

## Just Satire?: Minority Television Culture and Post-Racial Ideologies

Melissa Zimdars

Racial humor before the mainstreaming of post-racial discourses often operated in service of larger social and political critique. From Bernie Mac's racial "truisms" to Rock's "full-throttle ideological assaults" television was-- and remains-- an important forum for the interplay of different racial discourses and incisive political and social critique. For example, *Chappelle's Show* (2003-2006) indicts continued racism in American society precisely by evoking racial stereotypes and pushing audiences to think about their own complicity in continued racism and racialized thinking.

However, racial humor reflecting post-racial discourses seem to be without larger purpose, instead existing simply because it is now deemed "safe" to make fun of race when race "no longer matters." In other words, post-racial logics push back against continued claims of both systemic and individual racism, and disarticulate race as a salient identity category while simultaneously reveling in continued racialized assumptions and thinking. This logic is clearly contradictory and flawed, yet it always seems to be part of larger debates concerning contemporary racial politics. People who are socially and politically conservative may evoke post-racial discourses to critique programs like affirmative action or to defend against accusations of racism, but others truly believe-- or want to believe-- that we have entered into a multicultural era of not only tolerance, but equality and understanding where race shouldn't have to matter.

Reflecting these logics, contemporary post-racial satire and comedy tends to be more ambiguous and contradictory, simultaneously framing race as a non-issue while reifying racial stereotypes. Additionally, programs such as *Key and Peele* (2012- ), *Modern Family* (2009- ), and *Glee* (2009- ) all frequently discuss race, but rarely address broader issues or offer social or political critique.

For example, the Comedy Central program *Key and Peele* (2012- ) features two biracial comedians, Keegan-Michael Key and Jordan Peele, who engage with experiences, tensions and contradictions between the Black identities of the comedians, their characters, and with Black caricatures and stereotypes in popular culture more broadly. However, *Key & Peele* sketches rarely interrogate the basis for these tensions and contradictions, nor the impetus behind necessitating context-specific racialized performances (like when they demonstrate the way they switch between "talking Black" and "talking White"). Without the social critique behind the use of stereotypes, the onus of racism shifts to Black people moderating their own "blackness" in order to fit into a White world, relieving White audiences of their own culpability in sustaining systems of racial inequality and individual racialized thinking.

Like *Key and Peele*, *Modern Family* and *Glee* use racial humor in similar ways within a post-racial context. Narratives and joke structures often follow a format where people who initially believe stereotypes are critiqued for being judgmental or ignorant. But as storylines progress, those stereotypes consistently prove to be true or accurate. In one episode *Glee*, Will visits Jane Addams Academy, an impoverished inner city high school, to accuse them of stealing a routine. The principal response to Will's accusations by challenging his preconceived notions about the urban high school and the minority students who go there. Yet the narrative continues in conformation of the fact that the principal and her students are, indeed, lying and stealing competition ideas, showing that Will's initial generalizations about race, class, and morality were correct. This narratives construct a conflicting message; stereotypes are bad and people shouldn't always believe them, yet they often prove to be representative.

Furthermore, in many instances, the humor across these programs is directed not at those in positions of power or authority, as satire most often functions, but to groups relatively powerless and historically subordinated. This flip has lead toward a style of humor that "kicks down" without awareness of the privilege required to make such jokes in the first place.

In conclusion, satire before the mainstreaming of post-racial discourses of course contained stereotypes as well. What television text doesn't to some extent? We need to understand not only the way they are functioning, but also how they shift over time and are influenced by different contexts. We need to go beyond simple identification to understand how they are operating, as they may be useful for broad critique and for opening up racial politics for larger social debate. On the other hand, and as is the case for post-racial humor, we can also see recent shows are a long way away from evoking stereotypes for these ends.