In the Wake of “The Nigger Pixie”
Dave Chappelle and the Politics of Crossover Comedy

Bambi Haggins

When Dave Chappelle left behind his incredibly successful Comedy Central series (and a $50 million paycheck) for his South African walkabout, it was in the wake of the “Nigger Pixie,” a character created and played by Chappelle. The aforementioned pixie, clad in the costuming of minstrelsy (blackface, white lips and gloves, red vest and a Pullman Porter’s cap), was the centerpiece of a controversial sketch screened as part of the “Lost Episodes” of Chappelle’s Show in which culturally and racially specific devils exhorted individuals to react “naturally” and perform the stereotypical tropes of racialized masculinity.¹ When Chappelle greeted journalists before takes, he apologized for his appearance, slyly adding, “Bet you never met a real live coon.”² During the initial part of the taping, the comic explained, “The premise of the sketch was that every race had this...pixie, this racial complex... The reason I chose blackface... was [because] this was going to be the visual personification of the ‘N’ word.”³ Chappelle later described the experience of doing the sketch in terms that differed substantially from his pre-taping impressions. Loud and long laughter from one of the white members of the crew gave the comic a moment of pause. Chappelle later stated that this reception of the Nigger Pixie was the beginning of the end: “I felt like it had gotten me in touch with my inner ‘coon.’... When that guy laughed, I felt like, man, they got me.”⁴ On one hand, one might argue that the Nigger Pixie sketch is no more transgressive than other provocative comedic fare dealing with stereotypical tropes from the first two seasons. On the other, regardless of whether there was a sliding scale of outrageousness and offensiveness that afforded greater or lesser sociocultural resonance to the historical (or ahistorical)
construction of the pixies, it was Chappelle who questioned whether this use of internalized racism as a part of broad satire was crossing an ideological line. In the wake of the Nigger Pixie, Chappelle acknowledged the possible dangers inherent in comedy that challenges cultural, social, and political sensibilities and questioned whether his comedic discourse—as exemplified in his creation of little specters of racial self-hatred—was becoming progressively more open to [mis]interpretation.

The comedy of Dave Chappelle has always existed at the intersections of multiple comic trajectories in black comedy: the embodiment of de facto crossover. Chappelle's comic voice—in his standup and his series—reflects the dynamic, complex, and conflicted nature of sociopolitical comedic discourse in the post–civil rights moment. Chappelle's Show's consistent engagement with the politics of racial representation was the element that cast the series as both anomaly and model within the niched and narrowcasted televisual milieu of the post-network era. The series, like the comic, enjoys dual credibility through ties to the Afrocentricism of the black hip-hop intelligentsia, as well as the skater/slacker/stoner ethos of suburban life. This cred allows Chappelle to speak for and to Gen X and Gen Y subcultures in both the black and white communities.

As civil-rights-era comic pioneer Dick Gregory stated simply, "When you mention his name among young folks, it's like mentioning Jesus in a Christian church." In industrial, sociocultural, and aesthetic terms, attaining de facto crossover affords the performer a lofty and lucrative space in American entertainment and popular culture—and, as Chappelle discovered, this is a precarious space to occupy. The comic's awareness of both the industrial and cultural cachet that Chappelle's Show had amassed was compounded by the pressure and responsibility that came with that coveted position: it would also eventually make Chappelle question whether his series was exploding stereotypes or merely reinforcing them. In this essay, I explore disquieting questions about the price of de facto crossover for the comic, the industry, and American popular culture at large when those of us in the audience may—or may not—be discerning the politics of racial representation embedded in the satire.

Over the life of the series, the sociopolitical significance of Chappelle's Show becomes clearer as the fragile mixture of biting satire and gratuitous outrageousness becomes muddied. The problematic aspects of this discursive muddiness are exacerbated by the multiple reading positions of the decidedly diverse audience. As a sketch comedy program on a basic cable network (Comedy Central), Chappelle's Show's ability to inspire...
admiration and imitation from frat boys and backpackers (as well as the occasional scholar) raises questions about the nature, the source, and the subject of their laughter. Through the analysis of deliberately sociopolitically provocative sketches in the series, “The Racial Draft,” “Reparations,” and “Black Bush,” as well as the most controversial sample from the Lost Episodes, “The Nigger Pixie,” one can trace the escalation of the comedic stakes: how the power of being a cultural phenomenon complicated and confused the comic’s intentions for the satire and ultimately made even his basic cable refuge untenable. Before examining the products of the honeymoon period at Comedy Central—and subsequent estrangement—a greater understanding of Chappelle’s failure to connect in network (and netlet) programming is required.

The Middle Passage: Chappelle’s Road to De Facto Crossover

Although as early as 1996, when Black Block counterprogramming strategies had taken hold on the netlets (and some enthusiasm still existed for singular black comics on network television), Chappelle had signed a series of development deals with Disney to make sitcoms for Touchstone Television. Only one of the 11 pilots proved to be palatable to either the comic or the networks. The singular “success,” Buddies, was an interracial buddy comedy that had a 13-episode run on ABC. The show treated the professional partnership between the two leads (Chappelle as Dave Carlisle, black buddy; and Christopher Garlin as John Butler, white buddy) as a monumental feat—a victory of the civil rights era. “It was a bad show,” said Chappelle on a 60 Minutes interview. The central problem with this series (and the other 11 pilot attempts) was an inability to find an appropriate vehicle within the 22-minute programming framework to allow the friendly subversiveness of Chappelle’s comic sensibility to make more than a cameo appearance. The comic’s inability to find a “niche” in the age of “niche-marketing” signaled that his comic persona was not ready for sitcom prime time.

By the late 1990s, the changing network/netlet climate made it even more difficult to find an appropriate vehicle for Chappelle’s comic persona. When Chappelle developed a series for FOX television based on his life as an up and coming comic in New York City with Peter Tolan (The Larry Sanders Show and The Job), television success seemed imminent. After all, they were dealing with FOX, not only the home of Married...
With *Children, Martin*, and *The Simpsons*, but the originator of Black Block programming, dysfunctional domcoms, and boundary (and taste)—challenging television fare. Unfortunately for Chappelle, by 1998 FOX had virtually gained network status and was, for the most part, out of the Black Block business. The WB and UPN were still looking toward black comedy programming to open up the “urban” (read: nonwhite) audience. Both broadcasting entities catered to black viewers—seeking to fill a niche not adequately served by the major networks—at least in terms of the sitcom.

With six episodes ordered and the show slated as a midseason replacement in January 1998, negotiations between Chappelle and the network fell apart when FOX executives, seeing the Touchstone-produced sitcom as “too black,” suggested that the lead female character be changed from black to white, in order to “broaden” audience appeal. Chappelle and To- lan walked away; in the case of the comic, he did not do so quietly. Chappelle spent the better part of the next year (and multiple appearances on *Late Night with Conan O’Brien*) venting about FOX’s network practices: “This network built itself on Black viewers . . . [but] tells every Black artist no matter what you do, you need whites to succeed.”10 The FOX debacle, like Margaret Cho’s experience with the network dictating what her Asian American experience should look like, soured Chappelle on both the genre and the networks. In many ways, given the restrictiveness of the genre and the openness and fluidity of Chappelle’s comic persona, the lack of “fit” between the two is not surprising. As Chappelle himself noted, “I tried sitcoms before, and it’s something about the way I’m funny that is not for that venue. People never know the extent of how funny I was. I’d be Urkel. I’d be rich, but I’d be Urkel.”11

When *Chappelle’s Show* found a home on the network that championed a cartoon featuring a misanthropic and pathologically self-centered “big-boned” little boy with a foul mouth (Cartman of *South Park*) and a fake news program whose anchor lampoons the absurdities of domestic and foreign policy with the same ease he interviews movie stars and former and current heads of state (*The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*), it seemed Chappelle had found in a little corner of basic cable the niche that eluded him on network television. As *Chappelle’s Show* cocreator Neal Brennan, stated: “We’re trying to push the genre and make stuff that’s more interesting and personal . . . We went to a place, Comedy Central, that sort of needs us and gave us a lot of freedom. . . . We didn’t get much money, but that was the trade-off—you get control.”12
The series’ contentiousness, as well as its conflicting ideological and comedic impulses, positioned *Chappelle’s Show* as the product of our sociohistorical moment. The program, which the comic described as “hip-hop Masterpiece Theater,” spoke directly to the first decade of the new millennium—an era when duality seems the norm. From its midseason premiere in 2003, *Chappelle’s Show* engaged issues of race, class, ethnicity, and popular culture with irreverence, candor, and a decidedly black sensibility rarely seen in prime-time television comedy.

The duo that brought us *Half Baked* rejuvenated sketch comedy that they described as “cultural rather than political,” infused it with a hip-hop sensibility, and the espoused creative ethos of “dancing like nobody’s watching.”

However, given that the show averaged a viewership of 3.1 million per episode on basic cable, people were watching in droves. While the situation comedy is almost always about containment—within the 22-minute format, within cultural norms, within certainties of narrative closure—sketch comedy always has great potential for transgression and, in this particular post-network era, “edgy” is considered good for business. That is, as long as it’s not “too edgy”—a judgment call that, ironically, in the end, would be more problematic for *Chappelle* than for Comedy Central. Nevertheless, in its consistent engagement with performances of Blackness and Whiteness, *Chappelle’s Show* walked the razor’s edge of provocative comedic sociopolitical discourse.

Just as significantly, I would argue that *Chappelle’s Show’s* de facto crossover appeal facilitated and problematized its unique status as an industrial and cultural phenomenon. The intertextual pleasures of the series (especially those rooted in popular cultural referencing) provide viewers with a degree of cultural cachet as a reward for being “down”—meaning hip to the sociocultural positioning of black language, style, music, and humor embedded in the texts. As with any form of cultural acuity, there are multiple levels of “down-ness.” Insider/outsider, black/white, Boomer/Gen X and Y sensibilities—from these different reading positions, segments of the audience discern cultural traces and treatises produced in these comedies, which, in turn, inform notions of race in contemporary American society. *Chappelle’s Show* told stories inflected by multiple identities designed for multiple forms of identification.

In the process of partaking in all of these moveable cultural feasts, however, the spectatorial palates of all the consumers were not always sensitive enough to discern all the ideological ingredients in the series. But, arguably, such is the nature of the subgenre of sketch comedy, where
catchphrases are often appropriated while context is lost. The liberatory potential of the subgenre of sketch comedy, in general, and Chappelle's Show, in particular, must be seen within the context and constraints of American television. Even on basic cable, the potential to transgress, the pushing of aesthetic and generic boundaries, and the incredibly difficult task of being funny and original take place within and not outside of the industrial constraints of American commercial television. Nevertheless, with the interracial writing team of Chappelle and Brennan at the helm, in its freshman and sophomore seasons, the series thrived on speaking the unspoken and, in so doing, laying bare the absurdities and hypocrisy that often inform “polite” conversations about race relations.

In each season of Chappelle's Show, one can see moments where the mobilization of stereotypes arguably confront and conform to popularly, if silently, held racial stereotypes. Historian and cultural theorist George Lipsitz makes an unequivocal statement about the power and function of race in American society: “Race is a cultural construct, but one with sinister structural causes and consequences. Conscious and deliberate actions have institutionalized group identity in the United States . . . [including] the dissemination of cultural stories.”16 No doubt the way in which specific cultural stories are read can either contribute to or undermine hegemonic notions of race. Few moments of comedy have been positioned more tenaciously on that particular ideological razor's edge than a sketch titled “The Racial Draft” from the premiere episode of the second season.17

The sketch begins with a fairly innocuous lead-in: Chappelle talking about how Americans are “all mixed up . . . genetically” and recounting how he and his wife (who is Asian) argue about “which half of Tiger Woods is hitting the ball so good.” What follows is an astute and absurd “solution” for the ambiguity of racial classifications for multiracial America: a racial draft. With the Monday Night Football theme blasting as the draft's anthem, the sketch replicates the theatricality, media blitz, and fan frenzy of ESPN's coverage of the NFL or NBA draft: team representatives onstage; integrated anchor/expert team of Chappelle, Bill Burr, and Robert Petkoff in the booth; and crowds of partisans in the balcony, separated by racial and ethnic rather than team affiliation. Because the draft was designed to decide once and for all the racial affiliation of the best and brightest of the biracial in sports and entertainment, the (literal) representatives of their races and their choices speak to preconceptions about how race is performed and who is (and is not) considered “down” with their race or ethnicity. When Rondell (Mos Def), the black delegation rep,
takes Tiger Woods as the first pick, the balcony rocks with the cheers of a jubilant black delegation (as the disappointed Asian delegation glares silently at the victors). As Chappelle as Woods approaches the stage (clad in his signature golf gear with putter in hand), the commentators’ assessments praise the logic of the black delegation’s pick: “The richest and most dominant athlete in the world. His father, Black, and his mother, Thai, but that doesn’t matter anymore because now he is officially Black.” Chappelle’s Woods possesses a goofy intensity that, in the end, is almost childlike as he speaks of being relieved to know what he really is. A banner on the bottom of the screen displays “Tiger Woods: 100% Black,” as Woods exclaims (through a prosthetic-enhanced toothy grin), “Goodbye fried rice. Hello fried chicken. I love you, Dad.” Constructed as awkward and decidedly un-down, the No. 1 pick performs a notion of blackness informed by style rather than culture exemplified by Woods’s gleeful (and almost childlike) parting remark: “I’ve always wanted to say this: fer shizzle.”

Each of the ethnic delegations’ representatives and their picks play with stereotypes and current issues associated with their group: the Orthodox Jewish rep chooses singer Lenny Kravitz, whose mother, Roxy Roker (Helen Willis, The Jeffersons) was black, and whose father was her white, Jewish lawyer (“a Jew was her lawyer . . . I couldn’t make that up”); the Latina delegation’s female rep picks Cuban Elián González to prevent the white people from trying to “adopt him—again.” However, the final picks from the white and Asian delegations raise questions about race by affiliation rather than lineage. Chappelle revisits the role of anchorman Chuck Taylor, costumed in bad wig whiteface, and country club slacks and blazer. Jeers from the minority delegations are replaced with incredulous gasps and stunned silence when he picks Colin Powell. Confused banter ensues in the booth as commentator Burr blusters, “What? Colin Powell’s not white; he’s not even an eighth white. He’s 100 percent Black.” Following a stock photo of Colin Powell on screen, with the banner “Whiteness under Review,” Rondell (Mos Def) responds to the whites’ seeming breach of protocol: “We of the Black delegation accept the white delegation’s offer to draft Colin Powell on the condition that they also accept Condolezza Rice as part of the deal.” A shot of Rice and banner declaring that she was “Given away by Blacks” follows, and Taylor, “on behalf of white people everywhere,” accepts the deal.

Finally, just in case the absurdity of the sketch’s premise did not seem clear to all, the Asian delegation makes their pick—perhaps, at least
partially, in response to the loss of Woods: "The Asian delegation chooses the RZA, The GZA, Raekwon, Ghostface Killah, ODB—The Wu-Tang Clan." The RZA and the GZA take the stage and embrace their new racial identity—as does the entire Asian delegation, which chants "Wu-Tang" while throwing the "W" hand sign. The GZA's final line provides the last dollop of outlandishness and cultural misappropriation: "Konnichiwa, bitches." While some insider humor might be lost on the viewer, if they were unfamiliar with the philosophical ties between Wu-Tang Clan and Eastern thought, the division of loyalties with Latino communities over where and with whom Elián should grow up, or the oft-posed questions about how Rice feels about black people (and how black people feel about her), the satirical bite of the sketch remains fundamentally intact.

In this sketch, stereotypes are mobilized in a comic campaign of shock and awe that requires the viewer to recognize the play between the politics and performance of race and racial representation without offering a pedantic or oversimplified moral, which, one might contend, is both a good and a bad thing. On one hand, one might argue that Brennan and Chappelle's steadfast adherence to the notion that theirs was a "personalized" form of comedy takes the ideological edge off of the racially charged nature of the humor in sketches like the "Racial Draft" and, thus, affords a greater degree of discursive freedom. On the other hand, the ideologically idiosyncratic ethos might also serve to facilitate the view that the series neither endeavors nor aspires to engage in more complex (or confrontational) forms of sociocultural critique.

In her analysis of In Living Color, Norma Miriam Schulman reminds us that "appropriating a language of stereotypes in order to undermine the dominant order is an age old device employed by persecuted groups to subvert the status quo." The "Reparations" sketch from the first season of Chappelle's Show presents a litany of stereotypical constructions of blackness, mostly announced by the "white" media. Correspondents from Action News present stories of what happens when black people "get paid." On some level, the pleasures of this particular text are based in (minimally) dual recognition—the laughter impulse rooted in the "that's just wrong" response to constructions of African American taste culture and another more self-reflexive commentary that speaks to playing with "their" (read: outsider) understanding of our (read: insider) cultural foibles. The line is hundreds of people long at the check-cashing liquor store, because as the perky blonde correspondent chirps, "there are no banks in the ghetto because banks hate black people." This is the first of
many reparations-induced news stories explained by a white-faced Chappelle (as anchorman Chuck Taylor), who "makes sense" of the phenomenon for the virtual and literal audience. The finance reporter's announcement of 8,000 new record labels being formed in the last hour, the market implications of Cadillac Escalades and gold going through the roof while stock in watermelon stayed "surprisingly low," and the newly merged world's largest company, FuBu/KFC, leave few stereotypes unstated. The litany of racialized tropes includes the transformation of Al Roker–esque weatherman, Big Al, from one who jovially performs amenability to his "true" self, a "straight up gangsta."

Perhaps the most interesting character is the individual who is said to usurp Bill Gates as the world's richest man, "a Harlem native known simply as 'Tron.'" In matching grey PN Nation oversized basketball jersey and shorts, Chappelle plays Tron as a stylish street hustler with gold ropes hanging on his arms. Tron explains to the white female reporter that his new status was acquired by virtue of "a hot hand at a dice game, baby girl." Tron also taunts Taylor—"I got your girl, Chuck"—just before asking the white female correspondent to give "a lap dance for the world's richest man."22 Offering a cringe-worthy embodiment of stereotypes, the sketch (somewhat) congenially calls the audience out while also acting as a reminder of the issue of reparations for the legacy of slavery that still informs aspects of the African American experience. Amid the deliberately absurd performances of race, assertions are made about being black in urban America (before the national amends are made) that tie black life to that of the underclass, such as banking at check cashing places, "making money work for you" means a dice game, and having to perform whiteness to "make it" in the American mainstream. Along with the blatant lampooning of intolerance and a sort of "I know you've thought this stuff, too" sensibility, the sketch seems to simultaneously espouse the impossibility of "compensating" for centuries of oppression and its legacy, while still not rejecting the idea that amends need to be made.

While there is clearly a sociopolitical resonance to both "The Racial Draft" and "Reparations," "Black Bush" is the most overtly political sketch in the entire series.21 Chappelle introduces the sketch by immediately placing it in a "them versus us" context regarding both perception and policy: "If our president were black, we would not be at war right now—not because a black person wouldn't have done something like that, [but] because America wouldn't let a black person do something like that without asking them a million questions.”
Black Bush (Dave Chappelle) grabs the microphone like an angry M.C.

Thus, the premise of the sketch becomes facetiously educational: making it clear to nonwhites why they wouldn't trust the government either if it was being run by "Black Bush." The broadness of the sketch (including Mos Def as a gangsta George Tenet, who assures the press that his napkin full of actual "yellow cake" proved that Saddam Hussein did, indeed, have weapons of mass destruction) did not undermine the fact that Bush's actions (if not his rhetoric) had more than a touch of "street" sensibility. In a segment of a faux documentary entitled "Path to War," Black Bush performs "presidentially" by discussing the times as being "ripe for regime change." This performance of decorum fades quickly as Black Bush gets "real," with White House counsel Donnell Rawlings at his side providing back up:

**BLACK BUSH**: But, if I can be real.
**RAWLINGS**: Be real, son.
**BLACK BUSH**: Can I be real?
**RAWLINGS**: Be "real" real, son.
**BLACK BUSH**: He tried to kill my father, man. I can't play that shit.
**RAWLINGS**: Say Word. He tried to kill your father.
Jumping up from his seat, Black Bush grabs the boom mike like an angry M.C., and says (in melodramatic outrage), directly to the camera, “The nigger tried to kill my father.” To this Rawlings as his “back up” replies, “Word to everything we love. We’re coming to see y’all.”

The image of Black Bush, in all its “thugly” nuance, and his Pentagon posse getting ready to roll, replicates any number of moments in black gangsta-inflected films—from Menace II Society to Baby Boy—particularly if one substitutes “boy” for “father.” The pleasure added here for the insider is rooted in knowledge of other black cultural productions—like Black Bush naming Afrika Bambaataa and his Universal Zulu Nation as part of the coalition of the willing. However, the central premise that if one examines the actions of the administration, the emotional illogic of the foreign policy that seems more about turf, pride, and “cream” than exporting freedom can be understood without being able to decipher the hip-hop currency in the text. In these sketches, the conflation of race and culture provide at least two viewing positions from which to understand the comedy—but that does not prevent the viewer or this scholar from discerning the direction of the comedic discourse.

When De Facto Crossover Goes Terribly Wrong

When Chappelle provided an assessment of the body of his television work, he seemed acutely aware of the problematic aspects of his show: “I was doing sketches that were funny but socially irresponsible. I felt like I was deliberately being encouraged and I was overwhelmed. It’s like you are cluttered with things and you don’t pay attention to things like your ethics.” His ethical conundrum was resolved when Comedy Central chose to cobble together the sketches taped before Chappelle’s self-imposed exile (including “The Nigger Pixie”) and air them expressly against the wishes of the comic. Thus, the much anticipated and thrice-delayed third season consisted of an abbreviated three-episode run, entitled Chappelle’s Show: The Lost Episodes. And so, we return to the Nigger Pixie. In truth, the day the sketch was completed, the death knell began to sound for Chappelle’s Show and the “Lost Episodes” were simply the wake that not everyone in the family attended. Like a perfect storm, all of the elements—media frenzy (including a “Where’s Dave?” campaign on Comedy Central), the conflicts between Chappelle and Brennan (over the content, as well as the directives, of the comedy) and industrial imperatives (the $50 million
incentive to keep one of the cable network's cash cows on the air) served to feed the groundswell of controversy around the Lost Episodes, in general, and "The Nigger Pixie" sketch, in particular, while diluting the artistic and ideological stride that drove Chappelle away from the series.

In general, the Lost Episodes are unremarkable—along with the narrative bookends for sketches that were sprinkled with jokes riffing on the "Where's Dave?" premise. There was, however, both anticipation and curiosity of the sketch that sent Chappelle on his initial walkabout. When "The Nigger Pixie" sketch was finally introduced, Charlie Murphy's lines (although not his delivery) mimicked the typical Chappelle setup: "Have you ever been in a situation where you may have felt racially insecure? . . . I'm talking about a situation where you actually alter your behavior because you are afraid how someone of a different color might react—that they might possibly think you're living up to a stereotype. Check this out."55

Chappelle is seated in the first-class section of a plane, and a cheerful blonde flight attendant asks him whether he would prefer the fish or chicken. Enter the Nigger Pixie; like a minstrel version of Tinkerbell, the pint-sized sambo howls: "OOOOOOOweeeeee! I just heard the magic word—chicken. Go on ahead and order you a big bucket, nigger, and take a bite . . . Black motherfucker." The pixie follows his tirade with an all-too-junty little tap dance. When Chappelle requests the fish, the pixie admonishes him ("You son of a bitch, you don't want no fish.") and mocks him when his choice of entree is unavailable ("Back in the game, baby . . . you can't beat fate, nigger, eat the chicken."). With a hand crooked to his ear, the pixie waits for a reply to Chappelle's inquiry regarding the preparation of the chicken. When she replies that "it's fried," the pixie's jubilance cannot be contained as his cries of "Hallelujah" are accompanied by a sort of "busting his buttons" dance, intercut with reaction shots of an increasingly uncomfortable-looking Chappelle, whom the pixie calls a "big-lipped bitch." Once the chicken is ordered, the pixie calls for music, and a pickaninny-like accompanist (Mos Def) emerges, dressed in shabby newsboy garb, blackface, black fright wig strumming the banjo and shufflin' around.60 Together the pixie and the pickaninny sing a little "make way for the bird" ditty, which ends with the exclamation, "Chicken's on the deck," the sound of a ship's whistle, and overly ceremonious salutes. There is, then, a sort of unintended poetic justice to the fact that in the sketch, Chappelle walks away from the taunts of the Nigger Pixie.
Chappelle as “Nigger Pixie” from the Lost Episodes DVD.

Other stereotypical specters appear throughout the sketch, such as Chappelle’s Latino Pixie, dressed as a matador with oversized castanets and a voice like an East Los Angeles cholo’s, and his Asian Pixie, clad in quasi-samurai robes, with topknot and facial hair reminiscent of Ming the Merciless performing “yellowface.” One could argue that the virulence of the racist tropes is diluted by the absurd constructions of the particular self-hating specters as they tempt and implore their charges to do the wrong thing. With Donnell Rawlings’s introductory cry, “This is for all the crackers in here,” the White Pixie is introduced. The White Pixie, whose appearance fits Chappelle’s usual version of whiteface, invokes a fear of and disdain for all that is associated with the ethnic and racial other. As he offers faulty advice to his white guy (an ironically uncredited player) about using “their vernacular,” and then reprimands him for dancing with a voluptuous Latina (“For God’s sake, don’t freak her . . . Damn BET”), the White Pixie speaks with a stern and serious voice reminiscent of Ward Cleaver ordering the Beaver to tell the truth or Chappelle’s own Chuck Taylor doing the evening newscast. While this pixie’s construction of whiteness can be located through intertextual referencing, the cultural assumptions about whiteness refract stereotypes about other minority groups (i.e., the “scary” black men and the hypersexualized Latina). As
was true with the Latino and Asian Pixies, the Nigger and White Pixies fail to convince their color-coded wards to perform the stereotypical behaviors. However, only the Nigger Pixie manages to use both the historically rooted and minstrel show-branded assertions and epithets to berate his charge (Chappelle): in other words, the Nigger Pixie is an angry, self-hating pixie.

Playing on the popular and critical buzz associated with the pixie sketch, Comedy Central offered what I would argue was a cynical gesture of “programming responsibility” and PR repair in its “very special” interactive audience moment at the episode’s end. Charlie Murphy and Donnell Rawlings, in direct address to the camera (with a television monitor showing a freeze frame of Chappelle at the beginning of the Nigger Pixie sketch in the background), introduce the audience feedback segment. Both speak with an air of seriousness. Murphy states, “As some of you may know, Dave had some problems with the pixie sketch.” The sequence that follows begins with a close-up of the May 23, 2005, cover of Time with Bill Gates and the X-Box and the headline “Exclusive: Dave Chappelle Speaks.” As the pages of the magazine flip to near its end, quotations are highlighted, enlarged, and superimposed over the entire text of the article focusing on the passage where Chappelle “wonders whether the new season of the show had gone from sending up stereotypes to merely reinforcing them.” In the next frame, Rawlings confesses, “We didn’t know whether we should air the sketch or not, so we asked the audience what they thought about it.”

Accordingly, the responses were generally supportive of the sketch and the decision of Comedy Central (through their agents, Murphy and Rawlings) to play it. The closest thing to criticism that the session yielded was one black male’s assertion that it didn’t really show the white race in the same terms it did the others—that, in the end, whiteness was the “generic race” and was not subject to the powerful fallout that stereotyping can bring. Murphy restated the assertion by saying that the critique “wasn’t hard enough [that it was] the softest one.” The final audience comment, given by a thirty-something black woman, was the one that justified both the existence of the series and the impossibility of controlling (or, even guiding) the reading of the sketch by a diverse audience: “Even if it is being a responsible comedy show, no matter how responsible you are, you are not going to be able to educate everybody in the world so you have to stick to what your true goal is—making people laugh.” (Cheers in the audience abound.) Clearly, this “the people have spoken” moment
was designed to support the cable outlet’s position, and the cachet of the audience’s comments are lessened by the probability that anyone who felt strongly about the concerns expressed by Chappelle regarding the pixie sketch and the third season, would not have been in the audience for the Lost Episodes.  

Politics of Race and Satire in the “Post-Pixie” Era

In Laughing Mad: The Black Comic Persona in Post-Soul America, I describe Chappelle as the “Provocateur in the Promised Land”: one whose comedic discursive imperative is to challenge generic, industrial, and social boundaries (as well as his audience), and I would argue that the comic succeeded—but not without paying an economic, ideological, and psychological price. I often tell my students, many of whom want to be media makers, that once you put your work out there, it ceases to be yours, and the meaning made from your ideas, images, and words is out of your hands.

In Chappelle’s case, his acknowledgment of his powerlessness and his complicity in producing comic discourse that could be—and was—mobilized in myriad unintended ways, eventually made it impossible for him to continue his relationship with Comedy Central. In the wake of the Nigger Pixie, Chappelle’s desire to return to a space where reading the audience, correcting interpretation, clarifying politics, and disavowing misappropriated bits of comedic social discourse led him back to the direct autonomy and intimacy of stand-up. While one might assume a $50 million paycheck could go a long way in terms of assuaging the comic’s anxiety about the broader impact of superficial [mis]readings of his subversive comic texts and how his racial satire was (or was not) being read, this wasn’t enough. Being onstage with the microphone and the audience in the palm of his hand, Chappelle is, once again, “dancing like no one is watching.” The unfortunate thing is that, in comparison with the salad days of 3 million viewers per episode on Comedy Central, for all intents and purposes, no one is watching—and that’s not a good thing.

In the post-network era, everyone in network, netlet, and cable programming is looking for “the next big thing.” Even in the era of the niche and the narrowcast, being labeled “edgy with broad appeal” in the 18–34 demographic is the signifier of a programming Holy Grail. Chappelle’s Show filled that bill—a sort of de facto crossover Camelot of sketch
comedy. The series didn’t last because it couldn’t. The transgressive aspects of the comedic discourse were key to the series’ success—the fire in the belly of the show, if you will, depended on a sort of comic alchemy in order to produce a sketch series that was smart and funny, as well as culturally and intellectually honest. For two brief seasons, Chappelle played with comic discursive fire . . . brilliantly so. But the directives of a commercial medium (and Comedy Central, a minion of Viacom, would most certainly be bound by those directives) differed from those of Chappelle.

While Comedy Central encourages creative teams to “push any boundaries” as long as it generates revenue, reflection on the impact of the comedic discourse is simply not a priority, and Chappelle’s Show was a cash cow for the basic cable network. The fact that the series existed in a television landscape where expansive representations of genuine racial diversity is still an anomaly was not Comedy Central’s concern, although it clearly became a source of consternation for Chappelle. By the arrival of the much-delayed third season, the comic got burned by his own actions, as well as Comedy Central’s: the cable network may have aired “The Nigger Pixie” against the comic’s wishes, but it was Chappelle who, both literally and figuratively, brought him to life. Nevertheless, there is plenty of culpability to be spread around in regard to the fundamental quandary faced by Chappelle’s Show: viewers and actors, creators and network executives, producers and critics unequally share in the credit and the blame for the rise and fall of the most successful racial satire in television history. Satire reflects, refracts, and reconstitutes the fundamental beliefs and mores of a segment of the world in order to critique its practices—giving a through-the-looking-glass image of a particular swath of society with all defects in full and enlarged view. As long as the assumptions implied by the race-baiting little demons (the Nigger Pixie and his brethren) resonate in the hidden recesses of popular consciousness—not as critique but as confirmation—the road for racial satire, regardless of media outlet—will be arduous. In other words, as long as there is racism, doing racial satire will be problematic.
NOTES


2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.


6. Chappelle’s Show has the ability to mix sly sophistication and popular cultural savvy to interrogate issues of race. However, when mining other categories of marginalization for comic fodder, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality are either elided or exploited. Moreover, some of the most popular characters in the series’ comic stable can be seen as fundamentally apolitical and even bordering on minstrelsy.

7. Those familiar with Chappelle’s Show are undoubtedly aware that the two most popularly cited characters in the series—and their patented catchphrases—occupy the fringe of Chappelle’s comedy. Like parsley on the Chappelle’s Show discursive plate, the comic’s portrayal of a cocaine-frenzied Rick James in “Charlie Murphy’s Hollywood Moment,” as well as the nonsensical mimicry of the King of Crunk, Lil Jon, using his callbacks as his primary mode of expression, while undoubtedly funny, add color but little substance to the televisual meal. Regardless of their most-quoted status, these sketches provide little to no sociocultural context, yet award the trappings of cultural cachet.

8. The series was a spin-off of Home Improvement.


11. Cho details this experience in her first concert film, I’m the One That I Want, dir. Lionel Coleman (Winstar, 2000).


15. The qualifying “almost” in this statement is required by animated “radical” sitcoms, including The Simpsons, Family Guy, and, of course, South Park. See Thompson on South Park, chapter 10 in this volume.

17. 21 January 2004.

18. In an attempt to “hustle” another pick, Rondell requests Eminem; he is denied. Taylor offers another deal: whites keep Eminem, and blacks take O. J. back. Rondell agrees, to Burr and Petkoff’s subtle glee and Chappelle’s chagrin.


21. When discussing the insider humor and “that’s just wrong” impulses of the comic ethos of *Chappelle’s Show*, inevitable comparisons between the Comedy Central series and FOX’s *In Living Color* arise. For detailed examination of the two series, along with the short-lived *The Richard Pryor Show*, see Bambi Haggins, *Laughing Mad: The Black Comic Persona in Post Soul America* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 207–27.

22. When, later in the season, Tron reappears in *Mad Real World*, a racial reversal of the MTV reality series, he again acts the antagonist to whiteness—this time to the lone white “innocent,” Chad, who is placed in the house with a cornucopia of characters who occupy “ghetto” constructions of urban blacks by constantly partying, never working, and, “without provocation,” hating the white man. In this sketch, Tron acts as a facilitator for the token’s downfall when he beds Chad’s not so virginal girlfriend (on film)—as does Charlie Murphy as Tyree, the prison-hardened thug, who, over a “look,” “shanks” the white guy’s father—and makes the final house meeting pronouncement that Chad has to go (because, as one of the black female housemates says, they “don’t feel safe” with him). The absurdity of this statement is a direct response to the premature exit of David Edwards on *The Real World LA*. Edwards, with whom Chappelle grew up, was the first cast member to be kicked out of the house. On the season’s DVD commentary, Chappelle remembers (with what seems like a trace of anger) his response when the same phrase was used when David was asked to leave: “Don’t feel safe . . . the guy weighs maybe a buck-twenty. It was ridiculous.”


25. 16 July 2006.

26. It is interesting to note that on the DVD version of the sketch, Mos Def as the blackfaced buddy does not appear. One might hypothesize that, while Comedy Central owned the footage of Chappelle’s pixie outright, perhaps, after the initial broadcasts, Mos Def’s pixie sidekick became a free agent, and Chappelle’s friend opted out.
27. Since Chappelle began instructing his fans not to watch whatever fragments of the abortive season 3 that Comedy Central might choose to broadcast (and to boycott any DVDs of said material), both the advertising for and the buzz about season 3 of *Chappelle's Show* faded from popular media memory, until advertising for the Lost Episodes went into rotation in the early summer of 2006.
Of Niggas and Citizens
The Boondocks *Fans and Differentiated Black American Politics*

Avi Santo

Aaron McGruder's *The Boondocks* is a successful transmediated brand with a loyal community emotionally invested in its controversial and satirical take on black cultural politics and political culture from a black American perspective. Loyalty is expressed both through the community's purchasing power and through their ongoing conversations about *The Boondocks*, generating buzz and effectively advocating for the brand. While many brands cultivate and exploit positive emotional associations from their communities, *The Boondocks* largely trades on the power of controversy. *The Boondocks* has faced repeated accusations of political propagandizing for its explicit anti-Bush, anti-Homeland Security, and anti-Iraq war commentaries (to name just a few).\(^1\) It has also been repeatedly labeled racist by many of its detractors for its provocative depiction of black popular and political culture and has been cancelled or temporarily pulled from newspapers across the country on numerous occasions.\(^2\) Each time, these uproars have generated added publicity.

Though largely driven by the economic logics of contemporary media industries, *The Boondocks* also serves important cultural and political roles in providing outlets for social criticism and community engagement. In this chapter, I analyze how the community that has formed around *The Boondocks* TV series uses it to engage in political conversations and articulate a differentiated black cultural citizenship. I argue that the community invests in politics differently than traditionally imagined informed citizens, privileging identity over partisanship and emphasizing...