

ABSTRACT

Peeling *The Onion*: Race, Rhetoric, and Satire

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Fictional news outlet, *The Onion*, satirizes discourses of power which assist in the ongoing structural inequality faced by blacks in America. Through close textual analysis of articles, this thesis reveals the precise function of *The Onion* in terms of the deconstruction of racial ideology which prefigures racial inequality. Rhetorical intervention is necessary as the current failure of dialogue allows the smooth functioning of paradigms of exclusion and injustice.

Peeling *The Onion*: Race, Rhetoric, and Satire

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

It is impossible to search the term “satire” in any communication database without being bombarded with articles from *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*. Stewart and Colbert are some of the biggest names in satire, and for good reason. Their shows reach a multi-million member audience, they provide fresh new material four nights a week, and they have made a career targeting high level politicians and business leaders. Their segments go viral, their interviews echo throughout the internet. In 2005, Geoffrey Baym praised *The Daily Show* saying “The blending of news and satire confronts a system of political communication that largely has degenerated into sound bites and spin with critical inquiry.”¹ Jonathan P. Rossing has written on Colbert’s strategies for combatting racism, as well as the potential for satire as a genre to influence popular sentiment.² Roderick Hart, E. Johanna Hartelius, W. Lance Bennett, and Meital Balmas have engaged in protracted debate over the effects Stewart and Colbert have on the polity.³ In terms of direct media criticism, Joseph Faina, James Anderson, Amie D. Kincaid, and Zoe Druik have all taken up a defense of Stewart and Colbert as essential to contemporary critique of news media, especially those 24-hour news networks which are increasingly responsible for shaping public discourse.⁴

It is no surprise then to see studies on Stewart and Colbert have all but monopolized the discussion on satire in the last decade. Unfortunately, such hegemony in the field may steer the conversation in banal and uninteresting directions. Swirling

amongst texts on Stewart and Colbert are dozens of critiques of traditional news media, repetitive arguments over whether satire increases political participation, and accusations of increasing cynicism which never question whether such an orientation may be politically viable (and perhaps, as I will argue, necessary). While proponents of satire-as-transformative become mired in the quantitative debate over its immediate effectiveness and textual scholars provide close readings of television shows, theoretical concerns over satire as a force for immanent social change have taken a back seat. Perhaps this is because of the nature of *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*. Both shows are primarily concerned with the meta-level political spheres of Washington and Moscow. Stewart and Colbert confront the state, the law, politicians, big business, the police, and mass social events, but they have little to say about day-to-day lived experience. Most discussions about *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* focus on the linkage between viewers and the transcendent political sphere (Are more youth going out to vote? Are viewers of *The Daily Show* more or less “politically aware” than those who do not?), instead of discussions about the social relevance of satire.⁵

I aim to correct this trajectory by focusing on an underappreciated satirical force. Long before John Stewart and Stephen Colbert, there was *The Onion*: an online and in-print newspaper that mimics traditional news media in form but undermines its content with satirical headlines such as “Obama Camp Vows To Win Neighborhoods Where Romney Staffers Are Too Afraid To Go” and “Planned Parenthood opens \$8 Billion Abortionplex.”⁶ Beginning in 1988 as a low-circulation, low-budget, college newspaper, *The Onion* spread its influence by word of mouth and justified its existence with consistently scathing and socially relevant satire, eventually moving online and launching

its online video network in 2007.⁷ Comparable in reach to *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*, currently *The Onion* prints 710,000 copies of its weekly circular, and its online viewership is even greater with over 2 million readers a week.⁸ What sets *The Onion* apart from its competition is its enduring refusal to break the fourth wall and explicitly out itself as satirical. Even Stephen Colbert, who rarely breaks character in show, is forced to return to his true, non-satirical, persona on occasion. Comparatively, *The Onion's* unique brand of satire is so close to traditional mainstream media outlets that official channels often pick up stories as if they were honest reporting. In one case, a 2008 video entitled "Child Bankrupts Make-A-Wish Foundation with Wish for Unlimited Wishes" was picked up by several other news sources and presented as truth.⁹ In fact, *The Onion* has a long and sordid history of its headlines being taken literally, with their head office housing a corkboard to post "Letters, e-mails, and other proletariat grumblings" from individuals who mistook *The Onion* as serious investigative journalism.¹⁰ More than just a carbon copy of online news agencies, *The Onion's* attention to form is meticulous, including diverse types of articles (News in Brief, Commentary, Infographics, a sports section) and minute details like an updating weather widget which combine to form a robust mask over *The Onion's* scathing satire.

While the form of *The Onion* is meaningful and has critical effects on the way its content is received, I have chosen *The Onion* as a text for study because it consistently speaks on racial issues in a way other satirical texts do not. *The Onion* challenges assumptions about racial politics in a fashion more important now than ever. While *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* may have a segment on racist comment by a senator, or racial injustice within the law, *The Onion* has produced significant content on the lived

experience of racially marked bodies such that those everyday lived experiences can be *at least partially* understood by others. *The Onion* speaks about racial antagonism in a way that makes such systems of oppression visible to bodies otherwise not subject to gratuitous violence. That is to say, *The Onion* can help elucidate the dual paradigms of whiteness and anti-blackness in a way that simultaneously identifies and subverts them.

I will argue *The Onion*'s unique brand of satire is an effective challenge against contemporary anti-blackness and whiteness. I define anti-blackness as the structural paradigm of society which consistently threatens black life with unequal access to human rights, class advancement, and political power. Anti-blackness is the material foil to white privilege (whiteness), which Lipsitz explains as a product of a history of federal, state, and local actions and inaction that perpetuate a system of racial hierarchy.¹¹ If whiteness is unstated privilege, then anti-blackness is the targeting apparatus of hegemonic power that systematically denies privilege to groups that have been demarcated "black." Wilderson argues that while white and black do not a priori refer to skin color, historically it has been the case (at least in the United States) that whiteness actively targets black bodies as "police brutality, mass incarceration, segregated and substandard schools and housing, astronomical rates of HIV infection, and the threat of being turned away en masse at the polls still constitute the lived experience of Black life."¹²

Within the context of whiteness as a social and political phenomenon, satire offers an opportunity to effectively challenge the pernicious manifestation of anti-blackness by circulating discourses which both reveal the effects of power and criticize ongoing systematic sociopolitical failings. Whiteness, according to Kent Ono, "can be challenged

and ultimately changed . . . but not without a critical project to investigate it, make it visible.”¹³ George Yancy argues that illuminating the effects of whiteness and its means of power is a necessary prerequisite to emancipation as “whiteness...is a master of concealment; it is insidiously embedded within responses, reactions, good intentions, postural gestures, denials, and structural and material orders.”¹⁴ Rossing establishes an exigency compelling reconstruction of racial meaning as “the systemic privileges, power, and salience of Whiteness...remain hidden without the framework to acknowledge or critique them.”¹⁵ Satire operates as a direct challenge to whiteness because it “animates contradictions and tensions that offer fertile ground for humor” to “direct attention back to often overlooked discrepancies and social failings.”¹⁶ Furthermore, race is a unique site for satire to be effective, as Rossing explains that “Both racial comedy and the responses it inspires participate in the ongoing (re)construction of racial meaning.”¹⁷

How, then, does *The Onion* uniquely contribute to the “(re)construction of racial meaning”? Before the texts themselves can speak, I will outline my theories of interpreting texts, and the established tools I will take to disassemble *The Onion*’s rhetoric. First and foremost, however, it is necessary to distinguish the grounds for discussion.

Interpreting the Satiric

If we are to speak of satire we must first establish our interpretation of the term. What does it imply to call *The Onion* satirical as opposed to parodic or simply humorous? Answering this question is not simple. As Terry West notes that, despite incredible advances in the theory of satire, irony, and semiotics in general, any given understanding of satire must necessarily remain ironic as “we are still acting as if meaning can be

determined in some absolute way” when discussing a force which destabilizes meaning.¹⁸

Christopher Gilbert also bemoans attempts at defining satire because “Satire’s chameleonic nature means that the rhetorical form eludes concrete definition.”¹⁹

Furthermore, while it is possible to position satire as “a literary genre in which the foibles of humanity are ammunition for insult and injury,” or describe satire as “a mode of speech loaded with scorn, derision, and sardonicism,” satire as a genre of critique “accommodates such a vast array of traits” that we should be hesitant to define it through exclusivity.²⁰ However, given the relative meaning of signs, and the necessity of identifying our object of study, we may approach a general understanding of satire as rhetorical, even if we cannot locate its meaning precisely within the web of signs.

To organize the lexicon, I begin with Faina’s note that “The terms ‘humor,’ ‘satire,’ and ‘parody’ are often used interchangeably but have important distinctions.”²¹ The term “humor” is the broadest and houses the others. As Gray et al. tell us, humor is a “form that is always already analytical, critical, and rational, albeit to varying degrees” and thus constitutes a general sense of thought more so than a particular genre of category.²² Humor is a way of being, an approach more than a dress or style. Humor is the subversion of expectation and occurs within any number of critical axes. From here, Faina defines parody and satire as “related forms under the general rubric of humor yet not synonymous,” as parody more generally describes the “mimicry and imitation” of a form which “overlaps into the realm of satire” when “the media form it imitates is the one charged with educating the public.”²³ Parody is form, but satire is content. We may look at a text and argue that it is satirical while understanding that the satirical is not limited to parodic text. Druik further elaborates the relationship between parody and satire as “a

discourse on texts” compared to a “discourse on things” respectively.²⁴ That is to say that for Druik, satire “is a commentary not on a text, but on the social world.”²⁵

For example, rarely does an article from *The Onion* mock any particular news clip or column, its criticism of the news is not direct in that fashion, and so it is not strictly parodic. Rather, *The Onion* takes advantage of a parodic form to aid and abet criticism of both the news and the reality on which it reports. When Weird Al parodies a song he takes its structure and melody but his rendition is not a scathing critique of the original. When *The Onion* produces content it takes the look and feel of news *in order to* better deliver critique on any number of subjects not necessarily directly related to news reporting.

Given this, we may loosely understand satire as a humorous form of critique which often borrows from the parodic form. We must be cautious, at this point, to conflate the humorous with the comedic, with laughter. Grey et al. clearly “disagree that laughter is a necessary component or distinguishing feature of satire,” though they concede it is often an “important outcome.”²⁶ Similarly, George Test notes that satire has been associated with the “elements of aggression, play, laughter, and judgment” but that “No one of these elements is more important than another” and “each expression of satire will combine the elements with varying emphases.”²⁷ Sometimes *The Onion* forefronts the comedic, sometimes the punchline ambushes us and forces out laughter, but still other times there is no punchline, there is only sober commentary and scathing critique. This is for the best. If we were only to seek the comedy in satire, our scholarship would amount to little more than “explaining the punchline” and those who criticize satire as merely “poop jokes” would at least have the beginnings of a case.²⁸ Instead, my analysis of *The*

Onion will consider its rhetoric from multiple angles: humor, aggression, play, judgment, and how any number of constituent effects swirl together to produce criticism which subverts the taken for granted.

Literature Review: The State of Satire Scholarship

The past decade has seen a resurgence in satire studies motivated by the popularity of *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*. While many authors have drawn keen and unique insights from their investigation into fake news coverage, others have considered alternative satirical programs such as *The Yes Men Save the World* and *The Boondocks* while others have written more broadly about satire as a theory both communicative and theoretical.

Nearly a decade ago Baym praised *The Daily Show* as a poison pill to sloppy and biased news media, arguing that *The Daily Show* “contains much significance for the ongoing redefinition of news” and that “just beneath or perhaps imbricated within the laughter is a quite serious demand for fact, accountability, and reason in political discourse.”²⁹ Baym’s argument was not that *The Daily Show* itself would independently produce political change, but rather that it set the standard for news that “offers a lesson in the possible to which all students of journalism, political communication, and public discourse would be wise to pay attention.”³⁰ Baym is primarily concerned with the interrelationship between *The Daily Show* and other televised news shows, but his work here sets the stage for further analysis. Baym and Jones revisit these arguments in similar fashion when they investigate a variety of foreign news parody programs, suggesting *The Daily Show* inspired satirical resistance broadly.³¹

Following Baym, Lance Bennet defends *The Daily Show* as if it is a lone sane voice drowning in a sea of bought-off corporate shills when he notes "the public is being deceived," arguing that Stewart's brand of cynicism locates the truth hidden behind the "officially sanctioned news."³² For Bennet, *The Daily Show* produces cynicism in its audience, but it is a cynicism which drives political change. Bennet tells us that "cynicism seems to be part of a contemporary civic tool kit that tends to be used along with other tools, such as the daily news, to produce healthy levels of knowledgeable engagement with the political process."³³ Importantly, while Bennet defends *The Daily Show* against critics who argue it produces apolitical youth, he expressly does not submit that satire alone is sufficient for political change.

Faina defends Stewart and Colbert's programs as a reversal of political malaise, generating a form of public journalism that reinvigorates a political youth and inspires resistance to conservatism. Faina defines public journalism as "a general orientation toward news that engages in matters not only of public importance but in ways that help a public make sense of them according to their own lived experience"³³ and notes that "Public journalism emerged as a way to better engage citizens so that they may increase participation and make more informed decisions."³⁴ Here we begin to see a central flaw of contemporary scholarship on satire: belief in a universal subject who can make full use of the news (were only it done better) and whose participation in civil society may result in benefits for the self. Faina places faith in the restorative properties of "good" journalism to better align the state and its citizens while ignoring structural inhibitions occurring through anti-blackness. This dilemma in particular is addressed thoroughly in Chapter Two.

Although satire is immanently political, the political itself exists in spaces other than court houses and Senate chambers, and many authors have considered the value of satire within local political scenes. Rossing argues that Stephen Colbert's critique of postracialism (what he defines as "a belief that positions race as an irrelevant relic of the past with no viable place in contemporary thought") has an effect on viewer's perception of themselves and the immanent social world they inhabit by causing viewers to question their own postracial habits of thought.³⁶ According to Rossing, Colbert's satire functions through caricature, speeding up postracial arguments to their natural conclusion in a way that elucidates their harms. Elsewhere, Rossing also writes of the emancipatory potential of satire to challenge long held beliefs about race and racial progress.³⁷ Critical here is that Rossing argues the effect of *The Colbert Report* occurs immanently, in the way viewers approach thought patterns, opening discussion on the effects of satire locally, before questions of political praxis arise.

Similarly, Megan Hill "situates satire within narrative studies, conceptualizing satire as a type of counternarrative intended to resist entrenched accounts of how the world works" (what I will later refer to as simply ideology).³⁸ Hill notes that beliefs occur through accumulation of narratives and that satire provides a route to challenge ideology without confronting the master narratives otherwise immune to rational deconstruction. Hill frames the value of satire through social transformation, arguing "the satirist's jokes can be seen as a potential means for undermining society's master narratives by pointing out and ridiculing their gaps and fissures."³⁹ Where this may be most critical is in relation to whiteness and anti-blackness, which I will begin to explain in the next section and more fully comment upon in Chapter Two.

Ultimately what is at stake for Hill, Rossing, and others who consider satire's effect on frames of knowledge, master narratives, and lenses, is the question of ideology. Druik argues in favor of news parody as a way of challenging entire genres of information gathering, positing satire as resistance to the taken for granted. David Timmerman articulates a Burkean understanding of satire's effects on the production of new perspectives through incongruity.⁴⁰ Additionally, Amber Day argues that "What politicized satire has the potential to do is to push peripheral worldviews further into the mainstream, to contest the existing framing of particular issues, and to gradually change the associations that we collectively have of particular concepts/people/ideals, etc."⁴¹ These works all demand a focus on the relation between satire and ideology, something drastically under-performed in contemporary satire scholarship.

Detractors of satire studies find satire's effect on habits of thought underwhelming and in return posit a demand for more praxis, more direct political engagement, and more results-oriented scholarship. Hart and Hartelius argue that Jon Stewart is leading his audience astray, that he "makes cynicism attractive" and urges his audience to "steer clear of conventional politics."⁴² Hart and Hartelius are concerned that satire makes an audience feel like they have challenged the political order without actually accomplishing much of anything. While Hart's independent follow-up article focuses primarily on *The Daily Show* as a program, he once more advances a criticism of the cynicism bred through satire, arguing that "cynicism lets people avoid the hard work of politics, with its endless negotiations and compromises."⁴³ I will more thoroughly grapple with Hart and Hartelius in the conclusion to this thesis where I will put into question their assertions that (1) satire makes audiences *less* political, (2) state

engagement is the preferred political path, and (3) cynicism is detrimental to political aspirations.

Of course, Hart and Hartelius are not the only critics of satire (and satire studies): James Anderson and Amie Kincaid worry that satire makes so much a mockery of serious events that its consumers are laughing *at the expense of* direct political praxis. They argue that the humor of satire “effectively diverts attention from legitimate grievances and precludes the presence of other subversive satirizations at democracy’s expense.”⁴⁴ For Anderson and Kincaid, what matters most are measurable changes in political spheres, skirting the questions of ideology by noting that “Whether infusion of critical comedy into the greater public sphere actually raises awareness and supports some form of political engagement is...beyond the scope of this paper.”⁴⁵ Their critique therefore rises to the level of a warning against an exclusive reliance on satire as a force for political change – a concern echoed by Hart and Hartelius who criticize audience reliance on *The Daily Show* as a source of legitimate information, arguing that such a turn merely replaces one ideology with another.⁴⁶

By my evaluation, Anderson, Kincaid, Hart, and Hartelius appear to lose sight of the question of rhetoric in their critique. For all the vigor and angst with which they chastise young voters, their criticism is one of habit, not the rhetoric of satire itself. If one only learns about the world and its transgressions through satire, or if one only reads *The Onion* and watches *The Daily Show*, it is obvious that one will lack the knowledge necessary to pass a highway funding bill. That said, the questions quantitative analysis may answer are so broad they defeat the utility of such an approach. After all, it would be difficult to know if politically active youth are drawn to satire or if, once attracted, satire

makes our youth more (or less) politically inclined. No manner of survey, questionnaire, scale, or measuring cup could tell us if satirical rhetoric ambushes the reader and forces them to, even briefly, confront their ideology if any of our assumptions about the invisible nature of ideology hold true in the first place. Such a line of inquiry is inextricably linked to the approach of Hart et al. who insist on “proof” of the “effect” of satire.

We should be cautious of the quantitative approach to satire studies. As Day notes, when it comes to political satire “a favored angle is to ruminate on whether or not the piece of satire will have a tangible effect, which is almost invariably conceptualized as a direct impact on citizens’ behavior in the voting booth, or as measurable influence on individual opinions.”⁴⁷ She argues that the burden of “tangible effect” is a conservative tactic which effaces the potential of satire as “such a framework...assumes a one-to-one relationship between satiric text and action, as if one television episode, book, play, etc. is expected to spark a revolution.”⁴⁸ This burden is an absurd one, of course as, “there is almost nothing (satiric or otherwise) that has such a dramatic and immediate impact on people’s opinions.”⁴⁹

An alternative approach to satire identifies its potential for altering the political through immanent means. As Day explains,

What politicized satire has the potential to do is to push peripheral worldviews further into the mainstream, to contest the existing framing of particular issues, and to gradually change the associations that we collectively have of particular concepts/people/ideals, etc.⁵⁰

Though Day abstains from using the term “ideology,” we can imagine that contesting dominant frames and “pushing peripheral worldviews” would do much to combat the taken for granted. Even satirical projects designed to invoke immediate political change

can be evaluated through their secondary effects, as Reilly does with the Yes Men, a group of guerrilla satirists who crash conventions, hold fake press conferences, and otherwise disrupt the normative functioning of state and business practices. Despite this work, Reilly warns that "claims about satire's ability to single-handedly cause political change inherently miss the mark."⁵¹ Instead, we should champion satire as "an appropriate and powerful vehicle for exploiting flaws in the institutional structure, organization, and logic of mainstream news media"⁵² which can "call attention to various causes and sites of struggle and...create opportunities for dissenting perspectives to register with broader publics."⁵³ Timmerman's consideration of the television show *The Boondocks* does much work within this frame, showing precisely how satire can challenge problematic assumptions about race, a change with undeniable material consequence despite *The Boondocks*' lack of overt political messages.⁵⁴

Still, despite the possibility of satire's effect on ideology, the current state of satirical programming (and satire research) is lacking. Bemoaning the current trend of both televised satire vis-a-vis Stewart and Colbert, as well as academic treatments of satire, Gilbert emotes "a sense, then, that satire has become less episodic, less momentary, less festive, less processual, and less unsettling."⁵⁵ Without doubt this is the case. *The Daily Show*'s format has been copied and repeated ad infinitum with only minor variations on a theme, and with each iteration as intellectually compelling as the next study of Colbert and Burke's comic frame or Stewart and journalistic integrity. What was once in some impossible past a moment of rupture against doxa has become commonplace rhetoric - satire has become banal. Indeed, as Gilbert specifies "contemporary satire tends to narrow our political frames of reference according to

specific ideological anchors."⁵⁶ Here Gilbert critiques not the concept of satire but its deployment, no doubt guided in his viewership by the incredibly limited pool of content creators featured in academic research. Perhaps the staleness of satire studies can be chalked up to the endless buff and rebuff of quantitative arguments masquerading as rhetoric. Perhaps it can be explained by problems inherent in those satiric forms in which we have found comfort. Regardless, there is hope for something more from satire.

Following Gilbert, I argue for an interpretation of satire which exists "mythically, yielding temporal, psychical, emotional, and cognitive effects while remaining incomplete, partial, and tendentious."⁵⁷ Such an interpretation resists the "temptation to take satire too far."⁵⁸ If, as Gilbert theorizes, "satire does not approach tragedy; it treats (or retreats from) it as a point of departure" it does so only momentarily, distancing the reader from tragedy, flying from it, only to presence its absence, to force readers to question their own escape.⁵⁹ That is, through brief elision the muchness of tragedy and its affective baggage, satire makes readers more acutely aware of their position relative to the tragedy from which they flee. Satire beckons the reader to find the tragedy itself and fill the void of its absence. Satire cannot hold our hands and take us higher, it can only stop us momentarily, and that is all we can ask of it. To let satire ambush us, take us by surprise, and set us free just the same.

When Gilbert argues that satire can be reinterpreted as "a sociopolitical tactic for transcending our cultural troubles from within and reaffirming collective authorship of our lived worlds," the term "tactic" alerts us to the fleeting nature of satire.⁶⁰ It appears, it strikes, and then it reappears somewhere else. Thus when one speaks of satire it is best to speak of it as an abstract concept which takes particular aleatory forms. When I consider

the merits of individual articles from *The Onion* I will not question the weight of the text in terms of its unique potential for political change, rather I will discern its rhetorical effects, and the workings of those effects within the context of theoretical abstracts. The work of this thesis takes broad theoretical concepts from critical race studies, satire studies, and rhetoric studies, connects those concepts with individual works of satire and comments upon the interplay between theory and particularity. I turn now to a more precise explanation of the theory and method involved in such an undertaking.

Theory and Method

The Onion's strategy of mimicking traditional news outlets is a performative act that Don J. Waisanen describes as “ironic iconicity”. In his 2011 study of *The Onion*, Waisanen notes that “through ironic iconicity, audiences can relate to the material presented (i.e., the situation is not entirely absurd) while being invited to comically confront news choices.”⁶¹ By so closely resembling traditional news, *The Onion* embodies a form in which viewers are initially comfortable with what they are viewing and the audience is given space to approach the object of critique through comic distancing, allowing readers to contemplate the perspective of a given article without being directly confronted by its content. I will use the concept of ironic iconicity throughout my readings of *The Onion* to unpack the hidden meanings secreted away within the text.

Waisanen notes that ironic iconicity in *The Onion* “confronts a meta-level consideration—that whatever the facts, truth, or the real, they are inevitably naturalized narrative selections, filtered through...political and media interests good at hiding their craftings.”⁶² However, through their strict imitation of networks like CNN and Fox News,

The Onion recognizes the limited communication frameworks and channels available while distorting the popularized iconography of mainstream news sources to change the popular discourse available. Because rhetoric is limited to familiar structures, ironic iconicity is critical to advance argument and minority perspective beyond both contemporary media conditions and the epistemological blinders we all wear as a result of our racial experience. Because *The Onion* wears the cloth of a disinterested observer but in reality produces highly skewed visions of reality, it is a blatant call for readers to distrust other agencies which wear the same neutral face while masquerading ideology as news. Consequently, *The Onion* encourages its readers to be skeptical of the ideological underpinnings circumscribing all rhetoric. *The Onion's* skewed take on reality incentivizes a critical interpretation of daily events that disrupts hegemonic assumptions of politics both macro and micro. As Waisanen notes, while *The Onion's* perspectives do does not “create actual policies to put in the law books (...) they do craft broader outlooks for understanding the systemic political issues and social terrain that we all inhabit” and as such “they generally help us conceive of public habits in alternative ways, offering society pedagogical insights” which open space for radical shifts in thinking that would otherwise be bracketed off by ideological presuppositions.⁶³

Beginning with the question of ideology is of vast importance to understanding racial strife, where the taken-for-granted assumptions of lived experience maintain standpoint epistemologies which negate the possibility of meaningful racial dialogue. According to Frank Wilderson, the grammar of racial demands is at the heart and soul of continuous anti-black racism. For Wilderson, blacks in America have largely demanded only that which white America can comprehend: partial victories in the law,

desegregation, and minimal economic progress. The true problem of race lies in structural and ontological flaws which are continually reproduced because of an inability (or unwillingness) of whites to understand the contours of black suffering. According to Wilderson, the black experience is hidden from white life by all manner of devices including but not limited to: bracketing off inner-city poverty from white middle class experience; the expanded academic field of identity studies which steadily dilutes the significance of black skin against a backdrop of proliferating multiculturalism; media representation at all levels; and most importantly the innate white belief in “something to save” compared to the black experience of “nothing to lose” which emerges as the foundational distinction between optimistic and pessimistic racial strategies.⁶⁴ Against a seemingly insurmountable force of anti-blackness, I will argue satire can help bridge this epistemological gap by momentarily distancing the white body from its embedded social location to experience the gratuitous violence of anti-blackness, and it is this process which chips away at the structural conditions that perpetuate racial antagonism.

Wilderson’s afro-pessimist stance is consistent with much of *The Onion’s* characterization of race relations. Both Wilderson and *The Onion* paint a bleak picture of black life; suffering at the hands of the law, the economy, the police, and even well-meaning whites. Wilderson and *The Onion* both maintain pessimist positions that have long abandoned hope for meaningful political alternatives (at least not until a shift in consciousness makes possible an understanding of black suffering by non-blacks, among other prerequisites). It is important to note here that afro-pessimism does not deny the *abstract possibility* of a better tomorrow, rather it denies the possibility of that tomorrow emerging within the confines of current epistemological, ontological, and political

paradigms. While it is true *The Onion* has never advocated for a congressional bill, the linkage to pessimism is not assumed through absence, and I will more specifically argue that *The Onion* takes an actively pessimistic stance through textual analysis. Again, pessimistic here should not be confused with abject negativity. Afro-pessimism is not a refusal of all means of escape, rather it is the search for the “social life of social death”: the art of surviving in a world that is assumed to always be hostile toward black life.⁶⁵ Sexton explains this conflict through the question of, “How to orient or make sense of lived experience, the lived experience of the black no less, without break or interval or punctuation in the fact of (anti)blackness?”⁶⁶

Pessimism necessitates a consideration of the underlying ontological and epistemological systems behind contingent violence. This does not require the identification and isolation of particular persons, laws, or bills as much as it requires identification of paradigms. Thus, although *The Onion* is pessimistic, it does not rely on the production of villainous figures or wicked cabals behind the shadows, instead relying on what Kenneth Burke calls the “comic frame” to interpret events within a broader theoretical context. The comic frame is instrumental in explicating the rhetorical strategies used by *The Onion* as well as illuminating the subjects on trial in any given article. The rhetorical strategy deployed by *The Onion* is accounted by Burke as humor that is contra to heroic rhetorical frames. He explains that

Humor is the opposite of the heroic. The heroic promotes acceptance by magnification, making the hero's character as great as the situation he confronts, and fortifying the non-heroic individual vicariously, by identification with the hero; but humor reverses the process: it takes up the slack between the momentousness of the situation and the feebleness of those in the situation by dwarfing the situation.⁶⁷

Such a take may open space for readers to better identify with the critical details of what is humorous and what that says about the real world (up to and including what it says about readers themselves). For example, in one article titled “Alarming Study Finds more than 12 Instance of Racism Occurred Last Year,” by downplaying the effects of racism, and minimizing the apparent outrage of both those affected by racism and those perpetuating it, *The Onion* can approach the racial antagonism in a way that forces the audience to fill in the gap and posit their own theorization of the true depths and significance of anti-black violence.

By juxtaposing an under representative account of racism with the reader’s own knowledge of ongoing inequality *The Onion* sets up Burke’s “perspective by incongruity” which he argues is “necessary to counteract the dangers of ‘mystification,’ so momentous in their tendency to shunt criticism into the wrong channels.”⁶⁸ In effect, *The Onion* makes it impossible to uncritically advance many ideological arguments on race by absurd reduction of those positions as well as humorous characterizations of its proponents. Readers are initially forced either to reject or identify with the mistaken characters and mistaken representations of current racial affairs, but those who initially identify are given space to confront the limits of that position.

The Onion utilizes a “comic frame” which Burke explains “should enable people to be observers of themselves, while acting. Its ultimate [goal] would not be *passiveness*, but *maximum consciousness*. One would ‘transcend’ himself by noting his own foibles.”⁶⁹ On the surface, *The Onion* will often appear highly critical of one group when its satirical undertone makes clear the criticism is directed at another (for example, the article may target a handful of racists when the underlying content is directed at post racialism).⁷⁰

Readers who move from a surface level reading to a deeper understanding of the criticism at hand are invited to turn inwards and recognize their own complicity in ongoing problems. However, as Burke contends, the revelation of this perspective is not "demoralizing," but "designed to 'remoralize' by accurately naming a situation already demoralized by inaccuracy" so readers can come to terms with their own foibles and reorient their understandings of race in the 21st century.⁷¹

So then, what, precisely, does *The Onion* say that is so transgressive and capable of moving beyond preconceived ideology? Harts' criticism of *The Daily Show* (and those who write to support it) asks for the specific textual proof, the "how" and "what" of satire that make it transformative. What are the words, the themes, the unspoken assumptions and implications? In order to answer these questions, a close reading of several texts is obviously necessary. In the next section I explain my selection process and outline the articles I will be analyzing.

Selecting Texts

The Onion has a vast backlog of issues with thousands of articles, editorials, political cartoons, and videos. For this study I have refined the available selection pool to only written articles found under *The Onion*'s own "race" category. From there, I have selected articles which emphasized lived black experience. Because the race scholarship most cited in this study structures work around a strict white/black binary, and because of the specificity of many scholarly works on the intersection of satire and black life, articles about other races have been excluded from my analysis. As Baker explains:

The mere fact of slavery makes black Americans different. No amount of tortured logic could permit the analogy to be drawn between a former slave population and an immigrant population, no matter how low-flung the latter group. Indeed, had

the Great Society programs persisted at their highest levels until today, it is doubtful that the mass of American blacks would be measurably better off than they are now.⁷²

Given the particular history of blacks in America and the special ontological status afforded to the slave, it is necessary to begin racial analysis from the strict binary of white/black. This choice will be explained further in Chapter Two when I discuss in detail the relation between whiteness and anti-blackness.

Given this starting point, there are still many works that were excluded from substantive analysis because they either lacked sufficient text for a rigorous analysis to bear fruit (“Black Executive Prominently Displayed”), focused on public figures too specifically (“Will Smith: The Black Guy Everyone at Work Can Agree About”), or more generally because the content which could be explicated from an article was better covered by others. While every article from *The Onion*’s race category will be analyzed, naturally some will yield more critical textual analysis than others.

With over fifty articles to discuss, I do not intend to use space here identifying every title, but several should be highlighted. Two articles, "America Needs To Have A Superficial Conversation About Race" and "Open Dialogue Two Americans Having About Race Pretty Hilarious" flesh out the problem of wildly divergent understandings of race between white and black Americans. As my argument will prove satire is an effective bridge between racial epistemological gaps; it is necessary to establish the extant problem. Furthermore, as these pieces are meta-commentary on racial dialogue they prove self-reflexivity in *The Onion* which is central to satire’s effectiveness.

The articles “Report: Now Sadly the Best Time in American History to be Black” and “Nation Throws Hands Up, Tells Black Teenagers To Do Their Best Out There”

emphasize the feelings of hopelessness intrinsic to afro-pessimist analysis. These specifically engage in interplay between black and white perspectives on the issues of general dishonor and policing respectively, opening space for analysis about competing epistemic truth claims. To address contemporary opinion on race, I will spend significant time analyzing several recent articles on postracialism and tokenism, as both topics have been highly relevant to both satire and race studies since the election of President Obama.

To further explicate the current lived conditions of anti-blackness, several articles have been emphasized for their bluntness. The article “Sometimes Unfortunate Things Happen In The Heat Of A 400-Year-Old Legacy Of Racism” expresses the relationship between blacks in America and the police system which attacks them, but does so in a trans-historical manner that emphasizes the lineage of racism in America as well as the structuring effects of the middle passage on modernity. Policing will receive particular attention in this thesis, a topic of considerable importance in the wake of a multitude of controversial black deaths at the hands of police officers. The headline “Study: Reality TV, Reality Unfair To Blacks” links media misrepresentation to the everyday reality of black life in America, an article critical to my project both because it supports my conception of black suffering and also because it in many ways argues for the materiality of rhetoric. Finally, the article “Alarming Study Finds more than 12 Instances of Racism Occurred Last Year” contains a brutal and scathing critique of the attitude many Americans have toward racism in the status quo. “Alarming Study” uniquely positions discussion about racial disparity in America such that those who naively believe in a post-racial society are the butt of the joke rather than the so-called racists themselves,

pointing to a larger structural critique of racism at the social level, rather than encased in institutional and political life.

Theory and Method

I will argue that satire is a significantly more effective means of challenging the racial ideologies responsible for whiteness than direct confrontation about the pernicious effects of racism in the 21st century. While those effects are real and material, we have reached a blockage in race discussion that makes it difficult for individuals to convert sides. When Martin Carcasson and Mitchell Rice analyzed Clinton's race initiative they found "the primary reason why "talking about race" is such a difficult enterprise in the United States is because of the heavily fractured nature of the audience" which is a natural and inevitable product of the relationship between whiteness and anti-blackness, both creating entirely different and incommensurable lived experiences for white and black individuals.⁷³ I will argue *The Onion* is capable of overcoming such epistemological gaps and is capable of transforming the ontological paradigm at molecular levels. Thus, while *The Onion* does not produce a direct confrontation with racism in the traditional educational sense, its proliferation of minor discourses layer over one another to create counter-hegemonic understandings of race in the United States. I will argue satirical discourse on race has the capability to birth new critical perspectives on and interpretations of exigent socio-political concerns. Specifically, I will advance a claim that humorous incongruity and ironic iconicity as seen in *The Onion* enable the playing of counterfactual "what ifs" that upend normative readings of the situation in favor of inverted perspectives that undermine dominant racial epistemologies. Humorous

incongruity therefore opens space to take the perspective of the dispossessed, to see the world through a new lens, mediated and guided by black thought.

In Chapter Two I will argue that satire is especially necessary in the 21st century because backlash to black progress in America takes hold at ideological and epistemological levels. Anti-black violence occurs in the material world, but anti-blackness as a paradigm begins in the ways of thinking that pervade multiple strata.⁷⁴ Satire both attacks the epistemological habits that continue to feed anti-blackness and exposes how racial antagonism divests through individual's different ways of interpreting reality. Racial satire invites readers to investigate beyond the surface; it carves out space for readers to approach conclusions on their own. Racial satire attacks itself as much as others, opening up greater possibilities for challenging doxa because satire's very ambiguity and self-reflexivity allows the deconstruction of problematic practices without the replacement of others or the imposition of moral high ground. *The Onion*'s brand of humor has the potential to unite groups in opposition to pernicious practices and social injustice through epistemic revision, even if it is only a few casual readers at a time.

In Chapter Three I will elucidate the effects of whiteness on social strife through a reading of *Onion* texts about postracialism, multiculturalism, and white privilege. Chapter Four will focus on the paradigm of anti-blackness and *The Onion*'s ability to translate the lived experience of blackness into an intelligible grammar of suffering. While whiteness and anti-blackness are interrelated, they can also be examined individually from one another, a theoretical split explained in Chapter Two. As such, Chapter Three will examine how white privilege is made invisible, how progress is assumed neutrally across race, and how ongoing racism is made invisible. Chapter Four

will be concerned with how *The Onion* makes visible and intelligible the pillars of anti-blackness, how that violence is perpetrated, and the structural effects which make it self-executing.

Finally, in the concluding chapter of this thesis, in addition to summarizing my conclusions and implications, I will defend *The Onion* (and satire in general) against accusations of cynicism (what is really pessimism) by arguing that cynicism is a productive approach in the face of structural anti-blackness. This defense will take the form of a layered response to Roderick Hart's attacks on mass media satire.⁷⁵ If cynicism can be defined as a lack of faith in institutions, politicians, police, and the law, then I argue cynicism is perhaps more necessary now than ever, as many critical race theorists have argued that reliance on those institutions necessitates failure for black revolutionary politics. I will argue *The Onion's* cynicism provokes a response from readers at an epistemological level that opens space for paradigmatic change necessary to alter the ontological fabric of the civil society that produces anti-blackness.

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CHAPTER TWO

Rhetorical Constructions of Race

Introduction

Throughout this thesis I will argue that the discourse circulated by *The Onion* mounts an effective challenge to anti-blackness. I will make the case that satire is a necessary form for such discourse as it distances the reader from direct criticism while opening space for readers to approach minority rhetoric that may be contra to the reader's established beliefs. Essential to this strategy is the production of "perspective with interpretive ingredients" such that readers are confronted with criticism but must traverse its invitations on their own.¹ While these invitations are potentially open ended, I will make arguments about how *The Onion* directs its audience's conclusions through close reading of individual texts. There, I will explicate the difference between direct confrontation and satire. Specifically, I will argue that satire is a significantly more effective means of challenging the racial ideologies responsible for continually hiding the effects of whiteness than constant proselytizing about the pernicious effects of racism in the 21st century.

In order to prove my claims I will have to elucidate a linkage between rhetoric and the violence of anti-blackness. While that violence is real, material, and ongoing, we have reached a blockage in race discussion that makes it difficult for individuals to convert sides. When Carcasson and Rice analyzed Clinton's race initiative they found "the primary reason talking about race is such a difficult enterprise in the United States is

because of the heavily fractured nature of the audience" which is a natural and inevitable product of the relationship between whiteness and anti-blackness, creating incommensurable lived experiences for white and black individuals.² Following this argument, Carcasson and Rice attack normative racial education directly when they note that while racism is "caused primarily by ignorance and misinformation...racial animus cannot be alleviated solely through education."³ Additionally, they note that given the fragmented nature of discourse on race, "The debate concerning racial matters in the United States is divided in so many ways that no one rhetor could transcend these differences and present a message that was acceptable to a sustainable majority."⁴

Given these notes from Carcasson and Rice, my argument is not that *The Onion* independently is a poison pill to racism, nor that there is a direct, positive, correlation between *The Onion's* circulation and an increase in resistance to anti-blackness or decrease in anti-black violence. There are many novel factors to *The Onion's* text such as its refusal to break character, its ironic iconicity, and its subject matter, but while these attributes are what make the object unique they do not necessarily prove *The Onion* is drastically different in effect than *Saturday Night Live*, Richard Prior or Dave Chappelle. It is not my argument that *The Onion* is qualitatively *better* than other satirical outlets, only that it positively contributes to the deconstruction of metanarratives in a fashion worthy of examination. Thus while *The Onion* does not produce a direct transcendent confrontation with racism, I argue that its proliferation of minor discourses layer over one another, as well as already extant minor discourses, to create counter-hegemonic understandings of race in the United States which strike at the heart of anti-black ideology. Bolstering this claim, Rossing concludes his study on Colbert by arguing that

satire has the potential to break through racial gridlock because “humor functions as a critical, cultural project and site for racial meaning-making that may provide a corrective for impasses in public discourse on race and racism.”⁵ Humorous and satirical discourse on race has the capability to birth new critical perspectives and comments on exigent social and political concerns. Instead of forcing the audience into dialectical argument, “by holding a fun house mirror to contemporary culture, humor distorts, exaggerates, and reframes in ways that invite audiences to see themselves and society from new vantage points.”⁶

In this thesis I will argue that satire is effective at challenging both anti-blackness and whiteness. Satire can provide a backdoor channel to continue arguments that would otherwise be rejected on face due to ideological commitment, a necessary precondition for deliberation and the proliferation of minority dissent. Specifically, humorous incongruity and ironic iconicity as seen in *The Onion*, enables the playing of counterfactual “what ifs” that upend normative readings of the situation in favor of inverted perspectives that undermine dominant racial epistemologies. Humor can push buttons and force readers to interrogate internal habits of thought otherwise relied upon when considering race. Humorous incongruity opens space to take the perspective of the dispossessed, to see the world through a skewed perspective mediated and guided by black thought delivered in a white way. I will argue that *The Onion* can deliver extreme critiques of the current racial dynamic in the form of a nondescript editorial and in that way both disguise a palatable criticism and spread the message to a much wider audience than may otherwise be possible. Satire, then, is not merely a coping mechanism nor a

nihilistic way of dealing with the violence of the world. Good satire delivered to an attentive audience should spark discussion and clear space for dissenting opinion.

This particular effect of satire is especially necessary in the 21st century because backlash to black progress in America takes hold at ideological and epistemological levels. Satire, with its biting assault on what is taken for granted, blurs the line between truth and fiction, and in that intermediate space there is the possibility of communication. Satire as I have explicated here, especially racial satire, invites readers to investigate beyond the surface; it carves out space for readers to approach conclusions on their own. Racial satire attacks itself as much as it does others, opening up greater possibilities for challenging received opinion because satire's very ambiguity and self-reflexivity allow the deconstruction of problematic practices, and it does so without the replacement of others or the imposition of moral high ground that fracture coalitions.

I will argue through the next two chapters of this thesis that *The Onion*'s brand of humor has the potential to unite groups in opposition to pernicious practices and social injustice through epistemic revision, even if it is only a few casual readers at a time. In this chapter I will argue that while the most visible forms of anti-black violence occur in the material world of police shootings and poverty, anti-blackness as a paradigm begins in ways of thinking that pervade multiple strata. I will argue that any assault on structural racism must begin with the epistemological habits that continue to feed anti-blackness. First I identify the social construction of race before investigating the material effects of anti-blackness, then I examine the roles of epistemology and ideology in the continuation of racism before finally considering the role of satire in social justice.

Race is Constructed (but Real)

The social is formed through a web of interactions. Not one-to-one relationships between practices and outcomes, but an overarching system of interlocking activities, attitudes, and epistemologies which formulate temporary social spheres.⁷ Subjectivity is the result of being interpellated by social formation. Subjectivity represents multiple identities swirling into something altogether different, marked by their positioning in society.⁸ Indeed, the relations we perceive between individuals are constructed through social formation and are constantly under degrees of flux. The social moves, it ebbs, but it often maintains patterns and tropes which structure the material reality of those who inhabit it.

What is constructed is still very real. Theorizing race as socially constructed, then, does not categorize such construction as neutral, and does not dismiss the inequality between whites and blacks in the United States as merely a product of Darwinian social evolution. As George Lipsitz explains, though race is a cultural construct, the institutionalization of group identity has taken hold throughout cultural, social, economic and political spheres, continuously generating advantages for white Americans through the possessive investment in whiteness.⁹ For Lipsitz, the possessive investment in whiteness refers to the psychic and material investment by individuals into structural components of racial hierarchy which continuously produce privilege for those at the top (namely, whites). Whiteness is possible only through social constructions of race, specifically those which allow and invite demarcation of value between races. The concept of value is most important here: whiteness constantly produces value for those who benefit from it at the expense of those who do not. This value is very much material,

as Lipsitz explains, the cash value of whiteness can be found in “discriminatory markets,” “unequal educational opportunities,” employment networks which channel job opportunities to the friends and relatives of those whites already in power, and most especially through the “transfers of inherited wealth that pass on the spoils of discrimination to succeeding generations.”¹⁰

Whiteness produces the conditions for surplus value for whites without actively discriminating against non-whites. As Nakayama and Krizek argue, whiteness is most invisible to those who profit from it.¹¹ It is a force constantly at play but rarely, if ever, seen in action. Whiteness is unstated, it is normalizing, and it is the center without center. Whiteness does not have to revolve around exclusionary politics, instead relying on purely inclusive and additive functions often disguised by non-racial social constructions. As Lipsitz notes, “white supremacy is usually less a matter of direct, referential, and snarling contempt and more a system for protecting the privileges of whites by denying communities of color opportunities for asset accumulation and upward mobility.”¹² Indeed, as Nakayama and Krizek note, regardless of race’s social and rhetorical construction, or how one relates to that construction, “there is little room for maneuvering out of the power relations embedded in whiteness.”¹³

Lipsitz explains whiteness as a product of a history of federal, state, and local actions (and at times inaction) that perpetuate a system of racial hierarchy. There is a flip side in the form of anti-blackness, the material foil to white privilege. I define anti-blackness as the structural paradigm of society which consistently threatens black life with unequal access to human rights, class advancement, and political power. If whiteness is the unstated privilege imbued to the top of the racial hierarchy, then anti-

blackness is the targeting apparatus of hegemonic power that systematically denies privilege to groups that have been demarcated “black.” Furthermore, the privilege of whiteness comes at the direct expense of blacks. Frank Wilderson argues that while white and black do not a priori refer to skin color, historically it has been the case (at least in the United States) that anti-blackness does indeed actively targets black bodies as “police brutality, mass incarceration, segregated and substandard schools and housing, astronomical rates of HIV infection, and the threat of being turned away en masse at the polls still constitute the lived experience of Black life.”¹⁴ Even worse, the violence faced by blacks is rarely if ever attributed to structural conditions, and far too often, as Carpio tells us, “Differences in wages, access to health care, housing, family income, and more have been constantly attributed to the cultural and individual failures of African Americans.”¹⁵

At this point the link between whiteness and anti-blackness should be clear. The privilege afforded by whiteness comes at the expense of suffering by blacks. How this relation maintains itself is less clear. As Richard Dyer suggests, “white power secures its dominance by seeming not to be anything in particular.”¹⁶ Through the invisibility of whiteness comes the invisibility of structural social conditions which reproduce anti-blackness. Lipsitz explains that, “As the unmarked category against which difference is constructed, whiteness never has to speak its name, never has to acknowledge its role as an organizing principle in social and cultural relations.”¹⁷ Because the value of whiteness is unstated, also left unstated is the debt of blackness. Because whites do not attribute their success to racial organization which places them at the top of a hierarchy, and therefore do not attribute their wealth to systems largely outside of their control, blacks

are denied the opportunity to attribute their misfortune similarly. I turn now to a deeper discussion on the misfortune of black life in America.

The Harms of Anti-Blackness

So far I have explained anti-blackness as the systematic violence which is faced by blackened populations, but how, specifically, does it take form? Anti-blackness does not occur merely in obvious moments of racial discrimination, rather it has a structural basis which can be traced historically. While Wilderson argues that anti-blackness was born in the transatlantic slave trade, it is important to explicate the exact forms anti-blackness takes in modern times.¹⁸ Both Wilderson and Lipsitz identify anti-blackness as a structural paradigm which inhabits economics, the law, personal wellbeing, and every other facet of lived experience. I turn now to identify many of the specific manifestations of anti-black violence, though this list is by no means exhaustive and can only scratch the surface of the violence inherent to black life.

Filiative capital, or the passing of wealth along generations, is unfairly denied to black individuals by virtue of their history in the United States. Wealth accumulated through slavery was wealth denied future black generations as those who emerged from slavery did so with no reparations, and no material assets. The effect on black access to future wealth becomes self-executing: with no access to seed funds, blacks were less able to start their own businesses. Without protection under the law for equal hiring practices, for nearly a century blacks were unjustly barred from access to high-paying occupations. Segregated schooling ensured black youth were less educated (and therefore less valuable) than their white peers, continuing cycles of poverty and unequal opportunities for success. Poor families resulted in poor neighborhoods which resulted in low property

taxes which resulted in underfunded schools which resulted in underemployed black populations, which continues the cycle. All of this contributes to plummeting property values in non-white neighborhoods, preventing a core avenue for wealth accumulation among families. Additionally, the ability for non-whites to acquire property in white neighborhoods is curtailed by the lack of access to housing loans due to "the low net worth of minority applicants, even those who have high incomes."¹⁹ As Lipsitz so eloquently puts it, "We can't give you a loan today because we've discriminated against members of your race so effectively in the past that you have not been able to accumulate any equity from housing to pass down through the generations."²⁰

Housing is both a signifier of unequal distribution of wealth and also a contributing factor, however the cycle of poverty I have explained above was neither born from pure free market economics nor is it propelled by economics alone. Lipsitz notes, "The federal government has played a major role in augmenting the possessive investment in whiteness created by systematic racial discrimination in the private sector."²¹ The racist history of federal government action in regard to housing and property is too great to reproduce here, but I will present a few examples drawn from Lipsitz. He tells us that "For years, the General Services Administration routinely channeled the government's rental and leasing business to realtors who engaged in racial discrimination, while federally subsidized urban renewal plans reduced the already limited supply of housing for communities of color through "slum clearance" programs."²² Thus while the federal government ostensibly championed programs explicitly for the purpose of low-income housing, the implementation of those programs ensured access to housing mostly for whites while separate policy actively destroyed

black communities and housing. Note that these effects can hypothetically be explained in purely non-racial terms. Those bankers engaged in racial discrimination can point to average net worth of minority applicants as sufficient reason for rejection without recourse to abjectly racist logics. Similarly, “slum clearance” programs were characterized as a fight against crime despite the direct link between systemic poverty and violence, drug use, and other illegal activity necessarily implicating *any* anti-crime programs as necessarily anti-black.

Furthermore, many government policies directly and actively lowered the value of black housing communities. Lipsitz notes that, "FHA officials collaborated with blockbusters in financing the flight of low income whites out of inner city neighborhoods, and then aided unscrupulous realtors and speculators by arranging purchases of substandard housing by minorities desperate to own their own homes."²³ In essence, the federal government actively assisted the relocation of whites to outlying neighborhoods so that the inner city could be freely populated by substandard housing projects which black families, barred from all other opportunities, would have no option but to occupy. Segregation becomes *de facto*.

Once segregated, disastrous urban renewal and highway construction programs sped up the loss of power and wealth in black communities. Lipsitz describes a vicious cycle in which “population loss led to decreased political power, which made minority neighborhoods more vulnerable to further urban renewal and freeway construction, not to mention more susceptible to the placement of prisons, incinerators, toxic waste dumps, and other projects that further depopulated these areas.”²⁴ Thus, housing opportunities relate directly to political power, and the loss of political power opens space for worse

and worse material violence as black populations lack even the most basic access to civic restitution.

It comes as no surprise to see the effect poverty has on the health of blacks in America. Lack of political and economic power denies blacks the ability to negotiate the placement of hazardous toxic waste facilities and power plants, resulting in drastically higher levels of pollution in black neighborhoods. This is not merely an economic issue, as Lipsitz notes that "Scholarly studies reveal that even when adjusted for income, education, and occupational status, aggrieved racial minorities encounter higher levels of exposure to toxic substances than white people experience."²⁵ Thus, while economics can explain, on face, the placement of toxic waste facilities in low-income neighborhoods, broader exposure to pollutants can be explained only through race. Inequality in daily forms of health care is also apparent as minorities are significantly less likely to receive "either preventative medical care or costly remedial operations from Medicare," which means even those programs designed to help the dispossessed disproportionately benefit whites (and since Medicare funds are not unlimited, that benefit comes at the direct expense of blacks).²⁶ The health effects of environmental racism are not inconsequential, for Lipsitz notes that "if African Americans had access to the nutrition, health care, and protection against environmental hazards offered routinely to whites, seventy-five thousand fewer of them would die each year."²⁷

Unfortunately, the constant accumulation of black bodies through environmental degradation and exposure to toxic pollutants is not newsworthy. We rarely hear stories of the gripping drama playing out between factories billowing smoke and the people of color who breathe it. Not that such narratives would even matter, as we see when it

comes to the racial animus of the law. I write this section in the wake of dozens of tragic stories about unarmed black men being killed by police officers with no consequence. A detailed analysis of those stories deserves its own thesis, but their circulation in the media is telling of anti-blackness inherent in policing. Only anti-blackness can explain that "while comprising only about 12 percent of the U.S. population, blacks accounted for 40 percent [of drug arrests] in 1988, and 42 percent in 1990," or that "white drug defendants receive considerably shorter average prison terms than African Americans convicted of comparable crimes."²⁸ Purely economic arguments cannot possibly account for the fact that "sentences for African Americans in the federal prison system are 20 percent longer than those given to whites who commit the same crimes."²⁹ The strength of such data over time omits the possibility of a few "bad apples" corrupting an otherwise operable police force. Similarly, the consistency with which blacks are subjected to harsher criminal sentences than whites denies the possibility of a few racist judges, prosecutors, or juries being solely responsible for racism within the law.

Despite centuries of protest, despite mountains of legislation, and despite a litany of so-called "groundbreaking" court cases, anti-black violence continues today. I have explained how some of that violence continues through self-executing economic systems, but that answer hardly speaks to the nature of the law and only partially speaks to segregation, high rates of HIV, and a severe lack of government aid for underfunded schools. What is necessary is a step back: rather than question the individual forms of anti-blackness, we must theorize about the emergent conditions of anti-blackness and the ideologies in place which make racial hierarchy possible. I turn now to a consideration of the ideological and epistemological conditions that facilitate anti-blackness.

Epistemologies of Oppression

It should come as no surprise that racism, and anti-blackness in particular, are alive and well in the United States.³⁰ Indeed, Lipsitz notes that "There has always been racism in the United States, but it has not always been the same racism. Racism has changed over time, taking on different forms and serving different social purposes in each time period."³¹ Thus the particular forms of racism are less relevant than the conditions which produce them. Often individuals become enamored with the discrete political success of the civil rights movement, particular court cases, the election of a black president, and so on, losing sight of the epistemological and ideological foundation of anti-blackness. We must be cautious as, "It is a mistake to posit a gradual and inevitable trajectory of evolutionary progress in race relations; on the contrary, our history shows that battles won at one moment can later be lost."³²

Anti-blackness is a material issue but one that cannot easily be solved by direct political action. In addition to the already established provincial barriers separating most blacks from the political sphere, empirically those black movements which attempt direct engagement are quashed in one way or another by those who have the most to gain from extant racial hierarchies (most notably the United States federal government). Revolution in the streets has empirically produced cycles of backlash which preclude lasting structural change. In one specific example, Carpio notes that the anger at poverty and inequality which persisted beyond the civil rights era was quickly stomped out by the boots of COINTELPRO, which violently struck down black militant groups attempting to mobilize revolutionary anti-statism.³³ Those movements which threatened to effectively challenge anti-blackness were violently shut down by government agents under the

auspices of anti-communism, anti-gang, and (ironically) anti-violence policies.

Ultimately, government intervention may not have ever been necessary, as both the civil rights and Black Power movements were doomed to failure from the beginning because the scope of their demands could never hope to rectify “the genocide and dehumanization of people of African descent” which gave way to structural inequalities continuing to this day.³⁴ As Carpio explains, such movements “will continually return to the breach of slavery without resolving it” because they fail to account for the epistemological and ideological grounding of anti-blackness.³⁵ Critically, the backlash against civil rights policies coincided with “a liberal retreat from racial politics” as new forms of racism developed which, “because of their subtlety compared with the outright bigotry of the past” left dissenters with little hard evidence of ongoing racism, and thus “have been more difficult to battle.”³⁶ Thus whatever gains were made by the civil rights and Black Power movements had the unfortunate side effect of disincentivizing continued struggle, and so it will be with all further movements against specific and particular manifestations of anti-blackness. Because whiteness is unspoken, and so too anti-blackness is always partially obscured from public view, whatever short term gains are made for blacks in America are constantly under threat, and those very gains serve to obscure the deeper structural conditions for racism.

Wilderson asks us to consider anti-blackness paradigmatically by way of criticizing the underlying theoretical claims to identity and economic mobility as well as the “assumptions manifest in...political common sense.”³⁷ By approaching the problem of anti-blackness from the assumption it exists paradigmatically, any given instance/form of racism is linked back into an overarching web of discrimination that exists throughout

political, economic, and social spheres. Such an approach may allow us to account for individual acts of violence without obscuring broader emergent conditions. While Wilderson's pessimism precludes the question "what is to be done?" his refusal of pragmatic solutions does not deny the possibility of epistemic revision.

Taken for granted assumptions of lived experience are part and parcel of a flawed racial epistemology which mystifies the reality of antagonism in modernity. According to Wilderson, the grammar of racial demands is at the heart and soul of continuous anti-black racism.³⁸ For Wilderson, blacks in America have largely demanded only that which white America can comprehend: partial victories in the law, desegregation, and minimal economic progress, precluding structural demands necessary to reverse centuries of discrimination. Wilderson argues that the true problem of race lies in structural and ontological flaws which are continually reproduced because of an inability (or unwillingness) of whites to understand the contours of black suffering. Accordingly, the black experience is hidden from white life by all manner of devices including but not limited to: bracketing off inner-city poverty from white middle class experience; the expanded academic field of identity studies which steadily dilutes the significance of black skin against a backdrop of proliferating multiculturalism; media representation at all levels; and most importantly the innate white belief in "something to save" compared to the black experience of "nothing to lose" which emerges as the foundational distinction between optimistic and pessimistic racial strategies.³⁹

Lipsitz posits the relationship between white optimism and prevailing anti-black violence when he argues that optimism in regards to black life often only reveals ignorance of the dire conditions facing black communities, including but not limited to

structural denial of those opportunities whites are so quick to condemn blacks for not taking advantage of. Opinion polls prove whites generally blame blacks for not working hard enough or developing poor character.⁴⁰ At play here is an epistemological gap between white and black understandings of structural racism. When whites, most of whom are shielded from recognizing their privilege, deny extant racial hierarchy as the cause of black suffering, they turn to arguments about individual culpability to explain the current state of black life in America. Those structural forces at play are stripped of their racial baggage as neoliberal arguments about self-sufficiency blame the victims of racism for not working hard enough, for not educating their decedents, and so on. By defining social life through “deliberative individual activities,” white viewpoints on race ensure “we will be able to discern as racist only individual manifestations of personal prejudice and hostility. Systemic, collective, and coordinated group behavior consequently drops out of sight.”⁴¹ Thus, how anti-blackness is rhetorically framed determines how it is understood by mass audiences, and consequently shapes political responses. The results are political responses that are hamstrung from the start as they actively deny a paradigmatic understanding of race which locates anti-blackness in all facets of black life. Those optimistic views of race which identify anti-blackness only in individual moments of prejudice ignore the power of racism to manifest itself more broadly. As Lipsitz explains, “Collective exercises of power that relentlessly channel rewards, resources, and opportunities from one group to another will not appear racist from this perspective, because they rarely announce their intention to discriminate against individuals.”⁴²

Indeed, "The gap between white perception and minority experience can have explosive consequences."⁴³ Lipsitz' solution begins with a call to rectify the gap between white and black epistemology through white recognition of complicity with the problem. He notes that "those of us who are 'white' can only become part of the solution if we recognize the degree to which we are already part of the problem."⁴⁴ Unfortunately, as history has shown us, it is not easy to educate the privileged about their position due unlimited means of denying whiteness as a racial contingency, and therefore denying whiteness as a social and political force.⁴⁵ Before we can resolve the material violence of anti-blackness, the epistemological gap between white and black lived experience must be mediated. In order to do so, whites must be educated about their investment in whiteness, their complicity with racism, and the everyday thoughts and actions which reproduce racial hierarchy. So what, exactly, is stopping academics from reaching white populations? I believe the answer is ideology, and is to this concept that I turn now.

Conclusion

When Lipsitz uses the phrase "possessive investment in whiteness" he refers not only to the unconscious desire of whites to maintain particular hierarchy, he also speaks to the literal value of maintaining whiteness for white people. Ideology functions similarly in that those who buy into it so do because of the value it provides to their daily lives.⁴⁶ Barbara Jean Fields uses the analogy of a red light: it is beneficial for drivers to "buy into" the ideology of the sign because everyone else does as well, and thus buying into the power of the signifier has economic value (fewer car accidents and so on).⁴⁷ Thus the stop sign gains power not through imposition of force, but because of the literal monetary value of buying into its power. Fields expands on this notion by explaining

ideology as “the descriptive vocabulary of day-to-day existence through which people make rough sense of the social reality that they live and create.”⁴⁸ For Fields, ideology is a way of interpreting both the world and one's own relationship to the varied others which constitute social experience.

When we make “rough sense” of the world around us we naturally select and deflect information as we structure a coherent narrative which can explain our lived experience. For whites who have virtually no experience with discrimination, race is naturally a less relevant causal factor in their life narrative. As racism becomes less abject and more underground, whites are concerned less and less with the suffering of others *because of their race* and therefore construct alternative narratives to explain black suffering. From here emerges age-old arguments about self-control, laziness, work ethic, and so forth. It does not matter if all the evidence “fits” because of the nature of possessive investment ideology, specifically whiteness. Fields notes “Ideologies do not need to be plausible, let alone persuasive, to outsiders. They do their job when they help insiders make sense of the things they do and see—ritually, repetitively—on a daily basis.”⁴⁹ Thus whiteness maintains itself because it allows whites to participate in racially exclusive structures without attributing their success to the color of their skin. For example, whiteness as ideology can help a white person make sense of their success through non-racial means, and because it is much nicer to imagine one received their success through individual aspiration than racial privilege, the belief that race “no longer matters” becomes broadly accepted.

Fortunately, while ideology can be sticky, it is also impermanent. Fields tells us that “An ideology must be constantly created and verified in social life; if it is not, it dies,

even though it may seem to be safely embodied in a form that can be handed down."⁵⁰

The myth of postracialism, the invisibility of whiteness, and the invisibility of anti-black violence are all cohered around an ideology of race which is constantly recreated in everyday experience. Ideology becomes coherent and self-sustaining: First, I believe the world to be a certain way and make assumptions of the other, most often formed unconsciously. Next, I encounter an event, and I read it through my assumptions of how the world operates. At this point, my assumptions will ride roughshod over counter-interpretations of an event to guide my understanding. Finally, once an event has been read through ideology, it becomes merely additional proof that the world does in fact operate as assumed and contributes to the validity of the very ideology which interpreted the event as such in the first place. For example, as in the case of George Zimmerman, one believes that blacks are more violent than non-blacks, then that person kills a black teen in altercation. That person is then acquitted of all charges by arguing self-defense, ultimately validating the initial assumption that blacks are dangerous and that whites must protect themselves and others from blacks who threaten white life. What is necessary to disrupt these cycles is an event that cannot possibly be explained through taken for granted assumptions, or an event which resists extant coding strategies. In different terms: white people must experience a narrative event which can only be explained through structural racism. This is no easy task. Consider that the very concept of race itself is entirely constructed (we have long since disproven phrenology) but maintains its grasp on society so vigilantly.

Fields concludes with a call to responsibility when she says "If race lives on today, it does not live on because we have unconditionally inherited it from our forebears

of the seventeenth century or the eighteenth or nineteenth, but because we continue to create it today."⁵¹ It is the responsibility of all people to challenge racial ideology, to challenge whiteness, and to challenge the pernicious violence of anti-blackness. For some it may be as simple as educating them, plainly, about the conditions of black life they are ignorant to. For others it may be still as simple as educating them about the structural nature of racism or the invisibility of whiteness. However, those who can be taught so easily are those least beholden to ideology. Those individuals require no elaborate strategy to persuade. What is more difficult to consider is how to reach those in the middle: those who have bought into ideology but are not actively racist. How are we to reach those individuals who resist normative educational channels?

One avenue is racial humor, specifically satire. In Glenda Carpio's examination of the history of black humor, she notes that "For centuries, in fact, African Americans have faced racism, in its various manifestations and guises, with a rich tradition of humor that, instead of diminishing the dangers and perniciousness of racism, highlights them."⁵² She goes on to celebrate the power of humor by black individuals for black audiences as "for black Americans, humor has often functioned as a way of affirming their humanity in the face of its violent denial."⁵³ Humor was an instrumental site for resistance for blacks throughout history because of both the inaccessibility of the law and the threat of retaliation by those in power. Traditional political outlets have been ineffective for blacks throughout history because of their position in civil society and their relationship to the law. Carpio argues that "black noise is barred from court because it urges a radical transformation of society in which the court itself would have to undergo an overhaul, as would the liberal conceptions of law and property that guide the current reparations

debates.”⁵⁴ For Carpio, “black noise” is all that dominant white political systems can draw from black protest; all black discourse is denigrated to noise. Because black noise cannot be incorporated into the political, nor can it be used to change the political from the outside, it needs alternate sites for expression. Satire is one of those sites, and for centuries, blacks in America have taken up arms against racism and its manifest guises by using humor which highlights the dangers and properties of anti-blackness.

Carpio notes that black humor has often been linked to three types of humor: relief theory, superiority theory, and incongruity theory.⁵⁵ Relief theory emerges from Freud and argues that black humor can help manage the psychic harms of racism, fueling momentary respites from anti-black violence.⁵⁶ Superiority theory “posits that we laugh at other people's misfortunes” and derives from “the tradition of signifyin’, including the play of the dozens, of boasting and toasting.”⁵⁷ Both of these theories operate within the self. They do not make claims to the transformative and emancipatory potential of humor. Incongruity theory is most closely related to my arguments about *The Onion*. As Carpio notes, incongruity theory “suggests that we laugh when our expectations are somehow disturbed...the humor of incongruity... momentarily reconfigure habits of mind and language... we may fall into as we critique race.”⁵⁸ Conceptualizing humor in such a way delimits it: instead of positing black humor as “*only* a coping mechanism...African American humor has been and continues to be...an energetic mode of social and political critique.”⁵⁹

Black humor, and especially black satire with its roots firmly planted in criticism of white supremacy, opened space for criticism without increasing vulnerability for its participants nor alerting the audience’s natural ideological reflexes. Carpio explains that,

"[African American humor] developed a Janus-face identity: on the one hand, it was a fairly nonthreatening form that catered to whites' belief in the inferiority of blacks but that usually masked aggression; on the other, it was a more assertive and acerbic humor that often targeted racial injustice but that was generally reserved for in-group interactions."⁶⁰ *The Onion* mirrors this form: on the surface (to outsiders) it is a humorous, non-threatening, take on the daily news. To critical audiences (insiders), *The Onion* often makes bold declarations on race and challenges structural components of whiteness that traditional news sources ignore entirely.

For Carpio, humor "exposes how racial conflict, and the obsessive ways that it colonizes American minds, can divest everyone, albeit at different registers, of a sense of reality."⁶¹ *The Onion* is a modern source of humor which exposes; it exposes assumptions of postracialism, it exposes the tenacity of stereotypes thought to be extinct, and it exposes the true lived conditions of blacks in America. In the introduction to this chapter I argued that *The Onion* provides texts which enable the possibility of education despite ideological reflexes which would otherwise blockade such knowledge. I argued that satire is uniquely situated to provide racial education because it allows readers to engage in criticism without provocation and without direct confrontation which empirically produce gridlock. In the chapters which follow I will turn to specific textual analysis to prove these arguments by explicating the precise ways in which *The Onion* overcomes ideological reflex.

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CHAPTER THREE

On the Unbearable Whiteness of Being

Introduction: The Failure of Dialogue

Despite their "earnest expressions" and "apparent belief in the power of honest dialogue," the "open-minded, nonjudgmental conversation" between two Americans about race is rather humorous according to *The Onion* headline "Open Dialogue Two Americans Having About Race Pretty Hilarious."¹ Not only "hilarious," the exchange is "hysterical," "sidesplitting," and "uproarious" in its honesty and naiveté. Indeed, *The Onion* notes that the exchange reached its "climax as the two Americans nodded toward each other and agreed 'this is how change happens.'" Although the article omits any specific thoughts on racial animus or harmony, it is clear the conversation had by these individuals is ineffective despite the attempt to "engage in a meaningful discourse." Perhaps it is the notion of "meaningful engagement" itself within the context of racial dialogue that is so humorous.

Certainly, the state of racial dialogue in America leaves much to be desired. Another article titled "CNN Holds Panel Discussion To Determine If There Race Problem In America" subtly hints as some of the reasons dialogue is breaking down.² Accordingly, after the acquittal of George Zimmerman, CNN "convened a special on-air panel" to determine if "perhaps some kind of race problem or division currently exists in the United States of America." Commenting on the state of mainstream media, the article lampoons outlets like CNN for questioning the possibility of a race problem rather than taking it for granted. At its heart, this article criticizes the uncertainty of news outlets and

the American public with regards to ongoing racial antagonism. The article lists a series of rhetorical questions such as “is race, in fact, a powerful and complicated force in American life?” which are framed by the certainty of injustice in the Zimmerman trial. Thankfully, “several prominent experts in the field of race in America, including a black man, a black woman, a white man, and a second black man” will participate in an “hour-long dialogue” to get to the heart of the matter. That the panel would only need an hour to unpack “a larger problem in our country concerning race relations” is itself humorous given that decades (if not centuries) of racial strife in America has yet to yield a conclusive solution to the problem of racial animus, specifically the degradation of blacks by the law, the political, and the social. When *The Onion* lists the panel of experts as nameless individuals of certain races it mocks the nature of televised race panels which, evidently, are concerned with racial makeup over the content of arguments. What emerges from the text is an argument about the failure of the news media to seriously interrogate the question of race, a failing replicated throughout the social.

Given the current failings of racial dialogue it seems obvious that, yet again, “America Needs To Have A Superficial Conversation About Race.”³ After all, how better to “put aside differences and come together on common ground” than to “engage in an inconclusive, protracted, ignorant, and superficial examination of the issue of race?” Detailing some of the most common pitfalls of racial dialogue, *The Onion* asserts the need for “vagueness,” “self-righteous, know-it-all attitudes,” and “ill-informed citation of unconfirmed statistics on affirmative action programs.” The article lists dozens of concerns which inhibit meaningful engagement or dialogue on race, including the banality of semantics, the tenacity of initial assumptions, and the internet’s ability to

boost thousands of voices all “saying one version or other of the same basic three to five ill-informed viewpoints on this nuanced cultural issue.” The article concludes with a sarcastic affirmation of “one-dimensional dialogue on the most simple and wholly ignorant level,” for only through such discourse can we ensure that we “as a nation, never get down to the deeper issues about race and identity that truly threaten to tear this country apart.”

By satirizing trite calls for race consciousness, *The Onion* reveals the limitations of the status quo’s ability to engage in meaningful dialogue. Not simply an issue of sender or receiver, form or content, a multitude of positions, assumptions, and channels inhibit successful challenges to racial animosity and inequality. This should come as no surprise given the multi-century-long failure of America to resolve the systemic injustice faced by non-whites throughout legal, economic, and social spheres.⁴ While I cannot possibly hope to resolve in totality all that prevents racial harmony, I will attempt in this chapter to elucidate one central paradigm at the heart of racial animosity: the paradigm of whiteness.

Whiteness is not simple to define because it emerges through response. Whiteness is described by Lipsitz as a system of privilege, invested in by whites, which accounts for advantages in housing access, education opportunities, employment opportunities, and “intergenerational transfers of wealth that pass on the spoils of discrimination to succeeding generations.”⁵ Nakayama and Krizek understand whiteness as the social construction of social location by whites, emphasizing that such a social location is always made invisible to whites themselves who are distanced from their privilege through the elimination of white as a racial category.⁶ Yancy echoes these claims,

arguing that whiteness is “a master of concealment” that is “insidiously embedded within responses, reactions, good intentions, postural gestures, denials, and structural and material orders.”⁷ Furthermore, Sullivan argues that “ignorance of white domination is not just an empty gap in knowledge nor the product of mere epistemological insight,” but rather is an inherent product of whiteness itself.⁸

In this chapter I attempt to identify some of the ways that whiteness conceals itself. I say some, because the fluid nature of whiteness ensures it can never be entirely pinned down, that it can only be made temporarily visible through critical engagement.⁹ Rossing concurs, noting that “the systemic privileges, power, and salience of Whiteness...remain hidden without the framework to acknowledge or critique them.”¹⁰ An interesting duality is at play here: in order to understand how whiteness conceals itself (and thus negatively impacts attempts at racial dialogue), we must first reveal it through critical inquiry. For this chapter, the illuminating effects of satire, specifically within *The Onion*, serves as a method of inquiry which can reveal the fluidity of whiteness without having to directly confront it. This particular function is most critical given the general inability of direct confrontation to evoke meaningful discourse as proven both by the texts I have presented above and contemporary political guidance on race. Carcasson and Rice, for example, note the failure of Clinton’s dialogue on race because of the “heavily fractured nature of the audience” and “ignorance and misinformation” inherent to racial prejudice.¹¹

I argue that *The Onion* can enact what Yancy describes as an “ambush” on whiteness which causes one’s world to be “transformed and cracked” through the “throwing of white self into spaces of rich uncertainty.”¹² In this way, *The Onion* can

force readers to confront their own whiteness, their own complicity in white privilege, without direct confrontation which brushes against the whites who are “waiting defensively in fear of new information that may threaten to destabilize their sense of self,” resulting in the securitization of whiteness against external threat.¹³ My analysis begins with an examination into the ways whiteness conceals itself through the denial of race-as-meaningful, specifically through the construction of postracialism as a popular way of perceiving reality. Within that context I will explore the issues of multiculturalism, white allies, tokenism, and the non-uniformity of white privilege. Following my analysis I will return to Yancy’s concept of ambush and white existential conversion within the context of *The Onion*’s transformative potential.

Postracialism and the Elision of Race

Whiteness is made invisible to those who inhabit it through the denial of white as a racial category. Nakayama and Krizek note that there is no true essence of whiteness, “there are only historically contingent constructions of that social location.”¹⁴ Specifically, the universality of whiteness normalizes it and shields it from criticism of deviance and otherness. Whiteness is the centered identity from which all others are produced through relationality. Because whiteness is normalized it is guarded from reflexivity: it does not even exist for those who inhabit it, rather whiteness is the category of non-identity. White is a non-category, subtracted from the concept of race entirely. Consider the headline “I Can Instantly Tell Whether Someone Is African-American With My Amazing 'Blackdar'” in which a man explains he is capable of figuring out whether someone is black simply by looking at them.¹⁵ Playing on the notion of “gaydar” and the ability to detect queerness through external markers, the article reveals the inherent

visibility of non-whites. Those bodies with marked skin are incapable of hiding in whiteness because their very flesh reveals their racial status. Phenotypically, this is also the case for whites, but ontologically the white does not have to be revealed, it exists as the normative conditions for being.

Nakayama and Krizek note six rhetorical strategies of whiteness that enables its invisibility: (1) whiteness as unstated majority, (2) whiteness as the lack of positive definition, (3) whiteness as purely biological (and thus drained of historical context), (4) the conflation of whiteness with national identity (whiteness becomes synonymous with American), (5) European decent as a cultural rather than racial marker, and (6) the elimination of race as meaningful.¹⁶ I have already discussed some of the ways whiteness is made invisible through its masquerading as normative, but the sixth rhetorical strategy of whiteness deserves special attention. By attempting to move past race, to assert that race “no longer matters” in the world, whiteness conceals differentials in privilege which have resulted in the accumulation of wealth and power in the hands of whites. Rossing explains postracialism as “a belief that positions race as an irrelevant relic of the past with no viable place in contemporary thought.”¹⁷ Postracialism negates white self-reflexivity through the assertion that all racial categories no longer hold power within the social or political. This position negates the possibility of a grammar of suffering in the context of racial prejudice and mystifies ongoing racial antagonism.

To begin, let us consider the relationship between whiteness, postracialism, and the truth of ongoing racial antagonism. An Onion article titled “Alarming Study Finds more than 12 Instance of Racism Occurred Last Year” describes a “shocking study released...by sociologists at Columbia University” which “found that more than 12

instances of racism occurred in 2011, suggesting not only that prejudice based on the color of one's skin still exists, but that it remains disturbingly prevalent in modern American society.”¹⁸ The article is potentially humorous because it underscores the amount of racial violence that occurs annually compared to a reader's estimate. The article subverts expectations of racial violence as relegated to the past, and its humor exists only if one approaches it with an understanding that postracialism is not an entirely globalized and accurate characterization of the world (or at the very least that not *everyone* has moved “beyond race”).

Unfortunately, this is not the case for many. Much like the researchers who had “been operating under the commonly held assumption that bigotry on such a massive scale was a distant relic of the past,” large swathes of the population believe racism ended some years ago, or at least that the election of President Obama was the crowning achievement of a postracial society.¹⁹ With so many subscribing to its assumptions, Rossing argues that “postracialism arguably represents the dominant interpretive framework for assumptions about the salience of race in contemporary society.”²⁰ In a postracial era, satire can be an effective means of making whiteness visible without encountering knee-jerk reactions that undermine critical projects. As Rossing argues, individuals who “embrace postracial attitudes often resist aggressive antiracist education that highlights injustice and privilege.”²¹ He further claims that “race-consciousness becomes off-putting as it bumps against ideologies of race-neutrality and meritocracy.”²² Here, the ambiguity of humor is necessary to engage in critical dialogue about race. Predicting the incredulity of its readers, *The Onion* immediately undercuts the general

feeling that racism is a thing of the past by fronting a hyperbolic and over the top assertion:

"This simply does not happen—not in this day and age," said researcher Matthew Price, ... "I can understand one, possibly two racially charged comments uttered in the heat of the moment, and then quickly recounted and apologized for; people make mistakes, after all. But more than a dozen? That's inconceivable."²³

The small numbers in the article reveal its satiric nature. Expecting only “one, possibly two” instances of anti-black racism or other incidental racism is something even the most utopian post-racialists would dismiss as a pipe dream. *The Onion* develops characters who honestly believe racism is no longer a component of society, a vision that, while naïve, is at least positive.

The rhetorical strategy deployed by *The Onion* is explained by Kenneth Burke as humor that is contra to heroic rhetorical frames. He explains,

Humor is the opposite of the heroic. The heroic promotes acceptance by *magnification*, making the hero's character as great as the situation he confronts, and fortifying the non-heroic individual vicariously, by identification with the hero; but humor reverses the process: it takes up the slack between the momentousness of the situation and the feebleness of those in the situation by *dwarfing the situation*.²⁴

“Dwarfing” here is the continued insistence by *The Onion* that only “a dozen” instances of racism constitutes an emergency and that individuals would be shocked at the purported study. *The Onion* organizes its characters such that none interviewed is explicitly good or evil, at least within the broader subtext that this article is a criticism of postracialism, not racism writ large. Those who are problematic are literally misinformed; their assumed vision of the world is one that is informed by whiteness and takes racial harmony as fact rather than an elusive dream. Those who are shocked that racism still exists are not perniciously advancing anti-blackness; they are passively

endorsing whiteness by maintaining a presumed racial neutrality. That systematic racism is deemed “inconceivable” is a product of a particular way of thinking which excludes racism from the present and positions it as a singular phenomenon that has run its course.

The Onion’s satirical take on a postracial world may open space for the reader to better identify with the critical details of what is humorous and what that says about the real world (up to and including what it says about the readers themselves). If the reader moves to identify that she/he is not laughing at the characters but instead the magnitude of their assumptions, then the reader inevitably confronts the absurdity of any numeric tallying of racist incidents – if twelve is far too few, how many do we expect even in a postracial society? How many incidents do we predict to occur this year? *The Onion* notes that if this is indicative of an “upward trend” then “we could see instances of race-based bigotry skyrocket to more than 15. Possibly even 20.”²⁵ Readers are invited to recognize a tendency within themselves to “count” racism such that it is something that occurs in moments, and through reflection on the text readers are encouraged to conclude that such a means of understanding racism is problematic. Racism becomes contingent, isolated in the moment, rather than a structure of prejudice from which instances of discrimination emerge.

Race does in fact continue to structure and influence much of contemporary society. Not only incidents of anti-black racism that are more accurately described as discrimination, but structural racism that occurs in access to social/employment opportunities, the distribution of resources, education disparities, and underlying ways of thinking that continually reproduce material consequences.²⁶ These antagonisms are often swept under the rug, either ignored entirely or diagnosed as the actions of a select few.

When researchers for *The Onion* state that the shocking rates of racial bigotry belong more in “the Deep South back in the '60s, but not in the 21st century, and certainly not in America” the normative conditions of whiteness are misattributed to the failure of individuals, select minority cultures, and unique social groups.²⁷ Yancy underscores the importance of this line of argument as those who believe “white supremacy is something that existed in the past” must also believe that “the oppression of black bodies is similarly beholden to the past, or more importantly that whatever violence does befall blacks is contingent and unrelated to their skin.”²⁸ How *The Onion* describes acts of racism fits snugly into postracial assumptions about the nature of anti-black violence, detailing

A staggering five occasions on which white people walked faster after noticing a black teenager walking behind them, three instances of a clerk watching black customers extra carefully to make sure they didn't steal anything, and as many as two incidents in which black drivers' vehicles were unfairly targeted for searches by the police.²⁹

All of these racist acts are symptomatic of anti-blackness but assuming racism comes only in this form underscores the structural generative foundations of racial antagonism. Given its satirical context, this list of racist acts is both an under representation of the quantitative “amount” of racism as well as a misrepresentation of the qualitative nature of racism in the 21st century. Indeed, characterizing racism as incidental or occurring in singular acts frames the discussion in a way that marginalizes an understanding of race as structural. *The Onion* effectively satirizes an understanding of racism as only a series of acts by tallying them, thus forcing readers to confront their own instances of conflating anti-blackness and anti-black racism.

By juxtaposing an under representative account of racism with the reader’s own knowledge of ongoing inequality, *The Onion* sets up Burke’s “perspective by

incongruity” which is “necessary to counteract the dangers of ‘mystification,’ so momentous in their tendency to shunt criticism into the wrong channels.”³⁰ In effect, *The Onion* makes it impossible to uncritically advance the argumentative line of post-racialism by absurd reduction of the position and a humorous characterization of its proponents. Even those readers who hold a postracial world view are confronted with the difficulty such a frame has when tasked with explaining continued racial antagonism. Readers are initially forced to reject or identify with the mistaken characters shocked at the news of ongoing racism, but those who initially identify are given space to confront the limits of that position.

The Onion utilizes a “comic frame” which, Burke explains, “should enable people to be observers of themselves, while acting. Its ultimate [goal] would not be *passiveness*, but *maximum consciousness*.”³¹ In this way, “One would ‘transcend’ himself by noting his own foibles,” rather than through external confrontation with those shortcomings.³² On the surface, *The Onion* appears to be criticizing the few racists who are “out there” or from “the Deep South” but its satirical undertone makes clear the criticism is directed at postracialism. Readers who move from a surface level reading to a deeper understanding of the criticism at hand are invited to turn inwards and recognize their own complicity with whiteness. However, as Burke contends, the revelation of this perspective is not “demoralizing,” but “designed to ‘remoralize’ by accurately naming a situation already demoralized by inaccuracy,” so readers can come to terms with their own foibles and reorient their understandings of race in the 21st century.³³

Part of “accurately naming” the situation of racism requires a rejection of postracial tendencies to place the blame for racism on a select few individuals. Already

we have seen racism relegated to the “Deep South back in the ‘60s”, a time and place that is decidedly “not in America” in both a temporal and ethical sense.³⁴ Those who embody this stance must believe we have moved on as a country, and have undertaken a complete turnaround in our social organization in the last 50 years. What arises from this supposition is the contradiction between an understanding of racial justice as continuously progressive and the obvious existence of racists. To rectify this contradiction, proponents of postracialism rely on scapegoating tactics, blaming both the Deep South but also “an intoxicated man at a Plano, TX bar,” “individuals suffering from profound and debilitating mental ill-nesses,” and “the Presnall family of Hainesville, IL, whose members are widely believed to possess full command of their cognitive faculties while simply remaining ‘a bunch of racist assholes.’”³⁵ These examples prove the rule, so to speak: their existence explains how there can still be racism “a half-century after the Civil Rights Era,” especially after the United States became “the first Western democracy to elect a black person as its leader.” *The Onion* concludes that while racism is now “just barely within the threshold of being manageable” we must “take concrete steps to address racism before it becomes a national crisis.” This is a clever play on words to the reader who understands *The Onion* is criticizing not racism or racists, but people who believe racism is no longer an ongoing systematic phenomenon. The double meaning of the call to take steps *before* racism becomes a national crisis suggests to the astute reader that revealing the problems of postracialism may be one of those concrete steps.

In an earlier study on whiteness and humor, Rossing notes the danger of scapegoating strategies, arguing that “Scapegoating enables citizens to excuse themselves from participation in racial meaning construction by constructing the racial politics of

fear as an isolated problem perpetuated by individual outliers.”³⁶ If racism as a structural phenomenon is misconstrued to mean only acts of anti-black racism that happen in convenience stores and the living rooms of southern families, not only do we lose sight of the larger forces of whiteness, we also lose sight of our complicity in those forces, a trend corrected by *The Onion*’s invitation to readers to reflect on their own tendency to scapegoat racists. When the average person compares her or himself to an exaggerated racist stereotype they typically come out ahead, but that propagates a false certainty that racism remains only in the hearts and minds of a few bad apples. As long as we continue these scapegoating rituals, Michael Awkward warns, “We will all continue to put off the more serious—and painful—task of examining, and seeking to repair, the tremendous damage caused by our model democracy’s seemingly limitless capacity for expedient, racially motivated evil.”³⁷

Mounting an epistemic challenge to postracialism is prerequisite to successful political challenges to anti-blackness because of the ideological effect postracialism has on the articulation of racial injustice writ large. Postracialism brings with it a host of maladies which empower whiteness. Postracialism blurs the distinction between racial and racist, conflating the consideration of race with judgment of a person because of their race, creating conditions where pointing out racial markers in and of themselves is the central problem of race in the modern era. Postracial narratives construct an epistemological blinder which makes the pernicious and ongoing effects of systematic white privilege invisible.

As Yancy and Zack argue, “we cannot abandon race, because people would still discriminate and there would be no nonwhite identities from which to resist.”³⁸ Thus

while the dream of a world without racial animosity is not inherently problematic, the assumption we have already achieved that dream locks into place extant discrimination and denies the grammar of suffering necessary to make visible structural racism.

Postracialism results in headlines such as “All-Minority Postal Staff Undergoes Mandatory Diversity Training.”³⁹ In this article a racially diverse postal station is forced to attend hours of diversity training while employees are significantly more concerned with getting proper equipment and uniforms. Postracialism is at play here because the staff’s race is made invisible. For the sake of uniformity and universality, a group of minority workers are forced to hear lessons from white instructors on how to be racially sensitive. There is no voice for the non-white identity as all identities are equally non-racial and the standpoint epistemology of the all-minority staff is silenced by the call to equality. This is equivalent to the claim that “All Lives Matter” in response to protest slogans of “Black Lives Matter.”⁴⁰ Multiculturalism and the desire for universality ride roughshod over the particularity of lived racial experience, actively omitting the unique position of black life. As diversity training attempts to bring us closer to racial harmony, its application proves the underlying contradictions of racial experience (your skin is both hyper visible and invisible).⁴¹

Given the complex web of contradictions underlying racial antagonism in America, it should be clear that no single act can undo centuries of white privilege and its cumulative benefit for whites. The headline “Racial Harmony Achieved By Casting Of Black Actor As Teen Computer Whiz” openly mocks the very possibility of overcoming racial antagonism through contingent anti-racism.⁴² The article explains how television executives truly believe they are striking down centuries of racism through the casting of

a young black man as a computer technician in an affluent school. Specifically, this article deconstructs the idea that singular moments of positive representation are sufficient to overcome underlying assumptions about blacks or that a single “positive African-American role model boosted the collective self-esteem of the nation’s African-American community, thus establishing racial harmony at last.” At its heart, this article criticizes the notion that any one act of representation or anti-racism will push us past the tipping point and eliminate the structural paradigm of whiteness.

In a similar line of argument, the article “‘Now We Can Finally Put Civil Rights Behind Us,’” written in the wake of Rosa Parks death, criticizes the way Parks was made to stand in for all racial progress.⁴³ The article satirizes the idea that in her death, Americans can “finally put the subject of racial equality behind them.” The article’s humor derives from the celebration of Parks’ death as a signifier that the civil rights movement has ended, specifically that with her death there is no need for the NAACP or “all civil-rights bills currently under deliberation.” This is because “racial inequality [is] no longer part of the national dialogue.” That is to say, with Parks’ passing, there are no more champions of racial equality, there are no more larger-than-life activists who will shape national understanding of racial animus. It is not that racial harmony has been made, but that no one will be around to point out the failings of modernity in regards to racial injustice. Here, *The Onion* implicitly reveals the concealing power of whiteness to cover up racial injustice as soon as it is no longer made hyper-visible through protests like Parks’. When the article quotes senators who plead with the nation to cease the furthering of the civil-rights movement, one gets the feeling their eagerness is not benign but emerges from the possessive investment in whiteness.

Both the Parks and Computer Whiz articles reveal the nature of tokenism in discussions of race. In the same way one fictional television character stands in for the progress of an entire race, in the real world we have seen the election of Barak Obama championed as a sign that racial harmony is upon us. *The Onion* is conscious of this problem, and thus it is no surprise to find a headline like “Nation's Blacks Creeped Out By All The People Smiling At Them” which equates kind smiles and high fives directed at black Americans with a pandering essentialization that posits all blacks as politically aligned, thus robbing individuals of agency.⁴⁴ The article uses strategic essentialism to comment on the experiences of black individuals in the United States after the election of President Barack Obama. Even though the article’s title homogenizes blacks while simultaneously criticizing black essentialization, the first essentialization is necessary to highlight the second, more pernicious instance. Satire is especially effective at strategic essentialism because irony is a ripe comedic tactic, allowing contradictory truths to be explored by distancing criticism of the speech itself to focus on the topic of the speech. Though the article uses essentialism to mock essentialism, because it is a comedic text it can paint a target on itself as well as its enemies, something straightforward criticism must avoid lest it risk losing its credibility.

The article takes to task those who assume Obama’s election was a victory for all blacks in America by taking on the perspective of black individuals whose lives have only been made worse because of it. For example, the “cashier at the Giant Eagle winked at...Eddie Wilkes” as a sign of solidarity with Obama (and thus the black race at large) despite Eddie identifying himself as “not a politics person.” The cashier then overstepped by trying to “bump fists” after saying “something about what a happy day it was,” clearly

trying to share in Eddie's imagined victory through Obama. The Giant Eagle cashier is clearly in the wrong and occupies the space of caricature, an overdone example of how whites responded to the election of Obama as the first black president in United States history.

Larger than life, exaggerated characters, allow the reader to identify with foibles from a distance, perhaps even seeing these less exaggerated versions in themselves. By taking on the perspective of blacks experiencing the white response, *The Onion* can better foster empathetic awareness to whites who may be guilty of similar (if less outlandish) behavior as the Giant Eagle cashier. Jarell Brown in the same article complains he "can't even be at a bar anymore if they have the news on" because "Obama gives a speech on the economy and people act like my team just won the Super Bowl." Jarell explains that he "didn't even vote for the guy" because he is a libertarian, scripting a narrative contra to the tacit assumption that all blacks in the 2008 election voted for the black candidate. Even if all but one black individual voted for Obama, the assumption that "all blacks vote the same" is undermined to great effect by breathing individuality and uniqueness back into characterizations of black life. Furthermore, even if every single black individual in the United States voted for Obama, this article invites the reader to recognize differing black reactions to his victory. In both cases, the article is clear that the election of Obama did not uniformly bring prosperity to all blacks in America.

Regardless of voter demographics, the article invites readers to reach two conclusions necessary to understand race in contemporary America. First, the election of Barack Obama did not drastically change the day-by-day lived experience of black people in America. Second, black individuals are not uniformly ideologically aligned,

they are not equally political, and in fact reside in various divergent political axes. Very rarely is one white person ever asked to stand in for all of white people: they are just one individual. Yet time and again a single minority body is asked to stand in for every other person of that ethnicity. Marking Obama's victory as significant for the entire black race incorrectly presumes a restructuring of systemic social and institutional power that paves over ongoing anti-black violence. There is little proof that Obama's presidency has done much to change racial biases across the United States, with some studies indicating no change at all and others showing a deeper entrenchment of racial bias in those who showcased bias prior to Obama's presidential run.⁴⁵ Linking Obama's victory with the end of racism in America reinforces a notion of tokenism, which avoids a closer examination of the institutional and systematic racial antagonisms that continue. *The Onion* is challenging an argument that Obama's election significantly benefitted all black Americans through the interplay of individual characters. A deeper reading of the article produces opposition to narratives that Obama has resolved race relations, narratives that turn Obama into token proof the election is not rigged and persons of any color or creed can become president, covering up the system of racism which defined the demographics of the past forty-three presidents. Tacit assumptions taken by the white characters in the article reveal ways of thinking that must be undone through the advancement of a demand for unique and individualized understandings of black life. First and foremost, to understand the nuance of black life requires the acceptance that blackness represents a distinct way of being from whiteness, and thus the dismissal of postracialism as a way of understanding social relations.

Good Whites and Bad Allies

Overcoming postracialism is merely the beginning for whites who wish to challenge structural racism. White allyship is often a problematic position. Yancy explains that “when motivated by paternalism or moral narcissism,” claims to allyship often mistake instances of non-racism as transformative, ultimately functioning “to ease the conscience of whites” rather than effectively strike at structural inequality.⁴⁶ For many embedded within whiteness, the notion of being a “good white” and the “antiracist white” constructs a “sense of stasis and self glorification” which “obstructs the necessary deeper critical work required to unearth the various ways in which one is actually complicit in terms of racist behavior.”⁴⁷ Well-meaning whites who believe they are champions of social progress will elevate minor transgressions against racism as revolutionary, mystifying the paradigm which remains. Yancy explains

Confessions of giving generously to the United Negro College Fund, or that one has never used the “n” word or that one is currently dating someone Black or Latino(a), or that one just hired a person of color in one’s philosophy department, are perfectly consistent with a failure to explore deeper layers of what it means to be a white antiracist ally.⁴⁸

Thus, the headlines “I’m Totally Dating a Black Chick,” and “I’ll Have You Know I Have Several Black Friendsters” are both emblematic of the problematic nature of white allegiance.⁴⁹ For example, “Several Black Friendsters” is the story of a man who has many black friends online, distanced from his lived reality, which he substitutes for rigorous engagement with non-whites.⁵⁰ Those online friends “prove” he is not a racist because he does not succumb to the absolute worst forms of prejudice despite never having actually spoken to or met any of the people he considers a friend. In this way the man with black Friendsters believes he is racially enlightened and capable of righting

prejudice despite never having encountered a black in real life. This is precisely Yancy's criticism that "good whites" believe they have overcome racial barriers when in reality they have enacted only the most superficial form of anti-racism. Indeed, Yancy argues that to effectively bind to black people as an ally involves "fighting to undo the racialized material structures, discursive orders, and semiotic fields according to which the power of one's whiteness is purchased," a drive that is discarded when token friends stand in for progress against structural antagonism.⁵¹

Tokenism can be easily reversed. If having a few black friends can make one anti-racist, it is equally possible for one bad encounter to drastically increase one's racial prejudice. This is explored in the article "Recently Mugged Friends a Racist All Of A Sudden," in which Mark Weisner, an otherwise enlightened man, "learned his lesson" and became "more cautious around certain types" because of a single encounter.⁵² Again, at play is not the particular moment but the abstract concept of the one standing in for the many, a strategy of tokenism which is inherently reversible. Thus Yancy's demand that white allies move beyond the surface level of race relations to interrogate the oppressive nature of race. *The Onion* mocks the persona that would transition from open, accepting, and enlightened to harshly racist over a momentary encounter in a way that allows the reader to presence themselves in that situation from a distance. It is easy for readers to harshly criticize Weisner for his transition and in that criticism they can confront the way their own presuppositions about race were informed by singular encounters.

Another common pitfall for white allies is a misreading of white privilege as an all-encompassing force of advancement which equally affects all whites rather than a system of advancement which operates differently across individuals. Whiteness, Lipsitz

notes, “produces unfair gains and unjust rewards for all whites, although not uniformly and equally.”⁵³ From this perspective we can read the headline “White Male Privilege Squandered On Job At Best Buy,” and recognize it not as a dismissal of the existence of white privilege but as a critique of those who believe they are not privileged because of their position.⁵⁴ The article notes that “Despite being the beneficiary of numerous societal advantages and having faced little to no major adversity throughout his life,” area man Travis Benton has “spent the last four years squandering his white male privilege on a sales floor job at Best Buy.” Here, white privilege is revealed to take the form of “innate life advantages” such as “greater access to higher education, leniency from the justice system, and favorable treatment from other white males” which have made it easier for Benton to move through social life but does not inherently confer upon him prosperity or wealth.

White privilege then is a general force of accrued advantage, what Lipsitz describes as “a structured advantage” and “built-in bias” but not necessarily a free ticket to riches as some may misinterpret it.⁵⁵ In this way, *The Onion* criticizes understandings of white social progress as always mediated through hard work and dedication, arguing that privilege confers advantages but does not guarantee success. It is possible, after all, to not fully take advantage of white privilege, but as Yancy and Butler explain, that does not deny that “when a person with white skin walks into a store, it is assumed that she is not a threat.”⁵⁶ Whiteness then is a “visual technology” which enables movement through social space “without being profiled or stopped” and thus the denial of white privilege (even through omission) “contributes to the perpetuation of racial injustice” by normalizing whiteness. Whiteness is fortified through daily acts which normalize the

privilege conferred to whites such as the claim that white privilege was not helpful in the acquisition of a job at Best Buy or the assertion that a white merely “worked hard” for their lot in life. In both cases the structural advantages of white mobility, fluidity, and freedom are normalized as something universally accessible, disestablishing belief in white privilege and thereby mystifying it.

White privilege takes the form of economic benefits accruing through filiative capital and the passage of wealth over time, but it also takes social form. Zack and Yancy note that other forms of white privilege include that “whites are unlikely to end up in prison for some of the same things blacks do, not having to worry about skin-color bias” and “not having to worry about being pulled over by the police...in predominantly white neighborhoods.”⁵⁷ From this perspective it is easier to understand how white privilege can be squandered on a job at Best Buy. More importantly, reading about white privilege being squandered at Best Buy allows the reader to understand a broader conception of white privilege as more than immediate economic advantage.

Conclusion: On the Potential of Existential Conversion

It is possible for whites to better combat racism. It is not only possible to overcome the assumptions posed by postracialism and the general failure of white allies, it is necessary to educate whites if America is to overcome the structural antagonism of race built atop of, and mediated through, the paradigm of whiteness. Yancy and Sullivan note that “there are still are many pockets of whiteness — in neighborhoods, businesses, classrooms, philosophy departments – where you need white people who are going to challenge racism.”⁵⁸ It is still possible to hope that, despite the social location of whiteness, whites can become effective anti-racist allies to those who suffer from racism

daily. Educating whites through *The Onion* is complementary to these goals as *The Onion* allows whites to encounter their whiteness from a distance, to isolate, identify, and challenge it.

Yancy argues that it is possible for whites to transgress their whiteness through “existential conversion” which “calls into question, indeed disrupts, their previous certainty regarding how they understand and value themselves.”⁵⁹ In this way, the fundamental premise of existential conversion is that one is “not condemned to whiteness, but that there are always other ways of grounding one’s identity...within the larger social world of white power.”⁶⁰ Yancy advances a notion of “ambush,” that whites can arrive at the point of anti-racism but still be struck by their whiteness when they least expect it, whether it is through a racist instinct (clutching one’s purse in an elevator when a black steps on) or unexamined assumptions of black life. That same ambushing effect, however, can be reversed to challenge whiteness.

My argument is that *The Onion* is a form of ambush in which whites can be suddenly confronted by their whiteness in a way that sidesteps ideological reflexes which otherwise fortify whiteness. I have supported this argument through my analysis of postracialism and the failure of white allies. Through satirical texts like *The Onion*, whites may encounter hyperbolized white figures and in that encounter recognize and transcend their own foibles. The use of comic frame greatly assists such a process, distancing the object of critique from the reader to a fictive persona which can be struck down, allowing readers to better elucidate their own whiteness. Yancy notes that “to challenge the serious world of whiteness is to question, to counter what one sees even as the field of one’s white gaze continues to construct the social world falsely.”⁶¹ Thus the

effect of *The Onion* is not a universally accessible or successful means of challenging the total structure of racism, but is a point along the way of total transgression. Critically, we must accept that “existential conversion is *not* sufficient for undoing the various ways in which whiteness reasserts power and privilege,” but “it functions as a necessary critical process in terms of exposing the contingent and historicity of whiteness” as well as “challenging and troubling its ideological constitution as absolute and permanent.”⁶² It is not my claim that *The Onion* will “resolve” the problem of racism, but that its satire may reveal to whites the privilege that they take for granted and the ways in which they continually reassert and restructure prejudice through normalizing white social life.

Prior to questions of overhaul, we must begin the arduous process of building allies. Racism does not exist as a single institution: there is no smoky backroom or assembly line from which all racism emerges. Rather, racism is continually produced through daily encounters and fostered ideologically in the individual. As such, it cannot be stamped out through vigilant conquest or violent displacement. Racism must be challenged internally by those who hold onto it, most immanently by revealing those assumptions within individuals who otherwise believe themselves to be “good whites.” These individuals in particular are essential to anti-racism because they have already ethically aligned themselves against the more obvious manifestations of racism which characterized American history until just yesterday. These are people who believe they are doing good, and therefore will be more receptive to critiques of their strategies and assumptions. *The Onion* is insufficient to overwhelm the total sum of tacitly racist assumptions held by all well-meaning whites, but it aids in the project in a way that direct

confrontation cannot. For these reasons we should champion *The Onion* not as a poison pill to racism, but as a necessary starting point for existential conversion.

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CHAPTER FOUR

Anti-Blackness and the Grammar of Suffering

The Paradigm of Anti-Blackness

In the previous chapters I have argued that whiteness constitutes a normalized identity against which all other identities are made peripheral. This is an ontological positioning within the world that confers privilege to the center at the expense of the other. The other is blackened, made into blackness, and the hostility of the world toward the black other can be understood paradigmatically as anti-blackness: the persistent, systematic destruction of the black by institutionalized and socialized injustice. Butler explains that whiteness is established as the human norm, the center from which blackness is demarcated as deviant, even threatening to the centered norm of whiteness. Once this ontological relationship is established, she argues it becomes “increasingly easy for white people to accept the destruction of black lives as status quo, since those lives do not fit the norm of ‘human life’ they defend.”¹ Whiteness confers the possibility of ignoring black death because black death does not occur within the register of whiteness. As I will show through the example of policing, those lives loss are made to have always already been outside of the realm of the human; never lives at all.

There can be no whiteness without blackness. As McKenzie notes, “Blackness is the creation of whiteness and the Blackness of Black identity is rooted in a hostile environment.”² This is axiomatically true: were there never a meeting between white and black skin there would be no need to differentiate, there would be neither signifier. Wilderson argues that the first encounter between white and black sets the stage for the

anti-black violence still occurring, the effects of slavery and centuries of abject racism still essentially at work in modernity.³ Black life, according to McKenzie, becomes not only a struggle for survival within such a context, it becomes “a struggle for recognized humanity.”⁴ Whites are made other than blacks, but blacks, because they are denied humanity within the white gaze, can never be fully other to whites.

Sexton asks "what is the nature of a human being whose human being is put into question radically and by definition, a human being whose being human raises the question of being human at all?"⁵ He notes that "The formulation of a sustained response to such an inquiry is the province of the field of investigation called black studies," (later Afro-pessimism) and so it follows that any understanding of the effect satire has on black life must begin from an understanding of black life as social life within social death.⁶ Sexton notes that "social death has emerged...as a notion useful for the critical theory of racial slavery as a matrix of social, political, and economic relations surviving the era of abolition in the nineteenth century."⁷ That is to say, social death is not only the condition of Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, or Michael Brown whose bodies were left lifeless. Rather, as Wilderson notes, social death is descriptive of the fact that as “police brutality, mass incarceration, segregated and substandard schools and housing, astronomical rates of HIV infection, and the threat of being turned away en masse at the polls still constitute the lived experience of Black life.”⁸

Although anti-blackness is not expressly limited to the violence faced by blacks in America, Sexton notes that “the concept of social death cannot be generalized. It is indexed to slavery and it does not travel.”⁹ That is, the violence faced by blacks arises from slavery and attempting to relate that violence to other relations of power poses its

own unique problems. Blackness as a condition of otherization can be mapped onto other racial groups but the experience of social death is reserved exclusively for the black body which emerged from the slave trade. Wilderson argues that any attempt to understand social death and the position of the black in civil society requires a partitioning off of ancillary identity categories. He notes that “the protocols of multiculturalism and globalization theory” have made blackness “more unimaginable and illegible within this expanded semantic field than they were during the height of COINTELPRO repression.”¹⁰ This is because the grammar of identity has expanded to distance blackness from the ontological core of identity. As Sexton explains, theorization of one’s blackness requires refusing the “valorization of minor differences that bring one closer to health, to life, or to sociality,” such as those differences celebrated by queerness, feminism, or multiculturalism studies.¹¹ The theoretical jump from blackness to social death posits the black outside of “this world,” the world of civil society, and it is the “ruse of analogy” which “erroneously locates the black in the world.”¹² Only through the expanded semantic field can blacks find justice within the social world: gains for black queers, black women, poor blacks, uneducated blacks, but never for the ontologically posited black.

Understanding social death as the condition for black existence should not suggest that Afro-pessimism denies the possibility of black social life, “only that black life is not social life in the universe formed by the codes of state and civil society, of citizen and subject, of nation and culture, of people and place, of history and heritage.”¹³ Both Sexton and Wilderson argue that anti-blackness occurs structurally, steeped in the very rebar of modernity, and has been since the dawn of the slave trade. What they attempt to

do is understand the position of blackness within civil society while abandoning the possibility of reform through laws, the state, and all other institutions tainted by anti-blackness. Clearly lacking is a blueprint for change. In its place is a refusal to be seduced by the demand for praxis. Wilderson remarks that given the structural conditions of anti-blackness, “a concluding consideration of [*what is to be done?*] would ring hollow.”¹⁴

If what is to be *done* poses the wrong question, we may instead ask what is to be *thought*. Sexton argues we should think about “what makes New World slavery what it is in order to pursue that future anteriority which, being both within it and irreducible to it, will have unmade it.”¹⁵ It seems simple to say that we must understand the conditions of “New World slavery” (anti-blackness) to work against it, but knowledge of anti-blackness is continuously thwarted. Sexton notes that “This is Wilderson’s intervention: to illuminate the ways in which we do not, cannot, or will not know anything about this violence, the ways in which our analyses miss the paradigm for the instance, the example, the incident, the anecdote.”¹⁶ Far too often an instance of racism is taken to its specific context, its linkage to the broader structural paradigm of anti-blackness lost in the shuffle. What is necessary is to decontextualize contingent racist violence so it can be understood generically. Ironically, what will bring us closer to the truth of black social death is not adherence to details but the opposite. If we are to make the grammar of suffering intelligible, that suffering must transcend its thrown situation. To communicate the conditions of anti-blackness, then, requires abstraction.

I argue that *The Onion* is well suited to the communication of anti-black suffering by virtue of its principles of abstraction. Abstraction occurs in two ways: *The Onion* first abstracts its content from traditional communication channels through its parodic form,

then it abstracts a second time in its satirical content, distancing argument from text and thereby distancing the reader from the particularity of the subject. If we are to “illuminate the ways in which we do not, cannot, or will not know anything about this violence,” then we must consider who, exactly, “we” are. I posit there are two: the “we” within the academic circle, accessing the texts of scholars, actively searching for anti-racist strategies: the “we” who may read Wilderson and utilize his arguments in the construction of thought. Then there is the second “we,” the “we” of the world, the “we” who is all of us: the “we” who has no interest in Wilderson, who may neither realize they are participating in a system of exclusionary violence nor care. My argument is not that *The Onion* neutrally approaches either group, but that it approaches a “we” somewhere in the middle. *The Onion* speaks only to its audience, but it may change the opinions and assumptions of those who would otherwise continue to participate in anti-blackness at full speed.

I turn now to an investigation into several texts which bring grammars of black suffering closer to the realm of intelligibility. Again, my argument is not that these texts have uniquely transformed the social. I am arguing that these texts assist in the possibility of communicating anti-blackness, social death, and the grammar of black suffering without obfuscating the nature of social death. While the previous chapter contained texts on whiteness, the invisibility of white privilege, and the very possibility of racism in the 21st century, the group of texts in this chapter take racism as given and instead work to elucidate the texture of anti-blackness. These texts are organized in two groups. The first texts explain, broadly, some of the conditions of social death and the position of blackness in civil society. The second texts are exclusively on policing and the ongoing

destruction of black life by the law. Following both sets of text I conclude that *The Onion*'s rhetoric is necessary (even if insufficient) for the deconstruction of master narratives which continually reproduce anti-blackness.

On Blackness

In the previous chapter I argued that post-racialism is a popular view of modernity in which society is assumed to have progressed beyond racial inequality. In this chapter I will focus more precisely on the types of (and amount of) racism which continue to occur. We must be vigilant against assertions that things are “getting better” for blacks when those lines of argument rely on consideration of contingent violence instead of structural antagonism. The headline “Black Guy Doesn't Talk About All The Times He Didn't Get Discriminated Against” illustrates the problem with analysis of contingent discrimination.¹⁷

The article begins with an example of discrimination in which Renald Boyd, a 27 year-old black man is denied access to an apartment because of a racist landlord. The article laments that he “naturally failed to mention that the real-estate agent worked with him with no hesitation and that the taxi he took away from the real-estate agency was only the second one that he'd attempted to hail.” Illustrating a white perspective on racial injustice, the article's surface level criticizes blacks for overestimating the state of anti-blackness while its subtext reveals ongoing discrimination by both a landlord and a taxi driver. It is no surprise that Boyd would say “This country is insane,” instead of “this guy” or “this place” because his anger with a racist landlord does not occur in a vacuum, rather it is one of many instances of discrimination he has faced just that day. *The Onion* is criticizing the absurd burden of proof that blacks must identify racism in all instances

of life to prove it exists at all. Implicitly, this article criticizes the notion that some lack of discrimination is progress for society writ large despite the presence of discrimination elsewhere. Additionally, the article critiques those who would champion racial progress because of a decrease in anecdotal racism by alluding to the reality that prejudice is a constant possibility for blacks regardless of particular circumstances.

Emphasizing the destructive powers of ongoing racism, *The Onion* produced an article titled “Report: Now Sadly the Best Time in American History to be Black,” a piece directly challenging narratives of racial progress in the post-Obama era. It begins:

Despite rampant cultural racism against African Americans in all aspects of American life, discriminatory voting laws, and a vast gap in educational opportunities, there has, sadly, never been a better time than 2013 to be black in America, a Tufts University study revealed Wednesday.¹⁸

The article juxtaposes examples of ongoing structural anti-blackness with heartfelt musings on the tragedy of social progress. The high number of examples explaining the material effects of anti-blackness makes an argument that while things have improved for blacks in America, such improvements are limited and their significance is exaggerated. By noting the intersectional spaces of anti-blackness, the opening line serves to paint a picture of structural anti-blackness that affects all aspects of black life. By noting discriminatory practices in culture, the law, education, and prison systems, *The Onion* makes clear that racism does not just happen at the kitchen table in remote southern farms; it occurs systematically. Postracial beliefs are challenged when *The Onion* says “incarceration rates for blacks are nearly six times that of whites and only 42 percent of black students who enter high school will graduate.” *The Onion* presents those challenges by advancing discourse on anti-blackness, and by piling on examples of injustice which make it ever more difficult to attribute racism to instances of prejudice or discrimination.

After facing down direct evidence of the material effects of anti-blackness, readers are met with a veiled answer to the question “why is this still happening?” *The Onion* notes that,

If you don’t think about how—five decades after Martin Luther King Jr.’s ‘I Have a Dream’ speech—it’s perfectly legal in many parts of the country for police to detain and question a person just because he’s black, the findings are not as depressing. But then you do think about that, and then you realize it’s pretty pitiful that what blacks are going through right now in America could be considered a veritable heyday.

The last sentence frames the status quo: right now (2013) is considered a “veritable heyday” for blacks because in many ways black life has never been better in America. This thought brings peace to some, and when read uncritically it can dampen our outrage to incidents of racial violence because we know things are “getting better.” *The Onion* relentlessly drives home its argument with more examples of anti-blackness for the reader to consider, this time juxtaposed with Martin Luther King Jr., whose “I Have a Dream” speech could arguably be construed as a turning point in racial politics. *The Onion* is confronting what Gavrilos characterizes as an assumption that “sees history, and time itself, as moving inevitably, incrementally, and progressively toward racial justice” by forcing the reader to reconcile progress with the ongoing tragedy of contemporary black life.¹⁹ Readers are invited to confront their own complicity in narratives of racial progress and their assumptions about racial equality by comparing themselves to those who “don’t think about” the tragedy of ongoing race relations. Again, readers are not confronted with direct criticism that says they are villainous, rather those who are causing harm are simply not accounting for events in the status quo. *The Onion*’s continued fronting of anti-blackness forces postracial readers to situate significant anti-black violence within

their broader framework, a task that problematizes any notion of racism being a thing of the past.

There is very little explicit textual humor in the article's somber approach to the struggle of millions of black Americans. Even though the article does have a punch line, it comes at the conclusion and does not even explicitly mention black life: "The study went on to point out that, on an optimistic note, at least black people aren't worse off in 2013 than the nation's women, who are just as fucked now as they've ever been."²¹

Taking an Afro-pessimist approach to the situation, *The Onion* claims the only optimistic note to be had is that black people are not worse off than others. Optimism is not to be found in progress but the lack of regression. This is similar to the optimism and faith generated by removal of discriminatory laws and practices – essentially optimism because things have become less unfair when those laws never should have existed in the first place.²¹ Left unstated but implied is the effect of current social progress on black women, who are uniquely disadvantaged given that women are "just as fucked now as they've ever been" and what black American's are going through is "pretty pitiful" to begin with.²² The punch line is not light hearted, and if approached from the perspective of a black female, it is hardly funny. However, the punch line continues consciousness raising and leaves space for a future discussion/contemplation on women of color by inviting the reader to consider intersectional oppression.

As is typically the case when encountering satire's punchlines, readers are first invited to laugh at the ridiculousness of the statement before considering its more serious ramifications. Here the use of an expletive signifies a comedic moment by use of ironic iconicity: *The Onion* maintains the form of legitimate journalism while incorporating

content that would be barred from such publications. Indeed, the entire article is satire not because it is uniquely humorous or is riddled with jokes, but rather because it is presented in the form of official mainstream communication while actually advancing minority rhetoric. *The Onion*'s textual performance follows a trend in satirical publications identified by Baym and Jones in which "it becomes increasingly difficult to identify the boundaries between real news and fake news, between parody and its referent."²³ What is satirical is not the article in a vacuum but its broader context as part of *The Onion* as a whole. This article is part and parcel of a larger performance of ironic iconicity, and its masquerade as a straightforward, no-nonsense, editorial on the current state of black life in America while developing a categorical critique of anti-blackness blurs the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate discourse. Such a blurring effect is instrumental to critique of ideology by diminishing the authority of news programs and official discourses that produce postracial narratives.

Media portrayal of blacks may contribute to broader discourses of otherness through depictions of blacks as violent, poor, and deviant, but those representations are neither fictive nor ignorant of lived reality. *The Onion* comments with an article titled "Study: Reality TV, Reality Unfair to Blacks," juxtaposing injustice for blacks in reality TV with injustice for blacks in reality.²⁴ The premise is fairly simple: compare the representation of black reality TV contestants with the lived experience of blacks in reality. For example, the article tells us that

Blacks make up about 13 percent of the U.S. population, but only 5 percent of the contestants on *Survivor: Palau* are black....Similarly, while black males comprise only 6 percent of the population, they are the victims of half of its homicides.

Throughout the article we are informed of dual forms of injustice, both in terms of representation and lived reality. *The Onion* notes that "The average per-capita income among black people in America is \$14,953, with 22.7 percent of blacks living below the poverty line," as a set up to the punchline: "In much the same way, circumstances beyond their control keep black reality-show contestants from a fair shot at the jackpot." Here the juxtaposition of injustice magnifies the importance of both. Representative injustice is linked to the structural paradigm of anti-blackness, flowing directly from the reality of anti-blackness, while the injustice of institutional racism is driven into the reader. Much of the article follows this pattern and through this humorous cadence the reader is led through numerous examples of how, specifically, reality itself is unfair to blacks without any of those examples standing in for the whole. In this way *The Onion* can argue that it is reality *itself* which is unfair to blacks. Indeed, the article makes reference to police violence, poverty, health issues, and unequal access to education to prove that "Like reality TV, reality is a discriminatory institution that is unfair to the black community."

A final example: when *The Onion* claims that "Only 14 percent of the black population has a bachelor's degree, and there has never been a black bachelor on TV's *The Bachelor*," both claims are rhetorically equivalent. There is no more outrage at one injustice than the other, requiring readers to differentiate them on their own. By positioning a critique of reality TV before a critique of reality, the reader is given a modicum of space to contemplate its relation toward both. Burke's perspective by incongruity is at work when the injustice of reality TV and reality are equivocated, pushing readers to recognize the dialogic absurdity of comparison and thus necessarily coming to terms (at least partially) with the nature of social death.²⁵

Through comments on the law, the economy, and healthcare, “Study: Reality TV, Reality Unfair to Blacks,” paints a picture of systematic injustice at multiple levels – not merely discrimination, housing, or education, but the sum total of anti-blackness that has become paradigmatic by virtue of its insistence at every junction. In this way the paradigmatic nature of anti-blackness is made intelligible as a structure of ongoing and systematic racism rather than the contingent violence of a single discriminatory act. Three other *Onion* articles assist in the illumination of black social death in the contexts of poverty, healthcare, and the law. I turn to those now:

The article “East St. Louis Rated 'Number One City In America' By *Poverty Magazine*” is classified under the “race” category of *The Onion* despite never mentioning race.²⁶ Here, the racial undertones are implicit, and the very act of categorization *without naming race* is part of the satirical package. Thus when the article notes that East St. Louis tops “such categories as unemployment, hubcap availability, and liquor-stores-per-capita,” blackness is made both invisible and hyper visible as the reader recognizes that collection of categories as inherently blackened despite the invisibility of race in the text itself. That East St. Louis has “a student-gun ratio of 1:1” is not inherently racial in the strictest textual sense, but the placement of this article within the “race” category of texts subtly informs the reader that these are indeed black issues because poverty itself is a black issue.

Healthcare may not traditionally be associated with race, but given the significantly higher rate of health problems in blacks than all other races, perhaps it should be.²⁷ In the article “HMO Targets Blacks With 'Rapping Good' Health Campaign,” *The Onion* implicitly argues that healthcare providers are ignorant of black experience

and culture.²⁸ In the text, advertising executives rely on “a black teenager doing a ‘rap’ for good health” which will be “aired on black oriented stations.” Rather than meaningfully engage with the needs of a black healthcare consumer, executives attempt to reach blacks with “a campaign that co-opts their own language and musical style.” Humorously, *The Onion* makes it clear these advertisers are unfamiliar with rap altogether through phrases like “‘rapping’ music,” “‘rapping’ good health to them,” and “area blacks will...be ‘rapping’ happy with their HMO service.” This article accomplishes a few things: it shows readers a gap between advertisers and their audience which implies that the former is entirely ignorant of the latter (perhaps because the latter is not relevant); it illustrates white reliance on black stereotypes to sell to black audiences; and it alludes to the idea that a lack of healthcare access for blacks is a failing on behalf of providers, not consumers.

While the previous two articles consider examples of anti-blackness, *The Onion* is also critical of attempts to reform racism through the law. In "Anti-Racism Laws Mutate Racism Into Newer, Stronger Form," an article parodying CDC reports on infectious diseases, racism is treated as a disease itself which only gains strength when inoculated against.²⁹ Indeed, the article notes that

the passage of anti-racism laws in recent decades may have caused racism to mutate into newer, stronger forms, undermining federal efforts to control the spread of the disease by spawning new strains of "super-racism" impervious to traditional treatment methods.

Here, “traditional methods” are assumed to be laws designed to foster equality and tolerance. The signifiers of racism's "remission" by these laws are straw persons to be quickly torn down. We are told that "Red, inflamed outbursts of hate speech have become less common," and "at least some measure of diversity has been adopted by most of the

idea-circulatory system.” However, “these victories may be largely illusory” as the law has merely driven racism underground. As the report suggests, “by attacking only the symptoms of racism and not its economic and social causes, legislative efforts to vaccinate the populace against racism may have accelerated rather than halted the spread of the disease.” Several examples are present in the article, such as hate speech which has vacated its more vulgar forms in favor of a “secret code exchange[d] only in private,” and hiring-quotas which have fostered “a pseudo-moral justification for privately held racist beliefs by creating an atmosphere of perceived ‘unfairness.’” When it comes to “social-welfare programs, the rezoning of voting districts, and many current public-housing policies,” the law has not eliminated the underlying paradigm of anti-blackness, it has merely eliminated its weakest and most visible components.

By analogizing racism to a disease, *The Onion* accurately characterizes the way racism takes hold and proliferates. When told that new strains of racism are “absorbing the anti-racist measures into their own ideological make-up and putting neighboring social-cell structures at greater risk of infection,” the reader is made to understand racism as a web of thought which plays off and plugs into assumptions about the social. Here, racism is not a strict set of beliefs, it is a condition of making and positioning the other. Indeed, when Fields explains racism as something we “continue to create” she is describing the very ontology of otherness, not any particular set of acts or practices.³⁰ Furthermore, this article is consistent with Afro-pessimism’s dismissal of the state as a site for change through its criticism of extant anti-racism laws: the reader is left to conclude the state can never effectively challenge the underlying ideological cause of racism because any given law will only cause racism to mutate in ever more invisible

ways. Racism cannot be “cured” by the law because anti-blackness inhabits and is reconstituted through the social. This is not an argument in favor of the abandoning of the law altogether, but an argument against hope in the law to meaningfully improve black life within the context of black social death.

Hope in the transformative power of the law and faith in its institutions may not only be ineffective for addressing social death, such beliefs may be actively harmful for black youth. Specifically, faith in police, the most localized form of state power, may be lethal for blacks. The problems of policing stand in as a microcosm of everything wrong with anti-blackness as police gun down poor, unarmed, black youth, only to be exonerated by a judicial system which marks black life as inhuman and condones its elimination under preemptive logic. It is not that undoing the police would cleanse the system of racism, rather, explicating the racism of policing helps explain anti-blackness and social death broadly. Policing is merely a symptom of anti-blackness but it is one that has been recently made hyper-visible, and exploration of policing may illuminate contours of racism that would otherwise go unnoticed.

On Policing and Anti-Black Violence

The specific topic area of policing is given comparatively larger focus than other pillars of social death for two reasons. First, it is an issue which *The Onion* has written many articles on, all of which advance complementary lines of argument, and as rhetorical scholars we should allow our texts to interact with our theories.³¹ Second, at the time of writing America has borne witness to an obscene amount of black death at the hands of police, culminating in massive riots (most notably in Ferguson, Missouri). The deaths of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, and Eric Garner all seemed to happen one

after the other, each a politicized and publicized event in which police officers (or their stand-ins, as the case for George Zimmerman) killed an unarmed black man. Each death happened under slightly different circumstances and each was surrounded by dueling discourses of particularism (what did *this* person do to be killed, where did *they* go wrong, how did *this* situation get out of hand) and generalization (all cops are racist, these deaths are all the same, the system itself is at fault). Unfortunately, these three figures, while most publicized, are far from the only unarmed bodies killed by police. Even worse, the legal system appears to be of no assistance to blacks as time and again their assailants are given a pass by the law. *The Onion* comments on both the law and the police which are protected by it. What emerges from the text is a very clear predicament: the law is not protecting black people.

George Zimmerman's killing of Trayvon Martin was the first of several incidents of white law enforcers killing unarmed black men with no repercussion. *The Onion* commemorates this with the headline "Zimmerman Found Not Guilty, Technically, But C'mon."³² The article takes a highly skeptical view of Zimmerman's trial and the legal system which acquitted him, stating that, "More than 16 months after he fatally shot 17-year-old Trayvon Martin in an altercation at a Florida condominium development, neighborhood watch volunteer George Zimmerman was found, technically speaking, not guilty of murder Saturday, but c'mon." Interplay between the technical findings of the law and general feelings of injustice repeat throughout the article, pairing statements about legal findings with incredulous dismissal of the letter of the law. Additionally, the article links factual accounts of events with trial outcomes to juxtapose the reality of Trayvon's death with legal spin which acquitted Zimmerman. For example, the article

tells us that "According to jurors, Zimmerman lawfully acted in self-defense—but let's be serious here, shall we?—when he shot Martin at point-blank range in the chest, leaving him dead within minutes." It also tells us that "Mr. Zimmerman did not violate any Florida state laws—although, please, give me a break—and is an innocent man, I suppose, if you're sticking to the strict legal definition of that word." Here, the reader is forced to confront the gap between subjective understandings of events (and the desire for justice) and how the law interprets those events to protect a man who objectively shot and killed an unarmed teen. What is at stake is not the outcome of a single trial but the legal system as such.

Rhetorically, there is a sense of exhaustion as the piece goes on. What begins with mildly pessimistic ambivalence toward the trial outcome becomes exhaustion with the legal system in its entirety as we are told "this trial was properly conducted in full accordance with the U.S. justice system....For whatever that's worth." Exhaustion here mirrors the exhaustion persons of color feel with the law daily as it grinds against them. They are exhausted with what Butler and Yancy describe as "a police system that more and more easily and often can take away a black life in a flash all because some officer perceives a threat."³³ The reader follows in this wave of exhaustion, forced to confront a litany of problems with the trial and the legal system itself, bombarded with details proving the absurdity of the law when it comes to justice for black victims. Within the text, this exhaustion concludes with an affirmation of protests not because of their independent desirability but because there seems to be no other option. *The Onion* states that "In the wake of the verdict, large protests are confirmed to have erupted in cities throughout the country, which, frankly, is pretty understandable because, Christ, did you

watch this fucking trial?"³⁴ Exhaustion meets with a sense of disbelief in the trial's outcome to steer the reader to understand the systematic unfairness of the law when it comes to race.

For a trial that was made infamous because of its racial make-up, it may be baffling to some that the court would refuse to allow race-based argumentation to influence the jury. Indeed, *The Onion* notes that "The trial, which gripped the nation for three weeks, was particularly notable for Judge Debra B. Nelson's order barring any discussion of race, which she stated had no bearing on the case, but, again, let's be serious here for a second, as the victim was a black teenager."³⁵ Note the lack of explicit confrontation with race within the text: the article does not waste ink explaining the importance of racial divides in the Zimmerman-Trayvon conflict, it merely leaves the reader to explain it to themselves. The article implies that Trayvon was killed because he was black but not solely because he was black (the article does not imply Zimmerman was racist). This gives space for the reader to fill in a number of possible reasons why Trayvon's race was important to the trial: Zimmerman's proclivities against blacks, racial profiling, racist assumptions about black aggression, all could be relevant to the trial and the violence which occurred. The reader is left with a question (how did Trayvon's blackness affect both the incident and the trial) and a general guideline (the lack of race consciousness in the trial was important), but is left to conclude the particular details on their own. This allows the reader to consider the possibility of racial prejudice in the law from a distance, opening space for confrontation with and disruption of their own assumptions about the neutrality of race within the law.

Zimmerman's acquittal points to a broader problem of social death for blacks within the law and civil society. When the law fails to protect its citizens they are left to themselves: they are dead to the law and its protectors. For black teens, this means being open to gratuitous state-sponsored violence, it means general dishonor in the face of the law, and it means an inability to rely on the law for justice. Yancy notes that "As black, Trayvon was already known and rendered invisible. His childhood and humanity were already criminalized as part of a white racist narrative about black male bodies."³⁶ When a teenager can be shot dead on his way home from the convenience store and his attacker is acquitted of all charges, one may be inclined to blame a particular judge, jury, or prosecutor. When this happens multiple times in quick succession, a broader critique of the law is necessary to make sense of the violence. *The Onion* foresaw a wave of violence against blacks, and approaches the issue with pessimism in the article "Nation Throws Hands Up, Tells Black Teenagers To Do Their Best Out There," wherein survival strategies for blacks are contemplated and dismissed against a backdrop of anti-black violence.³⁷

Again we see the trope of exhaustion, this time as white characters encounter their inability to advise black teens on how to survive. The article tells us that

Following Saturday's not guilty verdict in the George Zimmerman trial, an exasperated and speechless nation could reportedly do nothing other than wish black teenagers good luck out there, saying that they're definitely going to need it.

What begins as an abject admission of failure to secure blacks against violence continues through particular lines of defense, ultimately finding all of them wanting as "the citizenry said that it's basically gotten to the point where African-American teens need to avoid walking alone, hanging out in groups, or even minding their own business,

especially if they are planning to do any of those things in public.” A laundry list of failed strategies appears, urging black youths to: “keep their heads down and hope nobody messes with them,” “avoid making any fast movements,” avoid putting “their hands in their pockets,” and avoid “wearing anything that could somehow be construed as intimidating.” Ultimately, it can be said that any action by a black teen can be misconstrued as violence. *The Onion* summarizes this predicament when contemplating clothing choice:

“If I were a black teenager, I would wear a white t-shirt and khaki shorts at all times, even if it’s winter,” said 34-year-old claims adjuster Nick Delmar. “Then again, some psycho would probably think white T-shirts and khaki shorts were some sort of gang thing, kill the kid, say he thought the kid appeared to be violent and dangerous, and probably be found not guilty.”

Readers are shown the inability of blacks to adhere to the law both de jure and de facto. For a black teen, existence itself is criminalized as any clothing choice can be misconstrued as “some sort of gang thing,” automatically opening the body to violent elimination. This article takes the reader through a journey of discovery by positing survival strategy after survival strategy only to dismiss them as ineffective, leaving the reader with a sense of despair for black survival as there seems to be no way out from gratuitous violence. Indeed, this pessimism is advocated explicitly. Accordingly, for a given black teen, “You have no legal system to turn to, the police are out to get you, and everyone is immediately suspicious of you.” The system, from the police to the jury, are biased against black life: this is the condition of blackness within civil society.

What is clear is that “all black teenagers...are pretty much on their own now, and the sooner they understand that nobody will be able to help them, the better off they’ll be.”³⁸ Ironically, the only advice *The Onion* serves is to recognize the futility of advice.

This leaves the reader in an interesting predicament as those who believe there is hope for black survival are tasked with inventing their own novel solutions, and those who recognize the vulnerability of blacks in civil society are tasked with recognizing the severity and encompassing nature of the problem. Either way, the reader is distanced from faith in the law and civil protections as sufficient for black survival (let alone black prosperity).

Even the most prosperous, affluent, and “whitened” blacks are vulnerable in America, proven by the arrest of Henry Louis Gates, lampooned by the article “Cambridge Cop Accidentally Arrests Henry Louis Gates Again During White House Meeting.”³⁹ In this text, we are informed that “Upon arriving late to his meeting with President Barack Obama and famed African-American intellectual Henry Louis Gates, Cambridge police officer James Crowley once again detained the distinguished Harvard scholar after failing to recognize the man he had arrested just two weeks earlier,” implying the police force is literally incapable of recognizing a black man as anything other than a threat. While in reality Gates was arrested for trying to enter his own home, in the text “Witnesses said that Sgt. Crowley, failing to recognize Gates on their flight to Logan Airport, arrested the tenured professor in midair, once again at the baggage claim, and twice during their shared cab ride back to Cambridge.” Wealth, intellect, speaking “white,” being exactly the opposite of a “thug”: none of these things are guaranteed survival strategies for blacks in America. When Dr. Henry Louis Gates can get arrested trying to enter his own home we are witnessing a much larger policing problem, one which results from assumptions about the inherent threat of black life.

While this particular article makes farce of a single officer, it represents a policing problem steeped in racism where even the most well respected black intellectuals are subject to gratuitous violence. The reader is witness to the failure of yet another survival strategy. Yancy tells us that “Black bodies in America continue to be reduced to their surfaces and to stereotypes that are constricting and false, that often force those black bodies to move through social spaces in ways that put white people at ease,” implying that the strategy of “acting white” is both already implemented by blacks and failing to curb anti-black violence.⁴⁰ From this perspective, it comes as no surprise that Dr. Gates would be arrested for being black in public.

Of course no survival strategies will truly work to protect black men because blackness is always already criminalized within the law. Butler and Yancy note that “In the wake of the recent killings of unarmed black men and women by police, and the failure to prosecute the killers, the message being sent to black communities is that they don’t matter,” and that trials and protests both “communicate the reality of a specific kind of racial vulnerability that black people experience on a daily basis.”⁴¹ Indeed, the black body is prefigured as threat within the eyes of the law. As Butler and Yancy explain further:

the police see a threat when there is no gun to see, or someone is subdued and crying out for his life, when they are moving away or cannot move. These figures are perceived as threats even when they do not threaten, when they have no weapon, and the video footage that shows precisely this is taken to be a ratification of the police’s perception.⁴²

Blackness itself is criminalized under the law. It is not the case that racism is abjectly written into the law, rather police are given carte blanche to defend against aggression, and social perception of blackness-as-aggression prefigures anti-black violence within the

law. It is already the case, according to Zack and Yancy, that “a large segment of the white American public believes they are in danger from blacks, especially young black men” as “This is an old piece of American mythology that has been invoked to justify crimes against black men, going back to lynching.”⁴³

This perception is taken up by police, and police perception of blackness-as-violent is ratified by the trial system which asserts innocence on behalf of officers. A feedback loop occurs: blacks are assumed to be violent, then a black person is killed by police ostensibly acting in self-defense, then the police are cleared of wrongdoing and the original assumption of violence is retroactively made true, setting the stage for even more violence. An interesting figuration emerges in which the black body’s claims of self-defense are denied as Butler and Yancy note, “Justifying lethal violence in the name of self-defense is reserved for those who have a publicly recognized self to defend,” which excludes “those whose lives are not considered to matter,” as those “whose lives are perceived as a threat to the life that embodies white privilege can be destroyed in the name of that life.”⁴⁴ The black body is made both disposable and inhuman, cast to the outside of civil society, something which can “only happen when a recurrent and institutionalized form of racism has become a way of seeing...to justify hateful and unjustified and heartbreaking murder.”⁴⁵

How institutionalized racism comes to be a “way of seeing” can best be understood as ideology. Yancy notes that the police have “already inherited those poisonous assumptions and bodily perceptual practices that make up what I call the ‘white gaze,’” which means police have “already come to ‘see’ the black male body as different, deviant,” denying black bodies neutrality within the law.⁴⁶ It is ideology which

positions blackness inherently as deviant within the law, an ideology that informs policing from the subconscious. Butler and Yancy explain the magnitude of this violence when they say “we cannot name all the black men and women whose lives are snuffed out all because a police officer perceives a threat, sees the threat in the person, sees the person as pure threat.”⁴⁷

Racism becomes self-executing, it snowballs, and precedent now makes racism later that much more likely. Butler and Yancy note that “it is because that form of thinking is becoming more ‘reasonable’ all the time.”⁴⁸ In other words, every time a grand jury or a police review board accepts this form of reasoning, they ratify the idea that blacks are a population against which society must be defended, and that the police defend themselves and (white) society, when they preemptively shoot unarmed black men in public space.”⁴⁹ Indeed, Butler makes it clear that racism is constructed through daily encounters both material and psychic.

It is both the physical act of policing and the mental image produced through ideology that reproduce racism in an endless waltz. Ideology persists because it has been made profitable to assume black deviance, and to make that assumption appear both neutral and normal.⁵⁰ Yet ideology is not transcendent, rather it is “reproduced through...daily encounters” wherein “The figure of the black person as threat, as criminal...conditions these pre-emptive strikes, attributing lethal aggression to the very figure who suffers it most.”⁵¹ Thus it is the case that with every arrest, every high profile case in which a cop is found innocent in the killing of an unarmed black man, that killing becomes normalized. This occurs in the law through legal precedent and it occurs in ideology through the circulation of anti-black imagery.

What *The Onion* can accomplish is to inform the reader of the black perspective of vulnerability. *The Onion* can paint a picture of vulnerability through its pessimism toward black survival without asking the reader to take sides with or against specific manifestations of the police, the state, or legal institutions: it asks the reader only to consider the hopelessness of the black position within the violent confines of the law as it plays out in the streets. There is no demonization of a given cop or precinct, there is only empathy with blacks who have no recourse to justice. By satirizing common advice given to black teens to appear less threatening, *The Onion* shows the reader the futility of survival strategies within a justice system that can freely eliminate black life.

An article titled "Tips For Being An Unarmed Black Teen" showcases further the difficulty of black survival.⁵² This time written in the wake of Eric Garner and Michael Brown's deaths at the hands of police, *The Onion* advises teens to "Shy away from dangerous, heavily policed areas," and "Try to see it from a police officer's point of view: You may be unarmed, but you're also black." Both of these tips are winking nods to the inevitability of anti-black police violence that occurs because of officer's assumptions of hostile, aggressive, and violent black youths. To say an "unarmed" man is perceived as threatening because he is "also black" points the reader to understand the problem of *perception* of black aggression and its relationship to police violence.

When the article advises teens to "Avoid swaggering or any other confident behavior that suggests you are not completely subjugated," and "Revel in the fact that by simply existing, you exert a threatening presence over the nation's police force," it posits a claim about the nature of blackness within civil society. Black life is assumed to be threatening and so it becomes threatening as society is built atop the backs of the

subjugated. Zack and Yancy explain that “unarmed young black men are the target of choice” because of “a long American tradition of suspicion and terrorization of members of those groups who have the lowest status in our society and have suffered the most extreme forms of oppression.”⁵³ This is why *The Onion* advises to “Be sure not to pick up any object that could be perceived by a police officer as a firearm, such as a cell phone, a food item, or nothing,” because even nothing in the hands of a black can be considered a weapon. Or as Martinot and Sexton put it, “To the police, a wallet in the hand of black man is a gun whereas that same wallet in the hand of a white man is just a wallet.”⁵⁴ Black life is perceived to be threatening, it is eliminated, and once that violence is exonerated within the law, black life is made to have always already been threatening. Here, *The Onion* explicates the double standard of white and black life within the law, giving the reader a sense of injustice without calling attention to the paradigmatic nature of anti-blackness, opening space for an empathetic reading of black life.

Racist cops are a low hanging fruit in many cases, and often times scapegoating a single officer distracts from institutionalized racism, but *The Onion* has two articles which deal with police racism in clever ways. The first, “Good Cop, Bad Cop Both Racist” rebuffs the common claim that only some cops are racist or that a few bad apples spoil the bunch.⁵⁵ The article contains several drawn out examples of interrogation styles to show how the officers differ in strategy but maintain racism. For example, “Officer McGrew is the tough, no-nonsense veteran of the force who pushes you around, threatens you with 15 years behind bars, and calls you a nigger,” while “Officer Bob is the one who picks you up, gives you a cigarette, and tells you he's there to help you before calling you a nigger.” It becomes clear that racism transcends minor differences in policing strategy:

good cop/bad cop is a microcosm which indicates that the systemic failure of police to protect black citizens is an issue with policing in general, not merely the failing of a few individuals.

Readers come to understand that the job itself necessitates racism and breeds it, as *The Onion* explains "McGrew was a grizzled veteran who'd developed a cynical attitude toward minorities after years of witnessing ugly street crime firsthand. West, on the other hand, was an idealistic young golden boy from the academy who took the horror stories his teachers told about the scum of the earth to heart." Racist assumptions of blackness-as-threatening are woven into the policing apparatus. Cops on the beat take high incidents of black incarceration as proof of deviance, policing black populations harder, substantiating racist assumptions which then pervade police discourse and the culture of policing. These assumptions pervade policing culture *despite* vast differences in individual cops. As *The Onion* notes, "Their mutual disdain for minorities aside, the two racist partners couldn't be more different, fellow officers report." Though the article refrains from accusing all police of racism, the rhetoric employed hints that policing itself is responsible for the growth of racist assumptions in all officers even if it manifests in different magnitudes.

A second article on racism and policing entitled "Police Officer Doesn't See A Difference Between Black, Light-Skinned Black Suspects" plays with the assertion that police do not see a difference between white and black suspects.⁵⁶ Printed during the Ferguson riots, this text challenges claims to race neutrality when "Fort Wayne police officer Vincent Turner" says "As an officer of the law, I am committed to administering justice swiftly and even-handedly, regardless of whether the suspect has dark skin or

really dark skin.” Here the scapegoat is fictive and stands in for any given police officer, avoiding pitfalls which may limit analysis to contingent violence. Throughout the piece, *The Onion* details instances where Officer Turner has no time to think “about where the suspect falls on the spectrum of African-American skin tones” because “you’re just thinking about doing your job.” Here, “doing your job” necessarily implies the targeting of black suspects and the targeting of black subjects becomes the job itself: both claims fold into themselves and become synonymous. Police are implied to target *only* non-white subjects for the express purpose of protecting whites. The article’s punchline is explicit on this issue: “Turner added that his dedication to upholding the law stems from a belief that all local residents should be able to walk their streets without fear, whether they come from an affluent white neighborhood or a working-class white neighborhood.” Note that only whites are residents and all non-whites are merely suspects. This rhetorical split is indicative of a way of viewing the world in which non-whites are cast as non-humans.

In fairness to police, Officer Turner implies his judgment occurs in the heat of the moment, in split second decision making which he has adopted as a survival strategy against a backdrop of black anti-police violence. The notion of a moment, however, is a red herring, asserting that police violence is impossible to predict and external to institutional racism. *The Onion* turns this notion on its head with the article “Sometimes Unfortunate Things Happen In The Heat Of A 400-Year-Old Legacy Of Racism.”⁵⁷ Written from the perspective of Thomas Jackson, Chief of Police for the Ferguson Police Department, the article satirizes police claims that violence occurs contingently and unpredictably. The article begins by dismissing claims of particularism which offset

consideration of deeper racial tensions at work, discounting detail-focused approaches (He stole! He was blocking the sidewalk! He had was wearing a hoodie!) and replaces that lens with one which foregrounds a history of racism. Mocking claims of exigence, we are informed that “tensions escalate during questioning or an arrest when, suddenly, in the commotion of four centuries of bias against racial minorities in the United States, the situation takes a violent turn.”

Argumentatively, *The Onion* approaches with a “yes, but” strategy: yes, tensions occur in the moment, but only as a result of “generations of systemic social, economic, and political discrimination toward non-whites—particularly African-Americans.” Rhetorically, this allows the reader to maintain assumptions about the need for police to defend themselves while also contemplating the root cause of violence which makes policing dangerous. The “decisive measures” police take occur “in the middle of longstanding policies denying minority men and women the most basic human rights,” not in a race-neutral vacuum. Thus readers can come to understand “tragic situations” as the direct result of “decade upon decade of racist enculturation and deeply institutionalized systems of inequality,” rather than the contingent violence of a particular encounter. That is to say, the reader may understand that were it not Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, or Michael Brown, it would have been someone else: that the death of blacks is inevitable given systematic oppression already at work. Yancy and James concur with this sentiment, arguing that “police crime and the duplicity of law are not new to America.”⁵⁸ It is improper, for them, to assert racism begins and ends with policing when “There is anti-black prejudicial bias not only in policing but also in education, employment, health and housing.”⁵⁹

Thus, racism manifested in policing strategies is a direct result of systemic anti-blackness which pervades the social at all levels. Systemic anti-blackness explains not only the police response to violence but the creation of that violence itself. *The Onion* tells us that “Without any warning, an officer of the law can find himself in the mayhem of formal and de facto segregationist policies such as mortgage discrimination and redlining that made it impossible for people in the most dangerous neighborhoods to live anywhere else.”⁶⁰ Anti-blackness limits opportunities for escape and contributes to the very poverty which incentivizes crime.

What *The Onion* has accomplished in these texts is the bringing to light of black social death and the complexities of black social life within social death. Readers are forced to confront latent racist assumptions which pervade policing strategies while also experiencing the hopelessness and exhaustion of those who must navigate through a social world antagonistic to their very survival. It is necessary to link incidents of police violence with broader discussions of race which address the systemic and paradigmatic functions of anti-blackness.⁶¹ Yancy notes that “our national discourse regarding Trayvon Martin and questions of race have failed to produce a critical and historically conscious discourse that sheds light on what it means to be black in an anti-black America.”⁶² He warns that “if historical precedent says anything, this failure will only continue.”⁶³ Butler further advances this claim by noting that black lives

are not really regarded as lives....So what we see is that some lives matter more than others, that some lives matter so much that they need to be protected at all costs.... then the lives that do not matter so much...can be killed or lost, can be exposed to conditions of destitution, and there is no concern, or even worse, that is regarded as the way it is supposed to be.⁶⁴

Thus when *The Onion* satirizes the notion of a survival strategy by positing hopelessness in place of hope, it is a wakeup call for readers to understand the position of non-being of the black body. It is also a call to reconsider the role rhetoric and discourse plays in shaping our assumptions of the other. *The Onion* complicates the smooth functioning of normalizing discourse by challenging assumptions of race neutrality in the law and satirizing police excuses. In essence, *The Onion* is informing an “ill-informed citizenry” which is quick to forget “racial animus and hatred from overseers, Klansmen and - women, police, segregationists, integrationists and various sectors of society from academia to athletics.”⁶⁵ In this way the reader comes to understand (at least a few of the dimensions of) the brutality of black social death.

Through satire, *The Onion* constructs knowledge of what Sexton calls “a grammar (of suffering)” and “structure (of vulnerability)” that is an otherwise “unspeakable knowledge.”⁶⁶ Knowledge becomes unspeakable when its content is made invisible, as is often the case with claims of racism against the law (most notably when race is explicitly barred from discussion, as with Zimmerman’s trial). Nyong’o notes that “The uneven ground of history ensures that social struggles are usually pitched not in terms of opposing discourses but in competitions over a single vernacular and improvisations upon a common repertoire.”⁶⁷ For blacks this means competition over the vernacular (grammar) of suffering wherein the paradigmatic nature of anti-blackness is reconstituted through contingent violence. What emerges is a grammar of suffering incapable of grasping the institutionalized nature of anti-black racism; a grammar made potentially intelligible through *The Onion*’s examination into policing.

Conclusion: The Role of Satire

In this chapter I have engaged in close readings of a number of *Onion* articles in an attempt to illuminate the ongoing paradigm of anti-blackness. My argument has been that *The Onion* is essential to knowledge proliferation which makes individuals less likely to foster anti-blackness and more likely to combat structural racism. This strategy necessarily relies on the possibility of white understanding. That is, the making of unintelligible suffering intelligible through translation of the grammar of suffering.

Wilderson claims that “It is not a lack of goodwill or the practice of rhetorical discrimination, nor is it *essentially* the imperatives of the profit motive that prevent the hyperbolic circulation of blackness” from deconstructing civil society’s “ontological structure of empathy” which makes impossible the communication of black suffering.⁶⁸ Instead, it is the essential nature of whites having “something to save” in civil society while blacks in civil society have nothing to lose. Baldwin explains that in his discussions with white life that “The really ghastly thing about trying to convey to a white man the reality of the Negro experience...has to do with this man’s relationship to his own life.”⁶⁹ Baldwin argues that the white man “will face in your life only what he is willing to face in his,” or more precisely, only what he is capable of facing in his.⁷⁰ That is to say the differential experience gap between whites and blacks a priori hampers racial harmony through dialogue.

In the previous chapter I argued that satire can help whites better understand their white privilege (and the broader structure of whiteness) by distancing themselves from immediate criticism such that they can better come to terms with their privilege. Here there is not as easy of an answer. Anti-blackness exists in the very rebar of civil society

and as such individual subtraction is hardly sufficient to deconstruct its ontological permanence. However, satire may work to deconstruct the master narratives which continue to reproduce anti-blackness. I have argued that black youth are targeted by police partially because of master narratives positioning black youth as inherently dangerous and deviant. Hill argues that the strength of these narratives derives from their invisibility as they operate as “taken-for-granted assumptions” which identify “what is ultimately defined as normal.”⁷¹ Indeed, master narratives work to “organize our perception of the world” and become commonplace through widespread adoption (here *The Onion*’s racism-as-disease analogy proves quite useful).⁷²

Satire is quite useful at deconstructing taken-for-granted assumptions through the creation of a counter narrative that “chips at a society’s preferred frame, exposing the hypocrisy and inequality master narratives work to conceal.”⁷³ This is not inconsequential as “the satirist gives credence to a counternarrative that might inspire individuals...to question the foundations of society’s dominant stories and, thus, to challenge power.” Indeed, Hill argues that satire makes “people aware of the lenses they see with,” deconstructing the tacit assumptions one makes when organizing the social.⁷⁴ Hill’s explanation of juvenalian satire bridges *The Onion* to afro-pessimism as juvenalian satire is tasked with “cutting off society’s master narratives at their knees” while simultaneously challenging the social body “ignorantly complying with such ideas.”⁷⁵ In this way satire may prove transformative because it is capable of cutting through to the core of paradigmatic anti-blackness. In this way *The Onion* furthers Wilderson’s intervention (as interpreted by Sexton) to illuminate “the ways in which our analyses miss the paradigm for the instance,” by consistently positioning anti-blackness as a

structural phenomenon which transcends contingent moments of prejudice.⁷⁶ Through its critique of the law, the police, the economy, and the state and social formations which attempt to correct contingent violence, *The Onion* instructs readers on the tenacity and reach of anti-blackness in a manner which makes possible the intelligibility of black suffering.

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CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusions, Implications, and Rejoinders

Summation of Argument

Despite its comedic elements and humorous content, *The Onion* effectively performs scathing critiques dominant worldviews, striking at ideology in a fashion that sidesteps unconscious reflexes which otherwise fortify take-for-granted assumptions. Predating *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*, *The Onion* has long criticized both mainstream media outlets and popular opinion, making the absence of literature about its strategies and tactics all the more perplexing. While *The Onion* may lack the household name status of Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert, its work takes place at levels significantly more immanent to the daily lived experience of its readers. In addition to taking jabs at meta-level political spheres, celebrities, and powerful corporations, *The Onion* also comments on local affairs such as dialogues on race, policing habits, and friendships. Within the context of race, *The Onion* is able to critically examine contingent forms of racial animosity without mystifying the broader paradigm of anti-black antagonism by consistently linking incidental discrimination, exclusion, and death with broader structures of power that continually produce violence.

Systemic inequality and racial antagonism continue to define black life in America. Racism persists throughout the social, political, legal, and economic, mediated and sustained through ideology. Specifically, the paradigm of whiteness makes invisible the structural advantage given to whites at the expense of blacks in the realms of wealth accumulation, legal rights, social mobility, and access to education and employment

opportunities. Collectively, these discriminatory effects have made the world anti-black. Whether the violence of anti-blackness takes the form of lethal force by police on unarmed black teens, significantly higher risk of exposure to hazardous chemicals and toxic waste compared to non-blacks, or disproportionate incarceration rates, it is clear that the antagonistic violence faced by blacks occurs paradigmatically, unfolding across nearly every aspect of social life.

Racial antagonism survives despite the election of a black American president, despite countless films and television specials about the virtues of racial harmony, and despite an untold amount of seemingly enlightened dialogue. It is my contention that dialogue is ineffectual because it is built upon the unintelligibility of the black grammar of suffering: that is to say that dialogue is impossible in any meaningful sense because of the epistemological gap between white and black lived experience which makes it difficult if not impossible for whites to understand the conditions of black suffering in America. This gap manifests itself at two critical junctions. First, white privilege is made invisible through social narratives which explain economic and social inequality as the result of hard work and personal responsibility, paving over considerations of race and the structural advantages provided to whites through asset and status accumulation. Second, the paradigm of anti-blackness is mystified through focus on the incident, the example, the contingent instance of discrimination which is always already delinked from structural discrimination. Lurking behind these effects is the habit of ideology to normalize its assumptions and mask them via the guise of neutrality. Racial ideology is persistent; it resists deconstruction and undermines challenges to its claims to authenticity.

Satire, specifically *The Onion*, may undermine the stranglehold of ideology by distancing readers from the object of critique, allowing them to encounter disruptions of whiteness without instinctually rejecting counter-narratives which do not neatly fit within prefabricated ideology. Borrowing from Burke's notion of the comic frame, I have argued that *The Onion* effectively characterizes failings of the status quo as the result of misinformation and foible rather than villainy and evil.¹ In this way, *The Onion* allows readers to identify their own failings in comic exaggerations and hyperbolic characters, opening space for self-reflexivity. Satire is particularly effective at, and necessary for, combating the paradigm of whiteness which is, as Yancy notes, "a master of concealment."² Whiteness remains hidden, Rossing argues, without an explicit framework to acknowledge and critique its systemic privileges, power, and salience.³ Satire may illuminate the effects of whiteness without pinning it to singular instances or examples of privilege (or discrimination); instead, it animates contradictions and tensions through humor, inspiring readers to participate in the reconstruction of meaning.

In Chapter One of this study I argued that satire scholarship is best accomplished through rhetorical criticism rather than quantitative analysis. Reliance on interview data, polls, and demographic trends hinders satire scholarship. Demands for statistical proof of effect, solid data indicating change, and the linkage between works of satire and political praxis all ignore the function of satire to deconstruct meta-narratives in a way that is often invisible to the reader. Hill situates satire within narrative studies, arguing that it works against entrenched accounts of "how the world works" by pointing out and ridiculing gaps and fissures within established metanarratives.⁴ *The Onion* broadens and highlights insufficiencies in ideology, especially with regard to race relations, through

humorous critique which does not seek to replace one set of assumptions with another. Satire does not dwell in the tragic, it retreats from tragedy as a point of departure. As Gilbert argues, it provides space to momentarily flee from the abject horror of black life, but in that flight one becomes more acutely aware of the realities ideology denies, and one is compelled to return to the object of critique.⁵ In this way it is not the case that satire is sufficient for deconstructing metanarratives of whiteness, however it contributes to the sum total of analytic, epistemological, and argumentative tools available for dismantling paradigms of discrimination as it works within the unconscious mind of readers to slowly undo the accumulation of taken-for-granted assumptions.

Of particular importance to the work of *The Onion* within the context of race is its alignment with Wilderson and others notion of afro-pessimism. Afro-pessimism denies the possibility of restitution for the black body through currently established political channels. It denies the efficacy of state reform, policing reform, and equal rights laws, instead privileging the ontological relationship between whiteness and anti-blackness, emphasizing the necessity of digging deep into the social positionality of whites and blacks within civil society. Afro-pessimism assumes the dereliction of the black body within civil society and the position of non-being grafted onto black flesh, taking material form in ongoing police brutality, economic disenfranchisement, and unequal access to opportunities for advancement. *Onion* articles which lament the tragedy of black life make the grammar of black suffering partially intelligible for whites who would otherwise champion traditional legal reform or contextualize black suffering through moments of contingent rather than antagonistic violence. Although satire may be

humorous, and the world as seen by afro-pessimism is anything but, through that satirical humor whites are more able to understand the hopelessness and despair of black life.

Essential to *The Onion*'s overlap with afro-pessimism is the definitive lack of concrete political advocacy. *The Onion* works only to elucidate what is mystified, poke through what is covered, and deny the certitude of doxa. By denying readers the safety of an alternative path, *The Onion* forces its audience to grapple with the nature of anti-blackness rather than find comfort in a sanctioned way of being. In this way, *The Onion* ensures its readers are continually self-reflexive, never able to rest in the solace of having arrived to the correct way of thinking or being in the world. What emerges is the necessity of unflinching and unending criticism of whiteness fostered both in the self and the social.

Chapter Two of this thesis attempted to link the paradigms of whiteness and anti-blackness, arguing a direct correlation between the unearned privilege of whiteness and the underserved injustice of anti-blackness, thereby allowing the claim that a mounted challenge to whiteness would have significant effect on the material reality of anti-blackness. In this chapter I also argue that the social construction of race is renewed continuously through ideology. Specifically, the ontological position of blackness may be traced through time to the transatlantic slave trade, but the form it takes today is maintained through ideology which does not befall us but must be continuously invested in. Lipsitz argues that whiteness has a cash value and thus investment will inevitably occur by those who have much to gain by eliding the effects of structural discrimination.⁶ In this way, whiteness thrives through rhetorical concealment, and it is rhetoric which is necessary to combat whiteness by making it visible to those who are unaware of its

effects. It is my claim that race is therefore rhetorical in the sense that the accepted meanings of racial coding, and the material effects which unfold from that positioning, are formed and maintained by rhetoric. What it *means* to be black is more essential to understand racial antagonism than the biological fact of blackness, and meaning is socially constructed. Satire's operation in discourse links to the material by altering the very epistemological base from which reality is advanced and social progress is steered.

Of particular concern to the epistemologies which generate racial strife is the distinction between optimistic and pessimistic strategies of engagement. I argued in Chapter Two that the fundamental starting point of black and white epistemological distance is the white belief in something to save as opposed to black belief in nothing to lose. That is to say, whites often mistake the condition of blackness as contingent upon particular social cleavages such that if only a few bad apples were excised the paradigm of anti-black violence would be dispelled. At stake for whites is the possibility of hope within the social, economic, and political spheres which compose modernity; hope that is essentially faith in the paradigm of whiteness, as it is from whiteness that dominant powers have emerged, and it is whiteness which defines the growth and sustainability of loci of power. Hope in institutions ignores how whiteness over determines hiring patterns, wealth distribution, and educational opportunities, irrevocably skewing the demographics of power. This is the same faith which allows whites to remain comfortable in their social location, certain of the inevitability of racial justice through institutional efforts.

In stark contrast to institutional faith, I have advocated for an afro-pessimist view of the world which asserts the inevitability of anti-black violence given the natural

playing out of power relations as they are currently established. Given enough time, absent the continued engagement of anti-racists, blacks will face more discrimination, more economic injustice, more police brutality, and more gratuitous violence, not less. One who dreams of a future in which the subjectivity is returned to the black body must engage in an unflinching rejection of all forms of whiteness, for absent sustained engagement whiteness grows increasingly invisible, increasingly insidious, and increasingly normalized. Afro-pessimism, then, ought not to be synonymous with absolute nihilism. Instead, afro-pessimism denies only faith in the institutions of power which have already been tainted by whiteness, shifting the location of resistance from political praxis to the ontological and epistemological assumptions which make material violence inevitable. At this level, *The Onion* serves to deconstruct the gap between white and black epistemology by communicating the reality of anti-blackness and elucidating the systemic nature of racial oppression.

In Chapter Three I analyzed several texts from *The Onion* in the categories of racial dialogue, postracialism, and white allegiance. I argued that the pitfalls of racial dialogue are illuminated by *The Onion* in a way that allows readers to recognize mistakes in their own approaches to racial understanding, including the reliance on outdated talking points, regurgitation of suspect data, and assumptions about the lived reality of those who are differently affected by the dual paradigms of whiteness and anti-blackness. I argued that postracialism, what Rossing defines as “a belief that positions race as an irrelevant relic,” is an inherently problematic lens that conflates the identification of racial disparity with its construction, strips minority voices of their subject position by denying the importance of race in standpoint epistemology, and actively repudiates the

continued existence of race-motivated violence.⁷ By taking the logics of postracialism to hyperbolic conclusion, *The Onion* reveals the absurdity of the belief that we have “moved beyond” the problem of race, or that the election of Barak Obama and other token victories are symptomatic of universally accessible progress for blacks in America. Instead of berating the reader with data about racial injustice, *The Onion* sarcastically affirms a true postracial world to highlight the gap between our current reality and the fictitious universe assumed by postracialism. White attempts to combat racism are thwarted by the tenets of postracialism, but even those who continue the work of anti-racism may be ambushed by their whiteness in ways which counteract their efforts. *The Onion* identifies several examples: championing a single black friend as proof one is not racist; allowing token individuals to stand in for larger groups; and conflating white privilege with effortless windfall rather than the accrual of unearned advantages. Collectively, these texts identify and criticize ways that whiteness conceals itself by obfuscating its form and subverting belief in its efficacy.

In Chapter Four my focus shifts to texts related to the structural antagonism of anti-blackness, specifically criticism of discrimination, progress narratives, and policing. In the text, “Black Guy Doesn't Talk About All The Times He Didn't Get Discriminated Against,” *The Onion* plays with the idea that *not* being discriminated against is itself something to be celebrated, satirizing conceptions of colorblindness and postracialism by taking up the perspective of a white who grows weary of his friends complaints about discrimination. In another piece *The Onion* applies an understanding of ongoing discrimination to a depressed acceptance that “Now [is] Sadly The Best Time In American History to be Black,” juxtaposing the lived reality of anti-blackness against

narratives of racial progress, establishing Burke's perspective by incongruity. The subject of policing yielded seven articles by *The Onion*, together describing a corrupt and unfair justice system which actively constructs cycles of violence and incarceration for blacks while simultaneously eliminating them without repercussion. Through a critical reading of policing, *The Onion* makes intelligible what it means to be non-human in the world and how, precisely, blacks are excluded from civil society.

Opportunities for Future Research

The Onion's back catalogue spans over a decade and touches on all manner of important rhetorical subjects. Even within the category of race relations, the topics of entertainment, sports, and hate groups all have multiple relevant articles waiting to be analyzed. Feminism, religion, and the wild antics of Joe Biden are all viable subjects even if one is only limited to *The Onion*. Beyond just *The Onion*, there are an enormous number of humorous news outlets online, including sites like *Cracked* which often blurs the line between investigative journalism and satire, and *The Daily Mail* which performs an over-exaggerated conservative caricature akin to Stephen Colbert. Satire studies need not concern itself exclusively with fake news, there are of course many politically charged comedy television shows and movies to which the conceptual frames of analysis I have used here may be applied. I have attempted to prove in this thesis that *The Onion* elucidates the readers own foibles and activates self-criticism. Other satirical texts may focus on external objects other than the reader, criticizing government functions, political rallies, media trends, dietary habits, or any other loci of power.

An alternative method of investigation would be to consider the ability of satire to function as a survival strategy for those who are targeted by power. Nyong'o explains

that historically satire, sarcasm, and dark humor have been used by blacks to voice critique while shielding themselves against backlash, increasing black mobility in an anti-black world.⁸ Satire is an accessible strategy for blacks whose marked skins necessitates rhetorical tools capable of undermining dominant metanarratives without risking gratuitous violence. Future research may conceptualize how best to use satire as a survival strategy, questioning under what conditions and in what forms satire is effective. Glenda Carpio has already aimed that line of inquiry at historical instances of black survival through humor, thus research which contemplates future strategies would significantly enhance a growing literature base.⁹

Closing: A Rejoinder with Hart

In the opening chapter of this thesis I remarked briefly on Hart and Hartelius' critique of satire, but a more robust rejoinder is appropriate here.¹⁰ In this thesis I have argued that satire effectively undermines and deconstructs metanarratives which lock into place structural inequality. I have claimed that *The Onion's* satire deconstructs taken-for-granted assumptions through ironic iconicity, use of the tragic frame, and elucidating the lived reality of blacks within the conditions of social death. In this way, satire is immanently political, interacting with epistemologies from which material inequality emerges. I have argued that race is constructed rhetorically as the signifier of phenotypic markings is relevant only given its placement within a web of signs, which means satire is particularly adept at challenging racial ideology that exists only through its continued reinvestment, mediated by discourse both public and private. While *The Onion* cannot claim to have passed a transportation bill or appointed a federal judge, its texts maintain a political function at the level of knowledge production and ethic formation. *The Onion*

will not equip readers with the skills to lobby a bill through their local government, but it will help equip them with strategies for identifying systemic injustice.

Hart and Hartelius warn against the cynical nature of satire for its potential to disengage audiences from meta-level political spheres. They worry of its effects on a well-functioning democracy, championing our extant political institutions because they “are founded by group effort, not by lone individuals.”¹¹ Indeed, the central framing argument for Hart and Hartelius is that “The United States is, after all, still the wonder of the world, the most successful mass democracy known to humankind.”¹² Both of these claims elide the question of white privilege and the accumulation of wealth and political power by whites over time. The institutions Hart and Hartelius defend are inextricably steeped in whiteness. Underrepresentation of minorities in government alone signifies the inaccessibility of government by non-whites, as the accumulation of filiative capital by whites has resulted in disproportionate ability to run for office, hire staff, take time away from family, and bear the financial risk of losing an election. The demographic makeup of meta-level political offices does not necessarily mean we must abandon the state in its entirety, but it does mean both that we have earned the right to be suspicious of the state sponsored progress narratives and that we must be vigilant for non-statist political avenues.

Consider Hart and Hartelius argument that the state is beneficial because it was responsible for “the Genome project, the Internet, the international space station, help with hurricanes and pestilence and AIDS.”¹³ Certainly, the American government has produced goods and services as most any government would, but at what cost? Critics cannot merely point to large projects sponsored by the state and declare the institution

ethically valuable when the question at stake is the management of resources and the distribution of goods and services among racial lines. Gil Scott-Heron famously lamented that he could not pay his doctor bills, but Whitey was on the moon. Rather than evaluate individual projects, we must consider the logics guiding the production of legislation and the underlying epistemological assumptions which frame political strategies for racial justice. A postracial government can map every genome in existence but will do nothing to help unequal access to public education and disproportionate vulnerability to toxic waste if such a government presumes that race is no longer relevant to social life. Hart and Hartelius argue that "only governments" can solve the problems of poverty, disease, and environmental degradation, but one is left to wonder who, exactly, will benefit from such projects.¹⁴ In the abstract it is certainly possible for the American government to funnel billions of dollars into education reform, housing reform, prison reform, and monetary reparations, but faith in the inevitability of such policies to emerge from the government as it currently exists denies the exigence of micropolitical activism in the present.

Optimists that they are, Hart and Hartelius worry that, in the world mediated by satire, "Personal triumphs are either short-lived or contrived and daily life is reduced to yet-to-be-discovered sins."¹⁵ This is, of course, precisely the claim advanced of afro-pessimism: personal triumphs are always short-lived for blacks as any gains are always already threatened by reversal, and whites ought to constantly be on the lookout for their yet-to-be-discovered sins of whiteness. Given that whiteness maintains its strength through normalization and the concealment of white privilege, anti-racists who consistently attempt to identify whiteness will necessarily reduce life to a string of

revelations about the sins of political modernity. Perhaps Hart and Hartelius fear that students of satire will be overtaken by political malaise and conspiratorial thinking, but considering that whiteness manifests inequality at nearly all levels of existence, the bar for what constitutes overly conspiratorial should be fairly high. It is a conspiratorial claim to argue that the offices, banks, police, courts, and lawmakers work in tandem to disproportionately incarcerate black men, and yet there are in fact a drastically disproportionate amount of black men in prison and my analysis has implicated every single one of those actors. What Hart and Hartelius consider conspiratorial, afro-pessimist criticism considers a necessary method of approaching the paradigmatic nature of anti-blackness, lest it becomes mystified through overemphasis on particularity.

Although they are writing specifically in the context of *The Daily Show*, Hart and Hartelius argue that satirists often play the role of a bully, uncritically replacing one ideology with another. There are two reasons *The Onion* is shielded from this criticism. First, *The Onion's* ironic iconicity undermines ideological certitude writ large, not merely liberal or conservative doxa. Second, satire in *The Onion* is destructive more than it is creative. It pokes holes and tears off masks; it does not advance a praxis of its own. There is no blueprint for defeating whiteness, there are only tactics for resisting it. Even if satire fosters alternative ideologies to replace the deconstructed, this effect only reveals the inevitability of ideology as some form of common assumptions are necessary to make sense of the world. Ideology is not dangerous at the moment of birth, it becomes problematic as it tenaciously grabs hold and resists criticism. By training its audience to be skeptical of any given ideology, *The Onion* does much to prevent the calcification of assumptions.

Writing on his own, Hart wonders if satire and its cynicism can foster political activism, reliably inform us, and put checks on those in power.¹⁶ I cannot speak to whether circulation of *The Onion* causes increased political activism, if an effect is merely correlative, or if there is no effect at all. Such a question belongs to our numerically inclined friends. However, in this thesis I have argued that *The Onion* is capable of informing its readers in a fashion that no traditional news source could via its ability to sidestep ideological reflexes and spread information which would otherwise be automatically rejected. Through ironic iconicity *The Onion* complicates notions of objective truths emerging from seemingly neutral news sources which complicates the channels of communication used by those in power to maintain ideology. Whether *The Onion* can inform us is hardly up for debate. Far more important is to question which ideologies it maintains and which it deconstructs, something only close readings can accomplish.

Throughout this thesis I have argued that satire has the potential to mount effective challenges to the paradigms of whiteness and anti-blackness by undermining the ideologies which reproduce racial antagonism in the world. Such a strategy is political because it alters the ethics and values we use to prioritize strategies for justice while informing audiences about the lived conditions of structural inequality in a manner that improves white allyship. Reading *The Onion* alone is unlikely to make one a political powerhouse, but satire contributes to ongoing destabilizing counter-narratives and minor discourses which mount effective challenges to power. To approach texts like *The Onion* and demand a clear linkage between any given satirical prose and concrete political change misses out on the work of satire at the level of epistemology. It is at the level of

knowledge production that *The Onion* stakes its ground, and it is at that level our analysis and criticism should begin.

Notes

1. Kenneth Burke, *Attitudes Toward History* 3rd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 43.
2. George Yancy, *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008), 229.
3. Jonathan P. Rossing, "Deconstructing Postracialism: Humor as a Critical, Cultural Project," *Popular Communication: the International Journal of Media and Culture* 10 (2012): 48.
4. Megan R. Hill, "'Developing a Normative Approach to Political Satire: A Critical Perspective,'" *International Journal of Communication* 7 (2013): 324, 329.
5. Christopher J. Gilbert, "Toward the Satyric," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 46 (2013): 284.
6. George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006), vii.
7. Rossing, "Deconstructing Postracialism," 45.
8. Tavia Nyong'o, *The Amalgamation Waltz: Race, Performance, and the Ruses of Memory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009): 157.
9. Glenda Carpio, *Laughing Fit to Kill: Black Humor in the Fictions of Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).
10. Roderick P. Hart and E. Johanna Hartelius, "The Political Sins of Jon Stewart," *Critical Studies in Media communication* 24 (2007): 263-272.
11. Hart and Hartelius, "Political Sins," 271.
12. Hart and Hartelius, "Political Sins," 246.
13. Hart and Hartelius, "Political Sins," 268.
14. Hart and Hartelius, "Political Sins," 270.
15. Hart and Hartelius, "Political Sins," 268.
16. Roderick P. Hart, "The Rhetoric of Political Comedy," *International Journal of Communication* 7 (2013): 338-370.

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