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**What are you laughing at? A social semiotic  
analysis of ironic racial stereotypes in  
*Chappelle's Show***

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MSc in Media and Communications (Research)

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# What are you laughing at? A social semiotic analysis of ironic racial stereotypes in *Chappelle's Show*

Cindy Ma

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## ABSTRACT

This study explores the racial humour of *Chappelle's Show* to answer the question, 'Under what circumstances, if any, can ironic portrayals of racial stereotypes serve anti-racist, counter-hegemonic ends?' A social semiotic approach to critical discourse analysis (CDA) is adopted to investigate three sketches from the show, and Linda Hutcheon's theory of irony is used to frame the subsequent discussion. Hutcheon argues that irony is defined by an 'evaluative edge' along with the presence of a said and an unsaid meaning. Within this framework, irony is a scene or a discursive event involving the ironist, the interpreter, and the social context. Thus, ironic meaning can only exist in dialogue and is never complete without interpretation.

The study identifies three mechanisms of ironic stereotyping used in *Chappelle's Show* to subvert dominant racial ideologies: *white stereotypes*, *stereotype inversion*, and *stereotype exaggeration*. The researcher proposes that each of these mechanisms has a differing degree of ironic stability depending on the disruptive potential of the *said* meanings. Thus, mechanisms in which *said* meanings clash with or disturb dominant systems of representation will produce more stable ironies, whereas mechanisms in which *said* meanings cohere with existing systems of representation will produce highly unstable ironies. Whether or not a viewer interprets irony is also highly contingent upon his or her membership within a discursive community. When the ironist and the interpreter share a discursive community, intentional meanings are likely to be internalized; conversely, when discursive communities do not overlap, intentional meanings are more likely to be lost. The political implications of this conclusion are discussed, and topics for future research are suggested.

## INTRODUCTION

‘Stereotypes abound when there is distance. They are an invention, a pretence that one knows when the steps that would make real knowing possible cannot be taken—are not allowed.’

- bell hooks<sup>1</sup>

‘I want to make sure I’m dancing and not shuffling.’

- Dave Chappelle<sup>2</sup>

In June 2014, American stand-up comedian Dave Chappelle returned to the public eye with a series of interviews on late night television to publicize his eight-night run at Radio City Music Hall (Reed, 2014). Between the usual jokes and semi-spontaneous banter, however, a question loomed uncomfortably in the air and was finally articulated by Dave Letterman thus: ‘You had the Dave Chappelle Show at Comedy Central, and then you didn’t have the Dave Chappelle Show at Comedy Central’ (Letterman, 2014). Referring to Chappelle’s highly publicized departure from show business in 2005, after two successful seasons of his own sketch comedy series, Letterman was not alone in his curiosity. *Chappelle’s Show* aired its pilot episode on January 22<sup>nd</sup> 2003, and with the comedian’s ‘dual credibility through ties to the Afrocentricism of the black hip-hop intelligentsia, as well as the skater/slacker/stoner ethos of suburban life,’ the show became a cultural sensation (Haggins, 2009: 234). By 2004, it had surpassed *South Park* as the highest-rated television program on Comedy Central, thus cementing Chappelle’s status as one of America’s pre-eminent comedians (Wallerstein, 2004).

The narrative surrounding Dave Chappelle’s departure became almost mythic in proportion in the days and weeks following his sudden disappearance. Why, people asked, would a comedian walk away from a \$50 million contract and his own television show—on which he served as host, lead actor, head writer, and executive producer—to go to Africa? When Chappelle finally resurfaced in the United States after his self-imposed exile, he remained relatively quiet about the issue, giving only a few interviews in the year following his departure. His 2006 appearance on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, however, provided some insight.

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<sup>1</sup> Hooks (1988: 340).

<sup>2</sup> Farley (2005).

During the interview, Chappelle stated, ‘I was doing sketches that were funny but socially irresponsible... It’s like you get cluttered up with things and you don’t pay attention to things like your ethics’ (Winfrey, 2006). In particular, he recounted filming a sketch entitled ‘Racial Pixies,’ in which he dressed up as a minstrel show performer, complete with blackface,<sup>3</sup> to become ‘the visual personification of the N-word.’ During the filming, however, he became suddenly disturbed by the laughter of one of the white cameramen: ‘I know the difference between people laughing with me and people laughing at me. And it was the first time I’d ever gotten a laugh that I was uncomfortable with.’ Later in the interview, he returned to the pivotal moment, saying, ‘When we were doing that sketch, and that guy laughed, I felt like *man*, I felt like *they got me*. They got me’ (Winfrey, 2006).

Those familiar with *Chappelle’s Show* will easily recall the series’ unique brand of racial humour, which often involved the comedian unabashedly performing racial stereotypes in sketches that ranged from nonsensical farce to biting satire. However, Chappelle’s eventual disillusionment with the show—and the type of laughter it was inciting—raises interesting questions about the complexity of racial humour and the use of stereotypes as a method of subversion. With the controversy surrounding Stephen Colbert’s satirical use of a racial slur in March 2014<sup>4</sup> and the emergence of hipster or ironic racism as a trend in youth culture,<sup>5</sup> racial humour has become a highly politicized site of contestation, and Chappelle’s story remains a defining moment within this ongoing debate.

This study will employ Linda Hutcheon’s theory of irony to investigate when and under what circumstances racial stereotypes can serve as a tool for subversion. Throughout the paper, the use of ironic stereotypes will be considered within the context of existing systems of representation and within America’s history of Othering. *Chappelle’s Show* will serve as the empirical focus of the study, and three sketches from the series will be examined using Hodge and Kress’s (1988) social semiotic approach to critical discourse analysis (CDA). Three mechanisms of ironic stereotyping will be identified—*white stereotypes*, *stereotype inversion*, and *defamiliarization through exaggeration*—each of which are used by *Chappelle’s Show* to disrupt dominant discourses of race and Otherness. This paper will argue that the subversive potential of these mechanisms will always depend upon the discursive community in which the interpreter is embedded; however, the mechanisms differ

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<sup>3</sup> An important contextual note: Chappelle is himself African-American.

<sup>4</sup> The hashtag #CancelColbert emerged in protest of Colbert’s tweet, ‘I am willing to show #Asian community I care by introducing the Ching-Chong Ding-Dong Foundation for Sensitivity to Orientals or Whatever’ (Kang, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> Hipster racism is described by Jezebel columnist Lindy West (2012) as ‘the domain of educated, middle-class white people ... who believe that not wanting to be racist makes it okay for them to be ... racist’.

in terms of the stability of their anti-racist messages. While white stereotypes and stereotype inversions tend to be incongruous with existing systems of representation and thus prompt viewers to search for ironic meanings, exaggerated stereotypes tend to cohere with dominant systems of representation and thus always carry the danger of reinforcing, rather than undermining, the stereotypes in question. Ultimately, the use of ironic stereotypes in the service of anti-racism is always highly vexed and requires the interpreter to navigate between a host of said and unsaid meanings.

## **THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS**

### **Race, Representation, and Stereotypes**

Although no paper of this scope can do justice to the work produced by scholars on the subject of race and its representations, a very brief overview is necessary here to introduce the key concepts that form the theoretical foundations of this study. To begin, it is important to emphasize that commonly held definitions of race and racial classifications are socially constructed, rather than natural or pre-existing categories, and the very concepts of whiteness and blackness have evolved over time, even within recent history (Brodin, 2011). In ‘Spectacle of the Other’, Stuart Hall (1997) outlines how racist representations emerged alongside racialized systems of economic domination, namely imperialism. Reversing the common-sense notion that race precedes racism—that different races are the natural foundations upon which racist systems are built—Hall, echoing Edward Said, investigates the construction of race through discourse, through the production of knowledge that emerged to support and legitimize exploitative economic systems such as slavery and colonialism (1997: 259). In a similar vein, Cornel West’s (1999) genealogy of modern racism traces the history of racial classification to the scientific revolution and the Enlightenment impulse to observe, measure, categorize, and order (1999: 77). For both West and Hall, then, modern day racial categories have never been eternal or inevitable; rather, they emerged out of intellectual and economic environments that cultivated specific types of knowledge about difference. Following these scholars, this study eschews essentialist notions of race and racial difference, taking instead the *racialized* subject as its focal point, a concept that highlights the socially constructed and historically specific nature of race. The fluidity of racial identity, however, does not undermine its far-reaching material consequences, as race continues to affect everything from how much a person earns, to where they live and the type of education they receive (Lipsitz, 2006: viii).

The longevity of racial inequality in the United States is rooted not only in systems of economic inequality but also in systems of representation. One of the key ‘signifying practices’ of racist systems of representation is the stereotype (Hall, 1997: 257). Stereotyping, according to Hall’s definition, ‘reduces, essentializes, naturalizes, and fixes “difference”’ (Hall, 1997: 258). That is, stereotypes *reduce* groups to a few, easily understood and oversimplified characteristics; they *essentialize* the people within a group so that they are all defined by those exaggerated traits; they *naturalize* differences, rendering them self-explanatory or common-sensical; and they *fix* those differences so that they are perceived to be eternal. Homi Bhabha (1983) adds that stereotypes are also marked by their ambivalence, which gives them flexibility and makes them adaptable to changing social and political climates. Thus, stereotypes about a group are rarely wholly negative or positive. While they are always reductive, group stereotypes often contain diverse, sometimes conflicting, traits, and this ambivalence ‘ensures [the stereotype’s] repeatability in changing historical and discursive conjunctures [and] produces that effect of probabilistic truth and predictability’ (Bhabha, 1983: 18).

The differences fixed in place by stereotypes, however, are not value-free. Stereotypes also have a regulatory function, in the Foucauldian sense, in that they separate the acceptable from the unacceptable, the normal from the deviant (Hall, 1997: 258). Stereotypes clearly delineate who ‘belongs’ within a society and who does not; they draw symbolic boundaries between the Self and the Other. Finally, stereotypes tend to exist and become especially potent where there are large inequalities of power. In such situations, the proliferation of stereotypes—for example that African-Americans are lazy or feckless—comes to naturalize the power of the ruling group (Hall, 1997: 259). Like Barthes’ (1991) concept of myth, then, stereotypes have a de-politicizing capacity, transforming the products of social and historical inequality into natural, self-explanatory facts (1991: 128).

Stereotypes, and racist systems of representation more generally, affect not only the social reality of the racialized subject—how they are treated by their neighbours, how they are perceived at job interviews, how likely they are to be a victim of crime—but also their own sense of selfhood. Power, in this sense, is not only an external force that oppresses the individual from without, but also an internal one that shapes his or her very subjectivity from within (Butler, 1997). Writing in 1903, W.E.B. Du Bois (2008: 12) articulates this phenomenon in the term ‘double consciousness’: ‘this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of the other, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity’. In a different, although not alien, context, Frantz Fanon (1999: 419) describes a significant moment wherein a young child points to him, frightened, and

calls him a Negro: 'On that day, completely dislocated, unable to be abroad with the other, the white man, who unmercifully imprisoned me, I took myself far off from my own presence, far indeed, and made myself an object'. In this process of self-objectification, a process Judith Butler (1997) calls 'subjection', external power structures are internalized by the subject, who comes to see him- or herself through the eyes of the oppressor. This state of 'double consciousness' emerges as an important concept when thinking about racial satire and how racialized people relate to the stereotypes imposed upon them.

While the literature on race and stereotyping has focused almost exclusively on the representation of racialized people, in recent decades, whiteness has also become a subject of critical analysis. In studying whiteness, scholars hope to dethrone its privileged position as the invisible race, or the default against which all others are differentiated. In *White*, Richard Dyer (1997: 1) catalogues the various ways whiteness has been represented within Western culture, arguing that 'as long as race is something only applied to non-white peoples, as long as white people are not racially seen and named, they/we function as a human norm. Other people are raced, we are just people'. This position of invisibility, Dyer asserts, is itself a place of immense power. Similarly, bell hooks (1992) argues that white supremacist society has always policed the black gaze, and so white people have never been forced to confront or acknowledge the quietly observed knowledge that African-Americans have accumulated about whiteness over centuries of oppression. Contrary to perceptions within the white community of whiteness as a normative standard, Hooks describes the intrusion of whiteness into black life as a source of terror (1992: 340). The examination of whiteness and its privileged place within Western culture has contributed a new critical dimension to the study of racial representation, and the works of both hooks and Dyer will inform this paper's reading of *Chappelle's Show*.

### **Irony and Satire**

The study of satire has a long history within the field of literary criticism, and while many theorists have attempted to define satire, George Test's (1991) 'four elements' definition remains the most widely cited today. According to Test (1991: 15), satire is defined by a mixture of four key elements: aggression, play, laughter, and judgment. Thus, satire must always be an attack of some sort, usually one in which the target is ridiculed or diminished in some way. It must contain an element of spirited 'make-believe' that causes readers to imagine the world as other than what it is. Satire must evoke laughter—whether it is the smirk that accompanies self-satisfaction or the howl that accompanies slapstick. Finally, satire must always pass a judgment; without this final element, satire is 'aggression waiting

for a target; it is laughter waiting for a stimulant; it is play waiting for a game' (Test, 1991: 27). According to Test, these four elements originate in the individual and manifest themselves 'in acts or expressions' as *satire*.

Despite the inherently combative impulse within the genre, there exists a healthy tradition of literary critics who link satire to conservative values. Focusing on the verse and prose satire of Western Europe, largely from the 17<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, these theorists emphasize the tendency for satirists to ridicule and target non-normative behaviour, thus re-enforcing the status quo (Day, 2011: 11). The very tone of satire, Dustin Griffin (1994: 138) argues, is highly aristocratic: imperious, smug, and disdainful of the unruly masses. Other critics like Leonard Feinberg (1967) espouse a safety-valve theory of satire, wherein the genre provides a cathartic release for readers' frustrations but yields no substantive result in terms of social action. Thus, satire allows readers to release their aggression towards a target, but without requiring any subsequent behaviour change, making the genre more enjoyable than the sermon or lecture, for example (Feinberg, 1967: 5).

When examining more modern cultural texts, it is useful to look beyond the genre of satire to investigate irony, as a communicative tone or practice, more broadly. Wayne C. Booth's (1974) distinction between stable and unstable irony arises here as a useful concept and is frequently referenced in the analysis of contemporary cultural texts. Stable ironies are defined by four key attributes: the irony is intentional; it is covert; the literal meaning of the text is undermined, rather than meaning altogether; and the text has discernable, finite targets (Greene, 2011: 120). In contrast, unstable ironies deconstruct and subvert their targets without affirming any alternatives; nothing is concretely proposed and no stable political position is adopted (Booth, 1974: 240). As Viveca Greene (2011: 120) describes, 'what distinguishes the two is the presence or absence of an affirmative position on the issue at hand'. Greene goes on to cite *The Colbert Report* and *South Park* as examples of stable and unstable ironies, respectively.

The idea of unstable irony, if not the term itself, has become increasingly widespread in literary and cultural criticism, especially amongst those who theorize about the postmodern age or ethos. For example, it appears in the work of critics like Frederic Jameson as a defining quality of the postmodern moment and of contemporary cultural production (Jameson, 1991; Hutcheon, 1994). The phenomenon presented here is not Booth's stable irony—the aggressive, judgmental irony of satire—but rather the 'blank irony' of pastiche, characterized by a lack of authenticity or genuine emotional engagement (Jameson, 1991: 17). A more overtly moralistic argument has also emerged in the past twenty years, culminating in

the work of Jebediah Purdy, who shares with literary scholars of the ‘conservative’ tradition a deep concern with the anti-democratic strain within ironic texts. In *For Common Things*, Purdy (2000) bemoans the rise and proliferation of the ironic pose in contemporary society, linking the phenomenon to political apathy and cultural paralysis. He describes a society populated by extremely self-aware individuals who possess a deep ‘fear of betrayal, disappointment, and humiliation, and a suspicion that believing, hoping, or caring too much will open [them] up to these’ (Purdy, 2000: xii). Irony, for Purdy, has become a defence mechanism used to evade the vulnerability that accompanies earnest speech, a protective shield for the hip and disillusioned, and a cultural phenomenon that is eroding popular discourse in America. Here, he echoes Terry Eagleton (1991: 39) who observed that ‘in the cynical milieu of post-modernism, we are all too fly, astute, and streetwise to be conned for a moment by our own official rhetoric. It is this condition which Peter Sloterdijk names “enlightened false consciousness”—the endless self-ironizing or wide-awake bad faith of a society which has seen through its own pretentious rationalizations.’

While Purdy’s and Eagleton’s critiques identify a striking shift within Western culture, their use of the term ‘irony’ is too broad and too all-encompassing to serve as a theoretical foundation for this study. Irony is used to simultaneously signify a communicative tone, a quality of texts, an attitude within the population, and a cultural malaise. In the context of this study, the concept is overly expansive and does not provide a substantive basis for textual analysis. Something more precise is required.

On the other hand, definitions of satire emerging from the field of literary criticism remain too narrow in focus and, for the most part, difficult to apply to a text like *Chappelle’s Show*, which is characterized by ambivalence and indeterminacy, rather than undisguised aggression and judgment. While the sketches on *Chappelle’s Show* certainly evoke, or strive to evoke, laughter and demonstrate ‘play’, they do not organically fulfil the remaining two, perhaps most important, criteria. Literary approaches to satire also tend to privilege authorial intent, locating meaning construction at the level of the text’s producer, and thus lack the theoretical tools to engage with the audience encounter—a crucial component of this study.

Linda Hutcheon’s theory of irony arises here as a useful alternative to both the rigidly defined, author-cantered notion of satire described by Test and the disembodied, ubiquitous concept of irony put forth by Purdy and other scholars of the postmodern. For Hutcheon (1994: 11), irony is a *scene*, a discursive situation involving the ironist, the interpreter, and the social context in which they are embedded. Defined by its ‘evaluative edge’, irony comes

into existence only in relation to an interpreter, thus making the scene of irony an overtly political one in which relations of hierarchy and subordination are inevitable (Hutcheon, 1994: 16). What literary theorists have called ‘understanding’ or ‘misunderstanding’ irony has more to do with a person’s membership within a *discursive community*—a group of people that share ‘restrictive but also enabling communication conventions’—than with his or her inherent competence as an interpreter (Hutcheon, 1994: 18). Thus, irony does not bring a community of listeners into existence; rather, a discursive community precedes and makes possible the comprehension of irony.

Hutcheon (1994: 58) argues that irony is defined semantically by three characteristics: it is ‘relational, inclusive, and differential’. First, irony is relational because it exists between meanings, between the *said* and the *unsaid*. Second, it is inclusive because both meanings exist simultaneously in the ironic moment, that is, the ‘literal’ meaning does not need to be rejected in order for the ‘real’ or ‘intended’ meaning to be processed. Hutcheon uses the duck/rabbit optical illusion—made famous by Wittgenstein in *Philosophical Investigations*—to illustrate how one might see two distinct images at essentially the same time. This model complicates ‘antiphrastic’ explanations of irony, in which the literal meaning is simply rejected and inverted to reveal the ironist’s intended meaning, and proposes instead that audiences rapidly oscillate between the said and the unsaid. Third, irony is differential because the said and unsaid meanings are different from one another but not necessarily opposite (Hutcheon, 1994: 58-64).

### **Theorizing Racial Humour**

This study is not the first to consider the political implications of irony in relation to racial humour. The question of audience interpretation looms large within the literature on the topic, emerging most notably with Vidmar and Rokeach’s (1974) seminal study on the hit American television series *All in the Family*. While the foul-mouthed, bigoted protagonist, Archie Bunker, was intended by creator Norman Lear to satirize the convoluted logic of racists, the study found that viewers who shared Bunker’s prejudiced views perceived him in a decidedly positive light (Vidmar and Rokeach, 1974: 44). Despite the negative framing of Bunker’s politics, audience members who held similar prejudices felt that the character articulated legitimate viewpoints, rather than the opposite. In more recent years, Lamarre *et al.* (2009) found in an analogous study that interpretations of *The Colbert Report* varied drastically depending on the political orientation of the viewer. While both left- and right-wing viewers found the show to be funny, viewers with right-leaning views were far more

likely to report that Colbert only pretends to be joking about his subject matter and in fact agrees with the views expressed by his character (Lamarre, *et al.* 2009: 212).

Since Vidmar and Rokeach's study, a host of other writers have used both empirical and philosophical arguments to critique the use of ironic racism within cultural texts. Amongst these scholars, one central question predominates: are people—or more specifically, white people—laughing at the absurdity of the stereotypes or simply laughing at the stereotypes themselves?

Michael Omi (1989: 121) argues that, despite the intentions of writers, producers, or actors, racial stereotypes exist within deeply entrenched systems of representation, and thus will always tend towards their own reinforcement. This process is by no means trivial, because the entrenchment of stereotypes within a culture subtly legitimizes existing inequalities. Condemning the widespread use of racial tropes in Hollywood, Means Coleman (2000: 130) characterizes sitcoms such as *Martin*, *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air*, and *The Wayan Bros* as a form of 'neo-minstrelsy', stating that the actors are 'taking part in their own racial ridicule by adopting Jim Crow, coon, and Sambo characterizations'. Writing on the 1990s sketch comedy show *In Living Color*, Herman Gray (1995) focuses on the highly ambivalent representation of African-Americans within the show. He argues that the social impact of racial stereotypes lies not in the representations themselves but in how the representations reinforce or subvert existing discourses about blackness. He concludes that stereotypes such as the crack addict and the welfare queen, even when purposefully stretched to the point of absurdity, 'leav[e] the black poor exposed and positioned as television objects of middle-class amusement and fascination' (Gray, 1995: 144). If some reading positions are more socially privileged than others, more valuable to television networks and seen as more 'culturally legitimate', then the white, male middle-class viewer occupies an exceptionally powerful position. His gaze upon the black stereotype tilts the 'hegemonic balance ... decidedly in the direction of objectification and derision' (Gray, 1995: 144).

Audience research has generally reinforced concerns from anti-racist scholars about the ethical implications of racial stereotypes, especially when viewed across colour lines. For example, in their study on *Rush Hour 2*, Park, Gabbadon, and Chernin (2006) interviewed White, Black, and Asian viewers about the film and found that, while none of the viewers identified the film's use of stereotypes as racist or offensive, notions of racial difference were subtly legitimized with the logic of 'it's funny because it's true' (2006: 171). Moreover, audience members claimed that the stereotypes were harmless because they were presented in a comedic context, and thus people knew not to take the representations seriously (Park,

Gabbadon, and Chernin, 2006: 166). Ultimately, participants did not produce oppositional readings, and even the observations of the Black and Asian viewers fell firmly within the bounds of hegemonic racial ideology, which holds whiteness as the norm and constructs non-whites as Other. These findings support Morley's assertion that 'the powers of viewers to reinterpret meanings is hardly equivalent to the discursive power of the centralized media institutions to construct the texts which the viewer then interprets' (quoted in Park, Gabbadon, and Cherin, 2006: 174).

In contrast to these findings, other scholars have argued in favour of the potentially liberating and emancipatory effects of racial humour. Jonathan P. Rossing (2012) argues that the humour of *The Colbert Report* serves to uproot the discourse of post-racialism, which holds that race no longer serves as a barrier to success, so ubiquitous in American culture. Colbert's performance of whiteness renders his race, and privilege, highly visible and thus opens up a space for critique. Furthermore, the comedic nature of the program and Colbert's clever imitation of post-racial arguments renders him relatively unthreatening to viewers, thus making the show an inconspicuous vehicle for advancing progressive and potentially subversive ideas about race (Rossing, 2012: 54). In her examination of *Chappelle's Show*, Lisa Perks (2010: 275-284) argues that Chappelle's use of racial humour destabilizes dominant discourses of race by subverting audience expectations and creating discord through the use of 'egregious stereotyping', 'inverted racial stereotypes', and the intrusion of serious messages into a largely comedic context. These ideas will be further explored in the textual analysis undertaken in the study.

## **CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

This study on racial humour in *Chappelle's Show* will be heavily informed by the work of post-colonial and critical race theorists, especially those whose works were outlined above. Racist systems, both economic and representational, are understood here to be self-perpetuating and thus requiring more than patience or tolerance to be disrupted. Racism, in this sense, is not simply the sum of individual utterances or personal beliefs; rather, it is institutionalized within the economy, within social relationships, and within culture. Just as the legacy of Jim Crow continues to survive today in housing segregation, in unequal education systems, and in racist policing tactics, the cultural legacy of slavery and segregation is embedded within America's cultural consciousness, and the media is just one of many institutions that 'secretes' white supremacy (West, 1999: 71), from the framing of news stories to the casting of film characters. The perpetuation of racial stereotypes remains important

today because racist ideologies are premised upon the notion of the deviant Other, and when this principle is affirmed through stereotypes, a host of other inequalities are also subtly legitimized. When stereotypes are problematized however, and when people are forced to interrogate them and their sources, racist discourses can be undermined.

With regards to the ironic content of *Chappelle's Show*, Linda Hutcheon's theory of irony will provide the framework for grappling with the show's use of racial stereotypes. Her conception of irony not only resonates with the subject matter but also coheres with the study's research methodology, which adopts a social semiotic approach to multimodal discourse analysis. Hutcheon's emphasis on *discursive communities* echoes the work of social semiologists, who similarly agree that all meaning-making must be understood within social context. Thus, meaning—like irony—can only exist in dialogue.

These theoretical tools will be used to explore the following research question:

*Under what circumstances, if any, can ironic portrayals of racial stereotypes serve anti-racist, counter-hegemonic ends?*

The central research question will be explored through the examination of three sub-questions:

- *What discursive mechanisms are employed to signal irony?*
- *How are stereotypes used to disrupt existing systems of representation?*
- *How can a single representation produce opposing interpretations?*

## **RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

### **A Social Semiotic Approach to Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)**

Because the research question outlined above is concerned with racist ideology—both its perpetuation and its subversion—this study will adopt a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach to explore racial humour in *Chappelle's Show*. As a research methodology, CDA aims to reveal relations of power and ideological interests embedded within cultural texts. It was chosen over a quantitative method like Content Analysis because classifying individual remarks or images as racist or not-racist would inevitably lead to surface-level wrangling over the *true* or *intended* meaning of the utterance, a task made herculean by the very nature of Chappelle's irony. CDA, on the other hand, provides a space for exploring the ambiguity of

his humour, especially his use of racial stereotypes, while considering the ideological implications of this ambivalence.

Regardless of the strand or model employed, all CDA approaches are united by a concern about power and dominance. For the purposes of this study, power will refer to the ‘privileged access to socially valued resources’ and dominance to the ‘exercise of social power by elites, institutions, or groups, that result in social inequality’ (Van Dijk, 2001: 302). The task of revealing ideology is also inherent to the methodology, and this study will refer to the definition set forth by Machin and Mayr (2012), who define ideology as ‘belief systems held by individuals and collectives... that reflect particular interests on the part of the powerful.’ Ideology, like Barthes’ notion of myth, naturalizes social inequalities so that people are unable to see alternatives to the status quo.

Although there are many models of CDA, this study will adopt a *social semiotic* approach, as defined by Hodge and Kress (1988) and later adapted for multimodal analysis by Machin and Mayr (2012). In this model of CDA, the key word *discourse* refers to ‘the site where social forms of organization engage with systems of signs in the production of texts’ (Hodge and Kress, 1988: 6), or, in simpler terms, where language meets social institutions. Like the Foucauldian definition of the word, discourse here is constitutive: it constructs or at the very least frames the concepts about which it speaks—recall Hall and Said, who argued that the modern notion of racial difference was constructed through discourse, through the production of knowledge that claimed to describe race while reifying it as a social fact. The purpose of CDA is to reveal the *ideological complexes* embedded within discourse, defined in *Social Semiotics* as ‘a functionally related set of contradictory versions of the world, coercively imposed by one social group on another on behalf of its own interests’ (Hodge and Kress, 1988: 3). Thus, Hodge and Kress (1988: 6) assert that all ideologies are riddled with contradictions because they must simultaneously maintain the consent of the masses while upholding the privileged status of elites. The critical edge of CDA becomes apparent here, as all texts are approached as sites where ideological complexes are sustained, disrupted, or perhaps both.

What distinguishes social semiotics from other strands of CDA, however, is its emphasis on the social context of meaning-making. Like Hutcheon’s concept of a discursive community, Hodge and Kress assert that communication can only exist in dialogue, and therefore is premised upon a shared understanding between the sender and receiver of any given message. They propose the term *logonomic systems* to describe the ‘set of rules prescribing the conditions for production and reception of meanings’ (Hodge and Kress, 1988: 4).

Logonomic systems are second-level messages that regulate the meaning of any statement, and while they are generally invisible, they become conspicuous in certain discursive situations: for example, at a royal dinner, where politeness conventions are highly valued, or more commonly, in the exchange of a racy joke between two strangers. In order for the joke to function, the receiver must recognize and accept the signals regulating the meaning of the message. If he is not familiar with the rules of the specific logonomic system at play, the intended meaning is lost and the joke may be interpreted as an absurd or offensive statement. Logonomic systems determine who can speak what to whom, under what circumstances, and how they will be interpreted. Thus they are far from value-free and serve as sites of contestation. For example, ‘when a logonomic system allows a statement offensive to women to be read as “a joke,” this signifies a particular structure of gender relations’ (Hodge and Kress, 1988: 5). With relation to Hutcheon’s theory of irony, it can be said that members within a discursive community share logonomic systems, and thus individuals within the community will have similar interpretations of ironic statements.

The purpose of CDA, from a social semiotic approach, is to make visible logonomic systems that regulate meaning and to reveal ideological complexes embedded within discourse. This pursuit requires close attention to detail, both to the text and its conditions of production. As Hodge and Kress (1988: 8) write, ‘a social semiotic account cannot proceed with a naïve text-context dichotomy, but rather that context has to be theorized and understood as another set of texts’. Thus, the history of the comedian, audience laughter, intertextual references—all of these must be approached as objects of analysis in their own right.

While no prescribed formula exists for the application of social semiotics to CDA, this study will follow the outline offered by Hodge and Kress, with a few variations adopted from Machin and Mayr. The analysis will begin at the level of *semiosis* with an exploration of the social and political context in which the text is embedded (Hodge and Kress, 1988: 9). Context itself will be ‘read’ in order to reveal the logonomic systems governing the interpretation of the show. Next, the analysis will move to the level of *mimesis*, and an un-interpretive description of the sketches will be provided to root the analysis in the details of the text. Finally, conclusions will be drawn at the level of discourse and ideology, especially with reference to the text’s relationship to dominant ideological complexes (Hodge and Kress, 1988: 12). At each point, Hodge and Kress (1998: 12) emphasize that texts do not always produce the meanings and effects intended by their authors; thus ‘it is precisely the struggles and their uncertain outcomes that must be studied’. In studying Chappelle’s use of ironic stereotypes, social semiotics emerges as a clear choice because of its attention to audience reception and its emphasis on social context as the site of all meaning-making.

## Texts and Sampling

*Chappelle's Show* was selected as the text for analysis because of its provocative use of racial stereotypes and the controversies surrounding the production of the show and its comedian. Chappelle's numerous comments about the social responsibility that accompanies racial humour and the reasons for his departure provide an interesting framework with which to analyze the show's sketches. If context is itself a text, *Chappelle's Show* provides especially fertile ground for the discussion of racial stereotypes and their capacity to both offend and subvert. After a comprehensive viewing of the show's two seasons, plus the 'Lost Episodes' released after Chappelle's departure from Comedy Central, three sketches were selected for semiotic analysis:

- 'Frontline: Clayton Bigsby,' Season 1 Episode 1, aired 22 January 2003
- 'Reparations,' Season 1 Episode 4, aired 12 February 2003
- 'Law and Order,' Season 2 Episode 5, aired 18 February 2004.

These sketches were specifically chosen for their highly charged use of racial stereotypes. Unlike some of Chappelle's more farcical or parodic sketches—his most famous being Rick James and Lil John—the sketches chosen here all demonstrate what Hutcheon calls the 'evaluative edge' of irony—that is, the unsaid meaning within each sketch passes a judgment, thus lending the texts their subversive potential.

It is important here to emphasize that the goal at hand is not to produce an authoritative reading of the show or its use of stereotypes. There are as many unique interpretations of *Chappelle's Show* as there are viewers, and this particular study will inevitably be informed by the researcher's own reading position. However, the themes and images analyzed were always considered within the context of existing ideologies and discourses about race, thus anchoring the analysis in a social context rather than a personal one. While the research questions would also support the use of interviews as a way of exploring audience interpretations of stereotypes, the length and scope of the paper do not allow for the inclusion of an additional methodology, especially one which is also highly interpretive and requires deep, rhetorical analysis. While no audience feedback was actively collected, the chosen methodology allows for the inclusion of audience laughter, which features prominently in all of the sketches, and contextual information, like Chappelle's comments on his comedy and his audiences, as objects of analysis. These elements, which themselves are

components of the cultural text according to social semiotics, enable the researcher to engage with the comedic *dialogue* that exists between the ironist and the interpreter.

## RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION

### Context

The first episode of *Chappelle's Show* aired on Comedy Central on January 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2003. The show quickly established itself as a highly controversial and irreverent sketch comedy program with Dave Chappelle at its helm, serving as its host, lead actor, head writer—alongside long-time collaborator Neal Brennan—and executive producer. *Chappelle's Show* was by no means the comedian's first foray into the television world, however, as he had been in talks with various networks, including Disney and FOX television, for over eight years in pursuit of his own series. But it was only with Comedy Central, a basic cable company, that Chappelle was given the creative freedom he needed to achieve his comedic vision in a relatively uncompromised way.

With Comedy Central's relatively marginal position in the television landscape and its young, willing audience, Chappelle was able to develop a sketch comedy show that broached 'edgy' topics with a decidedly black sensibility (Haggins, 2009: 236). *Chappelle's Show* quickly gained widespread popularity, especially amongst young male viewers, surpassing South Park as Comedy Central's highest-rated show and breaking records when the first season became the best-selling television DVD set in history (Lambert, 2004). When Chappelle's contract came up for renegotiation in 2004, after a successful second season, Viacom, Comedy Central's parent company, offered Chappelle a \$50 million contract to continue producing the show for two additional years (Winfrey, 2006).

After agreeing to the deal, Chappelle began writing and filming for the third season. However, in his stand-up routines, he began expressing discontent over his work on the show, especially when audience members heckled him with infamous lines from his own sketches, most notably, 'I'm Rick James, b----.' After a series of production delays involving Chappelle's dissatisfaction with the sketches, Comedy Central pushed back the release date for the third season, and in April 2005, Chappelle surprised both the company and his fans by abruptly leaving the show and flying to South Africa (Winfrey, 2006). Despite the myriad of rumours that circulated around his disappearance, from accusations of drug use to stories of a mental breakdown, Chappelle generally declined to speak on the subject, giving only a few interviews in the year following his departure from the show.

Although Chappelle never returned to Comedy Central, which would ultimately air sketches from the uncompleted third season against his wishes, he spoke candidly about his decision to leave in an interview on *Oprah* in 2006. In the interview, he repeatedly cited the highly stressful work environment and his ethical qualms about the show's content as reasons for his departure. The story of the 'N----- Pixie' was revisited throughout the episode, indicating how acutely Chappelle was affected by the incident. His concern with audience interpretation was not limited to that sketch, however, and he states later in the interview,

I know all these people who are watching TV, that there's a lot of people who will understand exactly what I'm doing; then there's another group of people who are just fans, like... the kind of people that scream 'I'm Rick James, B' at my concerts, that are along for a different kind of celebrity worship ride. They're gonna get something completely different. That concerns me. I don't want, you know, I don't want black people to be disappointed in me for putting that out there (Winfrey, 2006).

Revealing a heightened sense of self-awareness, Chappelle's reflections on the show give unique insight into the intentions of the comedian and will help frame the study's readings of his sketches.

Before delving into the textual analysis, however, a final contextual note should be made about the genre of sketch comedy, which comes with its own set of structuring rules and logonomic systems. According to Bambi Haggins (2009: 237), '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 a great potential for transgression.' Comprised of short, unrelated vignettes, usually humorous and involving a recurring cast of actors, sketch comedy is indeed liberated from the narrative conventions that constrain most other television genres. The disconnect and open-endedness inherent to the genre has prompted some theorists to argue that sketch comedy provides a rare space for viewers to develop counter-hegemonic viewpoints:

The property of segmentation helps rupture the power of a dominant reading by creating isolated pockets of meaning following discursive collisions... Each episode is formatted as a series of largely independent sketches with few consistent narrative elements coursing throughout. Because of this cornucopia of self-contained textual fragments, the program offers amused pleasure without ready ideological closure (Perks, 2010: 273).

While *Chappelle's Show* certainly resists all forms of narrative closure, thus allowing viewers to pass their own judgments on the sketches, meaning making is not completely unstructured. Audio of the live audience's laughter is included overtop each sketch, much like in a sitcom, providing cues for viewers' laughter at home. Additionally, the way Chappelle introduces the sketches helps to direct audience interpretation, giving them contextual clues about how and why the sketch came to be.

In terms of the show's logonomic systems, which always 'project a particular relation of producer and consumer for the text', the medium of television structures viewing as a one-to-many activity (Hodge and Kress, 1988: 9). Thus, control over the text, at least in a material sense, is concentrated in the producer. In *Chappelle's Show*, audiences are invited to identify with Dave-as-host, who often speaks directly to the camera and thus addresses viewers at home. The sketches invite us to peer into the comedian's head, and Chappelle often strokes his chin and gazes off into the distance as a way of transitioning into the sketches, as if imagining the scenes into existence. Within the sketches, Chappelle always plays a role, and although we are encouraged to laugh *at* the characters he portrays, we laugh *with* him as a host and comedian. Indeed, after the sketches, cameras often cut to Dave-as-host chuckling to himself, in a way mirroring our own laughter. The format of the show makes for a highly personal, almost intimate, experience in which viewers are given access to the inner recesses of Chappelle's mind, or at least the illusion of such access. Thus, the sketches are always anchored in a black, male perspective—both explicitly, in the show's framing of the sketches, and implicitly, in the fact that Chappelle writes and produces the show. Whatever viewing positions audience members might occupy in front of their television sets, within the discursive framework of the show, they are all entrusted with this special access.

### **Description of Texts**

#### *Frontline: Clayton Bigsby*

Adopting the format of a television documentary, this sketch aired in the pilot episode of *Chappelle's Show* and immortalized the character of Clayton Bigsby: black white supremacist. The sketch opens with Kent Wallace, *Frontline's* distinguished-looking host, describing the enigmatic man who has emerged as the leader of the white supremacist movement in America after publishing a number of highly influential books. After navigating the dangerous backwaters of the rural South, signified by images of skinheads and country roads, Wallace arrives at the home of Clayton Bigsby, who—lo and behold—is a blind black

man, played by Dave Chappelle. Shocked, Wallace then traces the story of Clayton Bigsby back to childhood, when he attended the Wexler Home for the Blind. Wallace interviews Bridget Wexler, the home's headmistress, who explains, 'Well, he was the only Negro we'd ever had around here. So we figure we'd make it easier on Clayton by just telling him and all the other blind kids that he was white.'

When Wallace attempts to inform Bigsby of the fact that he himself is African-American, Bigsby flatly rejects the statement, saying, 'Sir. Listen. I'm going to make this clear. I am in no way shape or form involved in any N-----dom.' The journalist then follows Bigsby to a book signing, where he rallies the crowd with messages of hate and white power. Swept up in a racist fervour, the crowd urges Bigsby to take off his clansmen's hood and to reveal his identity to them. When Bigsby eventually does so, exposing his own race, shock grips the audience and one man's head explodes bloodily across the room. The sketch closes with Kent Wallace speaking soberly into the camera and informing viewers that, since the book signing, Bigsby has accepted his race and, subsequently, divorced his wife for being a 'N----- lover' (Chappelle, 2003).

### *Reparations*

Chappelle introduces his sketch on 'Reparations' by recalling an appearance he made on a talk show in which the topic of debate was the 'Angry white man'. Chappelle recounts his disbelief and frustration when, during the show, a white audience member expressed anguish at being 'forced' to hire black people: 'Forced? Oh, you mean like *slavery* forced? Remember that thing where you forced us to work... What'd you think, black people was like "No problem boss, I'd love to!" Man... that was infuriating.' Chappelle goes on to declare that not only is he in favour of affirmative action, but he wants reparations for slavery.

'Reparations' takes the format of an evening news show, anchored by the recurring character Chuck Taylor, who is played by Chappelle in white-face—that is, made to look like a white man. The special report, entitled 'Reparations 2003' covers the effects of a bill passed by Congress that forces the government to pay over a trillion dollars' worth of reparations to African-Americans. With the money, black people are shown gleefully lining up at the liquor store with thick wads of cash. Financial correspondent Michael Peterson reports that Sprint stock has sky-rocketed after two million delinquent phone bills are paid, gold and diamonds are both at an all-time high, chicken has shot up to \$600 a bucket, and eight thousand record labels have been started in the last hour. He declares, 'Folks I am happy to report that the recession is now officially over. And we have nobody to thank except all these black people,

with their taste for expensive clothes, fancy cars, and of course, gaudy jewellery.’ Chuck Taylor then reports that the crime rate has fallen to zero percent.

Later in the episode, ‘Reparations 2003’ continues with Chuck Taylor introducing Harlem resident Tron, another recurring character in the show, who has overtaken Bill Gates to become the world’s richest man after a ‘hot hand at a dice game’. Loud and uncouth, Tron exemplifies the common media trope of the drug-dealing, black gangster, complete with du-rag and flashy jewellery. The news segment ends with Chuck Taylor warning white people to ‘run for cover’, after Colin Powell reportedly ‘b---h-slapped’ Vice President Dick Cheney (Chappelle, 2003).

### *Law and Order*

Chappelle introduces this sketch by ruminating:

These major corporations, they rip everybody off, the Enron’s the Tyco’s... And they don’t be getting no time. They don’t get no time in jail! I gotta get in on this being white thing. It’s like there’s two legal systems damn near. It’d be better if like, just for three days, they actually put those guys through the system that we all have to go through. And they put crack dealers and shit through the legal system that they go through. Wouldn’t that be something... (Chappelle, 2004)

The sketch then begins in the format of a *Law and Order* episode. The opening text plate introduces viewers to Charles Jeffries, CEO of Fonecom, who is getting ready for bed and bantering pleasantly with his wife. Just as they are about to make love, a hand grenade slides across the floor. A SWAT team then breaks down the door and, after some loud, incomprehensible yelling, needlessly shoots the Jeffries’ dog before forcibly arresting Charles. The scene then shifts to Tron Carter—the same character from ‘Reparations’—who receives a phone call from detective Charles Stevens, politely notifying him that there is a warrant for his arrest on charges of cocaine trafficking. Tron responds, ‘We don’t want to embarrass someone like me in front of my family and my community’, and the two go on to discuss when a convenient time would be for Tron to turn himself in.

In the interrogation room with Charles Jeffries, detectives angrily demand answers and blow smoke into his face. Charles asks to speak to his lawyer, at which point a dishevelled public defender walks into the room, carrying stacks of folders and explaining ‘you’re like my fourteenth case this week.’ Meanwhile, at the District Attorney’s (DA) office, Tron

compliments the DA on his fine cheese platter and apologizes for being late. After a quick, amiable discussion, Tron agrees to testify before a Senate committee and spend two months in Club Fed.

At the trial of Charles Jeffries, a police officer testifies before the jury, clearly lying about the circumstances of the arrest, and pulls out a large bag of 'pure Columbian heroin' that was allegedly found in the Jeffries' home. Charles ultimately receives the mandatory minimum sentence of life in prison from a judge who disdainfully declares, 'You're the worst kind of scum on the face of the earth. You're an animal, a filthy, big-lipped beast.' The judge congratulates the jury, a cohort of black men, on their decision. The sketch ends with Tron testifying before the Senate Subcommittee on Narcotics, where the crack dealer finds increasingly creative ways of pleading the fifth. After the committee hearing, Tron's lawyer tells him that his sentence has been reduced to one month (Chappelle, 2004).

### **Ideological Implications**

When considering these texts in relation to existing ideological complexes about race, a disruptive streak becomes clear in each of the sketches examined. Most obviously, 'Law and Order' highlights the inequality of the American judicial system, which targets and criminalizes the black community while allowing a culture of impunity to flourish in white corporate America; 'Clayton Bigsby' problematizes essentialist notions of race, revealing the very performative nature of racial identity; and 'Reparations' subtly mocks white perceptions of the black community, with anchorman Chuck Taylor embodying the essence of white privilege and ignorance. Having a sense of Chappelle's politics and social consciousness, the stereotypes employed can easily be read as a tool for undermining rather than reinforcing racial domination. However, a social semiotic approach can never limit itself to the intentions of the speaker, or the producer of a text. Rather, meaning can only exist in dialogue, and thus one must always consider the way these ironies are received.

In thinking methodically about racial stereotypes as a tool for anti-racism, this study proposes that different techniques, or mechanisms, of employing stereotypes have differing levels of stability. The term 'stability' here is adapted from the work of Booth (1974), although with important variations: while Booth's categories of stable and unstable irony are defined by the presence or absence of an affirmative position within the ironic text, this study refers to stability as the accessibility or 'stickiness' of the anti-racist message. That is, stability lies not only in the intention of the producer, as in Booth's categories, but also in the interpretation of the viewer. While it can be assumed that Chappelle's intentions are anti-

racist, how likely viewers are to internalize this message is up for debate. Here, three different mechanisms will be examined, each with a differing degree of ironic stability.

*Highlighting racism through stereotypes of whiteness*

In ‘Reparations,’ the character of Chuck Taylor embodies hegemonic white masculinity. Although occupying a position of authority within the sketch, Chuck remains a ridiculous personality who serves to highlight the subtle racism that continues to exist amongst



Figure 1: Chappelle as Chuck Taylor (Chappelle, 2003)

white Americans. At the end of the first segment of ‘Reparations 2003’, Chuck reports ‘We’re going to take a short break, but when we come back: the crime rate has fallen to zero percent.’ As the camera zooms away from Chuck in anticipation of the commercial break, he facetiously remarks to someone off-camera, ‘How could that be? Did the Mexicans get money today too?’ He proceeds to laugh heartily before realizing that the camera is still rolling. After Chuck is certain he can no longer be heard on air, he reassures one of his production assistants, ‘Listen, I think we’ll be alright because the Mexicans don’t watch the news’ (Chappelle, 2003).

Because the logonomic system of the text structures viewing in a way that audiences come to identify with Chappelle’s point of view, the show forces audience members to perceive whiteness from his perspective as a black American—an unusual position for many of the show’s young white viewers. In a culture of white invisibility, ‘Reparations’ presents a rare instance in which viewers are confronted with black perceptions of whiteness; and although the overall impression left by Chuck Taylor is undeniably humorous, there is also an

undercurrent of smug privilege. If we consider the irony of the portrayal, the said meaning derives its humour from the fact that Chappelle, a black man, is playing a stereotypical and quietly racist white news anchor; thus *the character is absurd*. The unsaid meaning, what is implied but never stated, is that a black man, playing a racist white man, still manages to reveal *truths* about whiteness and white racism; thus, *the character is not absurd*. The ‘truthiness’ of the portrayal pushes Chuck Taylor beyond the realm of simple mimicry and into the realm of the ironic. As Hutcheon argues, the said meaning does not need to be rejected in order for the unsaid to be internalized; or, in this case, one can simultaneously laugh at the absurdity of Chappelle playing the character of Chuck Taylor *and* appreciate the fact that Chuck’s words are in fact not absurd—the very opposite, they reveal realistic and insidious instances of racism. The character may be ridiculous, but what is perhaps more ridiculous is that people not so different from him exist.

I argue that this first mechanism, using white stereotypes to highlight racism, is the most stable of the three to be explored because the intended, unsaid meaning does not necessarily need to be internalized in order for dominant discourses of race to be disrupted. Within certain discursive communities, viewers may interpret the character ironically, and thus view Chuck Taylor as a critique of racism within news media; indeed, it is Chuck’s white privilege that enables him to succeed as an anchor while remaining unabashedly ignorant of other cultures. However, within discursive communities that do not internalize this unsaid meaning, the said meaning alone remains disruptive to notions of white invisibility. To be so aggressively confronted by white stereotypes, especially when performed by a black man, is an inherently jarring experience in a culture that generally holds whiteness as the default, the norm—all the more so for those belonging to privileged, white discursive communities. Even if the ‘truthiness’ of the portrayal is completely ignored, the stereotype renders whiteness highly visible, which in itself is a political gesture. Such stereotypes may be perceived as untrue or unfair, but they always serve to disrupt the status quo, rather than to confirm it.

### *Inverting Racial Stereotypes*

The inversion of racial stereotypes as a tool for undermining racist systems of representation has a long history in American popular culture, demonstrated most notably by the popularity of Blaxploitation films in the 1970s (Hall, 1997: 270). Inversion comes in many forms but always involves an element of semiotic *play*, in which racial signifiers are decoupled from their signifieds. For example, black characters might be inserted into cultural spaces traditionally occupied by whites—as in cowboy films or murder mysteries—and vice versa. Within *Chappelle’s Show*, the sketch ‘Law and Order’ serves as a prime example of this

semiotic tool, as traditional 'roles' within the American justice system are starkly reversed: Charles Jeffries is inserted into stereotypically black spaces, such as the interrogation room and the court room, while Tron Carter comes to occupy stereotypically white spaces like the office of the District Attorney and the Senate subcommittee meeting. Thus, viewers are confronted with a series of discursive clashes in which both white and black stereotypes are playfully displaced. We witness, for example, a well-to-do white man forcibly subdued and handcuffed—an image commonly reserved for black men in American media—while a black drug dealer politely negotiates the time at which he will turn himself into the police. Similarly, in 'Frontline: Clayton Bigsby', a series of semiotic reversals take place when a blind black man, unaware of his own race, uses the N-word to taunt a group of young white



Figures 2 and 3: Chappelle as Clayton Bigsby (Left) and Tron Carter (Right) (Chappelle, 2003; Chappelle, 2004)

men listening to rap music. Here, skin colour, the most common signifier of race, is completely severed from its usual signifieds, as a black man assumes the role of the white supremacist, and a group of white men are labelled with the N-word. This discursive tool works by disrupting tropes that have been naturalized over time, thus exposing the absurdities that exist within the status quo.

As ironic texts, both sketches fulfil Hutcheon's criteria of possessing an evaluative edge along with a said and unsaid meaning. In 'Law and Order', what is ostensibly said in the sketch is that *when blacks and whites reverse roles within the American criminal justice system, the outcome is comical*. What is unsaid, although lurking just beneath the surface, is that *the American criminal justice system is comical*. While the said meaning operates at the level of representation, and humour is derived from the utter shock value of the images, the unsaid meaning operates at the level of ideology, or ideological critique. Once again, these meanings are inclusive, so viewers can rapidly oscillate between the two rather than rejecting one in favour of the other. For example, when Charles Jeffries is introduced to his jury of 'peers', comprised of twelve intimidating black men, viewers can simultaneously find humour in the

highly incongruous image of do-rags and chains in the courtroom *and* acknowledge the implied meaning that black men are often unjustly found guilty by juries comprised exclusively of whites.

Similarly, in 'Frontline: Clayton Bigsby', viewers may laugh because *a black white supremacist is an absurd concept*, while acknowledging the implied, unsaid meaning that *racism itself is an absurd concept*. Indeed, the target of the sketch's irony seems to be racism as a cultural practice, which is revealed to be not only illogical but altogether delusional. The sketch problematizes the very notion of race by showing how whiteness and blackness are quite literally performed; they are external constructs imposed onto individual bodies rather than characteristics inherent to any person. Thus, race is shown to be a social construct and a person's racial identity to be highly fluid and contingent, rather than essential.

While the inversion of stereotypes provides a potent mechanism for disturbing dominant ideologies about race, I argue that it is a less stable discursive tool than the use of white stereotypes. There is more room for slippage or 'mis-interpretation' from the producer's point of view. Here, if a particular discursive community does not interpret the unsaid meaning and derives humour solely from what is overtly said, the laughter aroused stems from how poorly whiteness 'fits' onto black people, or vice versa. Humour, in this case, is derived from incongruity, and racial differences can ultimately be reified. For example, if we wilfully ignore the ironic edge of 'Law and Order', the sketch becomes funny primarily because a black crack cocaine dealer is inserted into various situations where he does not belong. We may come away from the sketch laughing at how different white and black people are from one another without questioning the systemic causes of those differences. Unlike white stereotypes, which contain an element of aggression when used to highlight racism, the stereotype inversions employed in *Chappelle's Show* are marked by incongruity, which is less overtly political. However, these incongruities may still serve to jar viewers, causing them to question the status quo or to search for a second, unsaid meaning.

#### *De-familiarization by exaggeration*

A mainstay in American racial humour, this final mechanism of ironic stereotyping is also the one most commonly employed in *Chappelle's Show*: exaggeration. Exaggeration can serve subversive ends by rendering stereotypes hyper-visible and thus vulnerable to critique; it also serves to highlight viewers' own prejudices by showing the logical extremes of commonly held stereotypes. As Perks (2010: 275) writes, '*Chappelle's Show* presents stereotypes on steroids, pushing the signifiers past the breaking point at which the cultural semiotic system can no

longer safely harbor them'. In making racial systems of representation visible, one can shatter the notion of a colour blind society and begin to critique the images that have been normalized over time. As many writers have observed, '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' (Schulman, 1995: 439).

The most apparent example of this technique can be found in the portrayal of African-Americans in 'Reparations'. Playing with white perceptions of the black community as showy, materialistic, and feckless, the sketch adopts and exaggerates a host of stereotypes about African-Americans. Tron Carter, in particular, serves as a representational vessel for all of the stereotypes associated with the black male Other: he is a crack cocaine dealer, as seen in 'Law



Figure 4: Chappelle as Tron Carter in 'Reparations' (Chappelle, 2003)

and Order'; a childish and uncouth gangster-type with a taste for flashy jewellery; and a predatory threat to white womanhood, touching Stephanie the reporter inappropriately as she attempts to interview him and taunting Chuck Taylor with the jab, 'I got your girl!' (Chappelle, 2003). Through characters like Tron, Chappelle dramatizes the experience of double consciousness by playing on white perceptions of the black community, a tactic used by countless other comedians of colour in all manner of media: 'Mocking the features ascribed to them by outsiders has become one of the most effective ethnic infusions into national humour' (Boskin and Dorinson, 1998: 220). In 'Reparations', the said meaning could not be clearer: *black people are crazy*. The accompanying unsaid meaning, however, might ring loudly for some and not at all for others: *white people think black people are crazy*, or perhaps, *racists think black people are crazy (and you might be racist)*.

In the context of this research paper, Chappelle's anti-racism comes through quite clearly in not only his introductions to the sketches but also in his stand-up routines and interviews. As the writer and producer of *Chappelle's Show*, he entrusts his audience with highly ambivalent sketches with the expectation that they approach the texts with discernment—a trust he ultimately felt they could not handle. At a 2004 show in Sacramento where he was repeatedly interrupted by audience members heckling him with lines from his own show, Chappelle finally responded, 'You know why my show is good? Because the network officials say you're not smart enough to get what I'm doing, and every day I fight for you. I tell them how smart you are. Turns out, I was wrong. You people are stupid' (Carnes, 2004).

From a researcher's standpoint, then, it is safe to say that Chappelle injects his racial stereotypes with a sharp sense of irony. However, as this study has repeatedly emphasized, meaning can only exist in dialogue, and in this case, the act of interpretation has important implications. Viewers whose discursive communities overlap with Chappelle's will internalize the unsaid meaning of a sketch like 'Reparations'. In fact, the unsaid meaning will likely be the louder and more powerful of the two. If, however, viewers are not familiar with the logonomic systems at play, then the unsaid meaning will recede or perhaps disappear altogether, leaving only what is being said: *black people are crazy*—'crazy', of course, serving as shorthand for the collection of Othering traits described above. In the case of exaggeration, the said meaning, when it isn't counterbalanced by the unsaid, by an ironic edge, actually reinforces harmful racial stereotypes.

Furthermore, as Hutcheon argues, ironic meanings are always inclusive. Thus, even viewers who perceive the unsaid meaning may find un-ironic pleasure in the racial stereotypes portrayed. As Hutcheon (1994: 12) writes, 'Interpreters "mean" as much as ironists do, and often in opposition to them: to attribute irony where it is intended—and where it is not—or to refuse to attribute irony where it might be intended is also the act of a conscious agent'. Interpreters have the agency to form their own meanings, and thus, despite the intentions of the speaker, interpretations of ironic materials will always be contingent. This conundrum demonstrates the *transideological* nature of irony: the fact that 'nothing is ever guaranteed at the politicized scene of irony' (Hutcheon, 1994, p. 15).

Irony becomes especially slippery in this final case because the said meaning is firmly embedded within dominant racial ideologies. Unlike white stereotypes or stereotype inversions, which generally disrupt representative norms, the exaggeration of stereotypes may sit comfortably with those who believe the stereotypes to be true. In this case, nothing

jars the viewer or triggers the search for a second meaning. For those who find black racial stereotypes to be un-ironically funny, satisfaction can be derived from the said meaning alone. Thus, when Chappelle became disturbed by the laughter of his white cameraman, he joined a long line of black comedians who discovered that ‘sometimes the laughter is of a confused sort, owing to misinterpretation, the joke merged with history and the ears of whites placed at awkward angles’ (Haygood, 2000: 31).

## CONCLUSION

The three mechanisms presented above are by no means an exhaustive list of the anti-racist tools used by Chappelle. Nor is the study intended to be a guide on how to effectively use racial stereotypes to combat racism. The argument made is not that white stereotypes have more political efficacy than exaggerated stereotypes, but that the two mechanisms have varying degrees of stability. Thus, when discursive communities overlap, the use of exaggerated stereotypes might prove to be highly subversive. However, in situations where discursive communities do not perfectly overlap and logonomic systems are unclear—which, in television, will almost always be the case—ironic stereotypes will more likely be interpreted as anti-racist when *said meanings* are disruptive, as is the case with white stereotypes and inverted stereotypes, than when *said meanings* align with dominant systems of representation, as with exaggerated stereotypes. This conclusion was reached through the critical discourse analysis (CDA) of three *Chappelle’s Show* sketches, using the approach outlined in Hodge and Kress’s (1988) seminal work on social semiotics.

The argument advanced in this study, however, remains a theory in its present form and requires audience research to be further validated. Interviews with viewers would serve as an insightful follow-up, allowing researchers to identify how viewers from different backgrounds, and thus different discursive communities, produce varying interpretations of racial stereotypes. Additionally, interviews could provide valuable information on how viewers navigate between said and unsaid meanings, and under what circumstances they do or do not interpret irony.

What can be stated conclusively, however, is that so long as racist stereotypes exist within dominant systems of representation, so long as ‘Tron Carters’ are embedded within the recesses of the popular imagination, the use of ironic stereotypes will be highly vexed. Or, in the words of Bambi Haggins (2009: 248), ‘As long as there is racism, doing racial satire will be problematic’. When jokes merge with history, as all jokes of a political nature must, the

dominant will inevitably colour the oppositional, and for some viewers, it will displace the oppositional altogether. This pattern becomes all the more acute with ironic texts because no one meaning is guaranteed: irony's edge always cuts both ways.

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