consider the popular television show *Key and Peele*, and how it operates under the confines of political correctness. I want to consider how political correctness is occurring in the United States by observing *Key and Peele*, a hit comedy series that plays on Comedy Central. By looking at and observing the ways in which *Key and Peele* utilize comedy in the current climate and the ways that they have been successful in creating an enormous fan base, I hope to determine that political correctness can actually have the opposite of its intended effect on our culture. Also, I want to take a deeper look at *Key and Peele*, and how their bi-racial identities help to cause a kind of disruption in the ways that we, as viewers of the show, perceive race and whiteness. An online posting by *Comedy Central* on Sep 12th, 2012 they said, "Keegan-

Michael Key and Jordan Peele are the stars of "*Key & Peele*," an original new sketch-comedy show that examines life in a provocative and irreverent way, through a combination of filmed sketches and live stage segments." Their provocations depend, to a large extent, in their performances that trouble interracial and politically correct boundaries. In this paper I ask about the relationship between the biracial performers and the subject of political correctness. Could it be that the biracial status presented by Key and Peele allows them to cross taboo areas that a strict political correctness normally prohibits for most people--especially white people? Whether it's satirizing the President, spoofing Nazis, or ordering up some soul food, *Key and Peele* showcases their chemistry, camaraderie and a unique point of view born from their shared background and experiences growing up biracial in a not quite post-racial world. What does it mean to be biracial in a not quite post-racial world, and what can they accomplish through these identities? I am going to look at how Key and Peele's sketch comedy show reveals my whiteness through an analysis of some of their sketches. Last, I will ask whether or not Key and Peele's performance is transgressing normative black stereotypes, or just reifying them.

Political Correctness

Political correctness has been looked at in many different ways in the recent century, and it is hard to fasten it down to any one particular genesis. It is remarkably hard to trace because of the ways that both conservative and liberal people bend the words to a particular meaning. Most conservatives use it as a way to bolster their beliefs, while liberals use it as a way to show the hypocrisy of the conservative beliefs, and as a way to redefine language in society. The first recorded use of the term in the typical modern sense is stated in William Safire's, *Safire's Political Dictionary* by Tony Cade in the 1970 anthology, *The Black Woman*, where she wrote "A man cannot be politically correct and a chauvinist too" (556). Since then it has been taken in

so many different directions that is hard to completely narrow down where its come from, or even what it is trying to accomplish.

First, what exactly is political correctness? It is described in *Rethinking Political Correctness* by Robin J. Ely as:

Unspoken canons or propriety [that] govern behavior in cross-cultural interactions—that is, interactions among different races, genders, religions, and other potentially charged social identity groups. We embrace the commitment to equity that underlies political correctness, and we applaud the shifts in norms wrought by that commitment. We are troubled, however, by the barriers that political correctness can pose to developing constructive, engaged, relationships at work. In cultures regulated by political correctness, people feel judged and fear being blamed. They worry about how others view them as representatives of their social identity groups. They feel inhibited and afraid to address even the most banal issues directly. People draw private conclusions; Resentments build, relationships fray, and performance suffers (Ely 2).

We also see it defined within political economy and political correctness by Arye L. Hillman, where He states:

The criterion which I propose for political correctness is educational. We should accept as politically correct a position or proposition which conforms to the norms of behavior and conceptual thinking which a society wishes to designate as exemplary for its young. This leaves open the possibility that, beyond the education of the young, those who so wish can view political correctness as an intellectually unworthy restriction on open intellectual academic debate. A broader disdain for political correctness in intellectual discourse need not contradict the position that societies should be permitted to choose

fundamental moral and ethical norms as the basis of a desirable education of their young, (Hillman 220).

Also, Glenn C. Loury, from Boston University gives us a working origin and definition of political correctness within his article, *Self-Censorship in Public Discourse*, where he says, political correctness is an important theme in the raging “culture war” that has replaced the struggle over communism as the primary locus of partisan conflict in American intellectual life. Starting on the campuses—over issues like abortion, and gay rights—the PC debate has spread into newsrooms, movie studios, and even the halls of Congress. Critics, mainly on the right, claim that only the “correct” views on these and other sensitive issues can be expressed—on campus, in print, on film, or in electoral politics—without evoking extreme, stifling reaction from activists seeking to make their opinions into an enforced orthodoxy. They cite a litany of woes about how, in venues where the left is most powerful, those expressing even mildly divergent views are treated poorly. In response, liberals call these charges overblown and insist that their efforts to hold people accountable for what they say and write are justified by legitimate moral concerns (Loury 429).

I am using Political Correctness within my analysis in a similar way as all three of these scholars. I see Political Correctness as the unspoken canon within discourse that seeks to confine and limit the kinds of discussions we are capable of having, by making us fear that we have said something that crosses too far over the imaginary boundary that exists to make more correct the kind of language that we use.

Due to the ambiguity of the words “political correctness,” it is at work in many facets. As a stand-up comedian I can tell you first-hand that there is a war going on in the U.S. right now over what is funny. Many professional comedians, who have done comedy all of their lives, are

beginning to see a shift in the way that people view ‘funny’. Mostly, the shift is due to the hegemonic nature of political correctness, and how it is becoming more prevalent in the U.S. It requests that we only say and speak about things as long as they exist within the limitations of ‘things’ we are allowed to speak about. Comedy seeks to subvert this notion, and says that everything is necessary to talk about in order to create any real and meaningful dialogue. Essentially, we can’t change what we don’t know is wrong. And in order to know what’s wrong, sometimes we need to be offended, or have our ideologies challenged.

Jordan Peele and Keegan Michael Key were featured on the cover of *Time* magazine on March 24th, 2014. They explain their approach to comedy:

Would you make fun of a burn victim? Well we did. Sort of... We’re comics. In the most recent season of our TV show a traditional stand-up comedian professes that he is “going to get everybody” in his set... That’s the phrase isn’t it, when a critic wants to praise a comedian for the fearless nature of his or her comedy? That he or she “gets everybody”? That “nobody is safe” (2014).

This quote seems to indicate that comedy is much more than targeting a victim. In some ways it is the particular focus that legitimizes a group. The subject goes from, “you can’t talk about that to talk about it,” and finally enters into relational communication, or the communication where conversations are most meaningful. The subtitle of the *Time* article, “Make Fun Of Everything,” reads, “When did America get so politically correct? It’s when we refuse to mock a group that we truly act like bullies” (2014).

When Key makes fun of a gay burn victim who is disabled, and can only speak through the help of a throat microphone he pushes the limits. Essentially, what Key and Peele are asking is, “At what point is a subject too vulnerable, too risky, and too wrong to talk about?” They

answer simply that there is no line, and, furthermore, if a line does exist, that we should question its purpose. Again quoting the *Time* article Key and Peele say:

Today it seems that we live in a world of extremes. On one end of the spectrum we have Internet trolls looking for opportunities to dole out cruelty with impunity. But in the mainstream culture, it often seems we're drowning in a sea of political correctness...somewhere along the line we've forgotten the true purpose of humor: to help people cope with fears and horrors of the world, (31 Key, Peele).

When looking at Key and Peele's understanding of political correctness, we see that they are undertaking comedy as a means of breaking down barriers. These barriers, that we can't speak ill of someone in a tragic position, or of tragedy itself, actually crimp our abilities to speak openly as a society, and actually perpetuate the foundational issues that exist because of our distaste for talking about them. political correctness becomes less inhibiting, and less ambiguous when we give it borders, and frame its identity. Without doing this, we stifle the progress of our culture, and inhibit the meaningful discussions necessary for helping us to coexist in further meaningful ways, and relationships. So, where I defined political correctness as the unspoken canon within discourse that seeks to confine and limit the kinds of discussions we are capable of having by making us fear that we have said something that crosses too far over an imaginary boundary that exists to make more correct our language choices, we see that Key and Peele's comedy tries to breakdown that imaginary boundary by exposing the detriment of having the line, and the negative effect it has on our culture.

Background

Key and Peele is a comedy sketch show that airs on *Comedy Central* weekly starring Jordan Peele, and Keegan-Michael Key. The stars are both biracial, a mix of black and white,

and they use their biracial identities to interrogate some of the stereotypes of white and black performances. After the failure of a few of the comedy shows being launched from *Comedy Central* there was some speculation as to whether or not they were going to be able to achieve success with their show, and part of the reason for this was because race relations had already been covered by Dave Chappelle, who ended his show in 2006 with wide critical acclaim. *Comedy Central* tried to capitalize on Carlos Mencia for a sort of Mexican-American feel to what Chappelle was able to accomplish, but his show tanked after only two unsuccessful seasons. They were both on *MADtv* for five seasons together before they quit in 2010. It was at this point that Key and Peele were approached with an opportunity to write, and star in a new television sketch show not unlike Dave Chappelle's show. Production for the *Key and Peele*, show began in 2011.

When corporate *Comedy Central* turned to Key and Peele, there was much anticipation as to whether the two semi-no name individuals would be able to pull off the kind of comedy they wanted on the scale that they wanted it. They waited to see how the public would accept them. It was in 2012 when the *Key and Peele* show aired that they realized they had made the right decision. Critics have raved about *Key and Peele*, and their wide success. SeriousJest, an online critic who, for IMDB, wrote simply, “[It is the] Best sketch comedy show I have seen since the *Chappelle Show*.” Ebonic Scholar, another *IMDB* critic, said, “Clever and ahead of it's time.” Lastly, Megan Angelo writing for the *New York Times* wrote, “With ‘*Key & Peele*’ now in its second season, they have created a sketch show that sends up race, class and culture while holding the attention of a young, diverse demographic.”

Another important fact about Keegan-Michael Key and Jordan Peele is that both of them are biracial. There is something about their ability to perform across racial boundaries, due to

their biracial identities, that gives them the opportunity to go further and to do more with sketch comedy, capturing more attention in the U.S. entertainment industry. Key and Peele perform a myriad of racial roles from Mexican-American and Middle-Eastern to stereotypical black and white. Not only do they perform all of these identities but also they succeed in a way that many audiences find inoffensive. Why is this, and what is it about their identities that allows them the ability to step beyond the typical racial identification that most other bodies receive? On one hand, it is the fact that they are neither black nor white. This holds huge implications in the way that their comedy is perceived by all three of the categories they represent; black, white, and biracial. They have the ability to claim any one part of their identities in a safe way, which many other racial identities do not. They do not seek to parody white or black by becoming white and black, but instead legitimately are white and black when they perform the two opposite identities. When I, who identifies as white, see Key and Peele pointing out the absurdities of the white race, I do not see black performing white, but instead something much more intricate. I see a race without boundaries performing a solid state of racially existing. This means that I do not find Key and Peele to be offending the racial boundaries that ambiguously exist in a comedian's portrayal of race. They come off much less threatening, because their race exists in a place that is partly my own. They can claim a piece of who I am and, therefore, exist in a similar racial space as I do. In the same way, they can claim black and exist in a space that no white person can go to. It is the uniqueness of their identities that allows them to cross racial boundaries and exist in the between place that does the most work and affords the opportunity for reconciliation between the monoracial identities.

Audiencing

My first experience of watching Keegan Michael Key and Jordan Peele was that I found them wildly hilarious. I remember them from when they were on *MADtv*, specifically Keegan-Michael Key. There was a bit that he did where he played a high-school P.E. teacher at a school meeting in the gymnasium. The principal of the high-school would get up and say a few words about the motivational speaker that he had brought in, and all the while Key was sitting on stage with the rest of the teachers distracting the student's attention from the principal speaking. As I recall, he would get up out of his chair and make threatening gestures to the students and say in a belligerent voice, "Carlson! I see you. Let go of Mr. Jameson. I swear, if you don't let go I am going to come out there, and I am going to break your neck! I am going to snap it clean off your shoulders!" Key's voice would squeal into a high pitch tone as he made these threats, and I remember laughing uncontrollably at the character that he was playing. There was something about the way he was able to achieve over-the-top humor, without being annoying or chaotic. He rode the perfect line of performance. From the age of fourteen, I liked Keegan-Michael Key. I first learned about Jordan Peele when *Key and Peele* came out in 2012, and I saw the very first Key and Peele sketch entitled, "*Key and Peele: Auction Block.*" The way that they both succeed and seem to give all of their talent and energy in nearly every performance they do has been enough to endear me as a long-term fan.

Jordan Peele is shorter, bigger, and darker than Keegan-Michael Key. Key stands at 6'3" with a slender build. When they stand next to one another their physical attributes seem to compliment one another in an amazing way. Peele said on Conan's late night talk show, "Have you ever seen the giant sharks that have the little parasite fish that suck onto them? Key is the shark, and I am the fish waiting to eat his leftovers." They accomplish a lot when they are

working together, and in part because of their physical appearance including their biracial identities. In order to address the complex biracial nature of the Key and Peele show, I will draw on the concept of liminality.

Victor Turner's discussion of liminality provides a frame for considering the performances of Key and Peele: Turner states:

Liminality, or of liminal personae (threshold people) are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elide or slip through the network of classification that normally locate states and positions in cultural space. Liminal people are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. As such, their ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed by a rich variety of symbols in the many societies that ritualize social and cultural traditions (89-90).

Turner's idea of liminality for a ritual subject is that when we are in an in-between place, the "betwixt and between", we have a better chance of coming out of the experience with something known as *communitas*, or the idea of community. We are bonded, and can better understand one another when we have been separated, left alone for a time on our own, and then brought back in and reintegrated with the people around us. Turner states "Rituals...provide structure and continuity to our lives. They are a means of ordering the world to fit our perception. We look to them [rituals] as fixed points from which we measure the rest of our experience," (Turner,87).

So then speaking of the *Key and Peele* show as a kind of ritual, we find ourselves often separated. How are we set apart and then rebonded? What is the kind of *communitas* that is emerging as a result of the work that they are doing on Wednesday nights at 9:30 when their new shows air? Identity is something that is learned through the process of experiences.

Key and Peele's show is a kind of liminal ritual for me. I am white, and I identify as white, but more importantly I wear my whiteness in a way that is unquestionable. So because of this, and because I was raised in a very white rural community, I do not have a deep experience with black culture. I grew up in a town with over ninety-nine percent Caucasian people. The other categories were a mixture of African-American, Asian, and Mexican-Americans. Because of this I knew very little of other races, of their cultures. My idea of black culture/identity came from many mediated stereotypes, and from the occasional track meet where we ran against a town from far away that had black team members. My experience with black people was, and in some ways continues to be, very narrow and limited. I believe that *Key and Peele* was, and is, a kind of liminal ritual for me. When I watch the show, something strange happens. All of their episodes start with them coming out to address the audience in a stand-up routine manner. They always set up the show, and the kinds of things you are going to be seeing within the sketches. This part of the show is the separation for me. Another form of separation occurs later when the actual sketch begins, but in their opening dialogue I am taken away from what I know, and from what I am 'comfortable with' or used to. This is due to the way that they command their biracial identities on stage. They often directly discuss race issues, sometimes even point out members of their live audience.

The obvious difference between the ways that Key and Peele interact to the way that I speak and interact with people jars me from my previous idea of how comedy should happen, and how sketch shows should begin. I might be more comfortable, and taken into less of a liminal space by a Jerry Seinfeld episode where he is talking about day-to-day nonsense. Seinfeld himself said that his show was about nothing, and everything at the same time. It was an opportunity to remark on all of the things that we see, and think absurd, but never think further

into. Most of Seinfeld's shows are witty, and cause me to think, but they never makes me uncomfortable of my race, and therefore do not put me in a place of liminality. When Key and Peele start an episode they talk about black men being unable to come to terms with the fact that they aren't as black as they think they are, and that they are performing black identity in order to get credit from one another. In this space I am taken out of my comfort zone, and led into a place where I do not quite have a foothold. In this space I don't know what Key and Peele are going to say or do next. In this space I undergo much of the learning that is necessary for me to reconcile some of the systemic racism into my beliefs and understanding and fostered by the racist cultural identity of my hometown.

Analysis Segment 1

When the sketch begins a second kind of separation takes place. During this part of a typical *Key and Peele* show, I don't know what to grasp in order to get a handle on the nuances of the scene. Take for example the first sketch that I ever saw by Key and Peele, *Slave Auction*. We are taken in the first frame to what seems to be a plantation slave auction in 1848 Georgia. There is a big white man, pot-bellied and sure, asking for the other gentleman to gather around. If one has any sense of whiteness, or of one's own whiteness, one is immediately unsure of what is about to happen in the sketch, and knows it can't be good due to the caricatures of the stereotypical southern white racist men. I didn't know if there was going to be a whipping or some other dangerous ground, but was sure that whatever was coming was not good because it implicated my body. Through this process of fearing that I might be implicated I was separated from my comfort zone, and from the normative 'white' narrative.

The man then states that it is a beautiful and blessed day for an auction. So now, not only is he implicating whiteness, but by saying 'blessed' he is also implicating Christianity, which just

so happens to be the religion that I practice. Keep in mind that this was my first experience with Key and Peele, and it was starting comfortably. That's the point. They don't aim for comfort. In an interview where Jordan Peele went to his hometown high school of Calhoun Georgia, he stated, "We believe that comedy is a form of truth. If you are hitting on someone's funny bone, you are exposing something that is engrained in them, and revealing something that needs to come out, (Jordan Peele '97 Returns to Calhoun 2013). Comedy is at work when there is thinking behind the laughing, and changing behind the thinking.

In the next scene we find Key and Peele stepping up onto the auction block, with another black man who is much stronger and fiercer looking than the two of them. Under their breaths you can hear Key muttering, "Let them put that whip down and see what happens though." Peele responds, "Straight up." I can't explain what this very initial phrase does to my white body. There is a myriad of directions and connotations that I am connecting, but mostly I am drawn in, and separated from who I was before. I am taken betwixt and between. I am in the liminal space. I am becoming. Then Peele says to Key, "I don't care what plantation I end up on, I am straight staging a revolt up in this mother fu*ker." Key responds, "Hells yeah." The fact that they are using modern vernacular to portray 1848 slaves is alarming. In its essence it's a comment on how different their own bodies have become, or are becoming, from the very bodies put in the space and place that they are portraying. It causes us to question exactly how Key and Peele are capable of making such a serious issue funny. This is where their work breaks down the boundaries of a political correctness that would silence voices that violate the social taboo of making fun of a serious subject- slavery.

Then the sketch picks up the action. The portly fellow announces to his bidder, "We will start with lot A," which is the black man who is not Key and Peele. Immediately, white

'gentlemen' in the audience begin bidding. "Three dollars! Four! Five dollars!" This moment is cringe-worthy. On a base level you are watching a black individual getting sold. Not just sold though, but sold to a white body. We are reminded of the not so distant past where white meant you could own, and black meant you were to be owned. Quickly the big guy yells, "Going once, going twice, sold to the gentleman in the black hat." At this point we are given a cut shot of Key and Peele's reaction, and for just a moment we see a flash of insecurity as they see the other black man step down from the auction block and into the grass. Then Peele says, "I mean...good. I am glad I didn't get sold, because I don't want to be owned by another human being." Key responds, "You got that right. If I get sold today they better just go ahead and put a bullet in me or else I am going to go buck wild on the whole operation!" Now, their voices seem less sincere, and there is some change looming. The white bodies and black bodies that are witnessing the sketch aren't taking themselves too seriously. This sketch is meant to be funny.

Next up comes another black man, but he is absolutely hulking. He is a head taller than both Key and Peele, and looks to be much stronger. However, it is not the big black man that steals the focus of the scene, it is Peele and Key located to his left standing as straight as they can, and Key is even striking a flexing pose. At this point it is obvious that they are competing, and that want to be bought. They desire that which our society has villainized, and put behind us like a plague. This is an untold narrative from the black bodies of the past, and one that is absolutely ludicrous, but they are doing it. Quickly, the 'gentlemen' in the audience begin spouting out bids, without even waiting. "Seven, Eight, Nine dollars!" "Nine dollars going once, twice, sold!" Key and Peele both exhale, and their postures relax, obviously frustrated, and then they begin to console one another saying, "I mean you have to buy that guy." Peele responds, "It's a no brainer." Key says, "I mean, he a massive individual." Peele says, "He's huge." Then

Key says something that absolutely jars me, and my whiteness. He says, “Even I would buy that dude.” Next, the giant man is replaced with another black man who is a foot shorter than either Key or Peele, and you can hear them whispering to one another congratulations. They know that one of them is going to get bought and they tell each other to keep their heads up here in a second when they expect to be bought. Immediately a man offers five dollars for the tiny black man, and the auctioneer yells “Sold,” and the scene is followed by an eerie quiet. Neither Key nor Peele can believe what just happened and they say, “I mean, at some point you have to wonder if these guys even know what they are looking for,” and then Key responds, “I mean at this rate I think they are just choosing lot A. Can a brother get on lot A already?” Then an even smaller black man takes to lot A. As before he is immediately sold, and this time Key and Peele have had enough. They begin to comment on how small the lot A, black man was: “I mean come on! He’s not even tall enough to pick a cotton plant! Look at him; he’s like this tall” (gestures to his hip). Then Key sees the small black man is looking angry, and he says, “I mean, no offense brother.” The small man says, “Offense taken.” Then the Auctioneer yells out, “Enough! I will not have my auctions reputation tainted selling superficial, bigoted slaves.” Key cannot believe what he has heard. He mouths the word superficial to himself and says, “Did he just say that?” Then the portly man yells, “That’s enough, auction’s over.” Quickly Key and Peele both start yelling out over the dispersing crowd, “No! The auction’s not over! I am strong, I know I don’t look it, but I can sleep in a bucket.” “I am smart, and fast, and I know magic!” Then Peele yells out, “My worst quality is that I am a perfectionist!”

Summary of Analysis

At first take, watching this video can be shocking. So much is happening and so much is being done that it is hard to find a particular place to stand. Sure, it is funny, but also I can’t help

but wonder in my whiteness how it is that they are getting away with a sketch so profoundly opposite of the slave narrative. ‘Slaves wanting to be bought’ is so far off the register for me that it causes me to think seriously, and deeply. It is not lost on Key and Peele that their sketches are unearthing entrenched ideas and putting them up as a spectacle. Peele says in an interview he did in Calhoun, “My favorite example of ‘edgy’ in our comedy is when we do the Auction Block sketch, and everyone starts off saying, ‘See this is already... this is dangerous.’ And they haven’t given it a chance, because the sketch isn’t really about race. It’s more about vanity, and very human insecurity.” I exist in the betwixt and between as I watch this Key and Peele sketch. I don’t know what to make of what I have just seen. Then, I find myself being reintegrated with Key and Peele, and the live audience. The audience laughs, and Key and Peele comment on the sketch that just played, and then on the sketch that is coming up, but for just a moment I am there with them, and the ritual of the sketch comedy show has gone full motion. It is in this moment that I begin to see that race is not something as frightening as I thought. To be a part of race, and to exist in the wake of terrible tragedy is not the point. It is what we do now, in the midst of a not so post-race nation that I am given the tools to speak back to the kinds of racisms that I see, and encounter. Key and Peele’s show takes me through the process of exposing things I think about black people. It allows me to have a script to speak aloud some of the dangerous and unique texts that black bodies encounter daily.

Transgression in Key and Peele

Are Key and Peele successfully transgressive, or do they simply reify racial stereotypes?

Keegan-Michael Key said on the Conan show:

Sometimes we make a sketch, and there is no point to it. We are guilty as artists of enjoying ourselves every once in a while and just making fun of, or poking fun at the

U.S. idea of race. It is funny to us. But sometimes this gets us into trouble. [Key smiles at Peele who is sitting next to him] For example, if we talk to someone from the old black generation, we have to be careful. They like to encourage us that we are doing good work, but there is always an element of ‘we need to watch what we are doing.’ They will say something like, “You guys are really funny together. You’re doing really good work.’ Then they will pause and say, ‘Just remember you are standing on the black shoulders of many men and women, who came before you,’ and it is daunting (Conan, 2012)

This dialogue shows that they are well aware of the kinds of conversations that are taking place in their sketches, and also the ramifications of the narratives that take place as a result of them poking fun at race. They know who have gone before them, and they do not take for granted what it means to be able to artistically, and comedically express oneself in a nation where not long ago many were suffering for the right to speak out into the zeitgeist at all. What kind of conversation are Key and Peele having with us as an audience, though? Key and Peele are both biracial and as a result they are able to accomplish something in their performances that many others can’t accomplish. They perform across race and across ethnicity constantly. Their bodies are not bound by white and black. They have the ability to perform different identities, and in so doing they raise an awareness of their race, and the racialized bodies that they represent. In their sketch *Das Negros*, they both perform whiteface in a 1920’s Germany where Nazis are raiding nearby homes looking for ‘Jews and negroes’. The joke is that Key and Peele are performing white; and that they don’t want the Nazi to realize that they are black, but the Nazi seems blind to their obvious disguises. There is a level of compromising that they are doing cross racially that allows for them to create conversations between races. They are causing meaningful conversation.

Despite their popularity, Key and Peele have their critics. In a 2012 *Huffington Post* article John S. Wilson writes:

Key & Peele, a sketch comedy show on Comedy Central, is peddling offensive comedy. I watched a variety of clips spanning 5 episodes. Not only were the subjects of their humor not ever any non-black group, but jokes solely focused on either parodying aspects of black culture (think black fraternities or soul food), or, worse, "black pathology," an all-encompassing category for any negative behavior exhibited disproportionately in urban areas for which, apparently, blacks have been genetically predisposed for over 25 years (Wilson, "Key and Peele Are Selling Comedy Blacks Aren't Buying").

Wilson's argument is contrived for a few reasons. He seems to think that Key and Peele's use of stereotypes actually reinforces them. I contend that Key and Peele expose the ridiculousness of the stereotypes in an effort to cause the conversation of "what is ridiculous." Wilson gives the example of the black fraternities and soul food sketches, which in their own right do serve a powerful function of both pointing out the need to fit in within the black community. In these sketches Key and Peele utilize satire to make a claim on the stupidity of the whole concept, not just the particular. Key and Peele are not necessarily satirizing the notion of black fraternities. They are satirizing the branding process, which at its root comes from a bizarre notion. Lonnae O'Neal Parker, a *Washington Post* staff writer writes, "Although doctors warn there can be complications – infection, excessive scarring, designs gone wrong – around the country lots of people get branded. For some black Greek fraternity members (and fewer white ones) it's a long-standing tradition, but experts say it has also become something of a fad" (Parker, 1998). Key and Peele have taken this argument up in *Key & Peele: Fraternity Branding*. The sketch opens with Peele branding Key. They are both acting stirred up, and not quite in control of their actions. The way they are speaking to one another seems to suggest that the branding was

something that had decided to do rather spur of the moment. Also, there is nothing about the branding process they are undergoing that illustrates community, or ritual. They are simply in one of their bedrooms branding. The simplicity of the question suggests that branding is not something necessary. This is important because, according to Parker, it is a conversation the African-American community needs to have. Branding was a signifier of ownership not long ago in our nation's history, so it is ironic when the African-Americans community continue the act themselves. I think Key and Peele have good motives behind the sketch, and that their consideration should cause conversation about the process of branding, or at least that African-Americans will consider the weight of the decision to brand before they go through the process.

Key & Peele: Soul Food is a little bit sillier than most of *Key and Peele's* other sketches. It seems to me no coincidence that John S. Wilson would critique it. His argument is fair. Aren't Key and Peele in the sketch, which boasts two black males becoming competitive over which of them enjoys soul food, or traditional black-culture food, better, just exhibiting a stereotype? Wilson would have us believe so, and that is in partly because he is working through a political correctness lens that doesn't let him credit the satire of Key and Peele's sketches. That they act "black" seems to aggravate him, and I think this clouds his ability to see Key and Peele helping to transgress the stereotype of soul food altogether. The point of the sketch is not black food, it is the essence of black competition, as it almost always is within their sketches. What is the purpose of arguing and fighting over whose roots are blacker? The real issue at hand is not getting laughter out of black stereotypes. Instead, it is why does one black man feel the need to establish legitimacy in front of another. Later Wilson says:

The *Key & Peele* show earned 2.1 million viewers and was recently renewed for a second season. Clearly, it's a success. The brainchild of Keegan-Michael Key and Jordan Peele, the show seeks to deal with issues of race in a fresh and "universal" way that lets the

audience in on the joke. But apparently, when Key and Peele say their comedy is universal what they really mean is that blacks will be the butt of the jokes and others will be the ones universally yucking it up. If that's their thing, that's fine, after all it is their show. But they shouldn't serve audiences horse crap and call it horseradish," (Wilson, 2012).

Again, he seems to be missing the point of satire as a comedic tool. You become that which you want most to make fun of, or point out. Where Wilson seems to think that the show is not fresh and universal, I completely disagree. Blacks are not simply the butt of the jokes within their sketches, and for one to see it that way suggests extreme tunnel vision, and shortsightedness. Towards the end of this quote we actually see Wilson's real feelings come out in the bit about how Key and Peele's comedy is "horse crap".

It is evident that Wilson does not feel Key and Peele are black enough to take on the work that they have. He says in another part in the article, "This isn't to say there isn't a demand for these kinds of jokes. Far from it, there certainly is. But why is that? And more important, why do Key and Peele believe they should be the ones supplying it"(Wilson, 2012). And then later, "Further research shows that there is a "protean identity, in which an individual can change his or her racial identification to suit the needs or appropriateness of the situation -- thus allowing someone to -- choose his or her identity." The biracial individual is essentially a chameleon equipped to change identity to suit a particular purpose at a particular time," (Wilson, 2012). It seems he thinks that because Key and Peele have the ability to choose their racial affiliation, that it does not merit them the ability to perform black culture stereotypes. It's interesting to note as well that Wilson suggests Dave Chapelle as a comedian who has had to strive for universal appeal. I wonder if he's talking about the same Dave Chapelle that left a fifty million dollar offer

because the requirements of his comedy were becoming too specific. Wilson's argument can be summarized by his quote:

“But why should the subject of that humor only reside in black culture? Taking negative stereotypes that have existed for years and regurgitating them in some "universal" packaging that is little more than spoon-fed coonery is neither funny nor courageous; least of all is it achieving a "greater sense" of anything,” (Wilson, 2012).

Wilson is simply missing the genius of Key and Peele's comedic point of view. Are they simply regurgitating “spoon-fed coonery?” It may appear that way to those who are looking to stifle meaningful conversations. Personally, I think if President Barack Obama can publicly endorse the show, it shouldn't be too big of a step for a *Huffington Post* writer to at least consider there may be more to Key and Peele's comedy than what he saw in a few episodes. I believe their comedy does transgress.

The question is, how are they able to perform across race and ethnicity? How are they able to perform stereotypical whiteness, as black-male comedians often do, and how are they able to utilize stereotypes to be able to further the race conversation? I believe their biracialism does not hinder their argument, but, instead, makes their point of view matter more. It helps them dance from point to point, and become a kind of equal opportunity offender. It helps them transgress in ways that particularized bodies cannot. This phenomenon makes *Key and Peele* perfect for continuing the race discussion. An article by Shih, Bonham, and Sanchez find multiple studies that show,

Multiracial individuals are more likely to have a heightened awareness of race as a social construct than monoracial individuals. Study 1 found that multiracial individuals reported subscribing less to the notion that race biologically determines ability. Study 2 found that

monoracial individuals show stereotype activation, whereas multiracial individuals show stereotype inhibition in reaction to race salience. The authors also find that Asian/White and Black/White multiracial individuals were less susceptible to racial stereotypes than monoracial individuals. Whereas monoracial participants showed significant performance changes in reaction to race salience, multiracial individuals did not. Study 4 found that emphasizing the social construction of race buffers individuals from stereotype threat effects” (Shih, Bonham, Sanchez, 1).

So the fact that Keegan Michael Key and Jordan Peele are both biracial affords them both sensitivity and flexibility in their performances.

We can take another sketch that they performed as an example of this. In the sketch titled ‘Phone Call’ Key and Peele play on the performativity of black culture. Key is walking down a city sidewalk when Peele’s character comes up beside him.

Key (In a white dialect)- Because you’re my wife and you love the theatre, and it’s your birthday. Great! Unfortunately the umm, the orchestra is already filled up, but they do have seats that are still left in the uhh, dress circle. (Notices another Black male approaching and voice noticeably changes) So if you wanna’ me and get them the-ater tickets right now, then we can do it right now.

Peele- Sup, Dawg? Nah, I’m bout five minutes away.

Key- Okay, cool! No, they all good singers.

Peele. Yeah, son. Nah, I am tellin’ you I’m bout to cross the street.

Key- Yeah, and that one dude that you love, yeah he gone be in it.

Peele- Nah, come on, man. You know I’m almost there! Alright, cool. Cool.

Key- Alright. Then I'm gunna' pick your ass up at 6:30 then. Yeah, yeah, yeah, the parking is uhh, the parking is free.

Peele (In a white dialect)- Oh my God, Christian! I just almost totally just got mugged right now!

The performance starts with Key saying, "Because you're my wife, and you are beautiful, and it's your birthday." His voice uses educated white dialect as he says this. Then he says, "Oh that's great. Unfortunately, the orchestra is already filled up, but they do have seats that are still available" that Peele walks up beside him. At the sight of seeing the other black male so close to him, Key's voice drops an octave and he begins purposefully cutting his words off, and using a stereotype urban black dialect. Peele, who has just walked up says, "Sup, Dawg? I am about five minutes away. Alright, Son. Yeah, that sounds good to me, I will be waiting there." There is a moment when Key and Peele make eye contact, but then Peele walks across the road, and the final scene is his voice whispering into the phone in a high-pitched "white" dialect, "Oh my gosh, Christian. I seriously almost just got mugged right now." The play here is that Peele was not a tough black man at all, but was actually having to pretend he was tough because he was so intimidated by Key. Also, that Key as a middle-class black man was speaking a standard White dialect, and that he felt he had to switch dialects to pass as black when another black man approached. The fact that he was talking about a very White stereotypical activity caused him to change his behavior.

The irony is that the only reason Key intimidates Peele's character is because he feels he has to perform bravado-masculine black in order to keep his status with a man, the other black man. The statement that the sketch makes to me is that black 'performance' reifies black stereotypes, and perpetuates a particular view of black culture. Key and Peele seem to be making

the statement that although whiteness, and pervasive white-normativity, are at the root of inequality, the inability for people of the black community to see past themselves is also inhibiting their progress. It is a very human argument, and one that is not only made of black culture, but can very well exist successfully as a critical critique of all humans. Why do we care so much what others think of us?

The reason that this particular sketch stands out as transgressive to me is because it accomplishes a cultural critique on the black super-masculine narrative. It says, “We are all acting. Every one of us is performing black to an exaggerated degree.” Their sketch acts out against this norm and questions it asking, why can’t we be the way we are, and why do we have to speak a certain way just because other members of our race get around us. It’s even acknowledged that Key, who is getting theatre tickets for his beautiful wife, becomes less romantic and cruder to her when he becomes ‘real’ black. He even says at one point, “I am going to come pick your ass up here in a second,” where only a moment earlier he was calling her beautiful. This is a transgressive in its essence because it calls into question the norm of what being black means, and why in black performance is keeping reputation so imperative. Peele had this to say at Calhoun about the duo’s comedy, “The thesis of our show is that when you boil everything down, race in and of itself is an absurd notion. That’s the point that we want to make. One day, hopefully in the not so distant future we are all going to be the same color, and then none of this conversation will be important, but until then we have to understand each other better. More than that, though, we have to understand ourselves,” (Jordan Peele ’97 Returns to Calhoun 2013). So when it comes to the question as to whether or not their sketch performances are reifying or transgressing I argue it is quite certainly one-sided in favor of transgressing.

Offensive Speech

I would like to take a look at another sketch where Key and Peele utilize comedy to discuss the political correctness movement. It is called “Offensive Speech.” I have transcribed it from Youtube.com where it was uploaded on November 10th, 2013. The sketch opens with Key and Peele and an unnamed woman sitting in their boss’s office. The white boss has called the three of them into the room to make sure that none of his comedy material for the staff luncheon is in any way racist, sexist, or homophobic. Key is playing a gay man, Peele is playing a proud black man, and the woman is playing an angry feminist. The boss starts by saying, “So please raise your hand and tell me if any of my material is offensive.” Immediately all three of the employees hands go up. The boss says, “Oh, I haven’t really started my speech yet... did you find something offensive?” The woman replies quickly, “The fact that you think I need a man’s permission to raise my hand is insane! I can raise my hand whenever I want to raise my hand because I am a free woman.” Peele says, “So I should just raise my hand like this, like a big ole black power fist, huh? Boss man?” Then, Key says, “Is this what you wanted? A floppy gay hand just floating around in the air? Well here you go. Here’s my floppy gay hand at the end of my limp gay wrist.” So what we see happening here is a deconstruction of how quickly people can become offended if they are looking to be offended. Whether female, gay, or black, the issue does not reside in your identity; it relies in the perception of your identity by others. It doesn’t matter that the boss has called them into the room in confidence that they will help him to be better in his attempts to be understanding of all identities.

The boss immediately begins back tracking trying to save face and says, “No! Jesus, no!” All of the three employees raise their hands again. The boss, exhausted says, “Wow—what?” The woman responds, “Why not Mary, no! Or Rachel, no! Or Bathsheba, no! Why does it have

to be Jesus—a man?” Key responds, “Are we talking about the Jesus who loves everyone for who they are? Or are we talking about the Jesus who doesn’t think people should be able to love who they love?” Then Peele says, “Oh, maybe I should just break out in some gospel song? Screamin’ and hollerin’ and hootin’ awe lawdy, lawdy!” The boss is getting so beat to death by how easily the employees have been offended that he has yet to even come to the place where he can properly learn their expertise. In fact, where the three employees think they are helping their boss realize where he is falling short, they are actually making it more difficult on him to understand what exactly leads to offense in all of their identities. He says, “No—I haven’t even gotten to my speech yet. Can I just do my speech?” Again the employees react offended. The boss finally says, “Whoa,” and raises his hands, palms facing towards them to signify that he is meaning them no harm, and that he isn’t armed. All of the employees blow up at this point, and Peele says “Oh! What’s with the hands, man? I ain’t going to shoot ya’.” Then the woman says, “What are you going to grab my breasts now with those hands?” Key says, “Protect yourself from my gay invasion!” The boss is beside himself at this point. He can hardly believe how the conversation is going, and in an effort to calm down the storm he is causing he says, “Guys—” No sooner does he say this that the woman freaks out, “Oh! Guys! Should I get up and leave?” The boss covers, “I’m sorry, I mean men and women.” Key, playing the gay man, exhales loudly, “Let’s exclude everyone who identifies as something else, because their not people!”

The boss can barely get the meeting controlled. He has tried and tried to facilitate what he thought was dialogue void of any persecution, but found at the end that there was no possible way that his current form of language could facilitate the right kinds of words to not offend. Rather he just pushes the meeting forward and says, “Okay here goes. A China-man, a Pollack, and an Arab walk into a bar.” The three people sitting in the room all beam with smiles. Key

says, “The mother of jokes!” The woman says, “Ching-chong!” in a very racist interpretation of a Chinese person. Finally, Peele says, “You had me at Pollack!” Then all three of the employees lean in closer to the boss to hear the rest of the joke. They are more than happy to engage in derision as long as it is not at their expense.

The reason that this sketch is so poignant to me is because it does something that all good comedy should do. It points out the flaws, and hypocrisies in the way that we react to certain kinds of languages. Essentially, it points out how in different oppressed groups we are taught to react to certain words and jargon that we think we should respond to, while dismissing all of the kinds of languages that may hinder others’ identities. The woman is obviously racist herself, but she is so caught up in the women’s rights movement that she can’t see herself. The same goes for the black man being racist, and the gay man enjoying the joke at the expense of others. How often is our guard sensing for more than just language that afflicts us? This is the true reason that the P.C. movement is often slowing the process in understanding one another by cutting our ability to engage in dialogue about difference.

Conclusion

In this paper I focused on the process of operations in the comedy sketches of *Key and Peele*. I took a look at Turner’s notion of liminality, which he developed in his article, *Liminality and Communitas*, as it applies to a ritual subject, and then examined the phases of liminal spaces as an audience member observing Key and Peele’s show as a kind of ritual. I reflected on the phases that I go through due to my whiteness when I watch the show, and how Key and Peele mark their show as a social commentary. Finally, I asked whether or not Key and Peele’s performance is transgressing normative black stereotypes, or just reifying them. It is my belief that Key and Peele are doing major work for biracial identities, and their work allows many

people to understand ‘other’ bodies through the process of being led through the ritual of their show, and the liminal spaces that arise as a result.

I have found a great respect for Key and Peele and their comedy throughout the research for this paper. The liminal spaces that I revisit as I watch their sketches cause me to think and rethink my performance as a white male. It also invites me into a larger conversation of black culture that I don’t typically feel invited to share in. I know that if the world sought to have the difficult conversations we see in *Key and Peele* there would be fewer misunderstandings in race relations and more laughter as well.

So then, this is how we find ourselves at a stalemate. The problem is that we are limiting what we say in all the ways that actually matter. What if we don’t agree to be offended? What if we aren’t looking for offense at all inside of humor, but rather a truth that we hadn’t realized before? Key and Peele say, “What we strive for—and what we think more people should strive for—is deeper: to make fun of everything... If a humorist makes a conscious decision to exclude a group from derision, isn’t he saying that the members of that group are not capable of self-reflection?” Herein lies the issue. If we specify a group or an identity that isn’t worthy of our critical derision and focus, then we are directly disallowing that identity to learn how to react and adapt to the different criticisms that are occurring. We are not giving the group or identity the opportunity to learn how to construct narratives to distinguish themselves, and their beliefs. A fighter doesn’t know what she or he is capable of until they are tested. In the same way we don’t know much about whom we are until we face conflict. Likewise, the majority narrative continues to dominate while the minority viewpoint is never allowed to speak back. This is what comedy has been allowing for centuries, and this is what the PC movement is seeking to silence.

Later in the *Time* article, Key and Peele note:

Where a lot of people get nervous, however, is when it comes to laughing at other people's culture or perceived weaknesses. That's when we worry that we are being insensitive—that we're being mean. But ask yourself again what's worse: making fun of people or assuming that they're too weak to take it (p. 32).

So there is undoubtedly a line. Smart comedians walk it narrowly avoiding the pitfalls of falling into offending. The closer the comedian can get to the line, the further they can push the discussion on the topic. But if they cross the line they risk eliminating the opportunity for any dialogue at all.

Another issue with fearing being insensitive is that the 'fear' is going to limit the creativity, and extent, of the subject matter being discussed. What if the easiest thing to say, and the least offensive thing to say, isn't what needs to be said? What if there is something much deeper, and some statement that hits much closer to home, and does more work? When the burn victim sketch is playing, and Key is making fun of all of the people in the audience, it is clear that each person has a clear desire to be made fun of. Everyone in the room wants the comic to say something about their look, or their clothes, or their faces. The reason the burn victim desires the razzing so sincerely is because he wants to know how he connects with the rest of the audience. This is because through comedy we are allowed to see ourselves in a different light. It is not all too different from a mirror that reflects back and shows us what other people see. It's the same way as when we look into a mirror as we are growing up, and for the first time we notice that we are beginning to look different. Whether it is definition in our body shape, or how much you notice we are beginning to look Dad, or Mom, all of us do it. We all want to see where we have come from, and where we are going, how our identities are changing, and how others perceive our identity to be changing. What do we look like to everyone around us? What would

we say if we knew what everyone else thought? Comedy is a tool, that allows us into that room with the mirror. More over, comedy is the mirror. In the sketch, the burn victim wants the attention. He wants to be noticed. He wants to be razed the same as everyone else. Why? Possibly because the one thing that draws us all together are our differences; and not so much just our differences, but also the acknowledgment from other people that our differences do exist, and that in some way we are unique for it. Not so unique that we are shamed, as this would hinge on the offense, but just unique enough to feel like we are marking a space in time. We are worth it.

Key and Peele end the *Time* article by stating, “The day we can make fun of a black lesbian dwarf with Down syndrome, and someone who isn’t a black lesbian dwarf with Down syndrome is able to laugh—instead of trying to protect the dwarf’s feelings—we can retire.”

Comedy is subjective. It can be many things to many people. The way that we laugh is not standard, and the things that we laugh at cannot be fixed. It is as ever changing as our identity, being informed from one experience to another, changing the way that we look at life and laugh at life. As such, I think as a society we should allow for a place for comedians to do rhetorical work. Their work is much needed in a time where the imaginary boundaries of political correctness seek to choke out the ‘extra’ language that doesn’t belong in our cultural zeitgeist. Key and Peele are some of the few that are tackling difficult subjects, and continuing to push conversation forth in a way that benefits race-related discussion, and allows for a societal future that is brighter than if we choose the recourse, or to criticize any form of language that isn’t kind enough, or ‘right’ enough.

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