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A Critical Study of the African-American Comedic Tradition

Allison Longo

Union College - Schenectady, NY

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Eddie Murphy and the 1980s:

A Critical Study of the African-American Comedic Tradition

By

Allison R. Longo

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Abstract

This thesis examines the changes in African-American comedy during the 1980s. In exploring the changes during this decade, specific attention is paid to Eddie Murphy, who achieved incredible beginning with his 1980 entrance on *Saturday Night Live*. In a relatively short period of time, Murphy was able to ascend to a level of cultural significance that far dwarfed that reached by any of the African American comedians who had preceded him. Through a comprehensive presentation of the historical development of African American humor, the following thesis challenges the consensus critical assumption that Murphy both consciously forewent opportunities to be politically relevant and actively perpetuated stereotypes as a means of achieving mainstream success.

Chapter one of this thesis describes the traditional characteristics of African-American humor and provide a brief description of the progression of this sub-genre of comedy from the slavery era through the 1970s. This chapter not only provides insight into the significance of African-American comedy, but places the changes that occurred in the 1980s as part of a greater historical narrative. Chapter two explores Murphy's early work on *Saturday Night* and in his stand up performance, *Delirious*. Chapter three focuses on film during this decade and how Murphy's work brought components of the African-American comedic tradition into Hollywood films. More notably, his early performances provided a means of placing his comedic persona within his film roles. Each chapter will place the changes that occurred during this decade in context of the work in the 1970s, while also assessing the extent to which the developments of the 1980s were responsible for changes in the comedic landscape that occurred in successive decades.

Chapter One: A Critical Study of African American Humor

I. Introduction

In 1997, Chris Rock's stand0up routine, "Niggas versus Black People" launched his career through its controversial exploration of intraracial affairs. That routine was later parodied in an episode of the American comedy series, *The Office*. In the episode "Diversity Day," Michael Scott's offensive attempt to reenact the routine results in sensitivity training. Scott, as portrayed by Steve Carell, asks, "How come Chris Rock can do a routine and everybody finds it hilarious and groundbreaking, and I go and do the exact same routine, same comedic timing, and people file a complaint to corporate? Is it because I am white and Chris is black?"

While the "Diversity Day" episode is meant to draw laughs from Michael's ignorance and cultural insensitivity, his attempt at Rock's routine reveals how the genre of African-American humor has become an identifiably distinct and popular part of popular culture. Ultimately, an understanding of the historical and cultural significance of the African-American comedic tradition might have had more benefit than any "diversity day."

The documentary *Why We Laugh: Black Comedians on Black Comedy* asserts that for African-Americans, "Comedy has always been more than a laughing matter. As the black experience evolved in America, humor served as a means of expression and inspiration."¹ W.E.B DuBois observed in the 1940s that to overcome and endure adversity, "God mercifully grants the divine gift of laughter" to the oppressed and unfortunate.² Comparable to Jewish humor, African-American humor can be understood as an ethnic humor that has emerged from a context of

¹ Quoted in the documentary, *Why We Laugh, Black Comedians on Black Comedy*, 2009.

² W.E.B DuBois, "The Humor of Negroes," *Mark Twain Journal*, 36, no.3, (1998), republished by Alan Gribben, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41641441>.

oppression. The roots of African American humor developed from the struggles of slaves who implemented humor in the form of passive aggression, irony, and parody to as a means of dealing with their white masters.³

Irony was at the center of the humor that had its roots in slavery and continued to develop throughout the twentieth century in jokes, stories, and songs. The African-American humor tradition is predominately ironic because (like the irony present in Jewish humor) it developed in a historical context that was never entirely hopeless, and instead of only expressing cynicism or despair, the irony in the humor served as a defense mechanism.⁴ This involved “inversion” or role reversal, such as the slave trickster tales in which slaves outwit and outsmart their numskull masters. Inversion also was present in jokes directed at both whites and marginalized ethnic groups (such as Jews and Irish) invoked feelings of superiority. African American jokes directed at themselves and their own customs allowed for the articulation of criticism concerning characteristics of race that troubled and often shamed certain members.⁵

In the 1960s, Ralph Ellison studied black humor, arguing that it is “cultural heritage shaped by the American experience, the social and political predicament” which derives from a “special perspective on the national ideals,” and African Americans have thus adopted a “special perspective” which incorporates the “comic vision as a means of coping the America’s social and political predicament.”⁶ African-American humor derived from a unique experience, is a

³ Lean Rappoport, *Punchlines: The Case for Racial, Ethnic, and Gender Humor* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2005).

⁴ Rappoport, *Punchlines*.

⁵ Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 297-344.

⁶Ralph Ellison, “The Extravagance of Laughter,” in *Going to the Territory* (New York: Random House, 1986), 190.

powerful tool, and can bring forth the angers, hopes, and other emotions of a historically marginalized society. Understanding this humor, moreover, allows American society to have a greater understanding of the African American experience.

Traditionally, the African American comedic tradition was confined as an “insider” humor. Their laughter and jokes often complicated by white observers who refashioned it to distorted mainstream representations. This humor in the public sphere is best understood as “crossover,” or black comedian’s crossing over to mainstream American audiences, through mediums such as television, stage, and film. As blacks were historically marginalized in society, their opportunities within the public sphere were limited. White Americans saw the dancing and laughing of African Americans and refashioned it into stereotypical depictions that traveled to the minstrel tropes, through vaudeville, and into television and film. In these instances, African American humor was distorted and misconstrued to present blacks as an object of ridicule rather than as agents of humor. Mel Watkins, who documents the history of African American comedy from slavery to today, argues that contemporary African American humor results from the merging of those two humors.

II. Historical Development of African American comedy

i. Minstrel Era

During the nineteenth century, white Americans would sport blackface for Minstrel shows, doing comic songs and dances exaggerating both the dialect and movements of blacks as a means of ridicule. Minstrel shows were credited for creating the “Sambo” stereotype: the lighthearted, carefree, yet incompetent “darky” archetype who thrived in their situation, rarely

addressed the hardships of slavery, and had no desire to seek his freedom.⁷ Historically, minstrelsy has been regarded an embarrassing legacy in American entertainment, creating stereotypes that originally provided justifications for slavery through portraying blacks as happily subservient and comical creatures who both desired and required the guardianship of their masters.

The minstrel era did more than misrepresent African-Americans and justify racist institutions through stereotypes. Slaves often used humor as a means of cultural expression and resistance, often making fun of their masters. This humor had to be subtle, and consequently employed many contemporary comedy practices. Among these practices were misdirection, or making things appear one way when they were actually another; and broken dialog where only the insiders would understand what was being said. Voice inflection was also important, so the tone of the phrase could separate it from being a commonplace statement or a biting insult and an innuendo, as a means of talking about somebody without their knowledge.⁸ It was these practices that would be distorted in blackface shows.

Eric Lott has examined the Minstrel tradition beyond its depiction of blacks and examined the phenomena in its spectatorship. In *Love and Theft*, he emphasizes the importance of blackface performance as the first formal public recognition of black culture by white Americans⁹. He argues that “the minstrel show was less the incarnation of an age-old racism than an emergent social semantic figure highly responsive to the emotional demands and troubled

⁷ Mel Watkins, *On The Real Side: A History of African American Comedy* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1994), 93.

⁸ Darryl Littleton, *Black Comedians on Black Comedy: How African Americans Taught us to Laugh* (New York: Applause and Theater Books, 2006).

⁹ Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 4.

fantasies of its audiences¹⁰.” Moreover, it was a “cross-racial desire that coupled a nearly insupportable fascination and self-protective derision with respect to black people and their cultural practices, and made blackface minstrelsy less a sign of absolute white power and control than of panic, anxiety, terror, and pleasure.”¹¹

As the Civil War brought minstrel shows into decline, African Americans increasingly began carrying out these roles in shows. Often, to entertain their audience, their exaggerations had to be even greater than whites and would have to black their own faces up with burnt cork, to make themselves even darker.¹² This brought the age of black minstrels such as Billy Kersands, James Bland, and Sam Lucas. In his anthology of African American humor, *On the Real Side*, Mel Atkins argues that black minstrelsy can be understood as a paradoxical element in black entertainment history. While it was highly criticized by middle class and educated African Americans, it was as a foundation in the growth of the black performing arts and would become the only way for more than half a century for blacks to gain recognition¹³.

ii. Vaudeville

Around the beginning of the twentieth century, blackface performers (both white and black) altered their minstrel routines transitioned to the vaudeville stage. The emergence of blackface performance within Vaudeville came with the influx of African Americans who fled the Jim Crow south during reconstruction. The comedy that emerged in vaudeville acts was ultimately indistinguishable from minstrelsy in spoken content, as most of these performers began in minstrel shows. Through Vaudeville, Bert performer Bert Williams transitioned

¹⁰ Lott, *Love and Theft*, 5-6.

¹¹ Lott, *Love and Theft*, 8.

¹² Littleton, *On the Real Side*, 19.

¹³ Watkins, *On the Real Side*, 133.

minstrel performances to “coon” shows, gaining unprecedented fame as an African-American performer.” Williams extended traditional coon songs and into a stage character (which would be mimicked throughout Vaudevilles), the shuffling, slow-witted clown, in his movements and dialect.

iii. Early Television and Film

With the beginning of film came Thomas Edison’s early “coon films,” that primarily served to present the African American as an amusement object and a mindless black buffoon.¹⁴ By the 1930s, the coon would be used as a means of creating a Hollywood star with, Stepin’ Fetchit, “the laziest man in America” (a character created by Lincoln Perry). Fetchit was the first African-American to receive featured billing and scenes written specifically for him in films. He was responsible for creating what Donald Bogle calls the “lazy man with a soul” that enjoyed massive popularity. Following Fetchit, every black comedian would later draw from this characterization.¹⁵ Fetchit extended Williams excessive and outlandish coon to a loyal servant in need of reform from his master, never posing any threat.¹⁶ Negro servants soon became the screen’s primary black stereotype. While Stepin Fetchit was a caricature, he further distorted the perception of performance and reality in African-American mainstream representation. Many saw his negative presentation of blackness as yet another justification for stereotypes.¹⁷

Amos n Andy was a popular 1920s radio program that was developed into a television program in the 1950s. It focused on two Southern black men, Amos Jones and Andy Brown, who

¹⁴ Donald Bogle *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, & Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2001), 9.

¹⁵ Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, & Bucks*, 41.

¹⁶ Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, & Bucks*, 42.

¹⁷ Watkins, *On the Real Side*, 227.

had migrated from the South to Harlem. They were infamous for their dim wit, poor language, and stumbling comic bits. The roles of Amos and Andy were intended to refashion classic minstrel figures, yet the characters existed in an entirely black setting, where their actions were never contrasted with the customs of the larger society.¹⁸ Supporting characters in the show, notably Kingfish, their old con-man neighbor, reappraised Sambo roles.

Despite these negative representations, there were African Americans who did enjoy the show, appreciating that presented some authentic folk humor, that humor in part deriving from the idea of distortion itself.¹⁹ More visibly, however, the NAACP and other activist groups sought to cancel the program, which they felt perpetuated stereotypes that thwarted the racial equity they had been striving to achieve.²⁰ In a paper titled “Why the *Amos ‘n’ Andy* TV Show Should Be Taken off the Air,” they claimed that seeing the show on television made these regressive stereotypes more visible than radio. Because *The Amos ‘n’ Andy* show was among the few programs featuring African-Americans, it was dangerous to have these stereotypes be the only mainstream representation of race. They called for a protest of the program considering:

Millions of white Americans see this *Amos ‘n’ Andy* picture of Negroes and think the entire race is the same...Millions of white children learn about Negroes for the first time by seeing *Amos ‘n’ Andy* and carry this impression throughout their lives in one form of another... An entire race of 15,000,000 Americans is being slandered each week by this one-sided caricature on television.²¹

As 1960s were approaching, NAACP and other black activist organizations were in the process of mobilizing for the civil rights movement. For these groups, ending segregation was

¹⁸ Watkins, *On The Real Side*, 267,

¹⁹ Donald Bogle, *Prime Time Blues: African Americans on Network Television* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001).

²⁰ Bogle, *Prime Time Blues*.

²¹ NAACP petition, referenced in Melvin Patrick Ely, *The adventures of Amos 'n' Andy : a Social History of an American Phenomenon* (Toronto : Maxwell Macmillan, 1991), 291.

made more difficult with the contemporary representation of the black community for most whites being so negative. Ultimately, the criticisms would put an end to the show.

iv. African American Performance Venues

While crossover complicated African American humor and racial representation, the comedic tradition further developed and thrived within the African American comedy. From the Harlem Renaissance, comedians such as Moms Mabely and Nipsey Russell thrived on stages on the Chitlin Circuit, a collective name for the stages in cities throughout the eastern, southern, and upper Midwest cities throughout the United States where blacks could safely perform.

Through the Apollo Theater and the Chitlin Circuit African American comedians were able to take their humor to the stage and pioneer new performance styles and techniques. “The critical and disdainful edge of black humor foreshadowed on the stage and openly expressed by the new breed of stand-up comics represented nothing more than a shift in the public display of black humor. That edge had been present since slavery.” In the 1930s, Jackie “Moms” Mabely branded suggestive, often irreverent humor through telling stories and comedic parodies of songs. Mabely, and other comedians of this era began the transition into mainstream and helped pioneer satire into standup performances.

v. Civil Rights Movement and Changes in African American Comedy

Dick Gregory

African American comedians would begin to reshape their mainstream representation with the Civil Rights Movement. During the Civil Rights Movement, African Americans were determined to force the nation to confront both the racial injustices and the marginalized black voice. Through the tumult of the Civil Rights Movement, Gregory was among the first to bring a sharp political racial driven critique into his acts. Gregory introduced topical, political material

into his work, truly introducing the concept of an African American comedian as a social satirist. His comedy provided an open assault on the injustices facing blacks. He was able to successfully perform before integrated audiences after examining the failed attempts of past comedians. His stand-up routines were driven largely by his realization:

“I’ve got to go up there as an individual first, a Negro second. I’ve got to be a colored funny man, not a funny colored man. I’ve got to act like a star who isn’t sorry for himself-the way they can’t feel sorry for me. I’ve got to make jokes about myself before I can make jokes about them and their society-that way they can’t hate me. Comedy is friendly relations.”²²

During a performance at the Playboy Club, he established his comedic persona and traditions:

“Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. I understand that there a good many Southerners in the room tonight. I know the south very well. I spent twenty years there one night... Last time I was down south I walked into this restaurant and this waitress came up to me and said, ‘we don’t serve colored people have here.’ I said, ‘That’s all right, I don’t eat colored people. Bring me a whole fried chicken.’ ... About that time three cousins come in, you know the ones I mean, Klu, Kluck, and Klan, and they say: ‘Boy... anything you do to that chicken, we’re gonna to you.’ So I put down my knife and fork, and I picked up that chicken, and I kissed it.”²³

As time would pass, Gregory would use his appearances on television programs and stage performances to emphasize less the “friendly relations” of comedy, and more to advocate for Civil Rights. His humor became angrier, sharper, and more confrontational, becoming less popular to the entertainment mainstream by the 1970s. Although his commitment to Civil Rights may have inhibited him from further success in crossover and limited his career, he is notable for the opportunities which he would provide for black comedians to follow.

²² Gregory, as quoted in *On the Real Side*, 500.

²³ Gregory, as quoted in *On the Real Side*, 501.

Bill Cosby

Among those comedians to follow was Bill Cosby, who was able to come out of the Chitlin' Circuit and achieve unprecedented success crossing over to mainstream audiences."²⁴ Storytelling had long been a part of the African American oral tradition and Cosby made it a cornerstone of his comedy routines. His humor avoided discussions of race, instead using universal topics such as family, childhood and biblical parodies. A notable example is one of his earliest famous routines about Noah, where he retells the original conversation between the biblical figure and God. During this bit he not only uses storytelling to show the different facial expressions and tones, and movements of each character, but provides sound effects as he reenacts the noise of Noah's saw. After God commands him to build the arc, he goes back to Noah, playfully grinning up to the ceiling, "Right... What's an arc?" After God's instruction, Noah once again grins upward, "Right... Who is this really? What's going on...? Am I on candid camera?"²⁵

Traditionally, African-American stand-up routines had exclusively focused on racial distinctions for mainstream audiences. Cosby, on the other hand, was notably for being the first to successfully deemphasize those distinctions and focus on common themes within his comedy. With the Black Power Movement contributed to white anxieties during this time, he comforted his white audiences with his friendly tone, clean cut appearance, and non-controversial material.²⁶ His successful standup routines secured him a role in a non-stereotypical role on the television program, *I Spy*. His Universalist humor, he was able to present a positive image of a

²⁴ Atkins, *On the Real Side*, 503.

²⁵ *The Best of Bill Cosby the Millennium Collection*. MCA, 2001, CD.

²⁶ Watkins, *On the Real Side*, 505.

black, self-made, upwardly mobile man, which allowed him to transition into a television career, most notably as the patriarch Cliff Huxtable in *The Cosby Show* (1984-1992).

Flip Wilson

Whereas Cosby achieved success by his deemphasizing race, Flip Wilson would introduce the distinctly black voice to his comedy on television. With *The Flip Wilson Show* from 1970-1974, he would become the first African American to own, produce, and star in his own television series. Like Cosby, he presented a non-threatening humor which typically avoided challenging the contemporary social and political climate.²⁷ Most notably, however, his characters in the show introduced black and urban culture to primetime television, with routines based in traditional African American comedy. In addition to the routines themselves, Wilson used his show to promote African American talent, inviting artists to perform such as James Brown, Bill Cosby, and Stevie Wonder.²⁸

Richard Pryor

While Gregory, Cosby, and Wilson had all brought some aspects of black comedy and innovation to the mainstream, Richard Pryor ultimately come to dominate the genre of African-American comedy through readjusting it in both execution and perception. Pryor was able to present a combination of the “traces of Cosby’s Universalist riffing, Wilson’s culturally specific cast of characters, and Gregory’s social commentary.”²⁹ During the 1970s as black power was on the rise, “his routines embodied both the rage and the vulnerability inherent in the burgeoning tide of heightened black awareness.”³⁰ He was able enhance his comedy routines through

²⁷Christine Acham, *Revolution Televised: Prime Time and the Struggle for Black Power* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 68.

²⁸ Acham, *Revolution Televised*, 69.

²⁹ Haggins 50

³⁰ Haggins 51

incorporating his tremendous acting capabilities in his routines. While the comedians who broke into mainstream comedy in the early fifties and sixties incorporated the satirical aspect of African-American comedy, that satire often muffled the specific style of the street humor from which most of them drew.³¹ His biting and audacious humor embodied actual people from his community, featuring pimps, junkies and winos. Much of his material was an extension of African American folklore, street humor, and oral tradition. Continuously, the profanity and raucous nature of his humor tested the comfort of his audiences while unmasking his own attitudes and ideas. In his characters he would use voices, body language, street vernacular, and gestures characters; then would place them in common satiations, allowing spontaneous humor to emerge.³²

Mel Watkins credited Richard Pryor's mainstream success to the ways in which much of his material from the "largely untapped reservoir" of African-American street humor that was familiar to many blacks. His novelty and genius, thus, came not from his material but from the ways in which he presented it, through his voices, facial expressions, and gestures, and his cocky and assertive tone.³³ Ultimately, Pryor "gave substance to types that were outcasts even in the ghetto" and, although each of his characters was presented humorously, "there was an aura of truth about his characters."³⁴ Although Pryor was wildly successful in both his stand-up performances and records, he struggled to bring that same comedic persona into television and film. *The Richard Pryor Show*, which aired in 1977 was cancelled after just a few episodes, due to his frustrations in regards to the program's censorship and lack of creative control.

³¹ Watkins, *On the Real Side*, 524.

³² Leon Rappaport, *Punchlines: The Case for Racial, Ethnic, and Gender Humor* (London: Praeger Publishers, 2005).

³³ Watkins, *On the Real Side*, 555.

³⁴ Watkins, *On the Real Side*.

Throughout his film career, he struggled to also effectively reflect his stand-up persona. In his early films such as *Silver Streak*, he struggled to gain starring roles, constantly playing supporting characters. Once he did star in films, his characters often were far more gentle and censored than his comedic persona. He would, however, alter the nature of African-American humor to for comedians to follow.

These comedians would ultimately embody a new African-American humor as a powerful weapon for societal change. For Bambi Haggins of *Laughing Mad: the Black Comic Persona in the Post Soul Era*, the civil rights moment was a watershed moment in black humor, signifying its potential power as a force for social change, for the authentic release of anger, frustration, and for the representation of blackness. For the black community, this humor “spoke to a deep cultural impulse, extending beyond articulating suffering in muted tones to howling about oppression and subjugation, as well as the victories in survival against strife. Comics and audiences were laughing *mad*.”³⁵

III. Post-Civil Rights Movement: Contemporary Comedy

In mainstream representations, African American comedy has progressed from a tool of perpetuating stereotypes to a tool for deconstructing them, to explicating what it means to be African-American. This thesis examines the ways in which this process has continued since the era of Richard Pryor. More, specifically, I focus on the 1980s, through the television and film works of Eddie Murphy. The next generation of comedians after Pryor, beginning with Eddie Murphy and extending to Chris Rock, Whoopi Goldberg, and the Wayans Brothers, would

³⁵ Bambi Haggins, *Laughing Mad: The Black Comedic Persona in Post Soul American* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007).

embody a young hip, movie star actor and comedian. Nelson George described these comedians as among “the post Soul Era.”

They hurried toward a future with a different set of assumptions from any minority kids in American history... As they grew up, both the black middle class and the black lower class expanded; they grew up with Wall Street greed, neo-con ideology, Atari's, Gameboys, crack, AIDS, Afrocentricity, and Malcolm X as movie hero, political icon, and marketing vehicle.³⁶

Historical Positioning

The Civil Rights Movements first strove for equality and integration and in later years focused on transitioning the idea of civil rights into socioeconomic equity. By the end of the 1970s and early 80s however, the achievements of the Civil Rights movements were evident primarily among the “black elite” (a socio-economic group, working primarily in the fields of banking, commerce, law, education, and medicine), who comprised only 7 to 10 percent of the total African American population.”³⁷ While this group felt comfortable applauding the gains of Civil Rights, including the end of Jim Crow and the emergence of affirmative action, they were a limited representation of black America as a whole. They could be distinguished from working-class and impoverished blacks by their income, education, political moderation and social conformity, and their appreciation for capitalism.³⁸

This was a time that brought an unprecedented acceptance of African-Americans in public life, with figures such as Jesse Jackson, James Brown, and Michael Jackson. In *Post Soul Nation*, Nelson George recognizes that the achievements of prominent celebrities did not necessarily have a tangible impact on the persistent poverty, poor education, and racial

³⁶Nelson George, *Hip Hop America* (New York: Penguin Books, 1998).

³⁷ Manning Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction in Black America, 1945-1990* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1999), 150.

³⁸ Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion*, 152.

discrimination that still plagued many African Americans. This further complicated the work of the Civil Rights movements as a conservative backlash was evident both in American society and government, in particular, in the ideas of government responsibility to ameliorate social conditions. Concurrently, there were rising class tensions within the African-American community coupled with increasing drug abuse and crime rates. This resulted in a crippling skepticism among many African American's in regards to the government.³⁹ Moreover, the aftermath of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements presented more complex and identifiable issues for African Americans.

For Nelson, the “Post-Soul” era debut in 1980 with two events: the election of Ronald Reagan and Eddie Murphy’s arrival on *Saturday Night Live*, “elevating two men who truly encompass the schizophrenic nature of the American experience in the ‘80s.”⁴⁰ Eddie Murphy, who first entered television at the age of 19, epitomizes the new comedians who emerged in the “post soul” era, captivating black and white audiences as A-list celebrities in standup, television and as leading film actors. Richard Pryor and other comedians before were the product of poor African-American community and worked to transition their Chitlin Circuit humor to mainstream audiences. Murphy, on the other hand, was the product of Roosevelt, Long Island, and a middle-class suburb. He began his stand-up work in white Long Island comedy clubs.

IV. Relevant works

Examining the nature of the changes in comedy during this era required textual analysis of those comedic representations within television and film. In *Revolution Televised: Prime Time*

³⁹ Nelson George, *Post-Soul Nation: The Explosive, Contradictory, Triumphant, and Tragic 1980s as Experienced by African Americans (Previously known as Blacks and Before that Negroes)* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004).

⁴⁰ George, *Post-Soul Nation*.

and the Struggle for Black Power, Christine Acham examines African American television programs around the 1970s. A majority of these programs include comedies, such as *Sanford and Son*, *Good Times*, *The Richard Pryor Show*, and *The Flip Wilson Show*. Acham illustrates how black television artists and producers have used the skill of improvisation “to challenge the television industry and to locate effective resistance in an effort to control black images.”⁴¹ It is this dedication to community and social change, she argues, that was represented through television during a pivotal time in black history. Black television artists and producers have used their skills to challenge the television industry and been able to convey black images.

In *Blacks and White TV*, J. Fred MacDonald provides a more comprehensive historical analysis of the medium. Through his comprehensive historical analysis of African American representation in this media, he argues that television has made more progress than any form of media its attempts to enact social change in minority representation, yet has not lived up to its fullest potential. Furthermore, in the industry, MacDonald finds a progressive trend towards positive change in the treatment of blacks. In the 1970s and 1980s, African-Americans in comedy programming were featured in television programming than ever before. Nevertheless, he finds that “many of those connected with the medium have yet to understand the responsibility television has to project undistorted, honest information as an antidote to the cultural legacy of bigotry.”⁴² African-American representation have grown in television over the twentieth century, comedy programs often still include stereotypical roles. Such roles include J.J. from *Good Times*, Eddie Murphy’s several characters on *Saturday Night Live*, and the exaggerated sketches on *In Living Color*, which criticizes for their minstrel-like performances.

⁴¹ Acham, *Revolution Televised*, xx.

⁴² J. Fred MacDonald, *Blacks and White TV: African Americans in Television Since 1948* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall Publishers, 1992), xvii.

In *Framing Blackness*, Ed Guerrero details the history of the black commercial presence in the American commercial narrative cinema. Within this narrative, Guerrero focuses on the ways in which African Americans are portrayed. Guerrero refers to film of the 1980s as the “cinema of recuperation.”⁴³ During the Reagan era, blacks in film found themselves confronted with “recuperation” many of the themes concerning submissions and inequalities they had fought so hard to eliminate in the decades prior. Moreover, the characters and stereotypes that had thought to be of Hollywood’s past were refashioned and resurfaced throughout the few films that featured blacks. Guerrero shows that the “cinema of recuperation” fits “into broader attempts to restore America’s optimistic, hegemonic ideology, which has origins in the countries expansionist, self-confident past.”⁴⁴

Donald Bogle’s *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks* provides a comprehensive historical analysis of African-American representation in film while focusing on individual actors for more of a “star” study. In examining the evolution of African American comedy in film, Bogle provides the substantive analysis on both Richard Pryor and Eddie Murphy’s films. In examining his starring roles in *Greased Lightning*, *Which Way is up*, and *Blue Collar*, Donald Bogle argues that Hollywood “sought to domesticate him, to transform him into an acceptable, middle-class fellow whose aims and ambitions are simple for a good decent life⁴⁵.” Although Pryor’s edgy, racially conscious humor was celebrated on the stand-up stage, it was still too threatening for mass audiences within Hollywood narratives. Like Guerrero, Bogle is critical of

⁴³ Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993).

⁴⁴ Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*.

⁴⁵ Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, & Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*, 4th ed, (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2001), 264.

Murphy's films places them within the greater regressive representations of African Americans in film during the 1980s. Despite these largely regressive plots, Bogle recognizes Murphy's talents, "to his credit-whether his films were good, bad, or indifferent- he remained a cocky and frequently engaging talent, a young man whose self-assurance, energy, and unflagging determination to do things *his* way made him a distinctive hero, especially for the younger black audience of his era."⁴⁶

While relatively few scholars have focused on the subject of African American humor, even fewer have focused on its developments in the "post-soul era" In *on the Real Side*, Mel Watkins places Murphy's emergence on the comedy scene at the end of his historical analysis of African-American comedy. By the 1980s, American comedy as a whole was in the process of a tremendous expansion while Pryor's drug addiction placed put career in decline. He argues that "Pryor's ascendancy, which had effected a literal emancipation of African American humor, combined with the flood of new outlets for performers, opened up opportunities for a raft of new, young, talents."⁴⁷ Murphy, who was the first of those talents to emerge, embodied a new, youthful, audacious African-American comic voice. Those comedians included Chris Rock, Arsenio Hall, and Robert Townsend, and the Wayans Brothers.

Bambi Haggins provides a more critical analysis of African-American humor in the last 45 years in *Laughing Mad: The Black Comic Persona in the Post-Soul Era*. She looks at the development of contemporary African-American comedian, beginning with Murphy. She refers to this new comedian as "the black comedic-A list actor with crossover appeal." Haggins examines the comic televisual and cinematic personae of Bill Cosby, Flip Wilson, and Richard

⁴⁶ Bogle , *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, & Bucks*. 287

⁴⁷ Watkins, *On The Real Side*, 563.

Pryor, and how their work in the Civil Rights Era provided opportunities for comedians to follow. The later comedic personae examined are Chris Rock, Eddie Murphy, Whoopi Goldberg, and Dave Chappelle. She argues that the potential of African-American comedy is not fulfilled when performances that highlight race are catered for consumption of mass audiences⁴⁸.

To fully understand the changes and influence of this comedy, I have cited two works that provide historical narrative of black comedy through the commentary of black comedians themselves. Darryl Littleton combines scholarly analysis with hundreds of interviews of African American comedians in *Black Comedians on Black Comedy: How America Taught us to Laugh*. Robert Townsend's documentary *Why We Laugh*, is based on Littleton's book, but gives a more updated reflection. Littleton and Townsend, also comedians, assist in providing important insight on the influence of these comedic works changed history, but more specifically how it influenced comedians themselves. Often, these comedians are more sympathetic and give credit to many comedians of the past, understanding the ways in which they provided opportunities for comedians today.

Littleton's text provides a more complete analysis of the comedy following Richard Pryor's heyday. As Pryor was struggling with addiction and other demons, America looked desperately for a black comedian to take the throne, and Murphy was that heir. By the early 90s, Littleton asserts, Murphy was "the Sydney Poitier of black comedies... To the newer generation Richard Pryor was from another era, but more importantly from another mindset... Though Murphy was also brilliant, he was a young man talking about things of his generation. Not everybody had come from the streets, much less a brothel."⁴⁹ Murphy's ascendancy would

⁴⁸ Haggins, *Laughing Mad*.

⁴⁹ Darryl Littleton, *Black Comedians on Black Comedy: How African Americans Taught Us to Laugh* (New York: Applause Theater & Cinema Books, 2006), 157-158.

produce what Littleton would call the “Black Comedy Boom” of the late 80s to mid-90s. What would follow would be a new flock of serious-minded, energetic black comedians who declared themselves disciples of Richard Pryor and called themselves “The Black Pack.” These new young comedians would accompany Murphy and included Chris Rock, Robert Townsend, Keenan Ivory Wayans, Arsenio Hall, Paul Mooney.

Much of these changes came as a result of Murphy’s unprecedented success as a black actor in Hollywood film. A more specific analysis of racial representation in 1980s film is done in Chris Jordan’s *Movies and the Reagan Presidency*. In this study, Jordan claims that President Ronald Reagan’s agenda placed the most commercially successful movies of the decade put forth the ideologies of WASP America, nuclear family self-sufficiency, and conspicuous consumption. He examines genres of film as case studies of how Reagan-era cinema addressed issues of race, gender, and class in ways very much in tune conservative culture of the 1980s. Author Chris Jordan provides a complete overview of both the influence of Reagan's presidency on the film industry and on the films themselves. He also describes the mode of the “High Concept Movie” and examines some Eddie Murphy movies such as *Beverly Hills Cop*, *Coming to America*, and *48 Hrs*.

Challenges to Crossover: African American Comedians in Television

In her essay, “Bringing the Black: Eddie Murphy and African-American Humor on *Saturday Night Live*,” Raquel Gates argues that Murphy’s work on the show introduced new performance methods that bridged black humor with mainstream white comedy. She argues that “on the surface, many of Murphy’s performances appeared to be tailored to appeal to mainstream white audiences. Many of his characters and sketches, however, contained aspects of subversive black humor that spoke to black audiences and black perspectives.”⁵⁰ In this chapter, I extend Gates’s assessment, arguing that these strategies altered the African American comedic performance in television and were an integral process in bringing the African American tradition into film. His early works more notably “reveal more than a hint at his struggle to sublimate his own, deep, conflicted feelings about black devaluation,”⁵¹ which becomes an important tool in criticism in these performances.

Before examining Murphy’s work, it is necessary to analyze the changes in in black comedy through the 1970s. The changing atmosphere of the 1970s resulted in a more progressive representation of blacks in popular culture. Not only were African Americans regularly featured in television programming alongside whites, the decade introduced television programming featuring all-black casts.⁵² Alongside the *Flip Wilson Show* were a string of successful situation comedies set in the black community introduced by Norman Lear. This began as comedian Redd Foxx transformed his Chitlin’ Circuit comedy material into the situation comedy titled *Sanford*

⁵⁰ Raquel Gates, “Bringing the Black: Eddie Murphy and African-American Humor on *Saturday Night Live*,” in *Saturday Night Live and American TV* (Indiana: University of Indiana Press, 2013), 152.

⁵¹ Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*

⁵² Bogle *Prime Time Blues*.

and Son in 1977. The show focused on Fred Sanford (Foxx), an aging, sarcastic, scheming junk dealer in Watts, Los Angeles and his son, Lamont. It's less than positive image of the black community lead to criticism of *Sanford*, comparing it to *Amos n' Andy*. For critics, liberal white frustrations were alleviated through the portrayal of African-Americans as content with their situation of poverty.⁵³ Despite criticisms of the show, it was remarkable in its extension of stand up material into the situation comedy. Like the stand-up comedy, *Sanford and Son* allowed ideas usually restricted within the black community to be projected to a mainstream audience, allowing black audiences still denied the promises of integration a sense of identification.⁵⁴ Instead of a joke, *Sanford* placed the humor within television narratives.

The mainstream success of *Sanford and Son* lead to a string of African American situation comedies such as *Good Times!* Premiering in 1974, the took place in the Chicago project and show centered on the family of Florida and James Evans and their attempts to overcome urban poverty. The show was innovative in that it pressed stances on social issues and the political agendas of black America in a confrontational, uncompromising manner. Frequently, the show shifted between light humor to heavy drama; dealing with subjects such as gang violence, drug abuse, teen alcoholism, unemployment, and bussing. As the series developed, its focus shifted toward the son of Florida and James, J.J. J.J was a lanky and outlandish, young black man, and a modern "coon" fixture. Playful, carefree and constantly dodging trouble; he was most famous for his trademark declaration "dy-NO-might!" J.J's catchphrase, exaggerations, and wild outfits made him both a pop icon and a subject of criticism by the African American community.

⁵³ Acham, *Revolution Televised*, 107.

⁵⁴ Acham, *Revolution Televised*, 109.

Like other situation comedies from Lear during this era, *Good Times* blended stereotypes with a rare humanity and earnestness, mixing racial exploitation and forceful role-modeling.⁵⁵ Other African-American situation comedies from this decade include *The Jefferson's* and *What's Happening!!!* Ultimately, these programs have been the subject of a wide range of criticism for their stereotypical depiction of African Americans. As Donald Bogle argues, however, the shows brought a source of pleasure for many African American audiences from seeing performers presenting black life and culture on television.⁵⁶

Despite such success for African-American comedic programs, Richard Pryor, arguably the most creative black comic of the era, experienced television failure. While Pryor's stand-up comedy was incredibly popular, his profanity and audaciousness was initially considered too threatening for mainstream audiences in television.⁵⁷ As he increasingly gained more mainstream popularity through film performances and profitable album sales, NBC looked to translate this popularity into a television program. From the start, however, the show sought to curb Pryor's comedic persona. NBC had scheduled his programming for Tuesday's at 8 pm, which would require Pryor to alter his vulgar, raunchy, politicized humor for family audiences, a task he was unwilling to fulfill.⁵⁸ Despite its creativity and innovation, there was an incompatible relationship between Pryor's comedy and the audience desired by broadcast television studios.⁵⁹

Christine Acham sees Pryor's failure on television as symbolic within changing representations of blackness in the late 1970s on television. By the shows start in 1977, television programs began attempts to present African-Americans within integrated settings, in

⁵⁵ McDonald, *Blacks and White TV*, 188-189.

⁵⁶ Acham, *Revolution Televised*.

⁵⁷ Acham, *Revolution Televised*, 151.

⁵⁸ McDonald, *Revolution Televised*.

⁵⁹ McDonald, *Revolution Televised*.

shows such as *The Jefferson's*. As Pryor's characters, like those of *Sanford and Son* and *Good Times* were distinctly those of the black underclass and seemed to counter this narrative. By the 1980s, the emergence of a new culture of political conservatism encouraged networks to conclude that viewers no longer craved programs about the black community and their social issues. The few programs that did feature blacks placed them in supporting roles in white casts and often ignored issues of race, as though blacks and whites coexisted happily in a colorblind America.⁶⁰ Pryor's experiences, however, brought him to bleaker views of contemporary society, including in the reversal of civil rights gains, achieved by the Reagan Presidency.⁶¹

i. 1980s, Murphy, and Television

At the age of 19, Eddie Murphy made his appearance on the late night sketch comedy program, *Saturday Night Live*. In *Saturday Night Live, Hollywood Comedy, and American Culture*, Jim Whalley attributes the show's initial success to its ability to reflect a distinctly liberal set of ideas and attitudes that were excluded from conventional network television. The sketch comedy program was primarily attempting to reflect American trends in its material that pursued a liberal social agenda. The show had a significant appeal for Generation X youth. *SNL* "not only offered comedy and other entertainment aimed at their specific tastes, but also a weekly enactment of their growing influence on American society as a whole through challenges to television as an institution."⁶²

Saturday Night Live would elevate Murphy into a film and stand up career after just one season. In reflecting on the career arc of Eddie Murphy, Bill Simmons has cited, "he was a cast

⁶⁰ Bogle, *Primetime Blues*.

⁶¹ Acham, *Revolution Televised*, 169.

⁶² Jim Whalley, *Saturday Night Live, Hollywood Comedy, and American Culture: From Chevy Chase to Tina Fey* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), 39.

member at 19, the shows meal ticket by 20, a movie star by 21, and a full-fledged superstar by 22.”⁶³ While Murphy’s ascendancy on *Saturday Night Live* was largely a result of his talent as both a comedian and actor, it is necessary to place it in context with the struggles of the show in 1980. In the show’s sixth season, *SNL*’s fate was in jeopardy, with its original cast and writing staff gone and network television facing the new competition of cable television. While *SNL* had historically under hired and underused their African American performers, Murphy’s young, hip, black perspective that was largely absent from television at the time helped revitalize the show. His early performances clearly exemplified that perspective. Among his first appearances was as Raheem Abdul Mohammed an angry, young, black man. Raheem appeared on the “Weekend Update” segment to discuss his disappointment in regards with a recent court ruling that required white athletes on high school basketball teams. He complains:

Anytime we get something good, ya’ll got to move in on it. In the sixties, we wore platform shoes, then ya’ll had to wear platform shoes. In the early seventies we braided our hair, then in the late seventies ya’ll had to braid your hair. Now it’s 1980. We on welfare, by the end of next year ya’ll gonna be on welfare too!”⁶⁴

His monologue begins with a gentle surface humor in describing appropriation then ended in a transition to social political commentary, closing on the welfare comment. Throughout the entire bit, he maintained a general friendliness that never suggested anger.⁶⁵ He ends the monologue by throwing a boom box onto the stage telling the audience, “If God wanted blacks and whites to be equal, he would have given everyone one of these.” Early on, Murphy had established himself as a black comedian providing a satirical analysis on contemporary events, linking ideas of appropriation to greater issues of poverty. For the primarily white audience, Murphy provides the

⁶³ Bill Simmons, “The Career Arc, Eddie Murphy,” *Grantland*, November 10, 2011, <http://grantland.com/features/eddie-murphy/>

⁶⁴ Eddie Murphy as quoted on *Saturday Night Live*, NBC.

⁶⁵ Gates, “Bringing the Black,” 161.

audience a young, cool, black friend. In this way, Murphy takes the ironic, critical African American joke telling for a primarily white audience. More than his commentary, Murphy was able to his popularity on the show due to his talents beyond joke telling, demonstrating his performance styles that incorporated acting, singing, dancing, and mimicry, including his spot-on impressions of Stevie Wonder and Bill Cosby.

By the end of his first season (1980-1981) Murphy was promoted to a full time cast member. His full-time role gave him the freedom and control to create a wide array of famous characters that no other black cast member had been able to do thus far on *SNL*. Three distinct characters, Tyrone, an imprisoned poet, Buckwheat, the grown up version of the *Our Gang* series, and the pimp educator, Velvet Jones, engage in somewhat stereotypical depictions of the black experience. Tyrone Green was among his earliest characters, who first appeared in “Prose and Cons,” a mockumentary for the budding prison library culture. Each stanza of the poem he recites ends in “kill my landlord, kill my landlord.”⁶⁶

For Bambi Haggins, Tyrone appeared as a missed opportunity for critique as he ended the poem misspelling “c-i-l-l.” Tyrone did, however, insert the issues of mass incarceration and criminalization of the black community, and embodied a sense of frustration towards whites. Haggins critique of the sketch rested on the basis that Murphy made “the incarcerated black male’s attempt at self-expression a laughing endeavor.”⁶⁷ Rather than a careless joke, Murphy used Tyrone to establish a cruel irony that is reflective in much of Murphy’s work. Tyrone, in part, was a representative of the growing crime rates of the black community, which resulted in

⁶⁶ “Prose and Cons,” *Saturday Night Live*, 1981.

⁶⁷ Haggins, *Laughing Mad*, 74.

growing incarceration rates with a more authoritarian regard to the criminalization of African Americans.

This sense of irony can be seen as an extension, rather than a digression, of the African American comedic tradition. In *Black Humor and Black Consciousness*, Lawrence Levine examines the tradition of inversion among African Americans in slavery and the early twentieth century. This humor was manipulative: African Americans “played up to and attempted to control whites through laughter.” While playing into the audience’s expectations on how Tyrone should appear as a black man, he was simultaneously making fun of those expectations, in an attempt to cast them off. With his tone and his delivery, he manipulated the audience in what they were to perceive about his character. As an angry inmate, he played into representations of blackness, he was to be angry and intimidating, but not very bright. The ultimate message may seem confusing and contradictory, however, the humor was a means of projecting those confusions and contradictions upon the audience.

Among Murphy’s more famous characters was Buckwheat, which was developed out of one of his stand-up routines. In these routines, Murphy played a grown up version of the stereotypical “pickaninny” character from the *Little Rascals* series from 1934-1944. *The Little Rascals* was a collection of live action shorts that remained in syndication long afterword the young character Buckwheat conformed to racial stereotypes during the era of its production, speaking in jumbled English, easily scared, and naïve. Criticizing the character of Buckwheat, Jim Whalley argues that “Murphy used the subject of race as a way to entertain, rather than entertainment being a way to raise a subject of race”⁶⁸ Murphy’s character presented

⁶⁸ Whalley, *Saturday Night Live, Hollywood Comedy, and American Culture*, 118.

Buckwheat's "absurd dialect and appearance," singing contemporary pop hits in garbled English with baggy overalls and messy hair, without addressing the implications of these stereotypical images.⁶⁹ A similar analysis could be applied to Velvet Jones, the author of *I Wanna Be a Ho*, among other educational programs that he advertises in his sketches. In these advertisements, shows women they can "make big money from the comfort of their own bedroom," he demonstrates special exercises for pimps, such as "how to kick your hos in the butt." Their uncontrolled body movements, poor dialect, and general lack of intelligence may seem as though it was one step back from Richard Pryor.

For a new generation, however, Murphy refashioned Pryor's comedy through using these characters. That irony had been present in Richard Pryor's stand-up characters, playing into stereotypes and used them to speak to audiences about issues that had previously been unspeakable. By openly confronting and ridiculing stereotypes and slurs rather than denying them, Pryor was "deflating them, draining the emotional poison out of them, and allowing laughter to enter where before there had only been aggression or anger."⁷⁰ Through the characters of Tyrone, Buckwheat, and Velvet Jones, Murphy explored that humor to the subject of black representation itself. He was taking stereotypical roles audiences and producers expected African-American's to perform and reclaimed them through confrontation and ridicule.

While Murphy does not address the implications of these representations immediately, he attempts to do so through their development over time, as he permanently puts each character to rest. In 1983, a series of episodes satirizes the "assassination of Buckwheat," as he is shot to death. Several sketches capture Buckwheat's assassination and the subsequent trial, parodying

⁶⁹ Whalley *Saturday Night Live, Hollywood Comedy, and American Culture* 119

⁷⁰ Rappoport, *Punchlines*.

the assassination attempt of Ronald Reagan. Although it was one of the most popular characters on television, Murphy grew frustrated at the public's obsession, telling producer Dick Ebersol, "I can't stand it anymore. Everywhere I go people sat 'Do Buckwheat this, do that.'"⁷¹ The irony in the Buckwheat character did not achieve its necessary distancing effect, so Murphy took action. Ultimately, the killing of Buckwheat satirizes the mainstream fascination with such a stereotypical "coon" character. Similarly, in 1982 (Season 7) Velvet Jones announces his last appearance, "You will never see me again on this show, because tonight I died from overexposure." Ultimately, through the creation and recurrence of these characters, Murphy gained popularity while perpetuating stereotypes, however, managed to cast them off while still remaining unthreatening to his audiences. Furthermore, through disposing of these characters, he does indirectly address their implications in ways that still provide humor.

After gaining mainstream popularity, he began to introduce more authentic African American humor and social satire. He often provides parodies of traditional mainstream pop culture icons. In Murphy parodies Fred Rodger's children's show, through "Mister Robinson's Neighborhood" in the projects. Like the situation comedies of 1970s, Murphy presented contemporary issues such poverty, drug abuse, crime, and violence into comedy. More notably, he continues the traditions established by Pryor. He takes the characters of the African American community in his standup routines and places them in a moment of mainstream pop culture. Within these situations, he finds playful situations to make brutal commentary. In one segment of "Mister Robinson's Neighborhood," Murphy holds a puppet show to express his discontents with

⁷¹ Eddie Murphy, quoted in *Live from New York: An Uncensored History of Saturday Night Live* (Boston: Little, Brown, 2002), 233.

President Reagan. One hand is five finger puppets of angry African-Americans and on the other is a puppet of Reagan.

Bogle criticizes Murphy, claiming that “Pryor had gotten inside his winos, junkies, and numbers runners, uncovering their vulnerabilities, their troubled histories, and revealing at times their sadness and touching beauty. Murphy, however, seemed to see his various characters as lowlife characters without any innate dignity.” As seen in “Mister Robinson’s Neighborhood,” Murphy extended Pryor’s humor in an accessible fashion. He mimics the same structure and connection to the audience as Rogers, while placing in racial humor through vocabulary lessons (teaching words such as ‘scum bucket’), puppet shows, and inviting guests such as his angry landlord. For the post-soul generation, the complexities that accompanied many of the issues in black America were difficult to comprehend, understand, or explain. Rather than attempt, Murphy provides a platform to present those issues through humor. More than explain, Murphy used satirical expectations of African Americans to make critiques.

White like Me

In his 1984 sketch "White like Me" Murphy mocks the 1961 book *Black like Me*, in which a journalist, John Howard Griffin, exposes the racism of the American South by going undercover as an African-American man. The premise of the book, that the African-American experience can fully be understood through simply wearing black makeup for a month, was first mocked when Richard Pryor hosted *Saturday Night Live* in 1975. In this sketch, he appeared as an author named Junior Griffin who was advertising his new book, "White like Me." Murphy expanded this small bit into an entire short mockumentary. More than paying homage to his comedic predecessor, Murphy was extending the criticisms and satire that Pryor was limited from doing on television. Murphy had established so much mainstream popularity in his comedic style that

he had more flexibility than comedians of the previous generation. As Raquel Gates argued, the humor in this segment was as a result of his greater mainstream success in his films, *48 Hrs.* and *Trading Places*. Moreover, Raquel Gates argues, it was Murphy's persona as a "safe" comedy star, (as constructed by his roles in these films) that made his whiteface critique in this sketch surprising and gripping, and was able to critique white privilege, systematic racism, and "the very notion of the 'safe' black man that he had come to represent."⁷²

He begins addressing the audience, "you know, a lot of people talk about racial prejudice in America, and some people go so far as to say there are actually two Americas: one black and one white. But talk is cheap, so I decided to look at the problem myself firsthand." To prepare, he mocks white customs and ideas by stating "I watched lots of *Dynasty*... And I read a whole bunch of hallmark cards." As he mocks these harmless indicators of "whiteness," he uses inversion (or the comedic use of "role reversal"), in suggesting the absurdity of traditional indicators of "blackness" and the African-American identity. Once his transformation is complete, Murphy's experience as a white man transitions from personal embodiment to indications of white privilege and systematic racism. When going into the white community, he experiences odd situations that occur, including a free newspaper at a convenience store, to a dance party on a public bus, to receiving a no-questions-asked bank loan. Gates concludes that, by setting up a number of scenarios in which the whiteface Murphy discovers the secret world of whites, "White like me" "does more than just expose viewers to the concept of white privilege. It also validates the suspicions that African Americans may have felt at the time-namely, that they

⁷² Gates, "Bringing the Black," 165.

were still on the losing end of unfair practices and biased treatment, even though they could no always find hard evidence to point to."⁷³

At the end of the segment, Murphy concludes, "So what did I learn from all of this? Well, I learned that we still have a long way to go in this country before all men are equal." He then threatens, "I've got a lot of friends, and we've got a lot of makeup." For Bambi Haggins, this final threat still rests on a regressive conservative idea of individual mobility, that one can "work the system." More likely, however, Murphy was in fact mocking this concept with a proposal so absurd.

Beyond Saturday Night Live: Eddie Murphy *Delirious* HBO

While performing on *Saturday Night Live*, Murphy had heightened his fame on television through his HBO stand-up special *Delirious*, a live performance in Washington DC from his national tour. Before HBO, comics had few venues to enter into mainstream audiences, the greatest being *Saturday Night Live*⁷⁴. It is important to note, however, (for chronological purposes of this essay) that Murphy was already a star at the time of this performance as a consequence of *Saturday Night Live* and his two films *48 Hrs.* and *Trading Places*. Like Richard Pryor, his stand-up routine reveals the ways in which Murphy tones down his humor on *SNL*, making it much friendlier to audiences.

Walking on the stage in a bright red jumpsuit to a packed stage of both black and white audiences, it is clear that Murphy sets himself apart from any comedian before, regardless of race. Traditionally, African-American comedians had made the staple stand-up uniform a suit

⁷³ Gates, "Bringing the Black."

⁷⁴ Bambi Haggins and Amanda D. Lotz, "Overview: At Home on the Cutting Edge," in *The Essential HBO Reader (Essential Readers in Contemporary Media and Culture* (Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 2013), 152.

and tie. Murphy's attire came from his life-long fascination with Elvis Presley. "Elvis was my idol then-still is. I thought he had more presence and charisma than anybody who ever existed," he has recognized⁷⁵. Murphy thus, adds the presence and energy of a young, hip, rock star into his comedic persona.

Murphy's *Delirious* begins declaring his primary rule, using expletives to announce that gay men "aren't allowed to look at my ass while I'm on stage." With a string of homophobic jokes about gay individuals and AIDS in the following ten minutes, the beginning of his routine can be difficult to digest from a twenty-first century perspective, similar to his material providing regressive perceptions of women. He says unapologetically, "I fuck with everyone, I don't give a fuck." Though uncomfortable and offensive, Murphy established himself as an equal-opportunity offender.

In combination with his questionable material, Murphy had emphasized the abilities of the comedian as an actor. The special is filled less with jokes and more with stories and different routines. His impressions of celebrities such as Elvis, Stevie Wonder, and Teddy Pendergrass are spot on, his stories are complete with him physically acting out each part. As a comedian, Murphy was willing to do anything, and try anything for a laugh.

In reviewing *Raw*, Richard Harrington of *The Washington Post* acknowledged that "like Pryor, Murphy has a mimic's ear, a mime's eye and magician's sense of misdirection, so when his stories connect, they connect hard... Murphy proved to be a compelling storyteller."⁷⁶ In examining the young Eddie Murphy in his early stand-up routine as an extension of his *Saturday Night Live* work, Mel Atkins sees him as the new, youthful African American comic voice. He

⁷⁵ Murphy, as quoted by Frank Sanello, *Eddie Murphy: The Life and Times of a Comic on the Edge* (Secaucus: Birch Lane Press Group, 1997), 11

⁷⁶ Richard Harrington, "Eddie Murphy." *The Washington Post* (1982).

acknowledges “if he sometimes teetered on the brink of excess-stentorian and superficial profanity, crass indulgence of homophobia, and sexism-his usually outrageous parodies were often perfectly conceived and executed.”⁷⁷

Eddie Murphy: Delirious marked a new direction for HBO stand-up specials. The special “captured the audaciousness in Murphy’s act, which was reminiscent of the irreverent blueness of Richard Pryor’s material (in terms of language and sexually explicit content) - although arguably without Pryor’s sociopolitical edge⁷⁸.” His special ushered in an era of stand-up specials as event programming comparable to a rap or rock concert dependent on energy and high-octane performativity.⁷⁹

Throughout his show, it was clear that Murphy was largely given the latitude to do or say anything that he desired. His profanity and his excesses signaled that his lack of sociopolitical critique in *Saturday Night Live* was less about the constraints of conservative culture and Network television, and more on his own comedic style. What had been solidified through *Delirious* was that, Murphy presented black humor as a means of mainstream entertainment.

For Chris Connolly of *Rolling Stone*, his stand-up humor provided the best example that “As a performer, Murphy’s paramount concern seems to be maintaining the biting edge of his work, rather than broadening its appeal across the demographic spectrum.”⁸⁰ His abrasive, challenging, and provocative material was far from “mainstream,” yet was widely celebrated by mainstream audiences.

⁷⁷ Watkins, *On the Real Side* 563

⁷⁸ Haggins and Lotz, "Overview: At Home on the Cutting Edge," 153-154.

⁷⁹ Haggins and Lotz, "Overview: At Home on the Cutting Edge," 154.

⁸⁰ Christopher Connolly, "Eddie Murphy Leaves Home." *Rolling Stone* (1984), <http://www.rollingstone.com/tv/features/eddie-murphy-leaves-home-19840412>.

With *Delirious*, Robert Townsend argues that Murphy "definitely took the art form and raised the bar. He set a tone, and the rest of the comedians had to step up their game."⁸¹ Chris Rock commented that it had led to his inspiration, "a combination of two great things: great material and great a great performance. I had never seen anything like it."⁸² Murphy's success on HBO signaled the new territory to which African-American comedians would have more creative digression and creativity in cable television, where comedians such as Chris Rock and Dave Chappelle would be inspired.

In the world of television, Eddie Murphy took the throne of African American comedy in the early 1980s. Amidst the political conservatism, Murphy became a breakout star. For Bambi Haggins, "His stardom was a product of the eighties- a time when progressive and regressive representations of blackness were intertwined in the rhetoric of Reagan America. In the days of trickle-down, greed-is-good aspirations to yuppiedom, truly contentious social critique did not play well in mainstream popular culture."⁸³ Raquel Gates argues "Eddie Murphy's skillful navigation of mainstream popular culture proved that African American humor could survive and even flourish in the midst of a politically conservative time when an emphasis on crossover appeal threatened to eradicate any meaningful representation of race on American television."⁸⁴ Through disguising his social commentary, she sees that Murphy discretely voiced a new African-American perspective

Both his progressive and regressive representations of blackness in television, however, were all a part of a larger transformation in African American comedy in analyzing the

⁸¹ Robert Towsend quoted by Chris Lee, "A 'Delirious' Comedy Turning Point." *The Los Angeles Times* (2009), <http://articles.latimes.com/2009/jun/15/entertainment/et-murphy15>.

⁸² Chris Rock quoted by Chris Lee, "A 'Delirious' Comedy Turning Point."

⁸³ Haggins, *Post Soul Nation*, 151.

⁸⁴ Raquel Gates, "Bringing the Black," 170.

programming before Murphy's entrance on *Saturday Night Live*. Richard Pryor agreed to work on *The Richard Pryor Show* due to his understanding of television as a social and political tool, and looked to use it as a means of addressing society for change. He believed that he could use a primarily commercial enterprise to market a different agenda.⁸⁵ Similarly, though often subject to criticism, the programs of Norman Lear and Bud Yorkin were intended with the hopes of progressive social change through their programming.

While *The Flip Wilson Show* rarely confronted social issues and was not particularly threatening, it brought African American comedy to television for similar reasons in less direct ways. Its use for comedy for social and political change, however, was evident in its introduction of black and urban black culture in mainstream television, and more importantly through featuring many African American entertainers on his show, using his position to provide more opportunities to blacks in mainstream venues.⁸⁶

On the surface, young Murphy had no such agenda. His aspirations, more notably, were towards a successful career and fame. Former *SNL* talent coordinator Neil Levy's memories of young Murphy on the set can best summarize how Murphy used television:

...sitting in the bathroom [and] you could see in pencil on the wall, "Eddie Murphy No. 1." And as he got famous, it got bigger. He put it in bigger writing and switched from pencil to pen. He told him when he was nineteen that he was going to be a millionaire before he was twenty-one... I never met anybody so sure that once he got his foot in the door he was going all the way⁸⁷.

Murphy's comedic work were reflective of more than ambition and fame. Through his comedy, he sought to question and alter traditional representations and expectations of African-

⁸⁵ Acham, *Revolution Televised*, 155.

⁸⁶ Acham, *Revolution Televised*, 69.

⁸⁷ Neil Levy, quoted in *Live From New York*, 239.

Americans on comedy. With his growing fame, he continuously demanded more creative control, beginning on *Saturday Night Live* and extending through film. Though his fame and success, he could take control of African American humor in ways that few programs had previously. As he increasingly grew more famous, his humor became more critical, and, ultimately, he used his success to bring that satire to a larger audience. The more famous and successful he became, the less he attempted to fit in with mainstream expectations. His ambition was more than fame, it was becoming a comedian who could defy the constraints and expectation of mainstream studios and audiences.

ii. Television in the Aftermath

When Eddie Murphy left television in 1984 to film *Beverly Hills Cop*, it would seem like his talent and contributions had little immediate impact on African American comedy in television. Following his ascendancy to A-list film star, Murphy When during the 1980s, few other comedy programs featured blacks. Among those programs include *Webster* and *The Cosby Show*. *Webster* (like the program of the 70s, *Diff'rent Strokes*) was a series featuring a young black boy adopted by a white family. Whereas the humor surrounding *Diff'rent Strokes* focused around race and culture, race problems seemed to have vanished for young Webster, aligning with the 1980s conservative tone.⁸⁸ Webster, played by Emmanuel Lewis, stood about 40 inches tall at 12 years old, throughout the show appearing as a young boy, who became an instant, albeit, short term celebrity with the show. More notable than *Webster*'s avoidance of race was the instant celebrity of its tiny star, with an updated pickanniny appeal for white audiences. Although black audiences applauded Lewis's acting abilities, African American parents felt as

⁸⁸ Bogle, *Prime Time Blues*.

though Webster projected the idea that “whenever advice and comfort were needed, both would be dispensed by knowledgeable whites.”⁸⁹

Premiering in 1984, *The Cosby Show* was the most successful 1980s black-oriented series. It was situated within an affluent African-American community featuring almost exclusively African-American cast members. Comedian Bill Cosby transitioned his stand up persona into Cliff Huxtable, a doctor, the patriarch of a large middle-class family. His transition from stand up to television is evident from the pilot, where he lectures his adolescent son Theo on the importance of good grades, discussing its necessity in college admissions. His familiar humor first emerges as he adult explains finances with Theo. He attempts to teach his son through monopoly money, snatching bills for every set of bills. What seems like a stereotypical father-son moment begins as Theo states, “maybe you can accept me and love me anyway, because I’m your son,” which Cosby replies, “that’s the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard!”

Bogle credits the show, as for television viewers, the show presented a hilarious presentation of an African American family. Through *The Cosby Show*, Cosby was “able to incorporate African Americans into the type of the fundamental experiences thought to be exclusively of white America⁹⁰.” Its positive presentation of African American life, however, was not without critics. Many critics have argued that the Huxtable family was an inauthentic representation among many African Americans in the 1980s. In her essay “Faking the Funk” Wendy Alexia Roundtree argues that the show was “creating the false impression that African Americans had achieved ‘the dream’” a had subsequently overcome racism. This idea, she argues, “could have been used by neo-conservatives and others who wanted to eliminate the

⁸⁹ Bogle, *Prime Time Blues*.

⁹⁰ Bogle, *Prime Time Blues*.

current welfare system.”⁹¹ *The Cosby Show*, compared to Murphy’s work, presented a contrasting image of African-American comedy. Aspiring African-American comedians, Murphy’s achievements would be a greater source of inspiration and opportunities.

The Wayans brothers increasingly became influential from the 1980s onward in television and film. In 1990, Keenan would collaborate with his brother Damon to produce the successful, yet controversial, sketch-comedy television series *In Living Color*. Inspired by *Saturday Night Live*, *In Living Color* presented an irreverent comedy show with a mostly black cast, including inventive, fast-moving, and often outrageous material. African American icons, who were previously “untouchable” were often the subject of their jokes. Racial misconceptions were often exaggerated and parodied throughout their sketches.⁹²

Skits about Anton, a homeless man, Handi-Man, an action hero with cerebral palsy, and Fire Marshal Bill, a whacky burn victim, seemed to cast cruel and insensitive comments on serious American problems for some viewers. Their often negative depictions of women (as evidenced through Jamie Foxx dressed in drag as the ugly, buck-toothed Wanda Wayne) and homosexuals through the “Men on Film,” sketches about two gay movie critics were among the topics of debate. More vividly, the show was the source of criticism for their stereotypical depiction of African Americans. Skits such as the “Homeboy Shopping Network,” with two black men attempting to sell stolen items from the back of a truck, were what some critics saw as the perpetuation stereotype of the lazy, incompetent African-American, taken from *Amos n Andy* and Steppin Fetchit and situated within the 90s.

⁹¹ Wendy Alexia Rountree, “Faking the Funk: A Journey Towards Authentic Blackness,” in *Authentic Blackness – “Real” Blackness*, edited by Martin Japtok and Rafiki Jenkins (New York: Peter Lang, 2001).

⁹² Bogle, *Prime Time Blues*.

There was a greater attempt for them to take these stereotypes, reclaim them, and demonstrate the ways of their absurdity through exaggeration as a means of showing the ludicrous nature of these depictions. The show took exaggerations of stereotypes to a new level with their show. Throughout *Saturday Night Live*, Murphy had played with this humor, playing with stereotypes and presenting them ironically to white audiences. The popularity of this humor allowed for the Wayans Brothers a program that existed entirely of this humor for African-American audiences. *In Living Color* was notable example of the way in which a multicultural show could function. This show was a comedy program that was ran, created and marketed towards African Americans. More notably, it was remarkable in the ways in which it pushed envelopes and provided uncensored sketch comedy on television. Music, dancing, and fashion were mixed with their social commentary in a successful manner.

From 1992 to 1997, Russell Simmons produced *Def Comedy Jam* on HBO. *Def Comedy Jam*, presented an edgy-confrontational comedic stand-up programing. HBO allowed for uncensored stand0up comedy to appear on television. An example of this uncensored humor is in Martin Lawrence's "Jail Routine," where he begins "There isn't a black person in here that don't know nobody in jail, because that's bullshit!" He then continues in through describing his anxieties of getting arrested and being raped in jail. The program provided a diverse number of African American comedians to take their traditionally too raunchy material and share it across the small screen. *Def Comedy Jam* opened the floodgates for African-American comedians, allowing for multiple comedians, with multiple styles, access to a larger audience.

Russell Simmons spoke out in defense of the program, arguing that the comedy is "similar to rap music in giving a voice to young African-Americans to express their rage, thoughts and observations about growing up black," claiming that the comedians on their shows

are voicing their unfiltered values and attitudes. In an interview, he argued, “These guys are expressing their real values and attitudes... If they are not as positive as you would like them you have to listen to them and understand them.”⁹³ *Def Jam Comedy* was able to produce the amount of African Americans as a result of Murphy’s stand up work. The popularity of *Delirious* and *Raw* created a demand for African American comedy and enabled HBO to create a show exclusively for this purpose.

Chris Rock

Although he is of the same generation as Eddie Murphy, he embodies different traditions within African American humor and did not come into prominence until the 1990s. After Murphy discovered a young Chris Rock performing stand up on the New York Comedy strip, Murphy secured an opportunity for him on HBO’s *Uptown Comedy Express* in 1987 and a small role in his film *Beverly Hills Cop II*. Eventually, growing popularity and the increase in demand for black comedy would bring him two his first two HBO comedy specials *Big Ass Jokes* (1994) and *Bring the Pain* (1996). The success of these two stand-up routines would ultimately contribute to widespread popularity that provided a transition into his television programming.

HBO Specials: *Big Ass Jokes* and *Bring the Pain*

Big Ass Jokes, a thirty minute stand-up performance, was Chris Rock’s first HBO comedy special. From his entrance, he reflects both a continuation and diversion from Murphy’s comedic persona of the 1980s. As he paces the stage while the crowd roars, he evokes that same rock-concert like feeling that was present in Murphy’s *Raw* and *Delirious*.

⁹³Russel Simmons as quoted by Greg Braxton, "LAUGHZ N THE HOOD : Television: A Showcase for Unknown Black Comics, 'Russell Simmons' Def Comedy Jam' Begins Its Second Season Friday on HBO," *The Los Angeles Times* (1992).

After establishing his rapport with the audience, he immediately begins his routine with a series of jokes addressing interracial dating. He begins first describing his recent successes, telling the audience, “So you know what’s next? White girl... Cannot be a successful black man without a white girl. You can’t even buy a mansion without a white girl!” He then continues into more critical material, “you know what’s funny, if you’re black, and you go out with a white girl, everything that goes wrong in your life people blame it on the white girl... ‘Yo man I heard Chris got hit by a bus, fuckin around with a white girl!’” His jokes deal not only with white women, but with black women dating black men. When analyzing figure skater Debbie Thomas’s marriage to a white man, he asks, “Damn Debbie, what do I have to do to get with you?” But imitating a figure skater acknowledges, “I bet she didn’t meet a lot of brothers on the ice.”⁹⁴

The subject of interracial dating (and its use as a status symbol) is used in Rock’s opening bit to play with the ideas and perspectives among the black community. While it may appear he is airing “dirty laundry” to nonblack audiences, he uses his jokes to place a critique on the verbose commentary on the multiple stances on the issue.⁹⁵ This segment, moreover, Rock provides a means of transitioning into deeper critical and observational material.

He reflected:

I do a lot of racial humor. You know why? I was bused to school when I was a kid... You supposed to get bused to school to go to better schools in a better neighborhood. I got bused to school in a poor white neighborhood—a neighborhood worse than the one I lived in... [My white classmates] hated by guts because my family had more money than them. That’s when I learned my lesson, boy there is nothing that a white man with a penny hates more than a nigger with a nickel.

⁹⁴ Chris Rock, *Big Ass Jokes*.

⁹⁵ Haggins, *Laughing Mad*, 78.

Here, Rocks separates his comedic persona and the nature of his comedy from Eddie Murphy. Though of the same generation, he experienced black American from a remarkably different viewpoint. From a young age, he was able to understand contemporary race and class complexities through his experiences. His comedy takes those personal experiences and uses them as a teaching tool to his nonblack audience members. While *Big Ass Jokes* is not as politicized as his later work, he is able to employ a critical racial humor, showcasing the ideas, opinions, and critiques within his jokes. His stand up is presented without much theatrics and physicality (as opposed to Murphy), and he speaks of issues and dilemmas a nonblack audience may otherwise be uninformed about.

Many of these ideas continued with Rock's second stand-up special, (which was extended to an hour). *Bring the Pain* begins with a montage of comedy albums beginning with Dick Gregory, and continuing with Flip Wilson, Richard Pryor, Steve Martin, Pigmeat Martin, Woody Allen, and Eddie Murphy. This montage not only pays homage to his influences, who were both black and white, but sets the stage for Rock's performance and persona, as a broadening the American comedic tradition. Within his first comedy set, he attempts to connect with his Washington D.C audience. He greets D.C "the home of the million man march," continuing to a bit about the event and acknowledging the influential black leaders who attended. "Marion Barry! At the Million Man March! How'd he get a ticket? It was a day of positivity!" Then ending with the punchline, "You know what that means? Even in our finest hour we had a crackhead on stage!" He asserts a sense of fearlessness with his audiences mixed reception, "Boo if you want... Ya know I'm right!"

Within his standup work, Bambi Haggins argues “Rock directly challenges notion of black identity in ways that few black comics have attempted.”⁹⁶ Like Dick Gregory, Rock vividly voices his views of the politicized aspect of race relations. Like Pryor, he mines the characters and stories of multiple black communities to comment on larger political issues.⁹⁷ In one joke bit, he asses the merits of legalizing crack so his friend’s mothers have “something to brag about.” He continues to mimic them, “Johnny got his own crack house! And every day I drive by and say, ‘That’s by baby’s crack house over there!’” Through imitations of these mothers, Rock addresses the crack epidemic and the ways in which it disproportionately affects the African American community. This joke set uses this humor as an introduction to his assentation that “the war on drugs is bullshit. It’s just a way to get more motherfuckers in jail.” Like Gregory he unambiguously states his views regarding the politicized sphere of race relations.

Eventually, he would bring his stand talents into the format of late night variety television world with *The Chris Rock Show* from 1997-2000. The show used classic hip-hop legend Grandmaster flash as the musical director, the show incorporating black humor, black music, insisting the show have a “youthful slant.” Like his stand up shows, *The Chris Rock Show* provided an African American perspective about current events. Each show opened with a comedy monologue, would continue with a taped sketch-comedy segment, with a celebrity interview, and ended with a guest performance.

⁹⁶ Haggins, *Laughing Mad*, 82.

⁹⁷ Haggings, *Laughing Mad*.

His confrontational humor took a new form through these on-the-street interviews, where he would go into different communities to ask ordinary citizens topical questions. It is within these interviews that he employed much of the confrontational humor that Murphy had fashioned. Rock selects particular interview locations and people as a means of making a broader statement in itself. After the anniversary of Princess Diana's death, he assess the emotional state of American's through conducting interviews in Harlem. He highlights the racial differences and attitudes, and satirizes the extensive fascination of mainstream media with the event. In another interview, he addressed the idea that no slain African American had a street in a white neighborhood, and goes into Howard Beach (a Queens area infamous for a 1986 hate crime incident) to ask their thoughts on a "Tupac Shakur Boulevard." Through these segments, he uses his friendly demeanor, spontaneous questions, and improvisation skills to both show irony and provide laughter.

In other segments, Rock delves into more serious issues, contrasting the views of blacks and non-blacks. After the NAACP called for a boycott of South Carolina for their continued displays of the Confederate Flag in state buildings, he goes to Charleston himself to investigate. Going into Charleston, he shows both the opinions on the Confederate flag of both African Americans and white south Carolinians. His digression from Murphy is clear, through his reactions and maintaining serious conversation the first half bringing uncomfortable laughter and demonstrating the racist attitudes that still prevail. Rock attempts to balance the biting critique with playful humor, suggesting alternative flags, including one featuring stars of the WB, one with "Malcolm" over the Confederate "X" and one that simply says "South Carolina is OKKK." These interviews, (as well as his interviews with celebrities) shared an overly blunt and unpredictable questioning style. These segments bluntly dealt with issues such as racism,

poverty, and race while taking a notably black perspective that forced the audience to laugh at the interviewees on screen and deal with such issues.⁹⁸

⁹⁸ HBO Reader

“There’s a New Sherriff in Town:” African-American Comedy in Film

To understand Murphy’s ascendancy in the black comedic tradition, it is necessary to examine his comedic predecessor, Richard Pryor, and his film career. Following a string of small roles, Pryor finally achieved fame in his supporting role beside Gene Wilder in the 1976 film *Silver Streak*. *Silver Streak* reflected the “biracial buddy format,” which would be a dominant mode of featuring African Americans upon Murphy’s entrance to film in the 1980s. Bing Crosby and Louis Armstrong, Jack Benny and Eddie “Rochester” Anderson, Frank Sinatra and Sammy Davis Jr were all examples from Hollywood’s history of interracial-buddy duos accepted by white audience. Sidney Poitier boosted his acting career and played a significant role in establishing the biracial buddy film genre in *The Defiant Ones* (1958) and *In the Heat of the Night* (1967).⁹⁹

Richard Pryor’s role in *Silver Streak* extended the typical format of this biracial buddy narrative. In this narrative, black and white protagonist are forced into partnership under circumstances beyond their control, causing friction that exposes their prejudices rooted in stereotypes. The two must overcome those differences to defeat an enemy who challenges America’s color-blind order based on individual merits.¹⁰⁰ In *Silver Streak*, Pryor plays a criminal in police custody whose freedom is dependent on the exoneration of his white buddy (Gene Wilder) from murder charges. His character is not introduced until halfway through the film, demonstrating that the film is from Wilder’s perspective, with Pryor in the supporting

⁹⁹ Jordan, *Movies and the Reagan Presidency*.

¹⁰⁰ Jordan, *Movies and the Reagan Presidency*.

“sidekick” role. His success within the film, however, allowed him larger roles in film, and by the late 1970s, he was considered to be the most valued black actor in film.

In examining Pryor’s roles in *Greased Lightning*, *Which Way is Up*, and *Blue Collar*, Donald Bogle argues that Hollywood, “sought to domesticate him into an acceptable, middle-class fellow whose aims and ambitions are simple for a good decent life.”¹⁰¹ Although Pryor’s edgy, racial humor was celebrated on the stand-up stage, it was still too threatening for mass audiences accustomed to conventional Hollywood narratives. These cinematic narratives denied him the creative control and unfiltered access he had in stand-up. Hollywood, thus, sought to profit from Pryor’s popularity, while cleaning up his content. Moreover, while Richard Pryor was granted opportunities as an actor, his roles still indicated that African-American comedy had yet to be given a proper space in Hollywood.

Although African Americans had experienced increasing opportunities through the Blaxploitation era of the 1970s, by the 1980s, film had retreated to producing films featuring mainly whites, with the appearance of A-list crossover celebrities in supporting or marginal roles. As the era of black power and black pride had come to an end, Hollywood studios believed that this formula was more practical in marketing to both white and blacks, believing whites were less likely to go to a film featuring primarily African-Americans. This was presented through the “Biracial Buddy Format.” This chapter takes a critical analysis of Murphy's work within these formats to demonstrate how Murphy used African-American comedy to break out of traditional "biracial buddy" constraints, making long-lasting changes in African-American comedy and its cinematic representations.

¹⁰¹ Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mammies, Mulattoes, & Bucks*, 264.

Early Buddy Films: *48 Hrs. and Trading Places*

In *48 Hrs.*, Eddie Murphy plays Reggie Hammond, who gets a two-day pass from prison to help a hot tempered white police officer, Cates (Nick Nolte), catch a criminal, and his ex-partner. Hammond's cool, young, and savvy character immediately serves as a foil for Cates, and the two move from hurling verbal insults to physically fighting throughout the first half of the film. Cate's insults tend to be racially driven, (Calling him "Watermelon," among other things) while Hammond does not hesitate to talk back and is always prepared to play on the officers stereotyped and racist ideas, and insult his masculinity¹⁰². Murphy's portrayal the bold, assertive, and hip Reggie Hammond transplanted Murphy's comedic style and persona into Hollywood cinema.

For Ed Guerrero, the film "literalizes the aforementioned metaphor of the black image in protective custody of white authority."¹⁰³ Throughout the film, however, Murphy's comedic persona and use of the African American comedic tradition attempts to challenge that metaphor. The film first sees Murphy as Hammond in his prison cell, belting a falsetto "Roxanne" in a lounge chair with shades on. The initial image of Hammond presents him as a stereotypical "coon;" carefree, happy, and unintelligent. Upon being temporarily released from prison, however, Hammond abandons his prison wear suit for a trendy Armani suit. Ultimately, the resolution of the film is dependent on Hammond returning to jail and sacrificing his freedom so Cates may keep his job. As the two argue, Murphy fires quick and humorous insults back at Cates racist remarks throughout the film.

But the fact that Murphy's Reggie never becomes enraged or truly angry greatly neutralizes the inherent racism. The attitude of the scriptwriter is that America is now hip

¹⁰² Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mammies, Mulattoes & Bucks* 282

¹⁰³ Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), Electronic.

and sophisticated enough not to be bothered by racist remarks. It's the perfect casual just-shrug-your-shoulders-and-say-no-to-racist-remarks attitude for the Reagan 1980s. 48 *Hrs.* makes racist jokes acceptable.¹⁰⁴

While the overall plot of the film is reflective of the constraints of the biracial buddy narrative, Murphy continuously uses his comedic talent to challenge these traditional representations. For example, in one scene, Cates forbids Murphy's character from joining him in interrogating a witness, handcuffing him to the car while he goes inside. When the witness, Luther, runs away from Cates, Reggie effortlessly tackles him by opening the car door. While still handcuffed, he snatches the gun and condescendingly greets him, "What's happening Luther? I'm sorry about the door man, did that hurt? It looked real painful when you slammed into it." Like his *Saturday Night Live* material, Murphy plays with traditional expectations of his role within the movie, reminding the audience that he was more than an obedient sidekick. Within this scene, Murphy employs the classic inversion and sly trickery of classic African-American comedy. He surprises both Luther and the Audience, demonstrating that he can defy their expectations as his role as the "loyal sidekick."

In the film's most famous scene, Reggie struts confidently into a redneck bar for an interrogation with a fake badge, clad in an Armani suit. He first approaches the bar and attempts friendly banter with the racist bartender (when the bartender suggests a "black Russian," Murphy wails in laughter, exclaiming, "That's a funny dude! I get it, because I'm black). He then switches attitudes completely, wreaking havoc on the bar, taking control and demanding information, proclaiming to one patron, "I'm your worst fucking nightmare, a nigger with a badge." While the scene appears to depict a reversal of black-white power relations that contradicts the racial order of the film, Ed Guerrero views it as "deceptive." Rather, he argues,

¹⁰⁴ Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mammies, Mulattoes & Bucks*, 282

the scene plays into a “paranoid logic” that blackness is to be feared and contained, as they would behave just as ruthless to whites as they have been historically treated if placed in a position of institutional authority.¹⁰⁵

As a comedian, however, Murphy possesses an awareness of these ideas and understandings, employing comedy as a means of satirizing them. After taking control of the bar, Murphy plays with the anxieties of the white audience. At the end of the scene, he takes the cowboy hat from the bartender and places it on his head, and tells him in an exaggerated voice, “you start runnin a respectable business, and I won’t have to come in and hassle you every night,” then announces to the bar, “I want the rest of you cowboys to know something. There’s a new sheriff in town!” As he ended this scene, he was making an announcement to both the bar and the audience in the film by poking fun at the traditional western macho character.

The following year, Murphy took on his next role as Billy Ray Valentine, a street hustler turned “buppie” in the screwball comedy, *Trading Places*. Two commodities brokers referred to as the Duke Brothers, (Ralph Bellamy and Don Ameche), have a gentlemen’s bet over a “nature versus nurture” dispute through a social experiment in reversing the two men’s fates.

Billy Ray is first introduced as a con man, who is pretending to be a blind, crippled veteran while begging for money on the street. When the police lift him up to reveal his legs, he proclaims “I can see! It’s a miracle! I have legs!” before darting away. His antics continue in the following scene while he is in jail, as he attempts to convince the much larger inmates he has street credibility, jumping around and demonstrating the karate that Bruce Lee supposedly taught him. These scenes reflect the ways in which the director allowed Murphy to demonstrate more of his comedic capabilities, as his high energy, largely physical comedy defines his Billy Ray

¹⁰⁵ Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*.

Valentine character. For Bogle, these scenes are representative of the ways in which the film uses him as “a highfalutin supporting player-the rowdy coon- there for gritty laughs.”¹⁰⁶ His work within these scenes does, however, have an important effect both upon his character’s development and in escalating the intensity of debate between the Duke Brothers. These scenes are juxtaposed with those featuring Louis Winthrop, (Akroyd), spoiled, uptight, young white commodities banker whose life has begins to be disrupted as part of the Dukes’ experiment. Valentine serves as a foil in the debate of “nature versus nurture” when evaluating their nephew, Winthrop.

The film attempts to suggest that with the proper influences, Valentine might be reformed into a more respectable and successful citizen. With the exaggerations in the beginning, however, Murphy makes fun of the debate entirely, suggesting that Valentine is product of regressive representations of African-Americans created by Hollywood. This representation allows for the ironic and satirical development of his character to follow. The Duke Brothers select Valentine as part of their gentlemen’s bet that is dependent on the results of their “social experiment.” They bail Valentine out of jail and take him into their home. When he first is introduced to his new surroundings with the Duke Brothers, Murphy sits cheerfully with the Duke Brothers in a suit and tie. He immediately switches from cheerful to challenging, taking items throughout the room, tossing a vase around “like a Harlem Globetrotter,” and throwing it to the ground. As he demanding asks, “Want me to break anything else?” he identifies his blackness, and humorously uses it as a means of challenging and attempting to outwit the two brothers.

He quickly adapts to the lifestyle and work ethic. The film lifts Murphy’s character out of the black community and into the culture of affluence that is dominated by white bankers.

¹⁰⁶ Bogle 284

Through the opportunity provided by two wealthy white strangers, he transforms immediately from a lazy, petty, and criminal into a hardworking, morally conscious businessman who ultimately rejects his African American peers.

In another scene, Murphy attempts to show off his new wealth to his black peers by inviting them over for a party. He increasingly grows frustrated with their antics and casts them off. While this scene appears to show the social and moral development of Murphy's character should be seen as ironic rather than literalized. He employs the exaggeration of the beginning of the film, but to demonstrate a polar personality to the Billy Ray Valentine in the beginning of the film, frantically cleaning up after partygoers, shouting tirelessly to them, "hey! That's a Persian rug! It's from Persia!" "Who has been putting out cloves on my floor?" and "hey, have you people ever heard of coasters?" Calling them, "a bunch of freeloaders acting like it was a god damned zoo."

Though the film was subject to mixed reviews at the time, it was Murphy who stood out for audiences. As a critic for the *Chicago Tribune* declared, *Trading Places* was "Murphy's film," and an indication that "he's going to be one of the hottest and most bankable properties in Hollywood for the next few years."¹⁰⁷ His roles in both *Trading Places* and *48 Hrs.* were both intended for Richard Pryor. Selecting Murphy, rather than Pryor for these big budget crossover films signified the industry's preference in the "type" of African American comedian they desired. Murphy's advancement within the comedy world was attributed to the way in which he worked within this highly antiquated narrative. While *Rolling Stone* went so far to declare that Murphy "wrote all his dialog for all his films,"¹⁰⁸ Murphy, more accurately,

¹⁰⁷ Gene Siskel, "Classic Comic Bits are Bigger and Better in 'Trading Places'," *Chicago Tribune* (1983), <http://search.proquest.com/docview/175887984?accountid=14637>.

¹⁰⁸ Connolly, "Eddie Murphy Leaves Home."

consistently altered and took control of the black dialect within scripts written by white writers. Within these movies, he took creative control to constantly improvise and command scenes.

1984 would mark Murphy's departure from the "buddy" role, as he was finally cast in the leading role of Axel Foley in the first installment of what would become *Beverly Hills Cop* series. His process in gaining this stardom was twofold: in *48 Hrs.*, Murphy demonstrated the ways in which his young, cocky, hip, black comedic persona translated well into the action-cop format, and in *Trading Places*, within the slapstick comedy. Most of the plot of *Trading Places* featured Billy Ray Valentine in separate scenes from his white costar, demonstrating the ways in which the black comedian could dominate a narrative, and be the more favorable character within the dynamic.

By the time he took this role, he not only had two wildly successful movies, but had ended his *SNL* career and starred in *Delirious*, signifying that he was arguably among the most famous young talents of the time, (black or white) allotting him to demand more control than any other black talents before. Murphy plays Axel Foley, a young Detroit police officer on thin ice with his boss for his reckless behavior. After the murder of his childhood friend, Mikey, he explicitly defies the demands of his boss to remain uninvolved in the case and travels to Beverly Hills (where Mikey was working) to seek justice.

Janet Maslin of *Newsweek* contended that while *Beverly Hills Cop* was no masterpiece, "it uses Murphy to maximum effect, at its best the movie is exactly as brazen, charming, and mercurial as Murphy himself, which is to say it is unimaginable without him."¹⁰⁹ Throughout the film, Foley constantly attempts to outsmart and outwit both the Beverly Hills Police department

¹⁰⁹ Janet Maslin, "Murphy in *Beverly Hills Cop*," *The New York Times* (1984), <http://www.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9E05E1D71438F936A35751C1A962948260>

and the murder suspect, reflecting a situation that “harks back to the slave outwitting a more powerful and presumably more knowledgeable master, or even the more venerable tradition of the black trickster.”¹¹⁰ Two officers, Andrew Bogomill (Ronny Cox) and Billy Tagwood (Judge Reinhold), are originally sent to keep an eye on Foley and make sure he does not get himself into any trouble, yet they find themselves struggling to keep up with Axel’s antics, from Foley placing a banana in the tailpipe of their car, to him leading the two officers on a trip to a strip club. In contrast to the buddy dynamic between Cates and Murphy in *48 Hrs.*, the young officer who ultimately realizes Axel’s capabilities, Billy (Judge Reinhold), is the source of comedic relief, depicted as dumb, incompetent and naïve.

Murphy returned for a sequel, *Beverly Hills Cop II*, in 1987. In the sequel, Rosewood and Taggart (as played by John Ashton, the original police chief who attempted to curtail Foley's efforts) call Axel Foley back to Beverly Hills to help stop a string of high end robberies with an increasingly corrupt Beverly Hills Police Department. In *Beverly Hills Cop II*, traditional "biracial buddy" roles are reversed further in the trio of Reinhold, Ashton, and Murphy. Whereas Reinhold and Ashton are constantly portrayed as naive, and the source of jokes, Murphy possesses the necessary computer and investigative skills that solves the crime.

Finally, Hollywood allowed Murphy to play the black comic action hero, yet he was still unable to reach the status of a romantic leading man. For Bambi Haggins, Axel Foley is yet another example of Murphy “repackaging the black stand-up action persona for mass consumption.”¹¹¹ Mainstream acceptance as a comic action hero was weakened by his inability to break other mainstream Hollywood boundaries into roles as a romantic leading man. In

¹¹⁰ Watkins, *On the Real Side*, 19.

¹¹¹ Haggins, *Laughing Mad*, 167.

Beverly Hills Cop, (as well as *Trading Places*), he is essentially desired. Moreover, *Beverly Hills Cop* was yet another example of Hollywood studios using Murphy's crossover appeal to project conservative mainstream ideas.

In these films, Hollywood depicts the black experience from a white point of view, with the filmmakers opting to isolating Murphy within a white cast and cultural setting, giving only limited insight to his background. According to Chris Jordan, "the narrative isolation of the black star in a largely white, often affluent cultural setting is an attempt to idealize America as a democratic consumer society."¹¹² Murphy uses this concept isolation however, and the constant obstacle of being "an out of townner," as a means of reworking blackness and subtly asserting statements about race through this running conflict. The fact that Murphy employs the themes of the black trickster suggests that Axel Foley does not need or desire the acceptance of those of Beverly Hills, as long as he catches the killer.

A writer for *The Chicago Tribune* analyzed Murphy's super-stardom:

What all Americans of all sorts detect in Murphy's humor is a man who is saying, that for him, race is no longer a burden or even an issue but something to be toyed with- another "fun" choice on the lifestyle menu that one may dig or not-as the mood takes you.¹¹³

Moreover, *Beverly Hills Cop* was yet another example of Hollywood studios using Murphy's crossover appeal to project conservative mainstream ideas. In all of these films, Hollywood views the black experience from a white point of view, isolating Murphy within a white cast and cultural setting and giving only limited insight into his background. Though Murphy had created a formula for a success of his own, he had yet to pave through opportunities for other aspiring comedians or actors. As Eddie Murphy rose to stardom during

¹¹² Jordan, *Movies and the Reagan Presidency*.

¹¹³ *Chicago Tribune* quoted in Sanello, *Eddie Murphy*, 87.

the first half of the 1980s, another African American comedian named Robert Townsend was growing increasingly frustrated. Their careers took wildly separate paths when Murphy first took his spot as “the black guy” on *Saturday Night Live* in 1980. He soon would realize that there were limited opportunities for “the black guy in Hollywood.” With the help of fellow African American comedians such as Keenan Wayans, he decided to make his own film with a budget of only \$200,000. In 1987, he wrote, produced, directed, and starred in the above referenced film, *Hollywood Shuffle*, which Townsend crafted as a semi-autobiographical story that heavily satirized the ways in which blacks were still marginalized and stereotyped on film and television.

At its core, *Hollywood Shuffle* is an episodic comedy, told through a series of vignettes that explores Bobby’s struggles while juggling his desire to work in the industry without sacrificing his dignity and cultural responsibility as an African American. Townsend created a satirical film that was comparable to a black protest novel in educating” the nation about the injustices done to blacks through the commercial film industry. Bobby Taylor hopes to finally make his big break in the film in “Jive time Jimmy’s Revenge,” playing a stereotypical “jive” character. While in line for his audition the actor next to him attempts to convince him to back out. He reminds him that this role is part of a tradition of a “white man’s stereotyping” of blacks, that “only an Uncle Tom would do this... they’re just looking for someone to sell out.” Nevertheless, at the end of the conversation, the aspiring actor jumps up enthusiastically when it comes his turn to audition. Through this scene, in combination with the scene that follows, the film uses the “humor of absurdity to demonstrate a historical dilemma of black comedians that has occurred throughout the twentieth century. Later, Taylor advertises “The Hollywood Black Acting School,” as a highly articulate British man playing a slave butler. At the “Hollywood Black Acting School”, they teach “Jive talk 101” how to “walk black.”

These scenes use a traditional African American comedic tool, the “humor of absurdity.” The humor of absurdity, as indicated by Lawrence Levine, employs inversion, and “worked through a straight-faced assumption of the rationality of the system and the belief structure upon which it rested.” The ludicrousness of “the white man’s puffery and the black man’s situation” was exposed by “accepting them with complete and faithful literalness.” Among the oldest institutions questioned through this humor included black jokes about segregation. The humor of absurdity unveils stereotypes that still existed in Hollywood in the 1980s. As the white instructors teach them the stereotypical roles, it unveils the white studios’ racist assumptions about African-American social roles.

In another sequence, Bobby receives a call from his agent, where he learns that at the callback, the studio is looking for “an Eddie Murphy-Type.” Lined up for the audition are countless men dressed like Eddie Murphy and impersonating him. Although Murphy’s comedic style inspired many, and produced the “black comedy boom,” it demonstrated how difficult it was to find success in his shadow. The studios wanted his “crossover appeal,” his body movements, his nature and mannerisms. In part, this nightmare satirizes Hollywood and white studio’s infatuation with Murphy, and their implication of Murphy as the new black A-lister.

The film ends with Taylor filming a commercial designed to recruit individuals to be mail carriers for the US Postal Service. Following the script for the commercial, Taylor ironically proclaims, “I deliver people’s dreams, and more importantly I have the respect and admiration of the entire community.” This unveils his sense of duty as a comedian, and foreshadows the fate of comedy in the future.

It was 1988’s *Coming to America* that would ultimately solidify black comedy within film. The film tells the story of Prince Akeem Joffer, (Murphy) wealthy royalty from the African

nation of Zamuda. Upon his 21st birthday, he yearns for an experience beyond his sheltered lifestyle, and seeks to find a woman (his Queen) in Queens, New York with his loyal personal aid, Semmi. (Arsenio Hall) From *48 Hrs.* to *Beverly Hills Cop*, Murphy transitioned the black comedian in film from being a secondary character in the “buddy” dynamic to the main character. In *Coming to America*, Murphy went one step further, as he had a significant portion of the film’s characters played by either himself or his co-star Arsenio Hall. For Murphy, these roles include Clarence, an elderly barbershop owner, Randy, an old Jewish man in the barber shop, and Randy Wilson, the singer in the band “Sexual Chocolate.” Arsenio Hall also plays Reverend Brown, Morris, a barber, and an ugly woman in a bar.

These scenes throughout the film take the diverse African American humor, previously utilized by Richard Pryor and by the writers of *The Flip Wilson Show*, and employ them in a medium, film, that had previously not been a vehicle for this type of humor. The barber shop scenes, the old African American men and Jewish man comically banter back and forth, in the first one debating Muhammad Ali’s name change.

This film brought the traditional humor that emanated from the black community, from house parties, barber shops, and porches¹¹⁴. Within the narrative of the film, as well within these scenes, the film places this humor within a literal spot of its existence. Their banter incorporates more assertive satirical depictions of African Americans and their perceptions to outsiders, and to critique discussions within the black community. Within the comedic tradition, “The outlandish story or tall tale is a central part of black American comedy (as it is among other ethnic or folk traditions¹¹⁵.” These stories were prominent in the barbershop scenes, as the men

¹¹⁴ Watkins, *On the Real Side*.

¹¹⁵ Watkins, *On the Real Side*, 23.

vocalize their opinions about who the “greatest boxer of all time” was, with exaggerations of Joe Louis being over 100 years old, to the barber knowing Frank Sinatra.

That humor is also carried out when they go to “black awareness week” in an attempt to find a woman. There, Arsenio Hall plays Reverend Brown. Here, it seems to allude to Reverend LeRoy of Flip Wilsons “Church of What’s Happenin Now” sketches. In that same time, Murphy plays the lead singer of “sexual chocolate.” Whereas his characters may have been criticized in *Saturday Night Live*, the film not only extends this tradition to the cinema, but places these characters within context of the black community, by also focusing the humor in the various responses (many unamused) within the congregation.

Murphy and Hall focused most of the comedic characters in these other roles, while Akeem resented an unprecedented character development in an African American role. In attempting to win the love interest of Lisa, the film uses comedic moments to explore class relations among African Americans. This is embodied through Akeem (pretending to be a poor student) Lisa’s middle class status, with her humorously social-climbing father, and Lisa’s wealthy, yet shallow, boyfriend, whose family is wealthy through the fictitious “soul glo” products.

“The film, and Murphy’s creative input, does represent the potential and the promise for a more forceful black presence in Hollywood. Moreover, *Coming to America*, (along with *Hollywood Shuffle*) mark the emergence of the ‘black pack’ in Hollywood” in which “race, genre, and history” are at play. (Haggins 108)

In the film industry, emergence of these comedians, coupled with Murphy bringing in his talent and popularity in *Coming to America* spurred a new series of comedies in film under the creative control of Africans. Towards the end of the 1980s, Murphy did increasingly begin to

pave out opportunities for black comedians, however, it his fame, coupled with the film's depiction of blackness (and incorporation of African American actors) ushered in both opportunities and inspiration for future generations.

It also signaled the possibilities of African American's taking creative control within films. In 1989, Murphy was given his first opportunity to direct with the film *Harlem Nights*. The story, set in the 1930s, pays homage to the gangster genre and the Harlem Renaissance, but more importantly, to the African American comedians who inspired Murphy, casting Richard Pryor and Redd Foxx. In the film industry, emergence of these comedians, coupled with Murphy bringing in his talent and popularity in *Coming to America* spurred a new series of comedies in film under the creative control of Africans. Towards the end of the 1980s, Murphy did increasingly begin to pave out opportunities for black comedians, however, it his fame, coupled with the film's depiction of blackness (and incorporation of African American actors) ushered in both opportunities and inspiration for future generations.

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While the film quality was significantly lower than some of Murphy's blockbuster movies, it pioneered the emergence of the African American comedy genre that would develop in the following decade, with African American directors. One such director was Reginald Hudlin, who, as a student at Harvard, directed an award winning short film titled "House Party." In 1990, he turned that short film into a feature length film of the same name, starring the rap duo Kid n' Play. The two are high school students, Play, throwing a party while his parents are out of town, and a grounded Kid sneaks out to attend. While the film had no profound messages, it follows the two through their wild adventures, school bullies, struggles in romance. While teen-comedy had increasingly become a plot of the era, it almost always featured middle-class suburban whites. In *House Party*, however, Hudlin incorporated both African American comedians, (from Robin Harris to Martin Lawrence) and had the rare portrayal of African American's as average teenagers, a rarity in cinema¹¹⁶.

More notably, the film presents a non-stereotypical depiction of the "black neighborhood," replacing the urban ghetto with teenagers with families who live in houses and often drive stylish cars. As the *Chicago Tribune's* Mark Caro noted in his review of the film, however, "this is not Cosbyland," as the young black director "celebrates the liveliness of young black culture, infusing the dialogue with some rap lingo, providing a hip hop soundtrack and capturing the teens' caution-to-the-wind energy in lively party sequences¹¹⁷." Caro further compared Hudlin's work and realistic portrayal of youth to the famed filmmaker John Hughes. (Of *The Breakfast Club*, *Ferris Bueller*, and *Sixteen Candles* fame).

¹¹⁶ Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mammies, Mulattoes & Bucks*.

¹¹⁷ Mark Caro, 'House Party' Full of the Energy of Young Black Culture,' *Chicago Tribune* (1990).

Murphy's significant box office success enabled him to create comedies with African American creative control and centered towards those audiences, thus, extended into the genre of the "youth-comedy," that had often ignored African American perspectives. This was possible not only as a result of the changes in film, but in the growth and popularity of hip-hop at the time. *House Party* continued this genre in its series of films to continue, with *House Party 2* in 1991, and *House Party 3* in 1994.

Another popular series to emerge out of this era began with the film *Friday* in 1995, the debut film of the young African American Director F. Gary Gray. Starring rapper Ice Cube and comedian Chris Tucker, the film lacked a directly identifiable plot, but was filled with humor, and the *Barbershop* series. These films would establish African-American comedy as substantial subgenre in American comedy film.

Conclusion

The 1980s for African-Americans could be characterized by its regressive conservative culture that worked to curb African-America progress. During that same time, however, the African-American comedy became a solidified genre in television and film through the popularity of Eddie Murphy's works. While Eddie Murphy was not the only relevant African American comedian of the decade he was undoubtedly the most famous. Moreover, his work can be viewed as a reflection in the growing changes in the mainstream representation of comedy for African-Americans. For Darryl Littleton's book, *Black Comedians on Black Comedy*, Eddie Murphy summarized his influence during this era:

Before I came out you had Richard [Pryor] and Bill Cosby and Flip Wilson and Redd Foxx and a handful of people. And after I came out it was just a fuckin' explosion of comics. So because I was so young it made the art form accessible to a lot of people, a lot of young people was like, 'Hey, yo- I can do that shit. That nigga's the same as me.' That's why you see these missions of niggas telling jokes now.¹¹⁸

From *Saturday Night Live*, Murphy's performance strategies created a means of mainstream accessibility for both his audience and for comedians. Whereas his predecessor's comedic talents had largely been shaped by the African-American community and personal experiences, Eddie Murphy placed that humor within the general tradition of American comedy. He was not only influenced and shaped by comedians such as Richard Pryor and Bill Cosby, but by Jewish comedians, such as Lenny Bruce, comedies such as *The Love Boat* and *I Love Lucy*, and by non-comedic performers, such as Elvis Presley. His comedic persona differed from those comedians before him in ways that brought forward the emergence of modern African-American

¹¹⁸ Eddie Murphy, as quoted in Littleton, *Why We Laugh*, 158.

comedy. His mainstream success and popularity would create a general demand for African-American comedians (and other comedians), as he revealed their wide profitability.

Harlem Nights signaled Murphy's career on the decline. While some of his films gained profitability, he would never duplicate the number of successful films and stand-up programs as he did in the 1980s. His career arc demonstrates the ways in which this thesis is not about Eddie Murphy himself. Rather, it is a study of Murphy's work as a greater part of the African-American comedic tradition. Comedians after Murphy, from Chris Rock to Dave Chappelle, benefit from Murphy's successes during the decade.

African-American comedians, like all comedians, are often shaped by their experiences. The experiences and upbringing of Eddie Murphy was dramatically different from those of comedians like Richard Pryor. In analyzing Murphy's material with his personal experiences, it is evident that his comedy was in fact critical. As Frank Sanello describes in Murphy's biography, while Murphy grew up in his Long Island neighborhood, he spent a substantial part of his childhood watching television.¹¹⁹ From television programs of the 1960s and 1970s, Murphy developed much of his ideas and understanding of race. From Buckwheat on *Saturday Night Live* to Billy Ray Valentine in *Trading Places*, he was using his comedy to analyze and criticize the mainstream representations of race, and the roles Hollywood expected him to play. By the end of his career, however, he created his own roles.

Today, there are more creative opportunities for African-American expression in comedy. However, many comedians still struggle for unfiltered expression and to break out of stereotypes. This is mainly because, as history has recalled, African American comedy becomes

¹¹⁹ Sanello, *Eddie Murphy*.

distorted and confused for nonblack audiences. Nevertheless, there are more opportunities for African American comedy, for African-American audiences in television and film. These opportunities allow these comedians to use their stage, television program, or film, to present the African-American perspective and assess contemporary issues.

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