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Cinematic Camouflage

Jared Valdez
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Jared Valdez
Candidate

University of New Mexico Department of English
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Stephen Benz

Bruno Gagnon

CINEMATIC CAMOUFLAGE

BY

JARED VALDEZ

A.A., General Studies, Santa Fe Community College, 2015
BA, English Studies, University of New Mexico, 2016
MA, English, University of New Mexico, 2018

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DEDICATION

This is dedicated to the two individuals who gave unconditional support to a young boy's dream: my mother and father.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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ABSTRACT

There is a war for recognition happening on the Hollywood battlefield. Traditionally, in every war there is an enemy and an alley; in this study, the enemy is systemic racism, and the alley is Black culture. That is, this dissertation seeks to detail the past, present, and future implications of this battle for truth, inclusion, and recognition in American pop culture. This discussion examines how various multi-media forms like literature, film, television, and comic books work as tools to combat racism in American society. More importantly, the theories presented in this text are all linked to actual tactics of military warfare. Specifically, how Black artists, actors, authors, and filmmakers have successfully deployed the use of camouflage to gain exposure and funding in American popular culture. Ultimately, this dissertation identifies battles won, territories gained, and looks towards a new dawn when the war against systemic racism will be won.

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Chapter 1

The Term

First and foremost, I would like to acknowledge and dismantle any correlations my theories presented in this argument have with that of the toxic and brutal history of the military/police as a primary apparatus of state control of Black populations in the US. I choose to signify my theories with those of the military because I am objectively acknowledging a *war* for recognition that Black artists and filmmakers are fighting. As such, in every war there are specific *tactics* that are used to fight and vanquish the enemy. Thus, my primary concern is quite literally offensive and defensive strategies of warfare. Likewise, the arguments I present are not specific to Black culture. For instance, the Asian/American experience is filled with examples of tactical camouflage. An example of this is manifested in the work of artist Liu Bolin, whose work is primarily devoted to the metaphorical symbology of the camouflaged minority in a capitalist society. Bolin's piece *Hiding in the City, Info Wall*, takes the dimensions of camouflage and uses them to critique, and question the means of capitalism, power, and segregation (See Figure 1). Bolin talks about the "dissolving" of the self behind mass culture in his 2014 TedTalk, "The Invisible Man." This of course is also a homage to the brilliant work of Black author Ralph Ellison. Likewise, the journey of Hispanic representation in film, literature and theory can be applied to all aspects of my arguments. Figures like Edward James Olmos, Americo Parades and Gloria Anzaldua arguably all had instances where their lives or their art represented and

demanded a militarized strategy to strike their racist enemies; often this was through means of camouflage.

Figure 1: Liu Bolin. Hiding in the city, Info wall (2011). Ink Jet Prints. 118.7 x 149.9. Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Ithaca, NY.

Therefore, I argue that there is a war waging between Black artists and the systemically racist dimension of Hollywood, including actors, directors, critics, and producers. Donna Murch's text, "The Prison of Popular Culture: Rethinking the Seventy-Fourth Annual Academy," further develops the dimensions of this war. Murch examines, "The struggle for representation remains one of the most profound aspects" in Hollywood. She states that Black artists face the issue of "representation at all levels of the industry" (25). This includes a lack of funding from production companies, respect from critics, and a significant lack of Black artists' involvement in the films they create. Murch continues to lament that one of the most difficult challenges Black filmmakers face in Hollywood is "a contestation over symbolic representations, of ideology and control over one's image," where "issues of stereotype and racial myth reside…" (26). Thus, I argue that the systemically racist battle Black filmmakers fight in Hollywood is a war for representation and recognition.

Yet, issues of representation and the public image of Blackness are only some of the many issues concerning racism in Hollywood. In his text, *The Complexity and Progression of Black Representation in Film and Television,* David Moody adds to these layers of oppression. However, he first acknowledges that despite all odds, Black film makers and actors made themselves known since the very beginning. Moody writes, "From…the early stages in American cinema, African Americans had a presence on the silver screen." In fact, Moody notes, "The twentieth century created a new era of cinema that consisted of films produced for and targeted to an all-Black audience. 'Race films,' which existed in the United States for over thirty years (1913– 1948)." These films were made by Black producers and they most often "focused on Black themes and highlighted the talents of African American directors, producers, scriptwriters, and actors." Still, many scholars argued these "early films were not truly Black because their functions, more or less, were to enlighten and mollify White people's curiosity concerning Black culture." (1-2) Likewise, during the 20s and 30s, "Black filmmakers such as William Foster, Oscar Micheaux, and Spencer Williams…were frequently afflicted by financial concerns, technical issues, problems with distribution, and controversial storylines." Despite this, for Moody "Race films" ultimately "made strong statements regarding class, color caste, and religion, while at the same time highlighting the conflict that exists between the distinctions of Whiteness versus Blackness." (9-10) Moody's remarks are poignant because they suggest that like Black actors, Black producers, and directors during the early ages of Hollywood needed to navigate objective racism in order to be represented in a space that was run socially and financially by white people. If they did not, the history of Black film would be arguably delayed, or abolished and certainly changed. Yet, many scholars and critics of this era in Black film history fail to acknowledge the success in their deeds. More specifically, how they did it.

Chapter 2

The Terrain

In every war, there is the terrain. I argue that in the war for recognition - for this discussion - the battlefield's terrain is the white Hollywood landscape. Most of the inhabitants of this place have always been dominantly populated by white people. This includes every facet of cinematic production (i.e., costume designers, writers, actors, musicians, directors, etc.). In her text, "Whose 'Black Film' Is This? The Pragmatics and Pathos of Black Film Scholarship," Terri Francis describes the cinematic landscape as "an absurd media environment and popular culture in which…." Black audiences "distrust Hollywood" (147). According to scholar Carol Clover in her text, "Dancin' in the Rain," and several other researchers, the white architects of this "absurd" landscape steal building blocks from Black visionaries, which creates "distrust" between artists, producers, and audience members. Thus, Black artists fight a battle in a terrain where they are significantly outnumbered by an enemy who steals and hordes a large portion of creative and political power.

The Hollywood terrain can be further understood in terms of a mass ornament which illustrates how white hegemony and hermeneutics have worked to place Black individuals into a racial ornament. This theory lays the groundwork for how Black filmmakers and actors broke barriers of racism by fracturing the traditional, socially constructed, white Hollywood space. First, I will describe and examine the racial ornament through space and setting. Second, I will elaborate on this structure by placing a finer lens on the individual inhabitants of the ornament. Consequently, this cultural/socio study will create a map of identity formation through communal resistance– or what I call the new Hollywood ornament– which works through individual detachment and group attachment.

Yet, to understand the spectrum of this discussion readers must briefly acknowledge and comprehend Siegfried Kracauer's text, *The Mass Ornament* (1963), and what he claims the ornament is. Kracauer examines that "the bearer of the ornaments is the *mass ana* not the people, for

whenever the people form figures, the latter do not hover in midair but arise out of a community."

Again, the construction, understanding and functions of the racial ornament are designed through

the ideology of white privilege. Kracauer continues, "a current of organic life surges from these

communal groups—which share a common destiny—to their ornaments, endowing these

ornaments with a magic force and burdening them with meaning to such an extent that they cannot

be reduced to a pure assemblage of lines" (76). Thus, if we are to understand white Hollywood as

being the controller of the ornament, the common destiny that is supposed to be shared with

Black people is one of oppression and subservience. Not being part of an assemblage of lines is

seemingly a positive factor; however, the meaning white power associates with the racial ornament

is so immense, there is seemingly no reduction of it.

Therefore, one logical solution would be for Black filmmakers to choose individuality

rather than being part of the traditional systemically racist Hollywood assemblage. However,

Kracauer's continues:

> Those who have withdrawn from the community and consider themselves to be unique
>
> personalities with their own individual souls also fail when it comes to forming these new
>
> patterns. Were they to take part in such a performance, their ornament would not
>
> transcend them. It would be a colorful composition that could not be worked out to its
>
> logical conclusion, since its points—like the prongs of a rake—would be implanted in the
>
> soul's intermediate strata, of which a residue would survive…It is the mass that is
>
> employed here. Only as parts of a mass, not as individuals who believe themselves to be
>
> formed from within, do people become fractions of a figure. (76)

First, Kracauer identifies the fact that each individual person processes their own ornament.

Therefore, ornaments do not always work in the fashion of subjection, racism, etc.; rather, they

can also be protective realms of individuality. However, Kracauer notes that these individuals who

withdraw from the mass are always already either re-enveloped by the power of the racial ornament or are inflicted with the residue of its power. Still, the decisive point he makes that is especially poignant for our discussion is instead of employing an individualist approach to dismantling the ornament, individuals can fracture it by working together as parts of the mass who were also formed from within it. That is, instead of choosing just individuality, Black filmmaker, actors and executives created a new Hollywood ornament that was diverse, equitable and accessible for audiences of all races. One primary way this is done, is through Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s theory of signifyin(g) which will be examined throughout my entire discussion.

Understanding Hollywood as a terrain, space, ornament, assemblage or body, must be approached through a macro and micro lens. In his book *The Racial Contract*, Charles Mills discissions of space is the best way to approach this discussion. Mills claims that on "the local level of specialization, norming then manifests itself in the presumption that certain spaces (e.g., those of the inner city) are intrinsically doomed to welfare dependency, high street crime, underclass status, because of the characteristics of its inhabitants, so that the larger economic system has no role in creating these problems" (50). Thus, the Hollywood terrain is dependent on the characteristics and actions of its inhabitants. This notion arguably indicates that the "political space" of the white Hollywood ornament "is not coextensive with its geographical space," rather, because it embraces all bodies, the entirety of the space is affected. Thus, through Mills, the Hollywood terrain could be recognized as "(dark) spaces" which would indicate a color line that is "discontinuous with white political space, where the rules are different in ways ranging from differential funding (school resources, garbage collection, infrastructural repair) to the absence of police protection" (51). That is, on a macro scale the (dark) space in traditional Hollywood is always already oppressive. Yet, Black filmmakers, actors and executives have fought to dismantle this space.

Still, to grasp the dynamics of the Hollywood space, we must view these people through a micro lens. Mills continues to observe that "there is the microspace of the body itself (which in a sense is the foundation of all the other levels) …that the persons and subpersons, the citizens and noncitizens, who inhabit these polities do so embodied in envelopes of skin, flesh, hair" (52). Mills claims that the microspace of the body is the foundation of all other levels. Likewise, the bodies within this ornament carry "a halo of blackness around it which may actually make some whites physically uncomfortable" where "Lewis Gordon suggests that the black 'presence is a form of absence…Every black person becomes a limb of an enormous black body: THE BLACK BODY…but even when blacks' heads are talking, one is always uncomfortably aware of the bodies to which these heads are attached" (53). This passage is reminiscent of Kracauer's discussion of the mass ornament as a kaleidoscopic ballet, or performance from the Tiller Girls through the visual representation of a mass of talking heads. Likewise, THE BLACK BODY can easily be applied to the new Hollywood ornament where Black actors and filmmakers are not only recognized, but they are also limbs, they are the body. As individuals their "black halos" make the hegemons uncomfortable, consequently their voices are heard, recognized and funded.

Mills concludes his text by claiming that 1920s "rock and roll" was perceived by "some white conservatives as a communist plot because it brought the rhythms of the black body into the white bodily space; it began the funky subversion of that space." Mills states that these musical symbols were "jungle rhythms, telegraphed from the space of savagery, threatening the civilized space of the white polity and the carnal integrity of its inhabitants" (53). What is most important to our discussion is Mill's explanation of how white space– or the racial ornament– is disoriented through music. This subversion through communal ornamental artforms – most important for my discussion being film - is a key discovery in the resistance of the hegemonic Hollywood

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ornament. Likewise, the forming of a new body – or ornament – is not something that is specific

to Black culture. All oppressed minority groups have engaged in redefining the spaces they inhabit.

Chapter 3

Theorizing Military Tactics

Once I recognized a war for recognition in Hollywood, and understood the battlefield terrain, I found it logical to conclude that Black artists use military tactics to combat racism in Hollywood. Ultimately, the issue I hope to raise in my dissertation is that since the beginning of Hollywood, Black artists have had to fight a war against systemic racism to gain recognition, respect, and creative control over their own work. Yet, my thesis statement will propose that through tactics such as *camouflage*, Black artists are winning the battle. However, before I further my discussion of *camo*, it is important that you understand the theories presented by Henry Louis Gates Jr. surrounding signifyin(g) in his text, *The Signifying Monkey*. Gates makes crucial distinctions between the meanings of white traditional forms of the words sign, signifier and signification and those of Black vernacular. For Black language, "Signifyin(g) is the Black trope of tropes. The figure for Black rhetorical figures," which is to say, Gates argues that all Black language falls under the category of signifyin(g). In their essay, "The Rhetoric of Freedom in Lorraine Hansberry's Play," Mohsen Hanif and Maryam Jalalifarahani examine:

> Thus, 'signifyin(g)' as the language of trickery, can mean any of a number of things; in the case of the toast about the signifying monkey, it certainly refers to the trickster's ability to talk with great innuendo, to carp, cajole, needle, and lie. It can mean in other instances the propensity to talk around a subject, never quite coming to the point. It can mean making fun of a person or situation. Also it can denote speaking with the hands and eyes, and in this respect encompasses a whole complex of expressions and gestures. Thus it is signifying to stir up a fight between neighbors by telling stories; it is signifying to make fun of a policeman by parodying his motions behind his back; it is signifying to ask for a piece of cake by saying, 'my brother needs a piece of cake.' (54)

Thus, another key distinction Gates makes is that unlike in white vernacular, the signifier is the person speaking in Black vernacular, literally the one who signifies. Likewise, where white

vernacular is fixated on "denotation," Black language is focused on "connotation (subjective,

hidden meanings, expressive)." This tradition developed during the period of slavery as a

survival mechanism. White slave drivers were not able to decipher Black vernacular because

every word was stylized, meant multiple different things and was a celebration of the subjective.

As signifyers, scholars of Black culture have long embraced this tradition. In fact, Gates

notes, "The black English vernacular, as early as this [1828], was a sign of black difference,

blackness of the tongue. It is not surprising that the vernacular is the source from which black

theory springs." (110) For instance, Nella Larson created the term *passing* to describe the

experience of her lead characters Clare and Irene. According to the article "Nella Larson's

Passing," Doreen Fowler argues, "Larsen's subject is a refusal to fully identify with African

Americans, but Larsen's critique is not only directed at members of the black community who

pass for white; rather, *Passing* explores how race is repressed in the United States among both

whites and some members of what Irene refers to as 'Negro society'" (157). Larson thus

signified the word *passing* to make sense of the self-loathing some Blacks experienced that was

manifested by white hatred. Again, in his 1903 text *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B Du Bois begins

his discussion by lamenting "between me and the other world, there is ever an unasked

question" (2). These remarks set up his theories of *double-consciousness* which Du Bois uses to

signify that Black America is not white America and Black Americans know it. Likewise, in 1952

Ralph Ellison - who was heavily influenced by Booker T. Washington - presented the term

invisibility in his iconic novel *Invisible Man*. Ellison used this word to describe how being Black in

America made you invisible to the rest of white America, thus being left segregated and lost.

This dissertation seeks to contribute to this tradition of signifyin(g) by introducing a new term of

resistance to the history of Black filmmaking. Erik Nielson examines in his essay "White

Surveillance of the Black Arts," that Black filmmakers throughout the history of racist

Hollywood used "strategies of annihilation and confrontation" which "can be seen instead as tactics" (171). There are several tactical ways in which Black artists have successfully resisted racism in Hollywood. Yet, in this dissertation, I will seek to understand how Black artists fight the war for recognition by being unrecognized, stealthily, through the tactics of *camouflage.*

Another distinction about relating camouflage to the film industry is that it is not necessarily a new concept. Activists and theorists Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino in their discussion, "Toward a Third Cinema," also relate military, war, revolution, and resistance with the cinematic landscape. They describe, "the camera is the inexhaustible expropriator of image weapons; the projector, a gun that can shoot 24 frames per second" (9). They also label the film crew as a "film-guerrilla group" that always finds themselves in "the same situation as a guerrilla unit" where the group "cannot grow strong without military structures and command concepts." Of course, in this example Solanas and Getino were referring to a particular type of film that had intentions of combating matters such as political, social and economic atrocities. Still, the connection can easily be made to the history of Black film and the people who fought/fight for representation in the systemically racist terrain of the Hollywood battlefield.

This conclusion is seemingly a contradiction; how can a battle for recognition, with the intent of being seen, be fought through a tactic with a specific use of invisibility? Therein lies the answer, white audiences, producers, film studio executives, and directors must be fooled into a seemingly white illusion. This is done by camouflaging Blackness to take over whiteness from the inside out. When I looked back at the history of Hollywood, I realized that the more camouflage is successfully deployed by Black filmmakers, the more terrain on the cinematic battlefield they win. This is to say, throughout the history of the war for recognition, camouflage has been used in various ways because the objectives were different for Black artists at the beginning of the battle when racism was arguably more rampant than it is now. In their text,

"Cultural Evolution of Military Camouflage," Laszlo Talas et al. note that "At face value, the function of camouflage - whether in the natural world, in or in civilian contexts…is straightforward: concealment." However, they continue to examine that the most "striking feature of camouflage is its diversity…Within a single theatre of war…different units within the same army, employ markedly different solutions to concealment of the same objects, most obviously a human body" (1). Likewise, in the cinematic "theatre of war," the "obvious concealment" that Hollywood targets are the "human body" which I argue is diversely concealed by Black artists through camouflage.

Chapter 4

The War's History

Therefore, I acknowledged that camouflage is "diverse" and is not always used combatively. The military and cinematic uses of camouflage demonstrate that this tactic is also used co-operatively or simply as a means of concealment for survival. For example, the tradition of cinematic camouflage can be traced back to the early 20th century during the Classical Hollywood period - roughly between the years 1910-1950, when camouflage was used visibly and objectively through means of the body. For instance, Lincoln Perry - known in Hollywood as Stepin Fetchit - got his first break in Hollywood in 1927 when he was cast in the silent film *In Old Kentucky*. On the set, Perry acted confused and lost. This act of camouflage instantly worked with the white executives, making Perry one of the first Black Hollywood movie stars. Yet, in his text, *Stepin Fetchit: The Life and Times of Lincoln Perry,* biographer Mel Watkins examines that Perry was an "amazingly complex man. Intelligent -- and he was anything but what people take him to be" (108). Still, in the 1930s Perry's career came to an end due to criticism of his roles in film and how those roles negatively depicted Black people.

Yet, in 1968 Perry rebuked those claims when he filed a lawsuit against CBS. The legal transcript of the case is provided in the appendix. There are many facets of this case to dissect. The episode in question, narrated by Bill Cosby – a contemptuous figure in the history of Black film and culture – endeavored to explain the history of the public image of Blackness in American pop culture. The arguments made against Perry in the series were based on the premise that he became rich through "selling out" his own race by accepting stereotypical roles in Hollywood. Their rebuke does hold some truth, "blame for the roles was squarely placed by the telecast upon the whites who wrote, produced and directed them," yet the word *was* should have been replaced with *failed to.* Clearly, Cosby places Perry as the primary catalyst to why these roles existed. The episode fails to acknowledge that Perry was the first Black movie star and the

blame for his exploitation should be directly placed on the white racist Hollywood executives who enforced it.

For Perry, he was arguably engaging in a form of camouflage so that he could break the white walls of power in early Hollywood. As the case digresses, "Perry was himself responsible for the erroneous two-million-dollar figure. He fostered the story and allowed it to circulate publicly so that he could be given credit for being a millionaire and also for setting an example that Negroes are millionaires." Given the period and the fact that there was almost zero Black representation in Hollywood, Perry's use of camouflage was not combative – some may argue that Perry simply contributed to Black stereotypes – yet it was effective and arguably represented one of the first battles won in the war for recognition. His actions also demonstrated that a Black man in America could become a millionaire by doing something they loved. Of course, Perry lost his case, the court found that there was no defamation or an invasion of privacy against him. Furthermore, because of Cosby's exalted place in pop culture, that gave him the right to freely comment on Perry as he pleased.

During this period in Hollywood history, Perry was not the only actor who had to take on stereotypical roles for Blacks to be represented on the screen. For example, like Perry, Hattie McDaniel was heavily criticized by the NAACP for her performances in films such as, *Gone with the Wind*, where she plays the mammy character. Still, MacDaniel became the first Black actor to win an Academy Award and an Oscar during a time of intense segregation (See Figure 2). As the article "Photo Essay - Blacks in Film and Television" argues, though some scholars saw McDaniel's and Perry's work as a means of making money by "letting down their race," the reverse can be said, Black actors during the 1930s and 1940s did what they had must to gain representation and through it, inspired future generations of Black filmmakers, actors and eventually executives. For example, the 1950s gave birth to powerhouse actors like "Dorothy

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Dandridge who is considered the first Black female movie star." She was the first Black actor to be nominated for an Oscar in a starring role, yet it wouldn't be until 2001 for a Black woman to win that award when Halle Berry won for her role in *Monster's Ball.*

Figure 2"Hattie McDaniel." The American Mosaic: The African American Experience, ABC-CLIO, 2023, africanamerican2.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/1642632. Accessed 2 May 2023.

However, in New Hollywood (1960-1980) and Contemporary Hollywood (1980-Present), camouflage is used subjectively - in a technological realm - on material, socio, cultural and psychological levels. Still, not every period of Black film can be covered in this text; thus,

this dissertation will focus roughly between 1950 and 2020. During this 7-decade period, the history of military camouflage, Black cinema, politics, and culture all coincide together. In 1947 Jackie Robinson became the first Black man to play in the MLB. Where in Hollywood, a sleeping giant – Sidney Poitier - had just received his first role in the movie, *No Way Out* (1950). In his article, "Conservative Implications of the Irrelevance of Racism in Contemporary Africa," Earl Sheridan elaborates, "After the Second World War, as America began to confront racism, so did Hollywood" (179). However, even though Black artists won early battles during this time, this was just the beginning of the race wars in modern American cinematic, social, and political history.

In 1964 Poitier became the first Black actor to win an Oscar for a starring role in his film *Lilies of the Field* (1963), yet "Poitier was criticized for always playing the stereotype of 'the Good Negro' who never stepped outside the lines of propriety." In addition, the apparent progress made during this time was seen by many scholars as white-washed and fornicated. Sheridan later examines that actors like Poitier were viewed by many "critics" as "White America's vision of what a Black man should be rather than a real flesh-and-blood man who was allowed to be angry or sensual" (180). This construct relates to Murch's argument about Black artists' inability to properly represent the self in such a racist and hostile environment. However, it also raises the question of motivation. That is to say, scholars like Sheridan fail to examine why Black artists choose to create the art they do during the time they make it.

For instance, Sydney Poitier's artistic intent is arguably drastically different from a filmmaker like Spike Lee's because the definitions and challenges of the war for recognition were different during the 1950s than during the 1990s and 2000s. Instead of seeing actors like Poitier and Perry as lesser, I argue that without their camouflaged artistic compromises, contemporary Black film would not exist as we know it. Thus, motivation can be sparked for multiple reasons,

which include financial comfort, successfully representing the self, demonstrating a realistic perspective of Black culture and society, combating systemic racism, etc. Still, the arguments made in my dissertation are not meant to imply artistic intent; instead, I am more concerned with the result of the art itself. I also realize that Hollywood films are not the sole creation of any artist; there are multiple facets of production, including actors, make-up artists, cinematographers, producers, directors, etc.

Like Poitier, Jackie Robinson also faced adversity on the Hollywood battlefield. In her essay, "Hedda Hopper, Hollywood Gossip, and the Politics of Racial Representation," Jennifer Frost discusses Black film critics in the 1940s. Frost notes that in 1950 Jackie Robinson "traveled to Hollywood to consult with the producers making a biopic about his life." The film, *The Jackie Robinson Story* (1950), "starring Robinson himself, presented a portrait of an African American man with ambition and talent and heralded a significant change in Hollywood's depiction of African Americans." However, Frost concludes that "the limits of racial change in the motion picture industry were clear" when Robinson faced Black film critics. (36) Still, Frost is keen to point out that during this period, the relationship between race and film was spotlighted in mass media. Frost states, "The first year of peace following the end of World War II was also the year in which Hollywood would either further 'the war-driven, nuanced changes in racial depiction' or 'restore its prewar racial order.'" Meanwhile, in Hollywood, the "NAACP…opened a Hollywood bureau in 1946 to more closely monitor how movies presented African American characters…" (40). Clearly, Black artists during the 40s and 50s did not concede artistic control back to "prewar racial" orders. Instead, they waged battle and changed how Black art and culture were represented in film.

Furthermore, the 1960s were filled with key political figures who made groundbreaking changes in society during critical historical events (i.e., Rosa Parks, the assassinations of Malcolm

X and MLK, the Civil Rights Act, Affirmative Action, Black Power, etc.). Similarly, Black artists were redefining the spaces they inhabited on all battle fronts. For example, musicians like Jimi Hendrix, Ray Charles, and Diana Ross redefined the art of how they played their instruments, influencing generations of future musicians and producers. Likewise, in film, Black artists were breaking the foundations of white Hollywood. In his article, "Tryin' to Get Over': 'Super Fly,' Black Politics, and Post-Civil Rights Film Enterprise," Eithne Quin examines, "Blaxploitation-era filmmaking took place in the aftermath of the 1964 Civil Rights Act (prohibiting job bias) when intense battles were fought to dismantle the entrenched culture of Black exclusion from desirable work." Quin continues to examine that "Film was a key site of contest: an industry full of good jobs and high revenues." Emerging from the Post-Civil Rights era were some of the most influential Black filmmakers in the history of cinema. Quin concludes, "directors of the most successful and prototypical blaxploitation films Van Peebles…Ossie Davis… Gordon Parks Sr…were among legions of Black people across America who sought to seize new opportunities and convert the formal promises of civil rights legislation into concrete jobs and infrastructural reform" (87). Thus, the clear linkage between politics, race, film, and camouflage is represented by the Black directors, producers, and actors who tactically resisted racism on every front mentioned. The gravity of the movies made by filmmakers such as Melvin Van Peebles, Ossie Davis, and Gordon Parks Sr represents the battles they won against the systemically racist Hollywood system.

However, not all scholars and Black audience members see these films as a means of resistance. Wright further explores, "Blaxploitation cinema…was often produced and written by Whites for the purpose of making a profit in low-income Black communities" (67). Wright concludes his essay by reflecting on "the rise of blaxploitation to the growing militancy among young Blacks inspired by the activism of the Black Power movement and the decline in

popularity of older, more conservative Black actors like Sidney Poitier." That is, audience expectations were changing during the 70s. Wright explains, "Black audiences were craving new, hip heroes to cheer for at the movies. They disliked the fact that Poitier's characters were often too perfect, unrealistic, nonaggressive, and sexless" (69). By the mid-1970s, Black filmmakers' response to this shift in audience expectations disrupted systemic racism on multiple fronts.

However, these Black films and filmmakers took a long time to find their way into contemporary cinematic scholarly discussions. Francis later explains that "Black film is an underground network of lost and recovered fragmentary archives, such as the LA Rebellion films…" (148). Francis' point demonstrates the importance of my project as I hope my research will contribute to contemporary scholarship that raises awareness of Black art's impact on the contemporary cinematic landscape. On the socio/political front, the 1970s were defined by Black women who led the African American Womanist movement. One of the most notable members was Shirley Chisholm, who ran for the presidency in 1972. In conjunction, Black actors like Pam Grier, Diana Sands, and Rosalind Cash carved a new space in Hollywood for Black female artists. By the 1980s, Black people were infiltrating all functions of white systemic American society. For example, Jesse Jackson nearly won the Democratic primary, and Oprah's iconic television talk show was preparing to launch to the tops of the rating charts.

Despite many battles being won during the 50s, 60s, 70s, and 80s, the war for recognition was still rampant in American politics, society, and cinema. In 1992 Los Angeles broke out into riots because of the civil rights violations against Rodney King. That same year, Spike Lee released his groundbreaking film *Malcolm X* which, at its core, is a narrative that represents both the racism X dealt with during the 70s while also acknowledging the racism at that current moment. In 1995 Minister Louis Farrakhan took control of The Nation of Islam and called for the Million Man March in Washington D.C. By 2001 Colon Powell would become

the first Black Secretary of State, 7 years later, Barrack Obama would become the first Black president. Shortly after Obama's presidency, chaos would lead comedians, artists, musicians, filmmakers, etc., to reinstitute old means of combatting oppression. The Black Lives Matter movement is the manifestation of this. Returning to Kraucer, all of this is to say that the political, social, and cinematic Black histories follow each other, blend together and form a new ornamental space of diversity, equity and inclusion. It demonstrates that racism has always been resisted against and systemic racist regimes are following faster every year that passes during the war for recognition. As Mills terms it, the limbs on a new BLACK BODY.

Chapter 5

Signifyin(g) Soldiers

All of this is to say that the correlation between Black art, Black history, and military camouflage uses tells a history of war. In that history, some soldiers used military, psychological, social, and cultural tactics such as camouflage to overcome each battle that needed to be faced. Yet, I needed to ask myself, what type of soldiers best relate to the Black artists who wage war for recognition in Hollywood? I discovered that in 1915 the French army was decimated in battle. The root cause of the losses the French endured was the flamboyant aesthetic appearance of their soldiers' uniforms. The French responded by enlisting artist Lucien Victor Guirand De Scévola to design a new uniform that would adapt to the environments the soldiers had to fight in. By the middle of WW1, the French enlisted the first camouflaged regiment: the camoufleurs. Likewise, in classical Hollywood, Black artists were being decimated on the Hollywood battlefield. White people dominated every corner of nearly every map. In response, Black artists began to use camouflage within their ranks. That is, I will endeavor to argue that some Black artists in the war for recognition can be likened to camoufleurs because they use similar tactics on the battlefield. These soldiers arguably help signify the strength of the new BLACK BODY, or new Hollywood ornament.

This metaphor is seen in multiple different films. For example, Spike Lee's motion picture and Alex Haley's text, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X,* both have a moral purpose, to put an iconic figure in Black history in the consciousness of audiences worldwide. Yet, where the film gains substance in Denzel Washington's stellar performance as Malcolm X, the truth of that time, person, and moment are camouflaged to appease 90s white audience expectations and fragility. Most of X's fundamental beliefs about women, government, and religion are lost in cinematic revisionist history. However, once these aspects of the story are adequately camouflaged, the true sense of Black bravery in the face of a seemingly unbeatable foe (white supremacy) echoes across the cinematic landscape. Wright later explains, "While Rev. Martin

Luther King, Jr. advocated integration, Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam called for self-determination and Black nationalism" (65). Washington's performance in Lee's *Malcolm X* directly relates to the soldiers who made up The Nation of Islam under Elijah Muhammad during the 50s, 60s, and 70s. Likewise, Washington's performance and Lee's film arguably worked to disrupt the white cinematic experience during the 1990s through means of self-determination and Black nationalism.

The notion of camouflage in Lee's film and Malcolm X's teachings runs deeper than just the representation of the camoufleur. Terrence L. Johnson, in his essay, "Religious Heretic, Political Prophet: Malcolm X, Democracy, and Abolition Ethics," calls attention to the specific wording Malcolm X uses when he discusses voting rights. Johnson examines, "Malcolm X emphasized, the right to vote had not translated into significant political and economic milestones for Blacks, especially the poor from urban areas." In response to this, Malcolm X stated that "All [the Democrats did] when they got to Washington was give a few big Negroes big jobs. . .That's *camouflage*, that's trickery, that's treachery, window-dressing" (64). In this statement, Malcolm X directly speaks to white politicians' use of social camouflage on the political battlefield. This being considered, in this dissertation, I will always already think how white artists, executives, politicians, etc. also used camouflage during the war for recognition; however, what is most interesting is how Lee's film and Washington's performance represent camoufleurs, through uses of camouflage, by echoing the historical figure Malcolm X who directly pointed to the influence and abilities of camouflage in the war for political recognition.

Likewise, Lee's film, *Miracle at St. Anna* (2008), arguably falls short of telling the entire cultural and socio-struggle soldiers had to endure during WWII because it was seemingly too fixated on the action, sex, and comedy of the characters. However, once this camouflage is deployed, Lee successfully creates a story in which actual soldiers had to use social camouflage to

be recognized and respected by their supposed white allies. Wright later examines that "Throughout the twentieth century, Black men fought for their rights through a variety of methods. Many joined the military…." However, there was a division between political and scholarly voices as to whether Black men should engage in such affairs. Wright continues, "Booker T. Washington endorsed accommodation and manual labor, whereas W. E. B. Du Bois called for Blacks to achieve higher education and advocate for civil rights" (64). On closer examination of Lee's film, these issues are successfully addressed. By the end of the picture, Lee's usual special forces regiment of camoufleurs, made up of actors like Michael Ealy, Derek Luke, and Omar Benson, delivers a true story of race, history, and war. Lee also uses an *active camouflage* – which will be discussed in length in the dissertation itself – tactic in subverting a familiar narrative: the white savior. In the film, the regiment of Black soldiers saves a white Italian boy from the enemy's clutches. As a camoufleur, Lee's artistic perspective all happens through camouflage, on the battlefield of Hollywood, in the war for recognition.

Yet, what is interesting about these films and other examples, such as Shaka King's 2021 film, *Judas and the Black Messiah,* which is inspired by the history of The Black Panther Party *, is that* the artists within them camouflage themselves as actual soldiers and the directors base their sets on real battlefields in the same war against racism that all Black people are fighting, they are just doing it on different lines across the terrain. One of the primary ways these soldiers' stories have been recognized and told is through the methodical tactics of camouflage. Ultimately, the issue I hope to raise in my dissertation is that since the beginning of Hollywood, Black artists have had to fight a war against systemic racism to gain recognition, respect, and creative control over their work. Yet, my thesis statement will propose that through tactics such as camouflage, Black artists are winning the battle.

Chapter 6

The Dazzle Technique
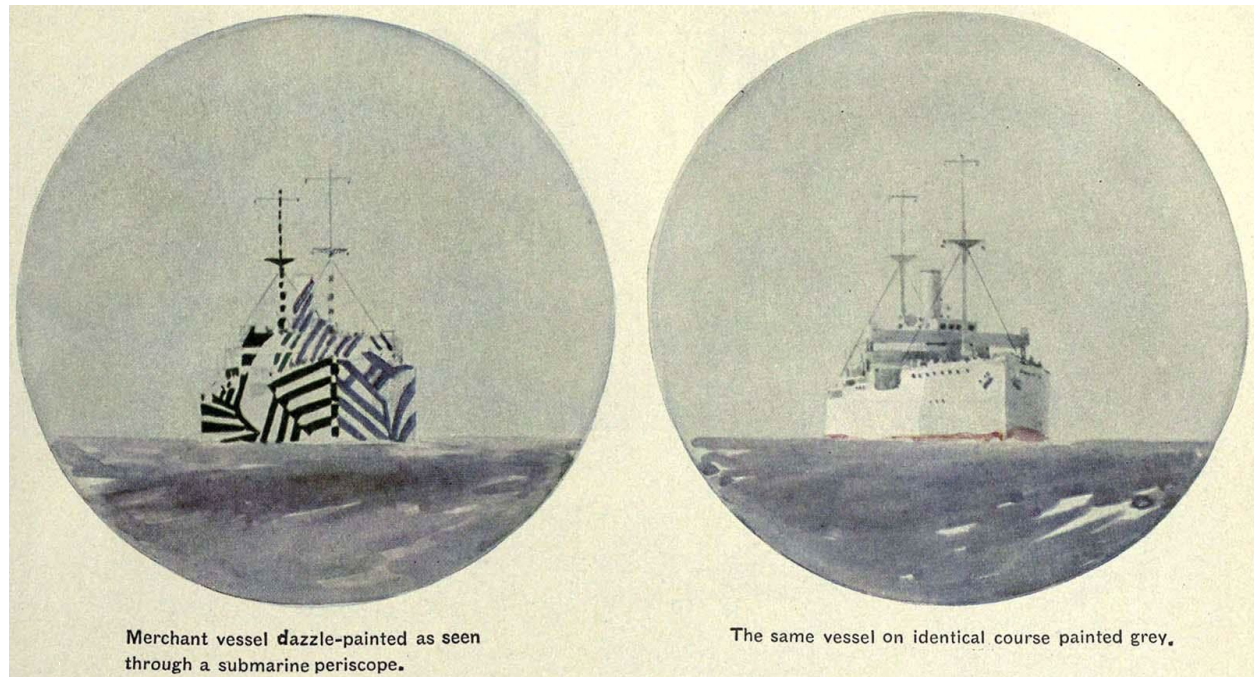
Figure 3. Claimed effectiveness: Artist's conception of a U-boat commander's periscope view of a merchant ship in dazzle camouflage (left) and the same ship uncamouflaged (right), Encyclopædia Britannica, 1922.

In 1919 British artist Norman Wilkinson camouflaged naval ships from incoming U-boat torpedoes by painting them with black and white stripes (See Figure 3). He called his method the "Dazzle Technique," which was highly effective, throwing off enemy torpedoes by up to 56 degrees off their intended target. Sami Merilaita, Nicholas E. Scott-Samuel, and Innes Cuthill, in their text, *How Camouflage Works,* explain, "dazzle camouflage - high-contrast geometric surface patterns - has been hypothesized to disrupt a predator's ability to intercept a target, either via distortion of speed, trajectory or both." (6) The first section of this dissertation will demonstrate how the Dazzle Technique worked through the cinematic adaptations of Black literature to disrupt the predators' (white Hollywood) ambitions of concealing Black art, history and culture. I consider the novels and the films as the stripes which work to camouflage and distract the mass of incoming torpedoes or, metaphorically speaking, Hollywood's systemic racism. Likewise, as noted through Kracauer's theories, the novels, their authors, and the films that were

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adapted from them, all work together both as individuals which disrupt the assemblage of racism, while also working as one to create a new diverse and inclusive Hollywood ornament.

The tradition of adapting Black literature into films has a longstanding history. Toni Morrison's, *Beloved* was adapted by Jonathan Demme, in 1998. Alice Walker's, *The Color Purple* was recreated in 1985 by Steven Spielberg. Solomon Northup's *12 Years a Slave* was made into a film in 2012 by Steve McQueen. Likewise, genre films like *Devil in a Blue Dress* and *A Rage in Harlem* were adapted from Chester Himes' and Walter Mosley's noir novels. The list continues; however, I will begin this examination by looking at Richard Wright's novel, *Native Son*. In this instance, Wright's novel is the Naval ship, Pierre Chenal's 1951 film, and Rashid Johnson's 2019 adaptation are the black and white stripes. That is, I will examine how each camouflaged representation of the story, *Native Son,* demonstrates something unique about the time it was made. Likewise, how each adaptation drew closer to the meaning of the novel through evolved uses of the Dazzle Technique (See Figure 4, Figure 5, and Figure 6).

In *Native Son*, the Dazzle Technique is filtered through the primary character, Bigger Thomas. Wright's protagonist is the quintessential example of how a person's lack of both romantic and familial/platonic love can send a person into madness and even lead them to their death. Because of Bigger's lack of true platonic love and friendship, the people that do try to befriend him in the novel end up contributing to Bigger's downfall. This is not specific to race, as Bigger's Black and white friends work to destroy who he is. Likewise, the role that Bigger had to play within his family (i.e., being the head of the household) detaches him from the love of his family. Both inside him and them. This depressive state places Bigger in a job he does not want and ends up putting him in a position he does not need. Again, when the superficial actions of Jan and the Daltons occur in the courtroom, they only work to further objectify Bigger. In his essay, "Bigger Thomas's Quest for Voice and Audience in Richard Wright's Native Son," James

Miller discovers that at the end of the novel, "we are left with Thomas facing his impending death in proud and lonely isolation to the sound of his own song." (506) Wright's novel ends in tragedy as Bigger awaits his execution. When faced with the challenge of reproducing the

Figure 5 Richard Wright (Bigger Thomas) and Jean Wallace (Mary Dalton) in Pierre Chenal's film Native Son (1951)
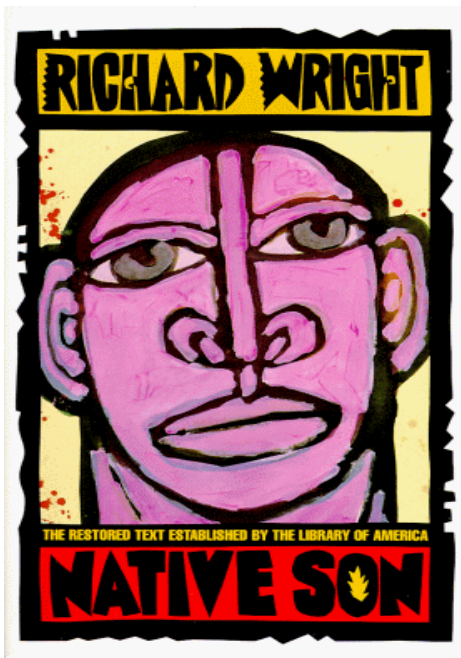
Figure 4. Harper Perennial's 1993 edition of Native Son

Figure 6 Ashton Sanders as Bigger Thomas in Rashid Johnsons HBO film Native Son (2019)

rawness of Bigger's story to the American cinematic audience, the filmmakers used the Dazzle Technique instead of abiding by the rules of white Hollywood that demanded a white sympathetic approach. In both films, much of Wright's Bigger is camouflaged through the Dazzle Technique. For instance, Bigger attends adult movie theatres, and his perspective on his girlfriend, Bessie is cruel and abusive. However, the films desexualize Bigger by removing these scenes from the narrative.

Still, what is most distinct about these three texts, is that they all speak to each other in unique ways. Each version of the story (including Wright's) is camouflaged according to the audience's expectations of the era in which they were released. Chenal's film stars author Richard Wright yet, his flamboyant, over-acted portrayal of his book's protagonist muddies the film's worth and credibility. Yet, Johnson's contemporary adaptation demonstrates that with each layer of camouflage, the true cinematic sense of Bigger Thomas is finally realized. Likewise, the justice Bigger seeks throughout the novel is ultimately found in this film. Bigger is aesthetically gender neutral (i.e., the color of hair, style, dress), the film is directed, produced, and acted by minority artists, and the true story of racial fear and hatred is built in a world that does not abide by white adaptation traditions. Thus, throughout the history of Wright's, *Native Son*, white executives and audiences did not know when or where to land because each time it was recreated, it resembled something almost entirely different. That is, the true meaning and importance of Wright's text have been successfully preserved from the grips of the Hollywood systemically racist machine.

Chapter 7

The Stage

Another demonstration of the Dazzle Technique is derived from two stage dramas: August Wilson's 1983 play, *Fences,* and Lorraine Hansberry's, 1959 play, *A Raisin in the Sun.* Both narratives exemplify the dynamism and struggle of achieving the Black American Dream. Likewise, the cinematic recreations of these plays were different because they needed to abide by the audience's expectations in the eras they were released. In her essay "Hip-Hop Cinema as a Lens of Contemporary Black Realities," Regina Bradley notes, "As the United States continues to assert itself as a visually oriented society, film remains a useful interstice for addressing issues of race and class." Whereas "the focal point on Black narratives and Black bodies, both behind and in front of the camera, is central to its continued development as both a signifier and juxtaposition of unfulfilled promises of contemporary American life that continue to haunt Black Americans." (145) The fundamental drive and ideology of these two stories – which rests on the foundation of "unfulfilled promises of contemporary American life" - were preserved through cinematic camouflage regardless of the medium or the era in which the adaptations were released. Daniel Petrie's, 1961 adaptation of, *A Raisin in the Sun,* was made during the time of New Hollywood, and Denzel Washington's, 2016 adaptation of, *Fences,* was made in the contemporary period. Thus, *A Raisin in the Sun* is the film that helped change New Hollywood and *Fences* represents the evolution of that change in our Contemporary moment. Like Wright's Bigger, the two protagonists from these plays, Troy Maxson and Walter Lee Younger Jr., took the drama genre and placed it in a world of daunting truth and realism, which arguably distorted romanticism, white cinematic familial tradition making, and storytelling.

Yet, *Fences* and *A Raisin in the Sun* are not gendered exclusive; the female figures in the stories are equally affected by the lead male characters' social, cultural, and racial struggles. They are also equally responsible for redirecting audience expectations as acting camoufleurs. The display of authority and power in these roles changed how Black women were depicted and

subsequently seen in Hollywood. In her book, *The Black Essay Film Book,* Kathleen Collins elaborates on this point. She examines, "While Black masculinity was explored in a multi-faceted way by Black male directors in the 1980s in the New Realism films, the representation of Black women continued to remain 'denormalized.'" (146) Claudia McNeil (*Fences* and *A Raisin in the Sun*), and Viola Davis (*Fences*), break this stereotype by being the most "normalized" voices in a denormalized world. Similar narratives followed the example of these films. Jason Smith furthers this point in his article, "Between Colorblind and Colorconscious: Contemporary Hollywood Films and Struggles Over Racial Representation." Smith digresses, "Hollywood films are reflections of the times in whereby the racial representations that audiences see represent the order of the given moment. Yet, the perspectives actresses bring to the table play a role in shifting how that racial order is presented." (780). Thus, these two narratives fundamentally contributed to the "shifting" of the cinematic foundations of the drama genre. Likewise, they accurately represented the social, political, and cultural climates during their moments in American history. The cast of camoufleurs did this by focusing on and filtering familial dynamics and the Black American Dream through a sociological camouflaging process with the directive of change and progress.

As for the male characters, many of Walter's and Troy's problems revolve around their inability to gain proper financial stability and freedom. For Walter, he dictates to his family with a deep sense of anguish "There are two people in this world, the talkers and the takers." (89). Walter further explains that while the talkers are stuck at home complaining about their problems, the takers are out getting whatever they can and want. From a distance, it would be easy to dismiss Walter as one of the talkers, yet, when Willy takes his money, Walter is not busy complaining about his problems. For Walter, the liquor store was his way of attaining his American Dream, simply keeping what was rightfully his. Thus, as a son without a father, Walter

was forced to become a talker because he was robbed of the opportunity Mama gave him. Therefore, talkers are made through anguish and inequality, and takers are placed in a pampered environment where they are allowed to do so.

The story of Walter demonstrates a genuine struggle for families during the time of New Hollywood, specifically, the struggle of young Black men without fathers. As Walter falls deeper and deeper into despair, he struggles to become the man he was expected to become, the head of the household. Unlike white families, whose place in society and economic comforts allow them time and the privilege to mature and grow – for example, going to college, traveling, becoming a business owner, etc. – Walter was immediately thrown into the role of financial provider and caregiver in a systemically racist business world. Yet, what is also interesting about the development of his character, is that at the end of the play/film, he can finally take on this role because of the courage he gains from the women around him. Still, *A Raisin in the Sun* is poignant in that it shows how a Black man's struggles in a white society can lead to such severe anxiety and depression that he could lose everything he held dear, including his wife.

Figure 7 "Sidney Poitier." Scene from the play A Raisin in the Sun (1959). Lorraine Hansberry. From left - Louis Gossett Gossett (George Murchison), Ruby Dee (Ruth Younger) and Sidney Poitier (Walter Younger).

However, the story is still romanticized, especially in Daniel Petrie's 1961 film adaptation of Hansberry's play (See Figure 7). Sydney Poitier's dramatic triumph over the white suburbs is steeped in mellow musical drama, triumphant close-ups, and a genuine disregard for the true feeling of what that act entailed. Wilson's play does a better job of capturing the reality of the situation: at the end of the story, the family is still moving to a neighborhood filled with white people who rejected them. Still, understanding the context in Wilson's and Hansberry's plays allows us to know how the films simply used camouflage to push a more important Black

agenda. Thus, the movies preserved and accurately represented the crucial aspects of the economic and racial struggles through the Dazzle Technique. Black families around America were enduring a new sense of narrative truth-telling.

Troy Maxson - like Walter - is bitter, conflicted, and angry. White executives were Dazzled by the idea of this character being set to screen because they thought these characteristics would shine throughout the movie. In so doing, white power and Black male frustration would again be the main attraction. They also thought Denzel Washington's film might reflect his directorial work in the movie *Antwone Fisher* (2002) and *The Great Debaters* (2007), where it can easily be argued that Denzel did not take as many chances as he did in, *Fences*. However, Washington's Troy demonstrates his struggles not through dramatic moral passion (like Walter) but through a sense of dark satirical humor, intoxication, and self-destructive actions. During an argument with his wife Rose, Troy tells her that when he was born, he came up to the plate already "two strikes down." Throughout the story, he laments that his dreams of being a professional baseball player were dashed due to inequality. Yet, this is questioned in the narrative because his family and friends tell him the reason was that he injured his leg and had nothing to do with racism.

Furthermore, Troy's son Cory reminds him of the strides made by Black baseball players like Jackie Robinson, but he is unwilling to acknowledge any progress. Regardless of why Troy's depression spawned from a similar reason to Walter's, he had to provide for his family in a world where he had to swing twice as hard. Again, this play/film shows the feminine struggle within this dynamic. Troy's power, sanity, and strength come from Rose. She must consistently deal with his self-destructive behavior, which includes raising the child he had with another woman. Thus, the theme within these dramas remains the same; if it weren't for Black women, the entire

decolonial project of the self within American cinema would be lost in a world of regret and anger.

The story of Troy is like that of Walter, yet Troy is a father and not a son. The dramatic loss within *Fences* is Troy's disconnection with his family, predicated in the narrative on his struggle as a Black athlete in America. The fear within Troy is so ingrained that he is willing to disown his son to protect him from potential segregation. Like *A Raisin in the Sun*, Denzel Washington's 2016 film *Fences* seemingly fails to capture a true sense of the "what comes after" due to an emphasis on cinematic romanticism. However, this is all just part of The Dazzle Technique. Washington's performance in the film is so powerful that one cannot help but relate and sympathize with his vision of Troy. Thus, the film works more to show how society could turn a young, talented, Black man with a mountain of potential into a bitter, angry father who cheats on his wife and fist fights his son.

What matters most in both plays/films is the realism of how a racist society can work to keep a person down by transforming and separating them from the things that they hold dear, the love of their families and the love of themselves. Walter and Troy are not supposed to be characters the audience loves; they are supposed to be characters the audience understands and forgives. The cinematic adaptations of these films stray from that goal. Instead, both movies manage to romanticize both characters (whether this is through acting, directing, music, etc.). However, regardless of how minute those changes are between the plays and the films, the results are still fundamental. Both films played crucial roles in changing the content and portrayal of the drama genre in Contemporary Hollywood. The drama was no longer centered on such things as fantastical white women in distress, rich white men losing their money, and white heroes winning wars. Drama now meant something true, equal, and diverse. Because of these

two texts, postmodern and contemporary drama became a platform for genuine social, cultural,

political, and racial issues within American society.

Chapter 8

Dazzling Literature

Other contemporary examples of the Dazzle Technique can be found in Steve McQueen's 2013 film *12 Years a Slave,* along with Solomon Northup's novel of the same title. As for Northup's book, it was received well by a diverse population at its inception. Erica Ball, in her essay "The Unbearable Liminality of Blackness: Reconsidering Violence in Steve McQueen's 12 Years a Slave," describes, "First appearing in 1853, Solomon Northup's memoir, *Twelve Years a Slave*, engaged multiple discourses simultaneously." (180) Likewise, McQueen's film reached multiple audiences and successfully managed to dazzle audiences when it first hit the big screen. The film endeavored to teach audiences the same thematic issues raised by Northup concerning chattel slavery, freedom, and the mission of maintaining the self in a soulless world. For instance, much time and care are placed into showing the brutal and torturous things Solomon had to endure throughout his life. For example, when he is left hanging from a tree with only his tippy toes to support him for an entire day. This is where the film is camouflaged for audience expectations. McQueen uses these scenes to objectify the character to create a horrific action-packed sequence for the easily distracted and blood-hungry American mass audiences. Arguably, contemporary Hollywood executives read these scenes as a means of sadomasochistic gore capitalism. This is not what they got.

Figure 8. "Epps greeting his slaves for the first time." 12 Years a Slave (2013). From Left - Lupita Nyong'o (Patsey), Michael Fassbender (Epps) and Chiwetel Ejiofor (Solomon Northup)

McQueen's work goes even further than objective bodily exploitation when he camouflages the characters' motivations towards anger, seemingly inciting sympathy towards the white oppressors in the narrative (See Figure 8). For instance, Mrs. Epps is almost completely freed from any involvement in the cruelty towards Patsie and the other slaves. The movie sells it off as a quarrel between husband and wife. Yet, the book tells a very different and cruel story. Likewise, the movie tries to make Mr. Epps into a better person than he was. The film attempts to convince the audience that he does not want to beat Patsie and is motivated to do so by his jealous wife. This is not the case in the book; Epps's cruelty is as pure and fundamental as his sexual needs for Patsie. Thus, many scholars have argued that for all the good McQueen's film does, the history it tries to rewrite is equally as harmful. Again, they fail to see the film's true success because they are distracted by the Dazzle Technique of film and novel.

Ultimately, the film successfully represents the sentiment in contemporary society where white women – and in some cases, white men – despite all forms of cruelty and power, must still be relatable through fake means of remorse. It also demonstrates past, present, and future implications of the detriments of slavery. Ball further drives this thought when she examines,

> By eschewing melodrama and sentimentality, and placing violence at the very heart of the story rather than making it an occasional intrusion into the circle of an otherwise thriving and ever-resilient slave community, McQueen and screenwriter John Ridley defamiliarize slavery for the viewer, forcing us to think about what we have just seen and, in the process, to consider, perhaps for the first time, the chattel principle itself: the obscene logic that transforms humans into personal property. This approach allows them to highlight aspects of Northup's original 1853 narrative—especially his meditation on the tenuous nature of Black freedom—that resonated with northern free Blacks at the time of publication. (177)

Thus, for Ball, the violence in the film works not as exploitation; instead, it submerges audiences into the horrors of slavery, both physical and mental. It also calls attention to the systemic racist issues that were occurring during the moment of its release in 2013. Ball concludes, "Moreover, McQueen invites us to meditate on contemporary manifestations of racism and to consider the ways that other forms of systemic, state-sanctioned violence continue to transform the person into property, the innocent into the convict, the living into the dead." (186) That is to say, McQueen's film and Northup's novel combined work to Dazzle audiences into a narrative classroom that enlightens them about the physical and mental consequences of objective and subjective means of racism.

Another example of the Dazzle Technique can be found in 1970s network television.

Gilbert Mosses' 1977 show *Roots* and Alex Haile's historical familial account of the same title

were well received by critics and audiences. Mosses' *Roots* became the most watched show in television history at the time of its release. It also launched multiple actors into illustrious movie and television careers (i.e., Levar Burton). The differences between the show and Haile's book are almost unsurmountable and include everything from more white characters to exaggerating the promiscuity of Kunta Kinte with the other slaves.

Like McQueen's film, Mosses' *Roots* is a critical work of cinema meant to evolve society and teach audiences, yet, that true meaning is camouflaged. Not every scene must be discussed; however, this process can basically all be summed up in the television series' account of Captain Thomas Davies, played by Edward Asner (See Figure 9). In the series, Davies is a fundamental part of the first section. Every scene tries to sell to the audience that this is a man who is against slavery, he is appalled by it, and white men like him will one day end it. In the novel, Davies is only briefly and insignificantly mentioned towards the end. Thus, we arguably have a loss of truth in the filmmaker's attempt to appease the consciousness of white audiences by selling the idea of a white savior. However, like the book, the Davies character fell into the realm of insignificance, and the true story of Black heroism was able to be watched, heard, and acknowledged by audiences worldwide.

The Dazzle Technique also worked in contemporary Hollywood to change genre filmmaking and storytelling. Specifically, noir and crime films. One example of this is Chester Himes' "A Rage in Harlem" and the film adaptation made by Bill Duke in 1991. This combination is groundbreaking on several different levels; not only does it abide by all noir literary traditions, but it also expands upon them with an all-Black cast and a new way to see the traditional noir detective. For example, Forest Whitaker's portrayal of a noir detective subverts familiar hyper-masculine tropes. His character is frail, nervous, and anxious, yet he is still determined to solve his case and win the girl. The Dazzle Technique further developed the noir

genre in Hollywood in Walter Mosley's text *Devil in a Blue Dress,* along with Denzel Washington's performance in the 1995 film adaptation directed by Carl Franklin. Unlike Whitaker, Washington's character sets the stage for traditional noir in the contemporary age of the 1990s. Yet, the film confounded conventional cinematography forms and directing. *Devil in a Blue Dress* stirred a generation of dark, visceral detective TV series and movies. Ultimately, these four texts demonstrate how the Dazzle Technique forever changed the way Hollywood produced the noir genre. Ultimately, film, theater and literature all work towards a new diverse terrain in Hollywood, or a new ornamental space, yet together they are a near unstoppable force.

Chapter 9

For the Love in Literature

One of the most significant examples of the Dazzle Technique comes from Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. In Walker's text, all characters are either found or lost because of love. For instance, Celie not only survives but also grows and finds power through her relationship with her sister Nettie, the advice from her daughter-in-law Sophia and her relationship with Shug. The traumatic reality of not having these connections is dramatically demonstrated throughout the novel, especially when Celie is separated from her sister. However, the fundamental chemistry between the sisters allows her to survive. This novel illustrates how even in times of immense loss and distress – in the Black American literary tradition – family and friends were one of the best ways of getting through it.

For all of its success, which included launching Oprah's iconic career and the inception of a significant white director adopting a Black literary adaptation project, Steven Spielberg's 1985 film adaptation of *The Color Purple* arguably abandoned the critical theme of familial love built in Walker's novel. For instance, the sexuality between Shug and Celie is ultimately passed over and forgotten. Yet, the traumatic sexual abuse of Celie by Danny Glover's character Albert is exploited. Likewise, the letters, conversations, and bonding between Celie and Nettie are heavily cut. Audiences are left to piece together a significant relationship at the end of the film when the sisters are united. This being said, the film's formula worked as a perfect use of the Dazzle Technique, in that Walker's perception of family, love, and loss that she so elegantly created in her novel was on full cinematic display for millions to witness. Even the scenes of sexual trauma have historical implications via such symbols as "the hand over the mouth," which is a reinstitution of clitoridectomy (FGM) in some African cultures. Ultimately, the film was praised by audiences and critics because it stood on the unmovable foundation of the novel *The Color Purple*.

Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* (1987) takes the idea of familial love and sets it into the realm of horror and fantasy. Like Walker's novel, the primary themes of Morrison's text focus on domestic and platonic love as critical stones in the foundation of the Black American experience. Sethe's love for her child Beloved seemingly destroys the normality of her and her daughter's life. It can be argued early in the story that familial love is the destructive force in the novel. Yet, Morrison demonstrates that Sethe's decision to take in Beloved – who has arguably come back from the dead and is more zombie than human – leads her and Denver to a place of understanding and courage. When Beloved leaves the family, the audience is critically reminded that this resolution and climax could not have happened without the basis of familial love. Even Sethe's and Paul's romantic relationship is built upon the platonic courtesy of her consent to let him live with her and start their lives over again. However, the romantic relationship between the two characters is lost at the novel's end. Yet, Sethe's and Denver's growth and strength within the story are still found despite this. This can only happen through means of familial and platonic love. Considering that in 2022 *Beloved* is being pulled from libraries around America, the cinematic adaptation of this film is significant in preserving such an iconic text.

Morrison's novel is sent through the Dazzle Technique in Jonathan Demme's 1998 film *Beloved*. Demme's adaptation is closely related to Spielberg's film *The Color Purple*. For example, Oprah and Danny Glover star in both films. This cinematic casting decision worked as a capitalist camouflage for executives who accepted Glover only as the sexual predator Albert in *The Color Purple*, thus assuming he would take on another role that degenerated Black masculinity. Yet, camoufleur Glover delivered a spirited and stellar performance of the warm-hearted Paul in *Beloved*. Thus, both films worked to change film and media by creating new Black stars. This included the rise of Oprah's long-standing television talk show, Thandiwe Newton's welcoming to the A celebrity list, and recognition for one of the all-time great actors Danny

Glover (See Figure 10). Smith later examines, "Consistent with theories of hegemonic control and representation in regard to culture, the ability for Black actors and actresses to create displays of colorconsciousness in film is competing with larger colorblindness." (793) By using the narrative building blocks of two of the most iconic Black writers in history, Demme's and Spielberg's films helped enter Black art, acting, and filmmaking into the realm of academy acceptance by raising "colorconsciousness" on the Hollywood terrain that is colorblind.

For instance, Morrison's character Beloved represented more than just the symbolic foundations of Black familial love. In her essay "The Troping of Trauma in Toni Morrison's Beloved," Florian Bast notes that "Beloved powerfully bespeaks slavery's paradoxical status as a phenomenon which, like trauma, not only 'demands our witness' but 'simultaneously defies' it." (1082) Because of this example of the Dazzle Technique, Morrison's novel and Demme's film opened more doors for Black art, culture, literature, and film in the contemporary period by

Figure 10. Beloved (1998). From left - Thandiwe Newton (Beloved), Oprah Winfrey (Sethe), and Kimberly Elise (Denver)

defying audience expectations. Since the release of Spielberg's, *The Color Purple* and Demme's, *Beloved*, Black narratives have been more widely accepted and funded by critics and executives, thus leading to more opportunities for Black artists, authors, and filmmakers.

The final example of the Dazzle Technique I will discuss is arguably one of the most authentic and deeply beautiful romantic relationships ever written. James Baldwin's *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974) follows the story of young lovers Fonny and Tish. Yet, the story is more inclusive than just a basic sappy love story. In her essay "The Eye as Weapon in If Beale Street Could Talk," Trudier Harris delves into Baldwin's more profound symbolisms in the novel. She notes, "If 'Beale Street' could talk, the talk would be of people in trouble, people who love, suffer, sacrifice, and hope. Baldwin's novel is about them, about their interaction by voice, body language, and eye contact." (54) In these two characters, Baldwin represents a large number of Black youth who share a prevalent love story: friends since childhood. Their relationship becomes even more complicated when Tish becomes pregnant, and the two face the challenge of economic survival in a segregated landscape. To complicate the issues of the couple even further, because of Fonny's love for Tish – which prompts him to protect her during a crisis – he is accused of a crime he did not commit and is sent to prison because of it. Thus, the action and resolution of the story are predicated on the romantic foundations the couple creates throughout the novel.

Fonny's entire sense of self, humanity, and future rest in the arms of his romantic connection with Tish. Baldwin's resolution tells us that without this love, Fonny would undoubtedly fall victim to the unjust juridical system that was trying to keep him as another statistic in a long line of falsely accused Black men whose lives were turned into nightmares for reasons that were not of their own doing. Barry Jenkin's 2018 cinematic adaptation of Baldwin's novel is one of the most underrated examples in this section. Yes, the movie camouflages much

of the sexual disparity associated with Tish's struggle as a pregnant, young, Black woman. For instance, there is no mention of her considering prostitution to pay Fonny's bail. Yet, what shines through are the performances of camoufleurs, such as Regina King's incredible performance as Sharon Rivers. Likewise, Black artist Barry Jenkins produced his vision with a primarily Black cast with little resistance from white executives. This is because the contemporary era is a utopia of entertainment. Numerous amounts of streaming services battle every month to create, find and fund content. Because of this, more Black artists are finding a platform to present their art. Likewise, there is more recognition of the importance and beauty of the films created by people of all races. Thus, instead of living in an era of the dilution of art, this is arguably art's most significant era. One of the best examples of this is how Black artists used the Dazzle Technique to rise like a phoenix in contemporary cinema.

Chapter 10

Active Camouflage

In 1917 The Austro- Hungarian ski patrol mimicked the illusive survival skills of the arctic fox by creating uniforms that matched the terrain they were in. This military tactic is called *active camouflage* which allows soldier to physically – though temporarily – change their appearance to blend in with the terrain. In so doing, the Hungarian patrol would be far less likely to be spotted during an offensive attack. Likewise, from the times of Phillis Wheatley, who had to write to an all-white female audience in an all-white terrain, Black artists throughout history have used active camouflage to survive, hunt, and thrive during the war for recognition. Most of this section will focus on contemporary examples of sketch comedy such as *Saturday Night Live*, *In Living Color* and *Mad TV*. However, it is important to first look back at the history of both genre, form, and setting. First, I will look back to the roots of *vaudeville* and correlate those origins with those of sketch comedy. The PBS special, "S12 EP2: Vaudeville: An American Masters Special," gives a brief historical overview of the vaudeville performances that took over America. According to the episode, vaudeville is "what a contemporary audience would recognize as sketch comedy" and "was the premier form of comedic entertainment from the 1880s until the 1920s." Likewise, actors such as "Stepin Fetchit first began" their illustrious careers on stage in vaudeville comedies. The episode further illustrates:

> Ironically, it is through the movie and TV industry that vaudeville eventually left its greatest mark. Nearly every actor in the beginning of the century either performed or visited vaudeville. The silent movies, with former vaudevillians such as Burt Williams, Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin, incorporated the animated physical comedy of the vaudeville stage. Many of the big names in vaudeville went on to be movie and TV stars, such as Will Rogers, Bob Hope, Burns &Allen, and Fanny Brice. Even today, shows such *as Late Night with David Letterman* and *Saturday Night Live* continue the traditions of popular variety entertainment.

There are various points to digest. Since shows like *SNL, ILC, MadTV*, etc. were born from the vaudeville platform, it is important to note that vaudeville was a place that thrived on diversity. However, most of the comedians who were celebrated later and landed movie deals were white. This tradition is continued in shows like *Saturday Night Live, Late Night with Jimmy Fallon* and *Jimmy Kimmel*. However, it is also rejected in shows like *Arsenio Hall*, *George Lopez* and *In Living Color*. Another primary factor is, despite the representation of Black characters on shows like *SNL*, the beginnings of the sketch comedic genre is embedded in a diverse tradition.

The obvious example of Black influence on sketch comedy comes from the minstrel show which developed on stage in the early 19th century. In her essay "*Dancin' in the Rain*," Carol Clover writes,

> The indirect influence of African Americans was nowhere more obviously admitted than in blackface number those of the Jolson films, and numbers like Fred Astaire's 'Bojangles dance' in Swing Time…the Negro musical faded, and in the forties, in the wake of 'post-World War II embarrassment about racial subordination and stereotyping' as well as in the wake of a deal the Hollywood studios struck with the NAACP on hiring and representational practices, and with the beginnings of the movement for civil rights, blackface came to an end.3l Traditional blackface, in any case…It could be argued that there was a perverse honesty to traditional blackface. In its own way, *The Jazz Singer's* blackface act does point to where credit might be due. Not so *Singin' in the Rain*, whose art, dancing, is surely as "energized" by African American forms as *The Jazz Singer's* singing is. But keeping with its investment in the form of blackface 'more broadly understood' that will characterize the coming generation of popular culture, *Singin'* keeps its energy source firmly covered. (31-34)

First, Clover gives us a timeline of traditional Blackface in Hollywood which spans roughly between the mid-1930s and the late 1940s. Then, she makes an argument that not all forms of Blackface worked as a means of segregation. Essentially, in Blackface – despite being objectively racists - there was an acknowledgment of Black culture, art, and influence regardless of how demeaning the act. Whether or not you agree with Clover's arguments, what is a sound appeal is subjective, contemporary, displays of white segregation, power, and theft in spaces like Hollywood are even more racist, detrimental and hard to see than traditional means of objective racism. Likewise, this points to the fact that Blackface was often used in the minstrel show, vaudeville, and most subsequent popular pop cultural examples of sketch comedy.

Chapter 11

Comedic Camoufleurs

One of the most iconic demonstrations of how these traditions of resistance continued in the contemporary period was executed on the social and comedic battlefront by camoufleur Eddie Murphy. When Murphy joined *Saturday Night Live* in 1980, Garrett Morris was the 1st and only Black person on the cast. The show was run by all white producers and executives: Lorne Michaels, Dick Ebersol, and Herb Schlosser. Likewise, much of the audience was white. Still, Murphy ingeniously used active camo to disrupt those white foundations instead of abiding by colonial tokenism by means of signification. Signifyin(g) is often done through uses of humor wit and irony to reinterpret societal and cultural signs. Actors like Murphey, Chappelle, and the Wayans, used this tactic to build a new culture of trust with Black audience members by reclaiming, creating, and claiming a Black mainstream voice. Gates jr. continues his discussion by linking the significance of humor with the process of Signifyin(g):

> This lengthy passage is relevant to this inquiry into the nature and function of Signifyin(g) because it reveals the close connection between "the dozens" and Signification. While most linguists, for reasons that remain unclear to me, separate these two modes of black discourse…the dozens is perhaps the best-known mode of Signification, both because it depends so heavily on humor and because the success of its exchanges turns on insults of one's family members, especially one's mother. (117)

Gates jr. first looks to the tradition of "the dozens" which is a verbal exchange that is filled with insults, wit and laughter (i.e. a Roast). Most importantly, he mentions that this mode of communication is one of the best modes of Signification because of its reliance on humor. This points to the importance of humor's role in a signifier signifying a sign. Likewise, humor, parody, the dozens, etc., all work to redefine the new ornamental Hollywood space that does not abide by traditional white comedic standards.

Figure 11. "Eddie Murphey." Gumby depicting white/face. Saturday Night Live, (1981).

In 1956, Art Clokey's, *The Gumby Show* debuted and quickly became one of the most

beloved cartoons of its era. Everything about the cartoon was arguably white (i.e., Gumby was

green, voiced by Richard Beale, created by Clokey, sold to young white audiences, etc.). No one

at that time saw Gumby as a confident, frustrated, and hilarious Black man. However, for

Murphy, this was the perfect character to mimic through active camo. Murphy's characterization

of Gumby is calculated, profound, and engaging for several reasons. In the photo above,

Gumby's painted face and the off-white circles around his eyes pay homage to the past as a sort

of reverse minstrel show character performing in whiteface (See Figure 11). Through this

activated camouflage technique, Murphy abandons the expectation of catering to white audience

members, and his raw, witty, and side-splitting original Black comedic style takes over. Likewise,

Murphy directly points to this fact in the sketch where Gumby directs a movie about himself

where white cast members play Gumby and are constantly scolded by Murphy for not playing

the role correctly. This is a direct demonstration of signifying through the tradition of "the

dozens." Thus, instead of being forgotten on an almost all-white cast, because of sketches like

Gumby (written by Murphy) Murphy became arguably the most famous and respected SNL cast

member of all time.

Figure 12 Cast of SNL (1991).

Figure 13 Cast of *In Living Color* (1991).

Similarly, in 1990 the Wayans brothers teamed up with Fox to create their show *In Living Color*. The show used active camouflage to challenge *Saturday Night Live's* social stronghold on American audiences by camouflaging the show on the same sketch-comedy premise. The

pictures above show the casts of both shows in the year 1990. The blaring difference is the number of white cast members in *SNL* than there is in *ILC;* this task was arguably only accomplished because the Wayans ingeniously used active camo selling the show to white Fox executives as basically *SNL* and were thus given the ability to hire a Black majority cast (See Figures 12 and 13). There are also subtle nuances, such as the jazz-centered, New York vibe of the *SNL* set to the modern, trendy and urban aesthetic of *ILC*. Both shows were similar in the number of stars that emerged from both pictures: Shawn Wayans, Dana Carvey, Chris Rock, Jim Carrey, etc.

Another interesting correlation between the two shows is the downfall and subsequent redemption of cast member Damon Wayans. In 1986 Damon was kicked off *SNL* because he decided to portray a macho cop as a flamboyant gay man on the sketch "Mr. Monopoly," which featured Jon Lovitz. Damon's decision was based on the fact that Lorne Michaels was rejecting the majority of his sketch ideas. Though Damon admitted later that he feels Michaels was trying to save him from becoming a copy of Eddie Murphy, it is arguable that Michaels was already diminished at his colonial battle line from Murphy's onslaught. Likewise, Damon may not have been as willing to participate in any form of camo because Murphy allotted him that luxury. Regardless, Damon later became the star of *ILC* and arguably the most famous of the Wayans brothers.

However, the active camo built by the Wayans was eventually discovered by the white Fox executives. David Peisner explains in his book *Homey Don't Play That!*, that *ILC* was a huge success the first two seasons because the Wayans held a large portion of creative control. For example, The National Football League was shocked when the Wayans successfully decided to air a special live episode of *ILC* during the Super Bowl XXVI half-time show. Since that date, the NFL has always booked the most popular and famous entertainers money could buy.

However, for all the show's successes, once executives at Fox began to identify the active camo tactics the Wayans were using to display their original and hilarious Black senses of humor, they seized control of the show. Subsequently, the show went on a downward trajectory and was canceled in 1994. Like Eddie Murphy, *ILC* was rejected by comics like Bill Cosby, which led to white executives canceling the show because it did not sit well with their taste in mainstream vanilla Black comedy propagated by shows like *The Cosby Show* and *Family Matters.* However, the battle had already been won. *ILC* not only forced *SNL* executives to be more aware of DEI (diversity equity inclusion) but almost every member of the show's cast went on to influence, change and define comedy as we now know it.

Chapter 12

Truth and Hilarity in Parody

The evolution of the active camouflage used by the Wayans in *ILC* can be related to Dave Chappelle's series, the *Chappelle Show,* which aired on Comedy Central from 2003-2006. David Gillota's essay "Reckless Talk" deeply examines Chappelle's current stand-up comedy. Gillota also gives a short history of the show. He states, "Chappelle's Show was popular with both fans and critics, and it has been the target of serious scholarly attention." Because of the popularity of the show, "Chappelle had a reputation as a cutting-edge comedian who appealed to audiences of all races and ethnicities and who used his humor to effectively satirize American race relations." (3) Of course, Gillota completely misses the boat when he ignores the exploitation of Chappelle by the Comedy Central Network. Still, his point about the impact of Chappelle's work is valid. Multiple instances of active camo used in the show successfully put a critical lens on contemporary liberal racism. For example, Chappelle plays white news reporters and even a blind, Black, white supremacist named Clayton Bigsby. Yet, arguably the most underread sketch of the show is also the most direct example of active camouflage.

In the sketch "Trading Spouses," Chappelle camouflages the skit as a hit Network Television reality series. He then questions the true meaning behind the term "reality." The sketch begins with the host claiming that "for the first time on" their "show" they "are going interracial." This of course calls attention to how inherently white the Network Television version of the show is. There are multiple other critical tactics of active camo Chappelle uses in the sketch. For instance, when the white father reads the magazine *Mahogony* and the Black father reads a magazine called *WHITE PEOPLE*. Here, Chappelle calls attention to the racist categories inherent in American pop culture. Likewise, when the white child tries to appropriate hip-hop music, claiming he is "from the streets," the father satirically drops him off on the actual streets. Quickly the child abandons his ambitions. Of course, this is just one of the multiple examples in which *The Chappelle Show* deployed the use of active camouflage to set on stage one

of the most successful comedic productions of all time. Other examples include Chappelle's white news anchor, who is comedically arrogant about the racial commentary in the sketch.

The Chappelle Show heavily influenced the following example of active camouflage. Comedy Central's sketch comedy show *Key and Peele* (2012) ran for five seasons. Like, *The Chappelle Show,* many of the sketches on *Key and Peele* were side-splitting and grimly telling, commentaries on race. Yet, the keenest example of active camouflage can be derived from the sketch "Das Negros," inspired by the introduction of Quentin Tarantino's film *Inglorious Bastards* (2009). The story is about a Nazi officer hunting for "Negros" throughout the city. When he arrives at Key's and Peele's home, both characters are comedically deployed in active camouflage (See Figure 14). They further their camo techniques by changing the way they speak to sound more like that of an upper-class white American. This tactic is called audible camouflage (which will be discussed in more detail later in this dissertation). The officer gives the two men a series of ridiculous tests to see if they are white (i.e., craniology test, beets test, kitty toy). Despite their absurd use of camo, fake names, and a break in white voice, the Nazi officer does not figure out

Figure 14 Jordan Peele and Keegan Michael-Key. "Das Negros." *Key and Peele (2012).*

their secrete. Thus, this sketch is a prime example of how camouflage was used by Black artists in Hollywood in a story that is about two Black men using camouflage to fool a seemingly – but ultimately stupid - white supremacist.

The tradition of active camouflage owes much of its foundations to other forms of art. For example, from 1952 to 2018, *Mad Magazine* was one of the most iconic staples in all comedic lore. Yet, the show *Mad TV* (1995-2009) has largely been overlooked. For example, the sketch "My White Momma" is a perfect example of how Black artists used active camouflage in the contemporary era. In short, Artie Lange accidentally fatally hits a Black woman with his car. Her spirit rises when he approaches her body and possesses Lange's body. The rest of the story takes place at Lange's home, where he disputes with his Black daughter about her choice of boyfriend. Throughout the narrative, there is fake network commentary on the show's reception. For example, at the end of the sketch, they pull counterfeit quotes from famous people: Tom Shales says, "The most shameful spectacle I've ever been witness to…"; The Wayans Brothers say, "That's the kind of TV program America needs more of…"; And Pat Buchanan says "That's the kind of TV program America needs more of…." Arguing that this script is racist would be missing the point. The white momma directly critiques how networks saw and depicted Black culture. The only egregious thing for the critics was that a white man had to be the pawn in Hollywood's racist game. Upon further examination of the fake quotes, the camoufleurs, the Wayans Brothers are the only ones who understand the purpose of the satire. This is, of course, an homage to their brilliant work in *In Living Color*.

Still, scholars may argue that examples such as *Mad TV*, *Chappelle Show* and *In Living Color* are exploitative parodies of Black culture that stream a toxic framework in the minds of American audiences. However, in the tradition of Signifyin(g), this assumption would be wrong.

When discussing Phyllis Wheatley's letters to Arbour Tanner, Henry Louis Gates jr. continues to exam:

> What is curious about this broadside is that its parody turns upon both a denigrating
> mockery of black dialect and an intimate familiarity with the model of the
> parody…Despite this quandary, the broadside is a salient example of Signifyin(g) and
> suggests that as early as 1828 what we might think of as the signifying black difference—
> Afro-American spoken vernacular discourse— could be the object and the mechanism
> of parody. (109)

Thus, through the lens of Gates' theory, these sketch comedic examples directly use parody as a means of signification. This process generates a familiar mainstream Black vernacular that contemporary audiences could identify. Likewise, the use of parody is one of the most effective ways in which Black actors, writers and film makers have been able to present critical social, cultural, and racial issues because they are easily camouflaged behind a humorous tone.

Beyond the sketch comedy genre, active camouflage has a long history in cinema. For example, Melvin Van Peebles' *Watermelon Man* (1969) follows lead Black character Jeff Gerber who wakes up one morning to find his face has turned white. In her essay "Subverting Hollywood from the Inside Out: Melvin Van Peebles's Watermelon Man," Racquel Gates concludes that Van Peebles's "*Watermelon Man*…stands as a testament to Van Peebles's difficult, but ultimately successful, ambition to criticize Hollywood and society's racism from the inside out." (9) Van Peebles's position as a director also points to the critical role directors have as senior camoufleurs in the war of recognition. Yet, the tradition of active camo could arguably be traced as far back as the early 20th century in films such as *Lime Kiln Field Day* (1913) and *A Natural Born Gambler* (1916), where actors like Bert Williams always already deployed active camouflage. This tradition continues today in such films as Spike Lee's *BlackKklansman* (2018),

where John David Washington dresses in full white garb to infiltrate the kKk and fool David Duke into thinking he is white. Thus, some scholars may argue that active camouflage is just a way to describe whiteface. It is that and so much more, such as a show's dimensions, the characters' wardrobe, the changing of one's voice, and the conscious intent to use such tactics combatively.

Chapter 13

Digital Camouflage

Initially, camouflage was created by artists whose paintings and 3-dimensional sculptures were meant to mimic battle terrain. Contemporary use of camo is designed with technology (i.e., digital camouflage). Retired Lt. Col Tim O'Neil explains in the documentary *Razzle Dazzle* that contemporary camouflage is a "combination of psychophysics, biophysics," and "optics." O'Neil adds, "you can't just" create camouflage with a pen and paper "like a fashion designer" and think it will work. Thus, with the expansion of technology, camouflage evolves. In his essay "Black Man's Vision of the World: Rediscovering Black Arts Filmmaking and the Struggle for a Black Cinematic Aesthetic," Lars Lierow elaborates on how Black artists also needed to adapt their decolonial tactics to meet the demand of the techno landscape. Leirow digresses, Black artists "challenged the overpowering influences of American mainstream media and their distortion or exclusion of art and information relevant for the formation of a self-conscious." In so doing, "the Black artist was urged to appropriate the power of media technologies and institutions."

Figure 15 "Jamie Neumann," tears off her white skin. *Lovecraft Country (2020).*

(18) Black filmmakers thus adapted to the contemporary era by filtering all previous tactics of artistic camouflage through a technological framework. These new foundations set cinematic camouflage into a space with seemingly endless bounds of potential.

The first example of digital camouflage comes from Misha Green's 2020 HBO series *Lovecraft Country* which puts the abilities of contemporary camo on full display. In the series, Wunmi Mosaku plays a talented young jazz vocalist Ruby Baptiste. When Baptiste meets rich, white and suave William, she is enticed to go home with him. Eventually, William convinces her to take the medicine he has been working on that will change her biology into a white woman for a short time. While Baptiste is not Black, she gains all the proponents of being white in a racist society. She gets the job she always wanted, cops cater to her, and other Black characters in the story treat her like royalty. However, Baptiste begins to lose herself psychologically, culturally, and socially. That is, through digital camouflage, Baptiste's self is visually and psychologically split. In her essay "Building the Black (Universal) Archive and the Architecture of Black Cinema," Lauren Cramer examines,

> Blackness and cinema constitute two ways of seeing, each with its own aesthetic arrangements, or grounding points; yet, when Blackness and the cinematic image are aligned in the visual field they appear unified, stable, and light. Blackness cinema visualizes the possibility of a universal archive precisely because Black cinema is suspended between the absolute visibility of the image and the invisibility of Blackness. (133)

Digital camo allows the pain of this split metaphor to manifest on the screen as every time Baptiste returns to her former self, audiences must watch as she viscerally and painfully tears the

white skin off her body (See Figure 15). As Cramer notes, this separation and subsequent

unification can only be tangibly created through the cinematic format.

Figure 16 "Regina King (Angela Abar) and Yahya Abdul-Mateen II (Dr. Manhattan)." *Watchmen (2019).*

Another contemporary example of the incredible range of digital camouflage can be

found in Damon Lindelof's 2019 series *Watchmen,* adapted from Alan Moore's 1986 comic book

of the same title. In the series, before Dr. Manhattan was blue, he was white. After Dr.

Manhattan falls in love with Regina King's character Angela Abar, he takes the form of a Black

man. There is a comical scene between Dr. Manhattan and Adrian Veidt (played by Jeremy

Irons) where Veidt calls Manhattan out on his decision to become a Black man. He jokes that he

is going to be canceled by society because of his choice. Yet, because of contemporary

technology, this digital camouflage works to create one of the most sound, intricate, and

powerful Black superheroes ever made during the contemporary period (See Figure 16). Thus,

Irons' humor becomes a direct jab at the white fear inherent in racist Hollywood executives.

Likewise, the use of digital camo is used in movies like Ryan Coogler's *Black Panther* (2016), which sets another Black superhero – or super camoufleur – on Hollywood's main stage. In their essay "Afrofuturism and Black Panther," Myron Strong and Sean Chaplin examine, "Afrofuturism triumphed in mainstream American theater with the enormous success of the film *Black Panther*." (57) Thus, we have a Black hero story that camouflaged itself in the white-dominated space of Marvel to portray a stereotypical high-budget, digitized superhero movie. However, the film works instead to tell the story of the Black camoufleur. For instance, one way Black Panther was sold to executives is through the characters seemingly stereotypical hero costume. Yet, through computer graphics, the suit Black Panther wears is a heroic visual extension of his Blackness. Likewise, the molds of a dominant white cast are disrupted in this film, leading to its success. Strong and Chaplin later note, "This joyful expression of pride was not only from watching a nearly all-Black cast in a major movie but also a collective exhale. Science fiction and media more generally have systematically neglected and narrowed Blackness; Black Panther was an undeniable expansion of Blackness." (58) With a 96% on Rotten Tomatoes, allowing star Chadwick Boseman to be seen and appreciated before his death, and an original narrative that does not abide by white power, *Black Panther* became one of the most influential films during the digital camouflage era.

Figure 17 Video game*. Marvel's Spiderman: Miles Morales (2020).* Sony.

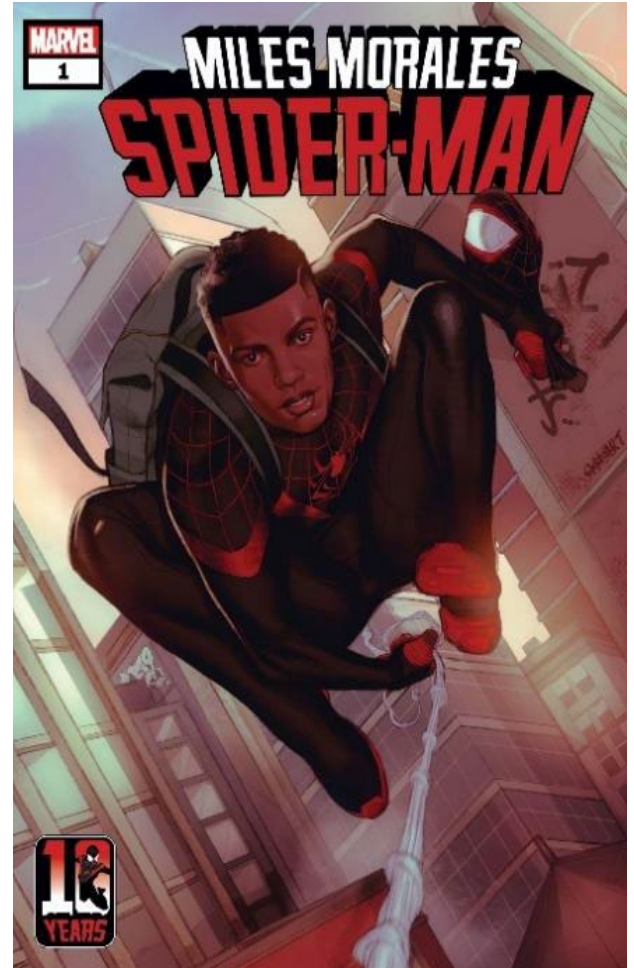*Figure 18* Film. *Spiderman: Into the Spider-Verse* (2018). Peter Ramsey.

Figure 19 Comic book*. Issue #1 Miles Morales: Marvel Tales* (2021). Marvel.

Chapter 14

The Tryptic Spider-Verse

Another crucial example of digital camo comes from the subversion of a classic Marvel character. For the first time, Peter Ramsey's film Spider-man into the Spider-verse (2018) sets Miles Gonzalo Morales, an Afro-Latino, in the role of Spider-Man. Beyond the herald reviews and a 90% rating on Rotten Tomatoes, this film is a quintessential example of how digital camouflage works in the contemporary cinematic era. In their essay "Can You Save Me?: Black Male Superheroes in Hollywood Film" Tia Tyree and Liezille Jacobs illustrate, "the Black male superhero is ripe for investigation as it could put forth a new perspective of not only an oppositional image of the superhero, but one of the Black male in mass media." (3) The induction of Miles Morales is a clear representation of Tyree and Jacobs argument in that it successfully changed how Black males are seen in contemporary society. It also disrupted the standard casting of a white, middle class, male for the lead role of most superhero movies. This characterization was wildly successful because of its use of multi-layered digital camo which I argue instituted the *super camoufleur*: the contemporary Black superhero.

One of these layers of camo being the Marvel comic book *"Miles Morales Spider-Man"* written by Brian Michael Bendis, Jonathan Hickman, and Nick Spencer. The comic book first appeared in the *Ultimate Fallout Series #4* in 2011 and was immediately loved by the fans. Yet again, Miles Morales transcends and adapts the dazzle technique in Sony's 2020 video game *Marvel's Spider-Man: Miles Morales.* This use of technology's reach adds to the depth of inclusion. That is, the adding of yet one more stripe of confusion for white executives allows young Black youth to see, read, and control a Black superhero they can relate to and aspire to be. Likewise, this triple layering of camouflage breaks sub-conscious biases in all kids who watch, read, or play the story (See Figures 17, 18, and 19). Thus, American audiences will no longer have generations who have never witnessed a Black super-heroic figure on so many various levels. Once again, this is an example of the new BLACK BODY or Hollywood ornament that is being changed

and redefined on multiple battle fronts. The contemporary era allows this process to happen

through multiple genres and platforms reaching the largest number of audience members than

ever before. This can also be represented as a form of the Dazzle Technique. Thus, digital

camouflage allows this to happen because it harnesses all the previous military tactics described

in this dissertation.

To better understand the significance of the Marvel comic book *"Miles Morales Spider-*

Man" in contemporary American culture, I will examine the origins of the comic book genre by

briefly researching the history of dime novels in American pop culture. The ephemeral nature of

the American dime novel often undersells the medium's cultural, socio, and historical

implications. Specifically, the dime novel's simulation of the West did more than just influence

generations of hyper-masculine want-to-be cowboys: I argue it is one of the first catalysts in how

the public image of Blackness was initially received by American audiences. Essentially, through

a close examination of the dime novel's cultural depictions, influences, and disruptions, I argue

that the dime novel created an aesthetic tradition of mass production which spawned the idea of

the Black superhero in comic books and films.

However, to understand this concept better, let's look to the work of Walter Benjamin

and his ideas surrounding aura. Benjamin's text "The Work of Art in the Age of Reproduction,"

essentially argues that film is the primary remover of the aura in American art. Benjamin

examines that "a work of art" is rooted in the "fabric of tradition." However, the period of

"mechanical reproduction" liberates art from its "parasitical" relationship with ritual; rather, the

work of art functions though "politics…reproducibility" and "exhibition" (6). As Benjamin

argues, the thing that binds the dilution of art with mass production originates through film. In

consideration of this, we can mark the beginning of this deconstruction as first occurring during

the late 19th century; however, when examining American history this concept should be

critiqued. I argue that this process began with the dime novel. Benjamin's theories are constantly compared and considered because the dime novel similarly functions like film. That is, the dime novel's procedures of mass production also networks through images, illustrators, publishers, lost authors, and narrative format. Likewise, the dime novel worked to form "the fabric of [white] tradition" in their stereotypical depictions of Blackness. Benjamin writes,

> This is the effect of the film– man has to operate with his whole living person yet foregoing its aura. For aura is tied to his presence; there can be no replica of it…the camera is substituted for the public. Consequently, the aura that envelops the actor vanishes, and with it the aura of the figure he portrays…His creation is by no means all of a piece; it is composed of many separate performances…a series of mountable episodes…The feeling of strangeness that overcomes the actor before the camera…is basically of the same kind as the estrangement felt before one's own image in the mirror. (10-11)

Again, Benjamin's theory can be respectively correlated to the dime novel. By transposing the actor with the illustrated hero (i.e. Deadwood Dick), the aura presented by these characters is arguably a fragmented representation of Black identity. The presence of these heroes is therefore a replicated simulacrum of Western masculinity. Furthermore, the illustrator (the substitute for the public) in this instance is metaphorically the camera as their bias informs the pictures they choose to include. Consequently, these narratives are set up in mountable episodes, separate performances, and various issues as the medium strived for mass consumption.

Likewise, the estrangement and strangeness that Benjamin notes as affecting the actor in film is experienced by the masses. That is, the influence of the dime novel stirred estrangement in readers as they peered into a metaphorical simulacrum of Western and Black culture; simultaneously, those readers integrated their simulated identities into American culture.

Benjamin's theory of the phantasmagoria will better illustrate this point. In his text "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century" Benjamin examines that the "phantasmagoria of the interior" is dictated by "man's imperious need to leave the imprint of his private individual existence" on the spaces he inhabits (163). The interior phantasmagoria of the white, Western colonizers needed a blueprint to imprint their identities on a space they were just beginning to inhabit: I contend that this instruction manual was the dime novel. Therefore, the dime novel's intent at mass consumption was multi-layered in the sense that it was also political, social, and cultural. Like the dime novel, the modern-day comic book genre allows for all audience members to "imprint" their own "private existence" onto American society, yet now these audience members are digesting art and stories that are more true to the cultures and people they represent. Black heroes like John Stewart (The Green Lantern) and Miles Morales (Spiderman) are one of several examples of how Black artists have used the functions of mass production to create a new Black assemblage of diversity and inclusion.

Still, the identity manifested by the dime novel was toxic for both the art form and the public who consumed it. In his text *Masculine style: The American West and Literary Modernism,* Daniel Worden illustrates the performative nature of the "cowboy masculinity" found in dime novels. He argues that the purpose of 19th century texts was to "unify Americans" through a democratic process of "mobility" (37). Worden claims that this "unconventional masculinity developed in the dime novel" restructures "both literary form and art's relationship to the social world" (19). Thus, the cowboy masculinity that was inculcated through the dime novel was a process that consequently fed democratic means of colonization and with-it Black exploitation. Likewise, the dime novel reinvented ideas of mass production – which consequently changed the form and intentions of American art – because the form created a uniquely close relationship with the public. This was considered unconventional at the time and thus set the example for

future money-grabbing and aura destroying artistic mediums like film that were exploited by white Hollywood executives.

Furthering the discussion of the dime novel's correlation with contemporary Black film is essential to understand how this form removed the aura in art early in American history and then inverted to be the strategy for the restoration of it in the contemporary period. In his essay "Aura as Medium: Walter Benjamin Reconsidered," Barry Schwabsky claims that

Aura is a distant propinquity, the remoteness of long-ago people in old photographs we can still hold in our hands today. For the Benjamin of 1931, the overwhelming need is to close this distance, 'to bring things closer' to us, or rather to the masses.' But to lay hands on the object, as the 1920 fragment recalls to us, is the need above all of the one who produces it, the one for whom its aura is an impediment that can only be avoided 'in an indirect manner.'" (99)

Following Schwabsky's discussion, the photographs– or rather illustrations– depicted in the dime novel represent historical and mystical American heroes. Further, the dime novel endeavored to bridge the gap with its audience by mass producing an affordable novel that everyone in the American bourgeois could lay their hands on. Still, this effect does not produce a genuine sense of aura; rather, as Benjamin argues, the desperate and meticulous attention at mass production eradicated any elements of it. Furthermore, the toxic stereotypical portrayals of Black culture in the novels falsified any true sense of relatability. More specifically, the dime novel used camouflage to mask Blackness and glorify whiteness.

That is, the simulation of aura – consequently destroys real aura – for the purpose of mass production. Miriam Hansen in her text "Benjamin's Aura," argues that "the simulation of auratic effects does appear on the side of the technological media (as in the recycling of the classics, the Hollywood star cult, or fascist mass spectacle), it assumes an acutely negative valence, which turns the etiology of aura's decline into a call for its demolition" (337). Hansen

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effectively points out the reproduction of auratic effects, however, she attests this process to only a technological and cinematic medium. Likewise, the dime novel simulated a classic portrayal of the West, Blackness, and the supposed "white heroes" who inhabited it; thus, marking the genesis of the etiology of auras decline in American art and how that art detrimentally depicted race in popular culture. However, the dime novel did not fully destroy aspects of aura in American art; rather, through tactics like camouflage, Black artists adapted and evolved the same process of heroics and mass production to return the aura of Black culture to American art, film, music and literature. Thus, in the contemporary period the influences of the dime novel eventually led to the success of the comic book genre which again has become a platform for diversity and a springboard for the success of Black heroes in film.

Still, the political and social influences the dime novel harbored can be critiqued if readers do not understand how aura and politics relate. Hansen claims that Benjamin "knew well, to corral the meanings of aura into the privileged sphere of aesthetic tradition—and thus to historicize it as a phenomenon in decline—was the only way the term could be introduced into… an intellectual and political…philosophical category" (338). Thus, if we are to see the dime novel as the quintessential medium that first flourished in mass production, the artistic identity it developed is the beginning of the American aesthetic tradition. Since the dime novel catered to a privileged sphere of individuals, the medium was classed however, it was also deteriorating. Therefore, the dime novel created a tradition of aesthetics; however, the remover of aura is never embedded in tradition. Consequently, the process is creative with the avail of self-destruction. Furthermore, the false creative sense the dime novel created was also the early showings of the rise of celebrity culture in America, which Benjamin argues is a means of false aura.

I will examine one example before I finish my historical recap of the dime novel and its correlation with Black film. Edward L. Wheeler's series, *Deadwood Dick*, demonstrates the functions of early celebrity culture, aura, and the initial public image of Blackness. I examine these correlations through Wheeler's protagonist Deadwood Dick and the actual person the hero was based on, Nat Love. The dime novel series camouflages itself by depicting a white hero who is embedded in cowboy masculinity. As seen bellow, the real Deadwood Dick was a Black man (See Figures 20 and 21). What is more interesting is Nat Love's personal memoir where he tells a brief narrative about his ascent from slavery however, most of the text is a heroic over-exaggeration where Love endeavors to live up to the celebrity standards set for him in the dime novel. In both instances, the aura that is portrayed is a falsified simulation that works to imitate aura; simultaneously destroying it. Regardless, the dime novel was responsible for creating one of the first Black superhero figures in pop culture and in the imaginations of American youth. This gleaming representation of camouflage by Nat Love is arguably one of the first battles won in the war for Black representation.

Figure 10. "Nat Love."
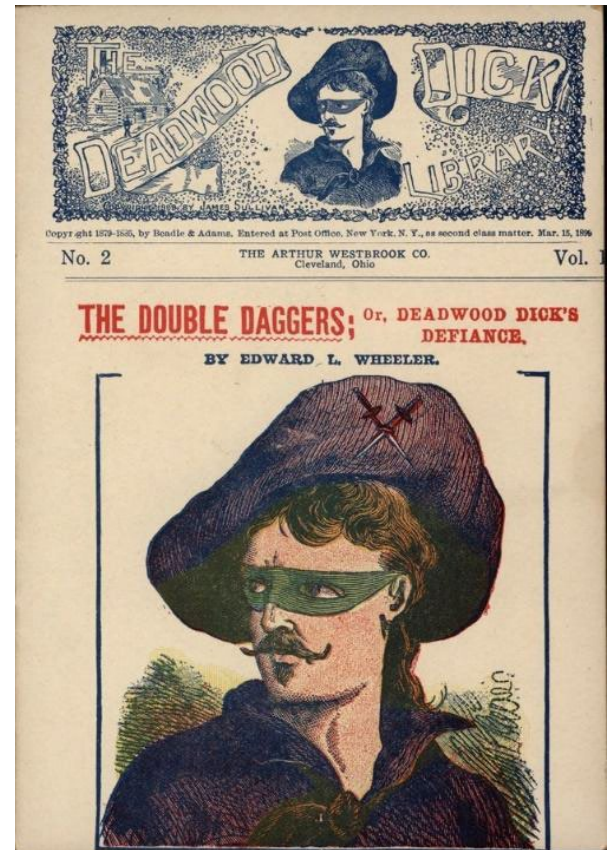
Figure 21. Deadwood Dick (1889).

However, the self-destructive nature the dime novel manifests erupt in American culture through narratives that are embedded in white power, hegemony, racism and misogyny. Allen Capo claims in his essay "Presence, Aura, and Memory," that for Benjamin "only hack writers pass on productive practices without improving the apparatus of writing to better serve society," instead they "actively write culture by expanding the privilege of producing discourses into society as a whole…" (31). The unrecognized and often unknown dime novel authors are not given any praise or agency because their purpose was to serve mass production; as a result, their narratives were arguably a detriment to society, literature and subsequently, film. Furthermore, it can be claimed that a major part of their texts was meant to expand the discourse of white

privilege and white heroism in the eye of the American public. In the essay "Dime Novels and the Rise of Mass-Market Genres," Shelley Streeby argues,

> That the first Deadwood Dick story was published in a new Beadle series for boys raises questions about how cheap literature responded to and shaped changing configurations of gender, race, and sexuality…in many dime outlaw stories, sometimes in lurid scenes such as one in *Deadwood Dick, The Prince of the Road,* when Fearless Frank rescues the beautiful Alice Terry from the 'fiend incarnate – Sitting Bull' after he finds her 'stripped to the waist' and with welts upon her 'snow-white back.' Centering emotion and drama around the figure of threatened white womanhood and imagining the Indian as a diabolical villain are familiar from earlier forms of both elite and popular frontier literature. (593-94)

Thus, the dime novel engaged in a generational movement which implored its moral and political agenda on the youth of America. This "cheap literature" assimilated its readers through notions of white power by dramatizing minorities into monsters. The most significant detriment to this pop cultural assemblage is that it was distributed on a massive scale which influenced the identity of the American West, the white people who inhabited it, and what was soon to be future generations of white film executives.

Consequently, we can see how the constructs of the dime novel influenced the psyche of the American public who consumed it. Bill Brown, in his text *Reading the West: An Anthology of Dime Westerns*, begins his discussion of the West by examining Stephen Crane's short story "The Blue Hotel" (1898). In the narrative, a "Swedish tailor from New York…grows increasingly anxious" because he can't "overcome his fear of the American West." By reading too many dime novels, the Swede "creates" his own version of "hell" which drives his "nervous aggression" and fuels his "new-found bravado" or cowboy-masculinity. Eventually the Swede picks a fight with a

gambler who murders him with a knife. Brown laments, "It seems as though, after all, the dime Western has revealed the truth, or created some new truth about the 'shootin' and 'stabbin' in the West" (1). Thus, the mass-produced simulacra of the American West, and through it the public representation of Blackness the dime novel created, was transposed within the god complex of white male frontiersman who in turn projected that world onto the space they inhabited. The poignant point being, the dime novel did more than just remove aura in American art, it also endeavored to eradicate any sense of it in American identity, culture, and society at that time. Yet, now Black illustrators and authors are using those same powers of persuasion in genres like comic books to progress a more true and diverse agenda. That is to say, despite all racist intentions by dime novel creators and distributors, the genre still gave way to Black representation. One of the best examples of this is the mass popularity surrounding the aforementioned *Deadwood Dick* series.

Chapter 15

Animation and Reality

In contemporary Hollywood, technology has exceedingly expanded the depth of the digital tactics Black artists use to wage the war for recognition. The result of this has been a significant expansion of territories won by black artists on the Hollywood battlefield. That being said, the story of the super camoufleur often appears in almost every genre of film, including animation. In his other text, *Rediscovering Black Arts Filmmaking and the Struggle for a Black Cinematic Aesthetic*, Lars Lierow discusses the implications of Black representation in Hollywood animation films. He notes, "Few genres remain as unapologetically white as animation." Black characters are often relegated "to animal voices" or "comedic supporting characters." (226-27). Yet, there are examples of films that used these white paradigms as camouflage in the digital age to push the Black artists' lines of defense forward. This includes Will Smith's character Lance Sterling's metamorphosis into a Pidgeon in Blue Sky Studios' 2019 animated family comedy *Spies in Disguise* (2019). Tyree and Jacobs conclude, "The Black superheroes wanted to change the world, starting in their communities. With many of the characters utilizing homemade costumes and makeshift weaponry, they fought to change the world and make it a safer place, and they often defeat their longstanding archenemies - White men." (20) *Spies in Disguise* takes this archetype and camouflages it. In the film, Tom Holland's Walter Beckett is more driven by helping his community after his mother – a cop – is killed in the line of duty when he is a child. As an adult, bumbling Beckett utilizes "homemade costumes and makeshift weaponry" in his fight against the white-male antagonist of the film. Sterling (played by Will Smith), on the other hand, is the upper-class, suave, 007-esque stereotypical superhero in the movie. Where white executives saw a film that was only about a Pidgeon who digitally transforms and joins forces with Beckett - this is where the camo is employed - the story of the super camoufleur is successfully deployed. This is, of course, one example of how Black artists have used digital camouflage to abolish the nurturing of white superiority in American youth. Other notable examples include shows like

The Pjs (1999), and *The Cleveland Show* (2009), which all used digital camouflage distinctly in the realm of animation.

Aaron McGruder's animated series *The Boondocks* (2005) is a shining example of how the digital era has spawned a new vision of Black representation in pop culture. David Moody continues his discussion in his text, *The Complexity and Progression of Black Representation in Film and Television,* by doing a deep examination of the series. Moody notes, "Not since the early development of the show *South Park* on Comedy Central has there been a more controversial, diverse group of satirical voices than those of the fictional characters created by Aaron McGruder." *The Boondocks* invests each story line in "sensitive themes such as racism, Black family structure, sexual orientation, politics, religion, and Black Nationalism." However, like Black film makers in the classical period of Hollywood, McGruder's series has become heavily criticized. For instance, critics have repeatedly accused McGruder "of making a mockery of the legacies of Rosa Parks and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr." (80) In response, McGruder appeared in 2006 on ABC Nightline to defend his work. Moody recounts,

> Aaron McGruder questions whether or not his (King's) character would work in a
> modern context. Apparently, McGruder has concerns on whether King's rhetorical
> messages would cut the grade in today's society. Alternatively, according to McGruder,
> Dr. King's final speech in this episode was one of frustration; thus the reason for his
> excessive use of the word 'Nigga.' McGruder is unapologetic for the use of the words
> 'Nigga' and 'Nigger' as part of his narratives. He states that 'On his show, we don't use
> the N-Word; we say Nigga' (ABC Nightline, 2006). The episode ends with King— tired,
> angry, and frustrated— making the comment, 'I will not get there with you . . . I'm going
> to Canada' (the King speech also provoked a second civil rights revolution at the end of
> the show). King's movement to another country, for me, is similar to Dr. W. E. B. Du

Bois' move to Ghana in 1961. Frustrated with racism in the United States, Du Bois left

for Ghana in 1961 and ultimately became a citizen in 1963. (79)

McGruder's rebuttal is based on Gates's foundations of signifyin(g). That is, he defends his use

of the N-Word in the show based on the contemporary significance of the sign, and the signifier.

That is, in the contemporary age the term has been reclaimed and reinvented by Black culture in

the contemporary period. Likewise, it is important to note that McGruder was writing in a

contemporary context and was expressing his idea of what he imagined Dr. King's opinion

would be on the continued systemic strength of racism in American society. He does this

through the use of contemporary signification.

Still, *The Boondocks* is a vital demonstration in this discussion because the roots of the

show are also firmly established in dime novel lore as it made a long appearance as a comic strip

in daily newspapers around the country. Despite what scholars and critics think of the show,

McGruder's "in your face" approach led audience members to "to question issues of social

identity, class status and race relations in America" (82). Eventually McGruder – like Chappelle

and the Wayan Brothers – relinquished control of the show to Sony Pictures in 2004. Shortly

after, the show was cancelled.

Thus, digital camouflage has become one of the essential tools for Black artists and

storytellers in contemporary cinema in their battle against racism in Hollywood. A blaring

example is how animation films are progressively becoming more diverse. This progression has

not only changed cinema but also redefined how society processes things like hero stereotypes,

racial categorization, and gender norms. That is, this groundbreaking work is happening on

multiple battle fronts. For instance, understanding the terrain of video games is an essential part

of how Black artists have used digital camo in the contemporary moment. The platform's

control, authority, and interactivity generate a new level of narrative influence on audiences.

According to mobygames.com, between 1984 and 1987, only 6 video games were made with a

Black lead character. Yet, between 2012 and 2021, there were 25 said games made. This can be

constituted to the rise in the technology itself, which is true, but this also indicates how Black

artists' use of digital camouflage has synchronously evolved with the history of technology.

Harking back to the reading of Spike Lee's *Miracle at St. Anna*, one of the best examples of digital

camo in the terrain of video games comes from the game *Battlefield 1* (2016). The game allows

players to play as the historical army infantry unit, the Harlem Hellfighters, who fought during

WWI and WWII (See Figure 22). This platform turns the players into camoufleurs by allowing

them to play soldiers who used camouflage to thrive on their battlefield in a game that uses

active camouflage (i.e., being sold to executives as a traditional wartime game that glorifies WWI

politics) to become one of the most popular of its era.

Figure 22. Members of the 369th Infantry Regiment (Harlem Hellfighters) posing with their awards for gallantry in combat. *Britannica.*

Chapter 16

The End of the War

The history of camouflage was created and pioneered by artists like Abbot Thayer. Thus, the foundations of camouflage are rooted in art. In his article "On Visual Art and Camouflage," Roy Behrens explains, "A breakthrough in the study of natural camouflage occurred in 1896 when Abbott H. Thayer, a painter in the U.S.A., published a paper on 'The Law Which Underlies Protective Coloration.' This was followed in 1902 by a paper on 'The Meaning of the White Under Sides of Animals' and, in 1909, by an influential book on *Concealing Coloration in the Animal Kingdom.*" Thayer also worked with "artists Rockwell Kent and Louis A. Fuertes." (203) Yet, as technology progressed, the military replaced artists with computer algorithms and generated social illusions. However, artists began to reclaim this space after the Vietnam war.

In cohesion with this history, in 1986, Andy Warhol's "Camouflage" series was unveiled to the public and immediately became some of the most respected and expensive works in

Figure 23. "Gata (Himself) and Lil Dickey (Dave)." Dave (2021). FX.

contemporary art history. Similarly, on the battlefront of social currency and fashion design, Black artists' use of camouflage has become a nationwide movement. This correlates with the

"Black is Beautiful" movement that started at a fashion show in 1962 at a small nightclub in Harlem named the Purple Manor. In the contemporary period, Black artists camoufleurs set the standard of what is *cool* in American society. In the 2020 FX series DAVE, Gata is doing more than just wearing camouflage; he represents a new social standard created by Black artists and is widely accepted by all races. Gata's white friend Dave lives out this reality as a dorky white boy who endeavors to be an artist in a terrain that is not all-white but rather is all-Black (See Figure 23).

This dissertation answers many questions; however, it arguably raises more. For example, what other military uses of camouflage can be applied to those of Black artists? During WWII, whole cities were built to detract enemy bombers. This tactic can be seen in movies like Mel Brooks' 1974 classic *Blazing Saddles*. Another critical form of camo is Audible Camouflage. During WWII, ally soldiers used auditory camo to misdirect the enemy on a battlefield. Prominent speakers mounted on tanks would project the sound of tanks and infantry going up trails, while other speakers would project the sound of tanks going down trails. This sound chain would continue as more speakers would lead the sound of fake regiments down empty trails and steep canyons. This rouse would exhaust German supplies and foil their tactical plans. Similarly, Black artists have used audible camouflage to exploit their enemies on the cinematic field of battle.

For example, Sidney J. Fury's *Lady Sings the Blues* is loosely based on Billie Holiday's 1956 autobiography. The film is seemingly camouflaged to be more concerned with showing the dazzle of the auditory musical performances by Diana Ross. Yet, this is just a delusion to tell the story of the racist systemic music industry. Thus, in this case, the film used auditory camouflage to entice white audiences and executives. Likewise, Billie Holiday used auditory camouflage to win her battle for recognition. Holiday's most requested song, "Strange Fruit," was also her most

hated. YouTube her "Strange Fruit" performances, and you will see her contempt. Yet, this

illusion did not encapsulate Holiday's music and Fury's film. Holiday became one of the most

iconic musical artists of any era. Likewise, the film does create a space that exposes the

systemically racist roots of the music industry. It also recognizes and displays the acting ability of

Diana Ross and Richard Prior. There are other notable examples of audible camo. For instance,

Ron Stallworth fools David Duke into thinking he is white only through phone conversations in

Spike Lee's 2018 film, *BlackkKlansman.*

Again, in Boots Riley's 2018 film *Sorry to Bother You,* Cassius Green is encouraged to use

"white voice" to succeed in his telemarketing career. Once he does, Green is economically

rewarded for his effective use of audible camouflage. Yet, Green loses his girlfriend, culture, and

himself because of his auditory transformation. In these examples, auditory camouflage worked

exceedingly well in telling a hard truth about racism and survival. In so doing, this tactic has

arguably changed how audiences understand the Black experience in American history. Indeed,

these narratives and artists who have used auditory camo have shifted the contemporary

cinematic landscape by expanding how art and oppression are understood and demonstrated.

This dissertation opens other avenues scholars could take in furthering the discussion of

camouflage. For instance, what is white camouflage? How was it used objectively through means

such as Black face? Likewise, how is it used subjectively in the contemporary period through

platforms such as *The Cosby Show?* That is to say, the term camouflage, theoretically, should be

used as a homonym. Gates jr. examines this redefining process through signification:

In the extraordinarily complex relationship between…two homonyms, we both enact and

recapitulate the received, classic confrontation between Afro-American culture and American

culture. This confrontation is both political and metaphysical. We might profit somewhat by

thinking of the curiously ironic relationship between these signifiers as a confrontation defined

by the politics of semantics, semantics here defined as the study of the classification of changes in the signification of words, and more especially the relationships between theories of denotation and naming, as well as connotation and ambiguity. The relationship that black "Signification" bears to the English "signification" is, paradoxically, a relation of difference inscribed within a relation of identity. (65) Therefore, the English scholarly tradition of term making should continue in areas such as critical race theory, however, the Black scholarly tradition adapts and evolves this tradition by means of semantics and signification. Whereas the scholar should always already understand that they are the signifier and are thus able to manipulate the sign as they see fit, while remembering that the ultimate signification offered is "arbitrary." Likewise, this approach and angle of scholarly work will develop a relatable palate that will serve a larger demographic. Gates calls this process an "act of self-definition" or a "(re)naming ritual" (67). My use of the term camouflage is an example of this adaptation.

The final question this dissertation raises is, will the war for recognition ever end? Certainly, massive strides have been demonstrated in this dissertation toward that conclusion, yet many would argue that the war is still alive and well. For instance, Racquel Gates, in her article "Art and Artifact," notes, "the fight to recognize the contributions of African American cultural producers remains an ongoing, uphill battle" (91). Again, we see this sentiment in the article "Cinethetic Racism: White Redemption and Black Stereotypes in 'Magical Negro' Films," where Matthew W. Hughey laments, "While African American characters are now more than stereotypes of "mammies," "coons," and "bucks," as they currently portray lawyers, doctors, saints, and gods, they seem welcome only if they observe certain limits imposed upon them by mainstream, normative conventions" (544). Still, despite the war of recognition still being waged till this day, in the contemporary period, understanding Black artists use of camouflage allows us to understand that through the means of precise military tactics, Black artists have won more

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interest, funding, and territory on the Hollywood battlefield. Gates concludes that Black artists had to work with "smaller budgets," and because of their "lack of resources," Black films "lacked the outward polish of their Hollywood counterparts" (88). Gates' observation points to another flaw in the enemy's line of defense that Black artists have barraged: the diminishment of high-budget films because they rely on technology and money to create a work of art that often works to desecrate the intended outcome. This leads to the rise of independent filmmaking.

Furthermore, suppose we follow the linkage between camouflage and the history of Black cinema. In that case, we can see that avant-garde, house, and indie - essentially all genres of film toting a low budget and an artistically driven narrative - owe the lineage of their genre to Black artists who were forced to pioneer such tactics. However, my discussion primarily focuses on pop cultural cinematic examples that are consumed by mass media. I specifically chose these examples for multiple reasons. First, mass culture arguably proves to be one of the most significant sociological, psychological, and political markers of a given time period. Second, examining and dissecting what is sold to mass populations presents a unique platform in which scholars can critique and identify systemic racism because it is transparent. That is, the product and agenda are objectively identifiable in the message. Finally, I am not concerned with avant-garde/indie/house audiences' responses because they are usually niche, privileged, small and white. However, this group is slowly diversifying in the contemporary era. Still, the correlations between camouflage and the history of independent film would prove to be an enlightening discussion all its own. In either case, cinema is quintessential examining the history of racism in America. Gates duly notes, "Unquestionably, no tool has had a greater impact in crafting an image of what America is/was, and to whom it belongs/belonged, than American cinema…That is why there is so much passion by African American filmmakers past and present that propels their projects into existence" (93). Likewise, Hollywood's current inclusion of more Black

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filmmakers who are developing these projects from top to bottom allows space for decolonial creativity. For example, Jordan Peele was recently noted as turning down an opportunity to make a live action *Akira* film because he wants to focus on making original content. His new film *Nope* (2022) is a testament to his decision and should further work to break white stereotypes in science fiction films going forward.

Considering the history and the arguments presented in this dissertation, scholars should consider the study of camouflage a vast garden with almost none of the fruit taken from its trees because it is virtually absent from every field of study. Behrens later examines, "Camouflage is a relatively neglected aspect of artistic, scientific and military historical studies, and it is challenging to trace their interrelation" (204). Such is the case with contemporary literary, race, and cinematic scholars who have entirely ignored the foundations of camouflage in cultural history. For example, this exercise in scholarship has demonstrated how Black individuals took a dominate white ornamental space or body and transformed it to be a symbol of representation, diversity, and inclusion. As we have learned from this study of resistance, emerging Black directors, actors, producers, and a shift in audience interests prove that through tactics such as camouflage, Black film, art, and culture are on an incredible decolonial upward trajectory. The new Hollywood ornament is one example of this progress.

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APPENDIX

Lincoln Theodore Perry, Plaintiff-appellant, v. Columbia Broadcasting System, Inc., et al., Defendants-appellees, 499 F.2d 797 (7th Cir. 1974)

US Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit - 499 F.2d 797 (7th Cir. 1974)Argued Sept. 28, 1973. Decided March 12, 1974, Certiorari Denied Oct. 15, 1974, See95 S. Ct. 150

John D. Raikos, Indianapolis, Ind., for plaintiff-appellant.

Thomas M. Scanlon, Indianapolis, Inc., for defendants-appellees.

Before SWYGERT, Chief Judge, O'SULLIVAN, Senior Circuit Judge,[*] and STEVENS, Circuit Judge.

SWYGERT, Chief Judge.

Lincoln Theodore Perry appeals from the district court's grant of summary judgment for the defendants. Perry, an Illinois resident, brought suit against the Columbia Broadcasting System, Inc. (CBS), Xerox Corporation, and Twentieth Century-Fox-Film Corporation,[1] all incorporated in New York and doing business in Indiana, and the Indiana Broadcasting Corporation, an Indiana corporation which owned and operated WISH-TV, a television station in Indianapolis. The district court had jurisdiction under 28 U.S.C. 1332.

Perry is a professional movie actor and entertainer nationally known by his stage name, Stepin Fetchit. CBS developed and broadcast a series of seven telecasts entitled 'Of Black America.' The series was broadcast nationally by CBS, sponsored by Xerox, and shown locally on WISH-TV. 'Of Black America' dealt with the history, culture, and experience of Negroes in the United States. The first telecast in the series was entitled 'Black History: Lost, Stolen, or Strayed' and was broadcast nationally on July 16, 1968 and rebroadcast on July 23, 1968. It is this telecast that is the subject of the litigation.

'Black History: Lost, Stolen, or Strayed' was written by CBS staff and narrated by Bill Cosby, a nationally known black entertainer. According to the district court's findings the telecast 'described how badly the Negro had been portrayed in the history books, the movies, and other facets of life in the United States.'

In the preface of the segment of the telecast which dealt with the treatment of Negroes in movies, Bill Cosby stated:

In the past fifty years, 33,000 feature films have been made in the United States, and about 6,000 of them have had parts for black actors. For the most part, the black portraits have been drawn by white writers, white producers, and white directors for a white audience. Most black parts were the way white Americans wanted them to be. The black male was consistently shown as nobody, nothing. He had no qualities that could be admired by any man, or more particularly, by any woman.

Famous black actors mentioned in the movie segment included Bert Williams, Bill 'Bojangles' Robinson, Willie Best, and Perry. The section dealing with Perry included film clips from movies that Perry had made interspersed with the following narrative commentary by Cosby:

The tradition of the lazy, stupid, crap-shooting, chicken-stealing idiot was popularized by an actor named Lincoln Theodore Monroe Andrew Perry. The cat made two million dollars in five years in the middle thirties. And everyone who ever saw a movie laughed at-- Stepin Fetchit.

It's too bad he was as good at it as he was. The character he played was planted in a lot of people's heads and they remember it the rest of their lives as clear as an auto accident.

He played in movies with other actors who were as American as Mom's raspberry jello. If they accepted the stereotype, how wrong could it be?

The thrust of Perry's complaint was that the 'defendants, without plaintiff's permission or consent to use either his real name or take parts out of context, intentionally violated plaintiff's right of privacy and maliciously depicted plaintiff as a tool of the white man who betrayed the members of his race and earned two million dollars portraying Negroes as inferior human beings.' The district court after finding no genuine issue on any material fact concluded that there was neither a defamation of Perry nor an invasion of his privacy in the telecast. A second basis for its

ruling was the conclusion that defendants had a constitutional right to comment on Perry since he was a public figure involved in issues of public interest and since there was no evidence that the telecast was made with knowledge of falsity or with reckless disregard of the truth.

* The first question is whether there was defamation. Perry contends that Cosby's statement was false in that he was neither lazy nor stupid, that the characters he portrayed in the movies never shot craps or stole chickens, and that he never made two million dollars during the middle nineteen-thirties. The record shows that, first, Cosby did not say that Perry was lazy or stupid but that the characters he portrayed represented such a 'tradition.' Second, the commentary did not state that Perry shot craps or stole chickens. Third, Perry was himself responsible for the erroneous two million dollar figure. He fostered the story and allowed it to circulate publicly so that he could be given credit for being a millionaire and also for setting an example that Negroes are millionaires. He is stopped now to point out its falsity.

Perry also contends that a jury could reasonably have concluded from the narrative that he had been charged with selling out his race by accepting two million dollars for portraying black people as 'lazy, stupid, crap-shooting, chicken-stealing idiot(s).' Under Indiana law, which controls in this diversity action, a statement may be defamatory when it is such as would tend to hold the plaintiff up to hatred, contempt, or ridicule, or when it causes him to be shunned or avoided or tends to injure him in his profession, trade, or calling. Prosser v. Callis, 117 Ind. 105, 107-108, 19 N.E. 735, 736 (1889). Under this definition, the charge that Perry sold out the other members of his race would be a defamation.

The defendants deny such a meaning to the words and argue that the 'blame for the roles was squarely placed by the telecast upon the whites who wrote, produced and directed them.' We agree with the defendants that white directors, producers, and writers were blamed in the telecast for creating the role, but this does not exclude the construction that Perry has placed on the words in issue. We agree that a jury could have found the intended meaning of the commentary was that Perry had sold out his race for money. A different but innocent construction, however, that could reasonably have been drawn was that Perry's excellent character portrayal reinforced the

stereotype view that many white persons had of blacks during the nineteen-thirties and that white moviegoers were

willing to pay two million dollars for that reinforcement. 'If the words (such as here in issue) are capable of two

constructions, one of which would be innocent, still it (is) a matter of fact to be determined by the jury, whether they

be used in an innocent sense or otherwise.' Waugh v. Waugh, 47 Ind. 580, 585 (1874).

Furthermore, in the event the jury found that a defamatory construction of the words was intended, they would

then have to determine whether the intended meaning-- that Perry had sold out his race-- was true or false. No

action would lie if that construction was true.

II

The next question is whether there was an invasion of Perry's privacy. Cosby's commentary dealt with two

matters, the character that Perry portrayed in the movies he made and the making of two million dollars for acting

in those roles. Perry was not a private citizen; he had been extensively exposed to the public. He began performing

in southern minstrel shows, moved to vaudeville, and then in 1925 appeared in the movies. He was in at least

thirty-three movies in the 1920's and 1930's. His last picture prior to the alleged invasion of privacy was in

1938. However, he continued from 1938 to 1968 in show business entertaining at picture clubs, fairs, radio

shows, road shows, night clubs, opera houses, supper clubs, minstrel shows, vaudeville, medicine shows, Broadway

shows, and on television. Perry complains that the 'Black History' telecast has injured his professional reputation

as an actor and caused Muhammed Ali and others to shun him. He also contends that the damage to his

professional reputation caused him to lose the television role of 'Sanford and Son.'

Perry himself summed up his notoriety as Stepin Fetchit in a deposition:

I became a household word. I elevated the Negro and I became a Hollywood motion picture star, and this was

during the time that a Negro couldn't ride in the front of a bus, couldn't go in no white restaurants, in no white

hotels. This was north and south, California, and everyplace.

Thus Perry by his own admission was a public figure. Curtis Publishing Co. v. Butts, 388 U.S. 130, 87 S. Ct.

1975, 18 L. Ed. 2d 1094 (1967) (an athletic director); Cepeda v. Cowles Magazines and Broadcasting, Inc.,

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392 F.2d 417 (9th Cir.), cert. denied, 393 U.S. 840, 89 S. Ct. 117, 21 L. Ed. 2d 110 (1968) (a

professional baseball player); Time, Inc. v. Johnston, 448 F.2d 378 (4th Cir. 1971) (a professional basketball

player turned coach).

A collateral question is whether the commentary, although about a public figure, concerned any element of Perry's

private life which might have amounted to an invasion of privacy. Cosby's comments dealing with the stereotype

created by Perry dealt with his public role as an actor, not with his private life. The comments concerning the two

million dollars Perry had made in his acting career during the nineteen-thirties did not concern Perry's private life.

Perry denied having made that much money and contends that it was erroneous to state otherwise. Perry however

cannot complain now of the error since he is the one who initiated that misstatement.

Perry also contends that there was an invasion of his privacy when only excerpts rather than the full length of his

movies were shown.[2] Perry agrees that it would not have been an invasion of his privacy to show the whole film.

There was no invasion when only a portion of the film was shown. Perry, as we have earlier noted, was a public

figure. The subject with which the telecast dealt, the stereotype, and erroneous characterization of Negroes in film,

was a matter of public interest.[3] Time, Inc. v. Hill, 385 U.S. 374, 87 S. Ct. 534, 17 L. Ed. 2d 456 (1967).

Lastly Perry contends that it was an invasion of privacy to comment on his acting role in movies during the

1930's since he had not made a movie since 1938. It is not necessary in this appeal to deal with the question

whether a lapse of time will restore a public figure to the status of a private citizen.[4] Perry continued to be a public

figure at the time of the broadcast. He may not have had the breadth of national fame with which he was earlier

associated, but he was still active in show business and was being considered for the star role in a television series

as well as for the subject of a movie about his life.

III

The remaining question in this appeal is whether the defendants were privileged in commenting upon Perry's movie

roles as Stepin Fetchit and the money that he made for his performances. The district court found that Perry was a

public figure and that the issue of the treatment of Negroes in American movies was of interest to the public. As we earlier noted, we agree.

In New York Times Co. v. Sullivan, 376 U.S. 254, 279-280, 84 S. Ct. 710, 726, 11 L. Ed. 2d 686 (1964), the Supreme Court held that the First Amendment's protection of freedom of expression prohibited 'a public official from recovering damages for a defamatory falsehood relating to his official conduct unless he proves that the statement was made with 'actual malice'-- that is, with knowledge that it was false or with reckless disregard of whether it was false or not.' This standard was later extended to issues of public interest. Time, Inc. v. Hill, 385 U.S. 374, 87 S. Ct. 534, 17 L. Ed. 2d 456 (1967), and to comments about public figures, Curtis, Publishing Co. v. Butts, 388 U.S. 130, 87 S. Ct. 1975, 18 L. Ed. 2d 1094 (1967).

Perry argues that the New York Times standard does not apply in this case since this was not a news program but a show made for profit as well as to foster militancy among blacks. The Supreme Court rejected the commercial argument in the New York Times case. The defamation there was a full-page advertisement. 'That the Times was paid for publishing the advertisement is as immaterial in this connection as is the fact that newspapers and books are sold.' 376 U.S. at 266, 84 S. Ct. at 718. This proposition is equally applicable to motion pictures, Joseph Burstyn, Inc. v. Wilson, 343 U.S. 495, 501-502, 72 S. Ct. 777, 96 L. Ed. 1098 (1952), and telecasts, United Medical Laboratories v. Columbia Broadcasting System, 404 F.2d 706 (9th Cir. 1968), cert. denied, 394 U.S. 921, 89 S. Ct. 1197, 22 L. Ed. 2d 454 (1969). Perry's second point is that the telecast encouraged 'black militancy as a solution to future black problems' and that 'black militancy is not an acceptable solution to either black, white, or mixed jury.' Freedom of expression does not mean freedom to express only approved ideas, it means freedom to express any idea. 'The constitutional protection does not turn upon 'the truth, popularity, or social utility of the ideas and beliefs which are offered.' N.A.A.C.P. v. Button, 371 U.S. 415, 445, 83 S. Ct. 328, 344, 9 L. Ed. 2d 405.' New York Times Co. v. Sullivan, 376 U.S. at 271, 84 S. Ct. at 721.

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Perry also contends without authority that even if CBS and WISH are protected by New York Times, it does not apply to Xerox which sponsored the telecast. To follow this logic would leave the First Amendment a meaningless phrase in most areas of the media. It would result in advertisers in magazines, newspapers, and television being sued for statements in which they had no hand. The free and robust debate fostered by the Constitution would quickly wither at the hands of censors for advertisers. "The effect would be to shackle the First Amendment in its attempt to secure 'the widest possible dissemination of information from diverse and antagonistic sources." New York Times Co. v. Sullivan, 376 U.S. at 266, 84 S. Ct. at 718.

Finally, Perry argues that there was evidence of actual malice in the production of the telecast. The trial judge made lengthy findings as to the detailed research that went into the production of this television series and found the evidence to be uncontradicted that the defendants had no knowledge of any falsity nor did they act in reckless disregard of the truth. Perry has shown us nothing to refute those findings.

The grant of summary judgment for the defendants is affirmed.

<u>*</u>

Senior Circuit Judge CLIFFORD O'SULLIVAN of the Sixth Circuit is sitting by designation

<u>1</u>

Twentieth Century-Fox was dismissed from the case on Perry's own motion

<u>2</u>

Perry's contention here is confused with an argument that there has been a violation of his contract and copyright rights in showing only excerpts from his films. No action was alleged in the complaint on these theories

<u>3</u>

After several years of major riots in the ghettoes of the cities, the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders was established to investigate the causes of the upheavals. One of the resulting recommendations was to the media to deal with the problem of race relations in this country. In short, the news media must find ways of exploring the problems of the Negro and the ghetto more deeply and more meaningfully. To the editors who say,

'we have run thousands of inches on the ghetto which nobody reads' and to television executives who bemoan scores of under-watched documentaries, we say: find more ways of telling this story, for it is a story you, as journalists, must tell-- honestly, realistically, and imaginatively. It is the responsibility of the news media to tell the story of race relations in America, and with notable exceptions the media have not yet turned to the task with the wisdom, sensitivity, and expertise it demands. **Report of National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (1968), at p. 384.**

David Moody concludes his text with a fundamental timeline of the most influential Black comedies in American pop culture. The list is provided bellow:

1. Beulah (1950–1953) is not considered a Black situation comedy, however the central themes concentrated on family matters; the key character role was an African American domestic female worker named Beulah (played by Ethel Waters and Louis Beavers). Her wit and wisdom was often seen as a "voice of reason" during the run of the series.

2. Amos 'n' Andy (1951–1953) was based off the radio comedy "Amos 'n' Andy" (1920s–1950s). Stories mostly centered on The Kingfish's schemes to get rich, often by duping his brothers in the Mystic Knights of the Sea Lodge.

3. The Nat King Cole Show (1956–1957) was, according to film scholar/ historian J. Fred MacDonald, "By any standard, The Nat King Cole Show was top-flight entertainment. Cole smoothly hosted this showcase for his musical talents. He sang his famous ballads and played piano in front of a first-rate orchestra. Sometimes, too, he exhibited the jazz dexterity that made him famous in the first place." Unsuccessful at reaching a mass audience and combined with poor ratings (the show was playing opposite Robin Hood on CBS which was one of the top-rated shows on TV), The Nat King Cole Show suffered from not having a consistent national sponsor. Although Cole was talented as a host for the musical variety show on NBC, the show had a short run.

4. Julia (1968–1971) is notable for being one of the first weekly sitcom series to depict an African American woman in a non-stereotypical role. Previous television series featured African American lead characters, but the

characters were usually portrayed in domestic/ servant roles. The show stars actress and singer Diahann Carroll and aired on NBC from 1968 to 1971.

5. The Bill Cosby Show (1969–1971) aired for two seasons on NBC from 1969 until 1971; the show was sponsored by Procter & Gamble. It marked Bill Cosby's return to television in a starring role after costarring with Robert Culp in I Spy.

6. The Flip Wilson Show (1970–1974) was an hour-long variety show that aired in the United States on NBC from 1970 to 1974. The show starred comedian Flip Wilson and was one of the first American television programs starring a Black person in the title role to become highly successful with a White audience. Specifically, it was the first successful network variety series starring an African American. During its first two seasons, it was one of the highest rated Nielsen programs on network television. (Nielsen is a global leader in consumer measurement. The Nielsen ratings are based on methodology driven by electronic meters and diaries that measure audience engagement—Nielson.com.)

7. Fat Albert and the Cosby Kids (1972–) is an animated series created, produced, and hosted (in live action bookends) by comedian Bill Cosby, who also lent his voice to a number of characters, including Fat Albert himself. The show premiered in 1972 and ran until 1985. The show, based on Cosby's remembrances of his childhood gang, centered on Albert (known for his catchphrase "Hey hey hey!") and his friends.

8. Sanford and Son (1972–1975) aired on the NBC television network from 1972 to 1975. The star of the show was the great comedic actor Redd Foxx.

9. Good Times (1974–1979) was a spinoff of Maude, was developed and created by Norman Lear (Eric Monte and Mike Evans are also credited for the creation of the show). The storyline was relevant for the time (and still is) considering the despair and poor living conditions that so many Black families face in urban America. Good Times aired on CBS from 1974 to 1979.

10. The Jeffersons (1975–1985) was one of the longest running sitcoms on network TV (CBS). The Jeffersons was a spinoff of All in the Family. Many considered George Jefferson to be the complement to Archie Bunker.

Both characters were bigoted and extremely opinionated. Notable fact: Roxie Roker, who played the role of Helen Willis, is the mother of rocker Lenny Kravitz. She passed away in 1995.

11. Diff'rent Strokes (1978–1986) made Gary Coleman a household name in America. The catchphrase "What you talkin bout Willis" became a popular saying by fans of the show during the late 1970s and early 1980s. Tragically, stars Gary Coleman, Dana Plato and Todd Bridges lives were plagued by legal woes and drug dependence. Of these three, Bridges is the only one still alive.

12. The Cosby Show (1984–1992), starring Bill Cosby, aired for eight seasons on NBC from 1984 until 1992. The show was groundbreaking because of its focus on an upper middle-class Black American family (the Huxtables) living in Brooklyn, New York. Cliff Huxtable (played by Bill Cosby) was a doctor; his wife Clair Huxtable (played by Phylicia Rashad) was a lawyer. The storylines and character roles depicted a strong Black nuclear family structure, which was a first for network TV.

13. 227 (1985–1990) aired on NBC from 1985 until 1990. The star of the show, Marla Gibbs, played the role of Mary Jenkins, a boisterous housewife who lives in the inner-city and is considered by her neighbors to be a gossipmonger. The series takes place in an apartment building numbered 227.

14. Amen (1986–1991): Deacon Frye, head of the First Community Church of Philadelphia, has a tendency to want to run everything. However, the church hires a new assistant, Rev. Reuben Gregory, who has a different approach on how the church should function. After all, Rev. Reuben has been "called by God" to lead the flock. However, if Deacon Frye has his way, the good Reverend won't be leading the flock too far. The show stars actors Sherman Hemsley and Clifton Davis.

15. A Different World (1987–1993): The storyline for A Different World centers on a group of students who are attending a historically Black university and their struggle to make it through college. Lisa Bonet (Denise Huxtable from The Cosby Show), Kadeem Hardison and Jasmine Guy star in the show.

16. Frank's Place (1987–1988): Frank Parish (played by Tim Reid) is a college professor from Boston. He is notified that his father (who he has not seen in thirty-five years) has passed away and left him a restaurant in

New Orleans. Frank has no interest in running a restaurant and wants to sell it to the employees, but is convinced otherwise. A curse is placed on him by Miss Marie (played by Frances E. Williams) which causes him to reconsider his intentions to sell. Scholars and critics have stated Frank's Place was a well written show that was short-changed in terms of its run on network television.

17. Family Matters (1989–1998) originated on ABC network from September 1989 to 1997 and then aired on CBS network from 1997 to 1998. A spin-off of Perfect Strangers, the series revolves around the Winslow family, a middle-class African American family living in Chicago, Illinois. Midway through the first season, the show introduced the Winslows's nerdy neighbor Steve Urkel (played by Jaleel White), who quickly became its breakout character and eventually the show's main character.

18. The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air (1990–1996) starred Will Smith, who is considered one of the most sought after talents in Hollywood. The show was paramount considering its use of Hip Hop and Rap at times during the run of the series.

19. In Living Color (1990–1994) was an African American sketch comedy show which aired on the FOX network featuring the talents of the Wayans family. The show launched the careers of Keenen Ivory Wayans, Damon Wayans, David Allen Greer, Tommy Davidson and Jamie Foxx. Additionally, In Living Color was a jump start for the careers of Jennifer Lopez (one of the original Fly Girls) and comedic actor Jim Carrey.

20. Martin (1992–1997) played off the random misadventures of Martin Payne, an argumentative, brash, Detroit radio talk show host and his mixture of friends and foes.

21. The Steve Harvey Show (1996–2002) featured a former funk star named Steve Hightower (played by Steve Harvey) who enlisted as a high school music teacher away from his original career in Chicago. Writer/Producer Cedric the Entertainer plays the role of Cedric Jackie Robinson.

22. The Bernie Mac Show (2001–2006) (often shortened to Bernie Mac in syndication) is a sitcom that aired on FOX for five seasons from 2001 to 2006. The series featured comedic actor Bernie Mac and his wife Wanda raising his sister's three kids: Jordan, Vanessa, and Bryana.

23. The Boondocks (2005–) is the brainchild of cartoonist/creator Aaron McGruder. The storylines for The Boondocks frequently focus on socio-political commentary. The show bridges the gap and juxtaposes taboo subject matter around two central characters: Huey Freeman (who is ten and considered the voice of reason in the show although he reflects the mindset of Malcolm X and Huey Newton) and Riley Freeman who is eight, militant, and resistant to any type of paternal order.

24. Tyler Perry's Meet the Browns (2009–2012) created and produced by playwright, director, and producer Tyler Perry. Tyler Perry's Meet the Browns centers on a senior family living under one roof in Decatur, Georgia led by patriarch Mr. Brown and his daughter Cora Simmons. The show premiered in 2009 and finished its run in November, 2011 on TBS; it is an adaptation from Perry's play and film Meet the Browns (2004/2008). The show stars David Mann and Ta mela Mann, who starred in the earlier stage play and motion picture.

25. The Cleveland Show (2009–2013): No, this is not a show about Cleveland, Ohio (darn) but its focus is on a brother named Cleveland Brown (perhaps the creator Seth MacFarlane was thinking about the Cleveland Browns when he developed the show) who is the neighbor to deli owner Peter Griffin (Family Guy).

26. black-ish (2014–): A family man, Andre "Dre" Johnson struggles to gain a sense of cultural identity while raising his kids in a predominantly White, upper-middle-class neighborhood. "Dre considers himself the family patriarch and when he looks at his life—he sees a beautiful wife and four kids living happily in their colonial home in the 'burbs" (abc.go.com).