

# SUBVERTING RACISM

WITH KEY & PEELE



## ABSTRACT

Examining the continued relevance of Fanon's seminal *Black Skin, White Masks*, and bell hooks' black feminist essays from *Killing Rage: Ending Racism*, we discuss Comedy Central's *Key & Peele* as a space of resistance to anti-black racism. The creators and stars of *Key & Peele* (*K&P*), Keegan-Michael Key and Jordan Peele, two biracial men, harness their identities to make their show accessible to both black and white television audiences.

We argue that far from presenting an overly harmonious post-racial vision of society, *Key & Peele* deploys sketch comedy as a powerful tool for decolonizing the minds of their black and white North American viewers. *Key & Peele* regularly challenges systems of oppression resulting from white supremacy through poignant satires of police brutality, white fear of black men, black machismo, thug sub-culture, black vernaculars, black-white interpersonal relationships, and white sub-cultures such as geek culture. The show also challenges patriarchy and heterosexism, unlike much of the struggle for black liberation, which has tended to reinforce these power structures, as hooks and others have noted.

Fanon's and hooks' explorations of psychoanalytics, self-esteem, and inferiority complexes are useful for examining the ways in which black and white people internalize racism, as well as analyzing how *Key & Peele* sketches subvert racist assumptions, problematize racial binaries, and celebrate intersectional black identities. This dramatization of multiple subjectivities and uncommonly represented, complex black identities also challenges existing approaches to black nationalism and Afrocentric thinking which tend to promote unitary notions of black identity.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. Can we consider *Key & Peele* a site of resistance to racism and racial binaries?
2. In what ways do *Key & Peele* sketches challenge (or reinforce) stereotypes about race and gender?

## RESULTS / ANALYSIS

Keegan-Michael Key and Jordan Peele inhabit a liminal space between two supposedly discrete worlds: white and black. In truth, their inspired-by-real-life sketches often reveal the intersections *and* contradictions between racial, gender, class and sexual identities. These become powerful examples for interrogating oppression, as well as for understanding the nuances in how it is reproduced.

For example, one sketch follows the biracial character of Jeff and his white girlfriend, who wants to enjoy the "best of both worlds" — the assertiveness of a black man and the gentility of a white man (S01E03). As a result, Jeff oscillates between performing stereotypical white and black behaviour. Sketches often poke fun at the perceived need for biracial people to self-modulate their identities to suit social situations, even symbolically bifurcating them on demand. The interrogation of authentic black identity and interpretation of blackness by white people, particularly regarding biracial people, is a core theme of the series.

### CONFRONTING EVERYDAY RACISM AND FEAR OF BLACK MEN

*Key & Peele* sketches reveal the mundane nature of racism and ubiquity of microaggressions. In one sketch, they satirize unprovoked fear of black people — and internalized racism — when one black man claims that he "almost totally just got mugged right now" after crossing another black man in the street (S01E01). In another sketch, white people provide unsolicited apologies for racism and slavery to two black men in a bar, until an honest bartender reveals that black people make him feel "uncomfortable" (S01E06).

At the same time, *K&P* exemplifies oppression on a lateral scale with comments that essentialize Africa and demonstrate fear and alienation rather than solidarity, e.g., "Africa is truly fucked up ... a fly-over continent" (S01E03). Other sketches demean ghettos, black people speaking Ebonics, the less educated, and "thugs." The ambiguity of whether we are supposed to laugh *with* or *at* these groups reveals class cleavages separating *K&P* from less privileged black groups.

### ANTI-BLACK VIOLENCE

From slavery to modern-day police brutality, *K&P* regularly addresses racist violence and the expendability of black lives head-on. Despite the decidedly unfunny nature of police brutality and racial profiling, *K&P* uses sketch comedy to spark dialogue on these issues.

In the closing sketch of the series, a young black man fantasizes about "Negrotown," a magical place in which "you can walk the street without getting stopped, harassed, or beat;" meanwhile, in the real world, he has been knocked unconscious by a police officer during a racially motivated stop and search (S05E11). A chilling parallel to the reality that birthed Black Lives Matter, this sketch points to the privilege of security enjoyed by white people and the institutionalized oppression of black communities.

### FEMINISMS & RACIALIZED MACHISMO

*K&P* uses satire to comment on social norms and expectations surrounding masculinity, including pressure on young black and latino men to appear "tough" or macho. In one sketch, a gang member's refusal to appear "soft" escalates from refusing to sit down at a meeting, to refusing medical treatment, to refusing to "go into the light" because "heaven is for pussies" (S03E03). The seriousness of gang violence is often undercut by absurd incidents or displays of vulnerability.

*K&P* also subverts uncomfortable realities of patriarchy and misogyny, including rape culture. In a parody of the song "Baby it's Cold Outside," a woman turns the tables on her date who is holding her captive (S02E08). Another sketch features a pirate anthem against rape culture, wage gaps, and objectifying women (S05E01). Other sketches offer public service announcements that teach men to be sensitive about menstruation (S05E02) and how to perform oral sex for women's pleasure (S03E06).

## RESULTS / ANALYSIS (CONTINUED)

### OBAMA'S ANGER TRANSLATOR: SUBVERTING RACIAL BINARIES?

*K&P*'s most widely-lauded character is Luther, who appears in a number of sketches to verbalize the anger Obama feels beneath his calm and collected exterior. Luther's extreme and cartoony fits of rage were a real-time comedic reminder of both how far American society has come and the continued sacrifice black people must make to be accepted by elites. Luther's sketches imply the need to remove black anger from the public sphere to maintain respectability. In doing so, they distill the core theme *K&P* appears to ruminate upon: the perceived threat of black anger and aggression, as well as the fluidity of biracial identity alongside a paradoxical division between black and white identities (what Fanon might call wearing the white mask of the oppressor).

## CONCLUSIONS



*K&P* offers us a snapshot of the legacy of slavery and colonization, and their evolution into today's complex and contradictory systems of institutional and everyday racism and white supremacy.

*K&P* makes an important contribution to breaking apart the myth of a post-racial society through highlighting both mundane and absurd experiences of racism. Its comedic tone and knack for handling nuance and microaggressions (as opposed to extreme fascist and right-wing elements) disarms white and black folks alike. It is also significant as a pedagogical tool, creating powerful opportunities for popular education about racism and anti-oppression.

## SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

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*They enjoy friendly banter whilst deconstructing representations of gender, race and systemic oppression in pop culture over a bottle of wine. Spoiler alert: they're big fans of Key and Peele.*