The Racial Rhetoric of Cuteness as Decorative Decorum

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THE RACIAL RHETORIC OF CUTENESS
AS DECORATIVE DECORUM

A Dissertation
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

Submitted in
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Requirements for the Degree
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Rhetorics, Communication,
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by
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ABSTRACT

This work looks at the trope of cuteness as a means of investigating the topological phenomena of race and public space, particularly in regards to African American rhetorical modes of visual and spatial practice. By introducing a sociological coinage known as the “teddy-bear effect,” this work explores how racialized expressions of cuteness give off the impression of a demurring civility surrounding the social expectations associated with the cultural norms of gender and class. As a preferred characteristic of information design and strategically deployed for the tactic of racialized passings in the face of increasingly regulated forms of “post-racial” gate-keeping and contemporary color politics, this research interrogates how racial cutification animates certain generational differences within African American communities while simultaneously shaping mainstream conceptualizations of what constitutes appropriate public decorum. Of specific concern is the cultural logic of “minoritization” on people of color as far as the techno-spatial processes of race and racism for how it serves as a means by which global citizenship continues to be fashioned, especially in American electoral politics, black women’s hair politics and identity, social networking, and multimodal pedagogy. Finally, this work asserts the ascendance of cuteness as a paradoxical sign of excess and miniaturization related to notions of multicultural authority and power and tracks the influence of this popularly imagined iconography of African Americanicity across the public sphere.
DEDICATION

Khembara, Menaba, and Khumra, any course of degrees I could ever receive would never be more intensive and precious than the education I’ve received in mothering you three. I lovingly dedicate this dissertation to you.
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

TITLE PAGE ................................................................................................................................. i
ABSTRACT ....................................................................................................................................... ii
DEDICATION ............................................................................................................................... iii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ............................................................................................................... iv
TABLE OF CONTENTS ........................................................................................................... v
LIST OF FIGURES ................................................................................................................... vii

CHAPTERS

I. “CUTE BLACK FOLK” AND WHY CUTENESS MATTERS ...................... 1
   Teddy Bears in Bear Country ................................................................. 1
   A/cute Turns .............................................................................. 5
   Rhetoric, Black Being, and Other Folk Ontologies ......................... 17
   Cuteness as Macrocosm ................................................................. 27

II. THE VISUAL RHETORIC OF CARL OWENS ............................. 31
    A Bio-Critical Account ................................................................. 31
    Regal Decor and Corporate Ideology ............................................ 38
    Rhetorical Cuteness and Racial Sentiments .................................. 42
    Taking the Edges Off ................................................................. 44

III. A CUTE BLACK WHITE HOUSE ............................................... 49
    Decorum Denied ........................................................................ 49
    Barackward: Between Awkward and Cool .................................. 55
    Michelle O: African American Womanhood and Iconic Style ....... 60
    Tastes Like Chocolate ................................................................. 66
IV. **AFRO AND AURA** .....................................................................................................................69

*Breakage and Rupture: Black Hair Care Politics* ........................................................................69

*Our 4Cs Ain’t Your CCCC* ........................................................................................................75

*Refraction/Reflection: Cinema Techne and Black Aura* ..............................................................79

*Reclaiming Outsourced Hair Care/Politics* ..................................................................................98

V. **CUTIFIED HIP-HOP AND MULTIMODAL COMPOSITION** ...........................................101

*Cutified Composition and Race Politics* ..................................................................................101

*De/composing Processes* ........................................................................................................110

*Toward De/minoritizing Pedagogies* .......................................................................................114

*Press Play: Workplacelessness and Multimodal Composition* ..................................................119

NOTES .............................................................................................................................................127

WORKS CITED ............................................................................................................................130
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.1 - Vintage Florida Tourism Postcard: Alligator Bait ................................20
Figure 1.2 - Nicki Minaj on June-July 2010 Cover of Vibe.................................26
Figure 2.1 - Owens (circa 1975) poses in front of “King Affonso I” .....................32
Figure 2.2 - Little Flower by Owens remains the best selling print .......................43
Figure 2.2 - The original Strong Black Men poster ............................................46
Figure 3.1 - In 1904 this political cartoon by William Allen Rodgers ..................51
Figure 3.2 - Barack Obama striking a classic “cool” pose ..................................56
Figure 3.3 - Official White House Portrait of Michelle Obama ...........................64
Figure 4.1 - This 1975 paperback version of Black No More ...............................71
CHAPTER ONE:
“CUTE BLACK FOLK” AND WHY CUTENESS MATTERS

“...cuteness creates a class of outcasts and mutations, a ready-made race of lovable inferiors whom both children and adults collect, patronize, and enslave in the protective concubinage of a vast harem of homely dolls and snugglesome misfits.”

Daniel Harris

Teddy Bears in Bear Country

A study was released in 2009 demonstrating the effects of “babyfaceness” in African American males, showing that “cuteness” actually functions as a preferred facial characteristic for the achievement of elite leadership in black men. Attracting national media headlines at the time of its announcement, this study also revealed how the effects of babyfaceness function oppositely for white men, among whom similar babyish physiognomy is negatively correlated with successful leadership. Coined the “teddy-bear effect,” this phenomenon demonstrates how successful African American leaders (aside from their obviously impressive credentials, competence, and diligence) actually possess “disarming mechanisms” or “physical, psychological, or behavioral traits that attenuate perceptions of threat by the dominant group” (Livingston 1229). Babyfaceness functions as a type of disarming mechanism that some African American men are shown to develop and make use of because they experience their “cuteness” as actually being helpful to “reduce the perception of ‘threat’ – whether threat is experienced as fear or intimidation due to an out-group individual possessing high levels of power (i.e., realistic threat)” (Livingston 1234). This bit of research serves as an empirical example of the quantifiably
predictable quality of “cuteness” as a racial construct.

Such strategies of racialized cuteness, researchers affirm, include “modifying style of speech or dress, adopting assimilationist ideologies, having a goofy appearance (e.g., big ears), smiling, or even ‘whistling Vivaldi’” (Livingston 1234). While, for many, the mention of “big ears” may immediately recall the image of Barack Obama, Livingston’s reference to classical music is a direct recitation of the frequently anthologized essay by Brent Staples, “Just Walk on By: Black Men and Public Space,” which focuses on the issue of how he had to develop coping tactics for the purpose of “tension-reducing” and for the general benefit of increasing whites’ comfort in the plural public sphere. Staples admits at the very end of his essay how “warbling bright, sunny selections from Vivaldi’s Four Seasons is [his] equivalent of the cowbell that hikers wear when they know they are in bear country” (365).

Possibly, teddy bears in bear country could allude to what Bryant Keith Alexander describes as “blackness under the traveling” or “a space of both empowerment and entrapment” (309) and serves as a perfect trope for cuteness as a racial-spatial phenomenon in the American public sphere. Appeals to “cuteness” as a convincing tool of rhetorical persuasion in American racial discourse are not uncommon. Through the work of the famous civil rights researcher team, Kenneth and Mamie Clark, an appeal of cuteness was explicitly put to work. The results of their series of black and white doll experiments have since filtered into the mainstream discourse like few others and have had a foremost impact on American public policy. The Clark studies demonstrate the twin phenomena of in-group derogation and out-group elevation among African
American children when it was discovered that many African American children often preferred white dolls over black and that, when asked to color in a picture to resemble their own skin tones, most black children were likely to choose a lighter shade than was actually realistic. Whereas children conferred “white” attributes such as “good” and “pretty” to the lighter color chosen, they often qualified “black” as “bad” and “ugly.” What this study showed was that black children have internalized the racism and stigma caused by the legacy of slavery, colonization and social segregation (Clark 347). Aside from the politics of color, the Clark studies become especially important in light of the empirical contributions made by the social sciences demonstrating the ways Americans have been socialized to interpret facial appearance and intelligence.

Foundationally, through the Clark’s groundbreaking research (not to mention the brilliant legal minds of the day, under the leading counsel of Thurgood Marshall – who would later become the first African American to serve on the high court) the US Supreme Court was persuaded to abolish segregation in public accommodations, thus making it the law of the land that separate commercial facilities and segregated public spaces constitute a fundamental social wrong. Marshall presented the Clark’s findings as his exhibit “A” in the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas case. Based on Marshall’s argument, the Warren Court determined that “to separate [school children] from others of similar age and qualifications solely because of their race generates a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely to ever be undone” (Alexander 896). Here was the uniquely cute moment that helped to reconstitute American society and is largely the reason as to why
this researcher writes her dissertation today.

While the prospects for social mobility through educational advancement have become more possible for so many black people today, there still remains a racial paradox that explains how the American populace could elect the first African American president while simultaneously acceding to a criminal justice system that incarcerates so many other African Americans so readily and disproportionately. This problem is especially troubling when it comes to capital punishment. Raymond Paternoster, for instance, contributed sociology research showing the likelihood of a defendant being sentenced to death is actually correlated to the color of the victim (447). Research determined, “the likelihood of facing a death penalty request in white and black victim homicides reveals considerable victim-based racial disparity. The probability that a death sentence will be sought is two and a half times greater in white victim than black victim homicides” (450). This report and other similar studies call attention to the abject inequality and racism built into the criminal justice system. It demonstrates with astounding obviousness that if a criminal punishment as severe as the death penalty can be issued on the basis of color, then our civil society is in profound political jeopardy. And if such arbitrary circumstances exist, then we might as well accept a rule where only drivers of illegally parked blue cars are ticketed while systematically exempting those with red vehicles. This and other discriminatory practices cannot be an acceptable course for any society.

Although the Paternoster study emerged in the 1980s and much has changed in American society since then, a 2006 study called “Looking Deathworthy,” led by Jennifer
L. Eberhardt, shows still another kind of racial disparity in death penalty sentencing continues to exist. This study demonstrates how a person is more likely to be murdered by the state depending upon the degree to which that criminal defendant has facial characteristics, which are perceived as stereotypically black (Eberhardt 385). This is to say, to the degree that one is perceived as having the appearance of dark skin, kinky hair, a wide nose and lips, etc., the more likely one is to be perceived as threatening or dangerous by the dominant society. This issue might at least partially explain the disproportionate numbers of black people populating America’s jails and prisons today. Overpopulation is especially important if considered in relationship to the “teddy-bear effect” as these issues both seem to represent different sides of the same coin (call one of these sides a “token,” if you will), and are reflective of the very real manifestations of race in our society. The fact that race is a factor in capital punishment clearly speaks to the exigency of why cute matters.

_A/cute Turns_

Of course, the word “cute” has become overburdened by its excessive deployment in the lexicon of everyday American usage, while also having become evacuated of all substantive meaning. Still, one suspects, a word so commonplace must surely be in such abundant use for more than simply describing things deemed “pretty” or “attractive.” To map out the full connotations of the word “cute,” a turn to the word’s etymology is helpful. “Cute” is an aphasis term derived from the word “acute” and belongs to a class of words like _void/avoid, vow/avow_, and _lone/alone_. Aphesis is when a vowel is deleted and the stress is shifted to the other syllable. Of course, the word “acute” is a term with
its basis in the logic of mathematics and has a double meaning. The first meaning is
temporally bound, in that it denotes an intense, though abbreviated period of onset like in
the instance of an acute illness, as opposed to one that is chronic. The second meaning is
a spatial term denoting a geometric angle of less than 90 degrees, as in the case of an
acute triangle, instead of an obtuse one. Sianne Ngai explains how through aphesis,
“acute” gives rise to a stunted, more diminutive version of itself, “making a word smaller,
more compact, or more cute results in an uncanny reversal, changing its meaning into its
exact opposite” (827).

The significance of the basic meaning of the terms “cute” and “acute” when
considered together reveals a topological frame that signifies much more than a visual
aesthetic. To phrase it differently, cute is much more extensive than mere visuality
because of its corollaries to obtuse notions of time and space relative to their periods and
degrees. Roland Barthes explicitly expounds on obtuse for constituting a third meaning
that etymologically indicates “that which is blunted, rounded in form” and inquires about
obtuse as being connected to the “blunting of… meaning, too clear, too violent” (Image
55). Barthes makes the assertion about the third meaning of obtuse:

An obtuse angle is greater than a right angle; *an obtuse angle of 100*... the
third meaning also seems to me greater than the pure, upright, secant, legal
perpendicular of the narrative, it seems to open the field of meaning
totally, that is infinitely… I even accept for the obtuse meaning the word’s
pejorative connotations: the obtuse meaning appears to extend outside
culture, knowledge, information; analytically, it has something derisory
about it: opening out into the infinity of language, it can come through as limited in the eyes of analytic reason; it belongs to the family of pun, buffoonery, useless expenditure. Indifferent to moral or aesthetic categories (the trivial, the futile, the false, the pastiche), it is on the side of the carnival. Obtuse is thus very suitable. (Image 55)

This meaning of obtuse demonstrated by Barthes indicates excessive varieties of culture that, for me, resonates with cute. In cuteness’s cultural relationship to the acute and the obtuse, the geometric logic of keen, sharply pointed spaces becomes reversed – opening up to an explosion of rounded emptiness. Obtuse is a spatial effect of cute because, though the forms and objects of cute may materialize through a perpendicular angularity, they are always rounded out in some way that becomes less precise. When this occurs through the cute, uprightness may exist, but not at the expense of comfort, ease, or simplicity. Obtuse – similarly to its cuddlier counterpart, then – denotes something about phenomena that are seen as impossibly excessive. Obtuseness could imply the annoyingly dense refusal to acknowledge the obvious existence of something that might be misunderstood for its awkward, difficult, or complex characteristics.

Cuteness, on the other hand, implicates the idea that the potentially clumsy and unwieldy can somehow be contained if only properly packaged for greater ease. This level of the obtuse echoes cuteness when it comes to contemporary styles of living, wherein cuteness usually implies something about propinquity and close quarters, neatly occupied by symmetrical, round edges. For instance, to describe a person’s apartment as “cute” is to pardon the potential for clutter. At times, cute is obtuse because it converges
with the affective pathos of empathetic content and is received as sentimental logos. Cuteness is a sentimental gesture toward the obtuse. Undeniably, sentimentality is seen as a misrepresentation of the world and devised to indulge our feelings of innocence, goodness, and vulnerability. Cute is closely connected to sentiment, which is almost always considered pure anathema in “high art” and considered among the most egregious commissions of aesthetic error. It is widely held that sentimentality as a mode of thought involves idealization for the sake of creating an oversimplified, distorted sense of self-gratification for audiences. Often, cute is the area where pathos spills into bathos.

These ideas become especially complicated when you consider them as a racial rhetoric mediating aesthetic regimes of commodity culture. According to literary theorist, Lori Merish, “[l]ike nineteenth-century sentimentalism, with which it is closely allied, cuteness is a highly conventionalized aesthetic, distinguishable both by its formal aesthetic features and the formalized emotional response it engenders” (187). Cute, for Merish, brings about an aesthetic reaction to family resemblance (186). An emotional response is produced on the part of the family unit to identify and recognize the cute. Feelings of empathy are thus naturalized as proprietary desire for an aspect of the self. A type of transference occurs from the young child, itself viewed as a commodified entity, to a logic of appropriate emotional response to the cutified object – as in the case of a favorite toy, for instance. “Drawing… from the Victorian sentimentalization of childhood, cuteness enacts… anxieties about the cultural ‘ownership’ of the child, and the racial identifications of children” (Merish 187). Through cute, the graphic novelist, James Kochalka finds an appreciation for a profoundly “unadulterated innocence,” akin to
purebeauty (94). Though some might worry that Kochalka’s view may be too naïve. Of course others, such as Sianne Ngai, do not believe cute should be considered an aesthetic of beauty as it seems more related to style – along the lines of appraisal concepts like zany, quaint, dainty, or dumpy (813-184). Under these circumstances, cute is a judgment of taste. Cute is not so much about what a thing appears to be, as much as how it appears to be. With the function of judgment, comes the possibility of condemnation. Therefore, when reduced to a taste concept, cute is usually considered within the realm of superfluous ornamentation.

From a rhetorical perspective and belonging to the third canon of style, cute is not incidental, superficial, or supplementary. Cute involves the means by which images and objects are molded and customized to their situational contexts. Cute is morphologically situated by that which is pliable and in process. Guided by the principles of decorum, cute is a sense of form that ontologically determines capacities and governs the appropriateness of the occasion and time of address, or aptum. The design of cuteness is built for delivery, which is the fifth rhetorical canon. As an encompassing principle associated with the practice of communication in the public sphere, cuteness’s persuasive effects operate with discernable outcomes in mind. For Daniel Harris, cute “creates a world of stationary objects and tempting exteriors that deliver themselves up to us, putting themselves at our disposal and allowing themselves to be apprehended entirely through the senses” (8-9). Rhetorically, the style and delivery of cute gives off an attention to ease, propriety, and commodity. Cuteness is to be possessed and, in this way, is a rhetoric of desire. Lori Merish offers this account:
That the cute demands a maternal response and interpellates its viewers/consumers as “maternal” is indicated by the most common synonyms of “cute” “adorable,” and “loveable” … the consumer (or potential consumer) of the cute is expected … to pretend she or he is the cute’s mother.

Valuing cuteness entails the ritualized performance of maternal feeling, designating a model of feminine subjectivity constituted against those (ethnic, class, or national) Others who lack the maternal/sentimental endowments (and aesthetic faculties) to fully appreciate the “cute.” (186)

We foist cuteness upon its would-be possessors, compelling them to imitate the inanimate objects we assign to cute’s domain. Ostensibly, we wish to adopt cute creatures for their “loveable” or “winsome” adorableness. In childhood, we are taught to value cuteness as the convention of what we should strive to like and be like.

In avoidance of the acknowledgment of the degradation that results from these cuddly encounters, cute elicits the magnanimity of the maternal gaze. As Harris maintains, toddlers and children are instructed in the lessons of cuteness:

The child is thus taught not only to be cute in himself but to recognize and enjoy cuteness in others, to play the dual roles of actor and audience, cootchy-cooing as much as he is cootchy-cooed. In this way, our culture actively inculcates the aesthetic doctrines of cuteness by giving our children what amounts to a thorough education in the subject, involving extensive and rigorous training in role-playing.  (13-14)

Through a focus on sentimentality, cute serves as an esthetizing device used to smooth
over anxieties related to extreme smallness, helplessness, or destitution. Sianne Ngai points out “the centrality of anthropomorphism to cuteness” (815). Cuteness begs to be touched, snuggled, or petted. Cute is most prevalent in commercialized contexts, often in a mode of pillow-like softness that solicits tactile encounters. “Vacant and malleable, [cute objects] inhabit a world of soothing tactile immediacy in which there are no sharp corners or abrasive materials but in which everything has been conveniently soft-sculpturized to yield to our importunate squeezes and hugs” (8), writes Harris.

Cute also serves as a quasi-aesthetic of the avant-garde, according to Sianne Ngai. This idea is traced to Ngai’s criticism of avant-garde artists not being as politically effectual as commonly perceived. Ngai paraphrases the frequently cited leftist cultural critique:

the cute is an aesthetic of the small, the vulnerable, and the deformed, the avant-garde’s lack of political consequentiality is typically attributed to the short or the limited range of its actual address, often taken as sign of its elitism as a mode of “restricted production”… its susceptibility to becoming routinized, in spite of its dynamism and commitment to change, and thus to being absorbed and recuperated by the cultural institutions it initially opposes… and a social overambitiousness signaled by the incomplete or unfinished nature of all its project – and incompleteness that in turn betrays overhasty assumptions… and thus, by extension, an over simplistic identity between political agency and radical form. (837)

Cute, therefore, reverts back to the field of an attitude of self-indulgence, very much
akin to sentiment. However, at a certain point, the sentiment of cute goes beyond the pale of avant-garde poetics, to the everydayness of object orientation where it is deemed attractive for the pleasurable paradox sometimes made available through kitsch, which situates objects for their “baroque... mad... romantic... completely dated” qualities (Roland Barthes 111).

To return to Barthes, this meaning implies the obtuse as that which is in excess of the obvious, oscillating towards artifice as it “shows its fissure and its suture” (Image 58). For instance, the exuberantly baroque assortment of “ol’ time mammy and uncle” salt and pepper shakers and cookie jars still held in private possession and circulating in the public sphere speaks volumes to the maniacally pleasurable consumption derived from these remarkably blatant representational ideas involving black people. While some claim to treasure these objects for their sheer kitsch appeal and nothing more, this paradoxical nostalgia for an indecorous material history illuminates for us an impossible cuteness that spills excessively into view. Perhaps this is where African American cuteness is “taken a step too far” (Roland Barthes 125). Of course the original appeal of the “auntie” and “uncle” material objects is an underlying nostalgia for a by-gone era wherein black adults could never be seen as primary authority figures. The secondary status of aunt and uncle allows for a regime of white supremacist thinking where the first-class expression of a major subject citizen is thwarted. Looking at cuteness as a transcendent sign of commodity exchange among raced bodies in the civic sphere expands the field of African American inquiry to the terms of a/cute proportions, whether they are in regards to bodies in size or bodies en masse.
Aside from deep concentrations of melanin resulting in dark skin tones, we usually associate black with facial phenotypes or physiognomies. However, there are common facial characteristics or physiognomic traits associated with the iconography of cuteness. This (often highly caricatured) iconography privileges a perverse emphasis on the gaze, while simultaneously understating the considerations of individual rhetorical potential. One observes the oversized, rounded forehead, exaggeratedly large eyes, chubby cheeks, and barely-there mouth. The exaggeration brought about by the giant-eyed gaze of cute objects is realistic and distorted at the same time. When cute objects are given a face, they are all about stylized simplicity, indicative of precociousness and fondle-ready appeal (Ngai 815). This category of representations literalizes the site of bodily scrutiny through the exaggerated minimization or altogether elimination of the source of linguistic agency – the mouth. With cuteness, expression is cut off at the point of mere gesture. The facial feature of gigantic eyes literalizes the desire to “look at” the cute while the almost nonexistent mouth of the gazed object virtually eliminates all possibility of the cute to “talk back.”

The cute is often depicted as having an oversized head that is larger than the body, very often, by over a third. Limbs are somewhat stubby, if not outright pudgy. Babies have round faces so that we’ll like them. Cuteness, of course, is a survival mechanism and is actually a Darwinian imperative. The scholar and popular science writer, Stephen J. Gould, in “Perpetual Youth: Mickey Mouse Mimics Evolution,” demonstrates the quantitative dimensions of cute by explaining the qualitative necessity for cuteness as an adaptive mechanism that triggers innate impulses toward affect and nurturing in adult
humans and, indeed, all adult primates. Gould’s claim shows how cute reveals itself to be an effect as much as it is an affect. Since “cute” is what American popular discursive habits have identified as this quantifiable quality when observed in most developmentally normal human infants, cute has subjective meaning because of the way it touches on certain intrinsically human emotions, which transcend the so-called “objective” evaluation of effect. As Disney characters’ foreheads and eyes became larger and more rounded, and an increase in “cranial bulging” (833), as Gould called it, could be quantitatively shown on Mickey Mouse, Disney audiences had no other choice but to adore the highly anthropomorphized mouse more and more. As Mickey and Donald came to be represented as having more stunted proportions, the cartoon characters became more likeable and funny – even less mischievous – to American audiences.

When animated, images of cuteness lean towards the deformed and are reflective of the infantile. As Scott McCloud defines it in Understanding Comics, “[w]hen we abstract an image … we’re not so much eliminating details as we are focusing on specific details. By stripping down an image to its essential ‘meaning,’ [iconic abstraction] can amplify that meaning in a way that realistic art can’t” (30). Cuteness relates to iconic abstraction through which images become increasingly abstract and simplified, moving further from the real. One might think about the chibi drawings of manga style anime. Or one could think about the stylized aesthetic of Japanese kawaii, which means “so super cute,” as exported through the various permutations by the global brand of Hello Kitty merchandise. That the giant headed cat with a bow on her head and no mouth has often been compared to the worst orientalist stereotypes about Japanese and other Asian
women certainly resonates with this idea about racial cuteness. These raced and gendered stereotypes emanate from a history associated with the period of American domination in Japan and across Southeastern Asia after the post-World War II period having to do with racialological and hetero-normativizing discourses about child-like proportions of Japanese women and their supposed desire to be mentally controlled, physically dominated, and sexually tortured by larger, hairier white men. While this orientalist racism governs many western perceptions of Asia and its Diaspora, much of the racial archive of popular images is usually framed in “terms of black and white” (2), as Peter Feng points out. This is true in literal terms having to do with the history of photographic and film technologies, but also this is true in the metaphorical terms of racialized troping on light versus dark in which Europe is pitted against Africa in a phallogocentric web of concretized white supremacy, enacted in and emanating out from the realm of families, communities, institutions, and geo-political entities.

This racialized relationship of cuteness to the standard western assessment of non-whiteness to the infantile can also be traced through examining the Deleuzian influenced Japanese economic theories of Akira Asaada, who has forwarded the idea that there is a certain cute manifestation of global markets in the form of a so-called “infantile capitalism” (237). According to Asaada’s western influenced paradigm, the western geopolitical project of Manifest Destiny reaches its final conclusion and reboots in an emerging Pacific Rim style of worker-citizen horizontality. Transnational subjects navigate the global market for jobs and resources along the blurry lines of play within an economy that privileges knowledge of software and a whimsical approach to
deconstructing and reversing mature technologies. This is in contrast to the “adult capitalism” of the Anglo-Atlantic world, dominated by Britain and the US, in which self-disciplined entrepreneurs exercise a vertical self-control over their personal labor habits in a distinctly “Oedipalized” approach to hard work and hardware. These latter economic forms, it is argued, have moved beyond capitalism’s “elderly” form, as characterized by continental Europe, which has an economy that has long been based on transcendent external values associated with the hoarding of relics as a system of static capital (otherwise known as the gold standard).

Some may recognize Asaada’s description of the worker of infantile capitalism’s approach as indicative of the culture of *otaku* for its ethic of software hacking, *anime* watching, and videogame playing, which is often negatively associated with one who either enjoys or endures an extended adolescence and still lives at home with one’s parents. This economy of play, for Asaada though, is not necessarily a negative thing. Through this idea of infantile capitalism and this topological troping on [a]cute spaces, Asaada argues in a Derridean vein when he asserts that a new class of workers are enveloped by a centerless “place” whose affective experiences are largely post-historical and often experienced in the digital realm. This topology of subsumption gives way to a place that is carried away by wordplay, parody, and childlike games of differentiation. In this way we can think of the spatial rhetoric of cute as having a more specific logic of “place.” Put another way, infantile subjects characterized as cute are not necessarily allowed to roam at will. At the same time, this raises certain concerns about how such a negative conceptualization of “minorities” as minors might play a role in limiting how
one’s rights and access as a global citizen are perceived. When this over-simplification of the subject occurs in racial terms, a fundamental notion of “minorness” conceptualizes an aesthetic regime that in turn upholds stereotypes which are then attributed to the reputed political ineffectualness ascribed to racially minoritized communities. This cuteness of proportions gives way to the cuteness of expectation for what it means to be a full-fledged grown-up in society.

**Rhetoric, Black Being, and Other Folk Ontologies**

My conceptualization of “cute black folk” is one that is quite literally imbued with a sense of place, but with room for expansion because it is not based on essences or metaphysical determinants. An analysis of the rhetoric of cuteness offers a way of looking at black folk as intensive populations across extensive territories. Through a mapping of this racialized cuteness, there is an elimination of metaphorical content by performing an “ontological analysis of state space so that its topological invariants can be separated from its variable mathematical content… [allowing for] a detailed discussion of how these topological invariants may be woven together to construct a continuous, yet heterogeneous space,” (29) as Manuel DeLanda contends. In other words, a rhetorical analysis of cuteness in its relationship to race offers a way of concretizing the techno-spatial processes of racism, which are based on stereotypes. Meanwhile, it allows for a situation in which empirical claims about African American life can exist, but does not essentialize, thereby providing a more deeply textured account of what it means to be black in the world. As stated by Vorris Nunley in *Keepin it Hushed: The Barbershop and African American Hush Harbor Rhetoric* a sense of black folkness is marked out, which
serves “to tether ontology and being to rhetoric and ideology…to make legible that being is more than merely existing” (18). Likewise, this dissertation will show how certain elements of black folk culture have moved to foreign locales, even as contemporary forms of racialized cuteness still carry strong connotations of African traditions (as in the case of the rituals and practices of black hair grooming designs and techniques).

The issue of being black as _black being_, has been a subject of explication ever since the preeminent work of WEB Du Bois in _The Souls of Black Folk_. According to Eric J. Sundquist, Du Bois uses the word “folk” as an interchangeable concept with “nation” in order to move forward a specific geography grounded in the soil and strictly delineated spatiality of the American South and America, in general. The line dividing these folk of the American landscape, of course, is famously traced out by Du Bois as that of a deeply rooted color consciousness comprised of the liminalities so famously explicated in his Hegelian theory of “two-ness.” This Du Boisian color line, according to Sundquist, is based on “a post-Reconstruction Victorian world of imperial rule and scientific racism on the one hand, and the modern era of anticolonial revolt and the escalation of civil rights activism on the other” (460). A notion of “black folk” is located by Du Bois through the rituals and practices of black life, which have historically innovated African traditions for the benefit of the larger American community. Hence, this is the beginning of the invention of the folk we currently call African Americans.

For Du Bois, like other thinkers, one of the more vexing aspects of race has to do with the seeming obviousness – utter obtuseness – surrounding its visual representations. In Terry Eagleton’s critical study, _Walter Benjamin or Towards a Revolutionary_
Criticism, a key section highlights the Black Power slogan of the late 1960s and early 1970s “Black is Beautiful,” and discusses how this folk expression is immanently rhetorical because of the way it calls attention to the falsity of western beauty standards (112). Therefore, according to Eagleton, this verifiably questionable discursive utterance is deployed for the purpose of diametrically opposing and dislodging the Kantian assumption about the exclusivity of whiteness as ideal beauty (112). Up until only thirty years ago, the great majority of philosophers, historians, educators – including many artists – were operating from a world-view that took it for granted that western European Christians were superior to all other categories of humanity. Of the popular images circulating throughout the western global material culture, up until only very recently, few, if any, positive depictions of blacks existed in the Atlantic world. In fact, when black bodies were depicted at all they were to be cast in the role of “naturally” inferior or subservient. In this way, the racial rhetoric of cuteness has elicited the magnanimity of the racially paternalistic gaze. This failed ethic of visuality serves as a foundational basis for becoming the social and political manifestations of global market culture.

This contention is based on the materiality of real circumstances. Indeed, by the time the United States was founded, Africans enslaved in America were forced by physical and legal sanction to watch their every word and action for fear of punishment or death. This is important to contrast this with the fact that whites, on the other hand, had complete freedom to reveal their vilest racial feelings, whether in private or in the public sphere. The need to express the slightest restraint on the expression of racial opinions was non-existent – least of all in the public sphere. Any public injunction by American courts
upon the forthright expressions of racist behaviors and practices was not to occur for many decades. During slavery and Jim Crow it was a commonplace assumption made by many whites that no black could be trusted – not even with the knowledge of the alphabet. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that anyone who was considered black was subject to being demonized and treated accordingly. As a matter of basic everyday existence, blacks were to be denied the virtue of innocence from the cradle to the grave. Given this history of racism faced by African Americans, meeting the criteria for “deathworthiness” was all but unavoidable. This issue continues to haunt black existence. For most African Americans – whether child or adult – not even the cuteness of a childlike face and genuine innocence could provide refuge from the legal persecution or casual viciousness of white racism. The Florida Tourism Board’s practice of distributing “alligator bait” postcards (well into the 20th century) speaks to this issue most profoundly.

It is probably fair to argue that these issues would have never been interrogated if
it had not been for the intervention of African American visual rhetors who sought to reverse the inhumane effects of American racism. According to Danielle S. Allen, since the fundamental reconstitution of the United States beginning from the time of this landmark Brown v. Board case, through the 1966 Voting Rights Act, and up until the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. (collectively referred to as the historical episode known as the Civil Rights Movement), there has been an ongoing cultural and political renegotiation of what amounts to “major” and “minor” forms of citizenship (175). This issue of minoritization, I argue, determines the specific aesthetic rules of this “racial cuteness” and thus delineates the standards of sorting racialized bodies across our public spaces and social designs. By asking about the social rules that come with cuteness as they possibly contribute to a distorted notion of what it means to be a fully mature global citizen, one asks about the role of cuteness’s function as a reinforcement of a type of second-class civic status, or to use the language of Lauren Berlant, a practical politics of “infantile citizenship” (395).

My notion of a folk ontology means that there is somehow a placeness based on the common materiality of objects as it relates to citizenship. A folk culture of racialized space can be understood from the mythology that tells us how the United States of America is a place founded on a common set of values shared by the cultural multitudes who ostensibly have come together over time, thus historically establishing a collective, unified whole from the aggregate masses made up of the Old World blending with the New. This creation myth of American multiculturalism suggests an ideal situation of equality among all the contributing cultures, an amalgamation of peoples under the
umbrella of an “Anglo American” (i.e., white) national agenda and purpose. This imperial project, operating as an American origin story, thoroughly obliterates the contributions of indigenous populations and non-Anglo worldviews and presumes the western fulfillment of Manifest Destiny.

Of course, the narrative of this American multicultural melting pot necessarily manifests as commonplace in our culture and spins the yarn about a unifying national character always being made and remade in the image of the newest arrivals to the American national scene. In many ways, this narrative pattern reveals a paradigmatic bias. This American narrative is so deeply enmeshed within the ideals of American thinking as to make for a situation in which the social constellations of geography, history, and memory coalesce and manufacture a social collectivity that is akin to a social ontology. Containing these heterogeneous denizens, unified by the results of people’s everyday practices and shared beliefs, a kinship of survival networks is presupposed, though not necessarily guaranteed.

My contention is that insofar as African American identity has needed to function as a basis of fundamental existence, a folk ontology of racialized decorum can be established. In light of the glaring racial disparities in death penalty sentencing, not to mention the seemingly endless perpetuation of residential and educational segregation, African Americans continue to find it necessary to claim race as materially substantive of individual and collective beings, despite all the rushed proclamations about post-blackness and post-raciality to the contrary that circulated in the pop culture discourses following the aftermath of the 2008 presidential election into the early days of the Obama
administration. This way of thinking is usually referred to as “colorblindness” in popular conversations about “race relations” represented in mainstream media and by those less invested in the complex discourses of cosmopolitan “post” terms. In other words, being black functions as *black being* (Nunley 38). This is an important detail. In the words of Victor Villanueva, for many people of color (African Americans, in particular), the strategy of absolute divestment from one’s racial existence or assimilation with the dominant culture in favor of a type of “racelessness” operates as “the decision to go it alone” (40). This is why the overwhelming majority of black folk choose to identify as “raced” beings because people are not meant to be alone. And no matter how post-human we all supposedly are, human beings are always enmeshed in a social ontological web that makes us always in contact with others.

As the contemporary cost of living continues to escalate, for many African Americans, going it alone does not become a viable option. The geometry of currency transfer for black families does not reflect the model of the nuclear family unit, but is much more reflective of extended networks of familial relations. One social science researcher, Ngina S. Chiteji, explains it rather clearly:

> In a nation in which the myth of the self-made man persists and Horatio Alger-style imagery dominates thinking and discourse about individual outcomes, African Americans often find themselves put in a position in which they have to explain any apparent lack of success relative to other groups. The rhetoric of the United States as a land where opportunity is equal and bountiful is so pervasive that citizens sometimes forget that many opportunities are endogenous to the
family, that is to say that the family serves as a space where opportunities get created. (368)

This means that the transfer of money does not occur in a vertical manner, but instead a horizontal transmission of wealth occurs. The a/cute “daddy-mommy-me” triad is simply an inadequate paradigm (Deleuze xv). As the joke goes, in African American communities, when news of a family member “doing good” makes it to extended relatives, it becomes that individual family member’s responsibility to financially assist others who are not as fortunate at the moment, whether it is a sibling whose spouse has been recently laid off or just had a baby, or maybe a cousin who needs a hand until he “gets on his feet” because he’s having a hard time. In other words, contrary to mainstream stereotypes about black material impropriety and overconsumption, one of the more profound consequences of the racial and economic discrimination resulting in intergenerational poverty is that African American wealth is much more dispersed and invested in economic collectivism. This difference in wealth distribution speaks to differences concerned with the spatial practices of day-to-day living as it works to organize and guide African American existence and social presence.

Much has been made of the folk origins of hip-hop culture, but how has this expression of African American urban folk culture been affected by its tremendous success in the commercial market? As Tricia Rose understands it, despite the fact that many commercially powerful artists and moguls began with “virtually no money, little education, a lack of early access to high-level financial mentorship,” it is not uncommon for them to adopt the conservative values based on the American values of hard work,
enterprise, and self-reliance that often go with the large accumulation of personal wealth (108). Rose identifies this double standard in the American economic system:

In the conservatively valued standard of personal success and entrepreneurial spirit, these men should be lauded. Since few businessmen or corporate success stories emphasize liberal values concerned with how such money was made and what impact personal accumulations of wealth have on an already hyper-privatized model of wealth hoarding, these men should be celebrated. When rappers apply very similar strategies of success that define the often ruthless models of American capitalism (which, in itself, is frequently off-set by well publicized philanthropy), they are viewed as threats, not as proponents of such values…. Not surprisingly, they defend themselves by adopting conservative values of personal success. (109).

This double standard and the negative connotations of cuteness influencing the stereotyping of the African American contemporary ethos as an immature mode of citizenship, becomes even more pronounced by the seemingly inexhaustible list of hip-hop figures, whose monikers are preceded by the suffix *lil’* (in the case of Lil’ Kim, Lil’ Wayne, Lil’ Jon, Lil’ Bow-Wow, Lil’ Romeo, ad infinitum) – not to mention those rappers whose names are meant to imply their childlike qualities such as Da Brat, Big Boi, Souljah Boy, Wiz (Kid) Kalifah, Young Jeezy, and even DJ Spooky, a.k.a. That Subliminal Kid. Following this convention, white rappers such as Kid Rock and the Beastie Boys have adopted infantile names as a means of gaining “street cred” in this African American dominated musical form. This, unfortunately, might contribute to the
racist idea that African American culture can be subsumed by the appropriations and re-appropriations of youth subculture. Further examples of this cute rhetoric regarding racialized bodies can be extended to include the fashions that come out of hip-hop culture, from oversized tees, to book-bag napsacks, and the brightly colored sneakers and backwards baseball caps indicative of a nostalgic longing for adolescence. All across popular media, beyond African Americanicity proper, cross pollinations with other global forms of cuteness can be observed in the hip-hop hybrid styles of Asian cartoon *anime* through the cynical ruminations of “Huey P. Freeman” from the Aaron McGruder *Boondocks* comic strip, as well as the “blinged-out” multinational brand licensing of Hello Kitty merchandise by female hip-hop mogul, Kimora Lee Simmons. Most recently,
as hip-hop continues to be circulated across the globe as a chief export of western popular and youth culture, we can see how racialized cuteness as a specific aesthetic design code comes back at us through the Japanese club-kid alias of “Harajuku Barbie,” made popular by the female rap act and Lil’ Wayne protégé, Nicki Minaj.

It can be seen that mainstream, commercialized conceptualizations of hip-hop, once deemed a socially menacing cultural export associated with rap groups such as Public Enemy and NWA (Niggaz with Attitudes) are no longer considered a threat. Today, hip-hop methodologies have been firmly adapted to pedagogical approaches across the areas of both lower and higher education. This is especially true in multimodal composition writing. What this says about the relationship between rhetoric, multimodal composition, multicultural education, and global plural democracy has yet to be fully interrogated.

**Cuteness as Macrocosm**

My contention is that attention to the racial rhetoric of cuteness contributes to a better understanding about how racist tropes related to the African American ethos as that of the perpetually childish subject function and open up a field of critique that allows for greater democracy. We generally accept cuteness as that which is generally pleasant to gaze upon – so long as it remains in the microcosm; excessive cuteness, be it spatial or temporal, becomes an imposition and has been known to eventually incite annoyance and subsequent dismissal. I propose a global approach of looking at cute in the macrocosm. Therefore, my research is concerned with what determines the specific aesthetic rules of this so-called cuteness and thus delineates the standards of sorting racialized bodies.
across our public spaces and social designs. Having already discussed how the myriad terms of gender, age, and sentiment are connected to the issue of racial cuteness, this dissertation contextualizes the ways in which cute race connects to our social field in terms of proximity, bodily proportions, and even gesture. This topic is of value to the general public for the questions it raises about the role of cuteness as it more and more begins to represent certain perceived values of downsizing (i.e., impulses and patterns towards miniaturization), especially in regards to how our social and civic landscape is apportioned and shared. Indeed, spatial contests for social justice have frequently animated the activisms and discourses of civil and human rights and, as much of the emerging scholarship attests, a critical stance in and across urban studies suggests this restructuring process as a productive site for imaginative engagement.

This notion of place is connected to my thinking about cuteness as a question of accessibility across space based on the right of an individual to move and travel freely. A spatial critique of racial cuteness as a rhetoric of proximity would take the aesthetics of mobility into account. Clearly, mobility is a polymorphous concept. For the purposes of this dissertation on African American rhetorics, I am specifically thinking about a cute style of “passing” in terms of it being used as a strategy for African American social and spatial mobility. I am extending this meaning beyond the notion of the social tactic used by some African Americans to appear as “white” through the boon of mixed racial heritage and a public performance that refuses identification with other blacks. I argue that there is a visual and spatial etiquette that exceeds the mere visuality of race as it is engaged by some African Americans to convey the affective effect of a “model minority
citizen” in order to traverse tricky racial landscapes. Very often this social performance of cute entails displaying an impression and aura of innocence – exhibiting the expression of one who is easy to approach, but not necessarily reproach.

Today, we are soaking in a media-saturated cultural environment that is bombarded by an onslaught of mass-produced images – images generally intended to serve commercial purposes, ranging from everything to the sale tobacco products and the endorsement of candidates running for political office, to the promotion of novel new business schemes and modes of transportation. Consequently, our beliefs about people, events, and places are largely mediated by the massive infrastructure of communication technologies that span the globe, which often depicts the Other in unrealistic and stereotypical ways. By looking “cute,” I argue, “race” can be elided and one’s right to public and commercial facilities can go unchallenged. Perhaps driving a “cute” car instead of a very large one, aside from issues of gas mileage and sustainability, could excuse the offense of “driving while black” in many cases. Of course “driving while cute” is a complex speculation and has yet to be fully formulated, but I will attempt to pin down this elusive issue by exploring the impact of social policy on personal style.

Whether one’s patterns of mobility assume the ethos of frequent-flyer, motorist, cyclist, or pedestrian, the overall aim of this dissertation is to explore the African American habitus of self-stylizations and the models of citizenship they inspire, which are often constructed against stereotypes of criminal suspicion. This critical area of rhetoric is under-researched. My hunch is that this racialized cuteness represents the contemporary habitus of black bodily engagement, which goes far beyond the influences usually
ascribed to contemporary hip-hop culture and is actually very closely tied to social rules regarding unspoken disputes over citizenship and the uses of public and commercial facilities.
CHAPTER TWO:

THE VISUAL RHETORIC OF CARL OWENS

*You think you so cute!*” I swung at her and missed, hitting Pecola in the face. Furious at my clumsiness, I threw my notebook at her, but it caught her in the small of her velvet back, for she had turned and was flying across the street against traffic.

Safe on the other side, she screamed at us, “I am cute! And you ugly! Black and ugly black e mos. I am cute.”

We were sinking under the wisdom, accuracy, and relevance of Maureen’s last words. If she was cute – and if anything could be believed, she was – then we were not. And what did that mean? We were lesser. Nicer, brighter, but still lesser.

Toni Morrison (*The Bluest Eye*)

*A Bio-Critical Account*

This chapter offers a biographical criticism of the life and work of the graphic illustrator, painter, and portrait artist Carl Owens. My goal is to contextualize Owens’s work within the historical and cultural backdrop of late-twentieth-century African American visual culture and to recognize his contributions in the areas of educational and commercial graphic communication. I hope to further situate the work of Carl Owens as a significant African American visual rhetor by expanding the biographical entry I published on Carl Owens for the *African American National Biography* (McFarlane). In so doing, I present an analysis of the challenges faced by makers of the African American visual archive, through a discussion of the ramifications of Owens’s exploitation of cuteness. However, it should be noted, by taking this racial cuteness approach, Owen is attempting to positively shape perceptions of African American cultural identity and civic culture writ large. Looking at the visual conceptualizations of cuteness in relation to black subject
matter allows for greater consideration of how mainstream tastes have been manipulated and deliberately appropriated for the purpose of promoting favorable perceptions of the public display of racial images. Through the strategic deployment of the racial rhetoric of cuteness in visual representations of African Americans, images created by Owens make explicit persuasive claims.

![Figure 2.1 - Owens (circa 1975) poses in front of “King Affonso I - King of the Congo,” a painting commissioned by the Anheuser-Busch Great kings of Africa poster-print series.](image)

Using the tools and technologies at hand to help reverse the inhumane effects of racist caricatures and blackface stereotypes, Owens sought to create glowing images of African Americans. Owens developed a considerable body of work for private collections and public display; though he never receiving the same level as critical acclaim of more prominent artists such as Romare Bearden, Jacob Lawrence, Elizabeth Catlett, and John Biggers, Owens managed to garner a considerable amount of notoriety and commercial accolades. As Samella Lewis explains, African American visual rhetors of Owens’s generation supervised limited-edition prints created from their artwork especially for purposes of mass reproduction and consumer affordability. These methods of mechanical
reproduction helped address the major problems confronted by African American artists in regards to “earning a living and communicating with as many people as possible” (251). For Owens, therefore, it was imperative that he adopt printmaking methods for the creation of quality productions, thereby making it possible for more people to own high-quality reproductions of his original works of art. Through adopting the technologies to his artistic needs, Owens engaged a unique rhetorical process intended to enhance the collective self-image of black people. With a professional background as an art educator and as a realist painter, Owens grounded his style in his expertise as a portraitist and, accordingly, his depictions can be viewed as extremely representational and blatantly didactic – some would say to the point of bordering on agitprop. Yet it should be noted, the work of Carl Owens should not be read only as steeped in the pathos of political sentimentality, but should also be understood in terms of marking a particular instance of deliberative rhetoric. As I will show, Owens employs black subjects to serve as “pleasurable stereotypes fit for aesthetic desire” (hooks 137), his work reflects his commitment to making the necessary persuasive visual appeals by which social diversity has come into view. Owens is working firmly within the historical framework of civil-rights-era cultural production as he readily rendered his work for appropriation into the public domain in support of the underlying American narrative of cultural pluralism.

The only son and middle child of three born to Carl Frank Owens and Ada Mae Lighfoot, Carl Owens began his life in 1929 in the predominantly black west side area of Detroit. The senior Owens, who appeared to be white, though his racial heritage was never disclosed) migrated from the Appalachian region of North Carolina in the mid
1920s. Probably due to his ability to pass, Owens’s father managed to a decent and secure living as a city bus driver while Ada Mae (who was obviously black) was allowed to remain at home as a housewife. Although the senior Owens experienced the treatment of a white man beyond the borders of the west side of Detroit, he worked diligently to instill a sense of racial pride in his three children. Therefore, Owens was able to experience a relatively secure childhood in contrast to the economic hardships faced by so many other African Americans during the Great Depression. As a child Owens demonstrated exceptional artistic promise; he recalls a childhood in which he enjoyed many afternoons at the Detroit Art Institute, where he spent countless hours gazing at Diego Rivera’s famous mural, *Detroit Industry*. Owens described the tremendous impact of Rivera’s politically controversial left-wing themes on his formative perceptions of art and what it could do. The experience of growing up in the Midwestern industrial capital in the midst of a thriving civic arts culture quite literally illustrated for Owens the rhetorical power of visual images as a means through which citizenship can be permanently shaped. Owens’s parents were sufficiently convinced of his talents to support his choice to pursue a career as an artist upon the completion of high school. However, Carl Frank and Ada Mae, having made it through the Depression, remained true to their working-class concerns by imposing the condition that the young Owens professionally pursue his passions through the practical and stable field of teaching. After earning his bachelor of science degree in art education from Wayne State University in 1952, Owens landed his first professional job teaching art in the Detroit public schools. He was drafted into the US Army, however, only three weeks after starting his faculty appointment. Scheduled for a tour of service in
Korea, he was stationed at Fort Leonard Wood in Missouri. His commanding officers, however, soon became aware of Owens’s talents for visual design and graphic art. They were so impressed by a mural that Owens painted in the company mess hall that they recommended the young serviceman be reassigned to design recruitment posters and training manuals. This pleased Owens greatly, as his artistic talents enabled him to completely escape combat altogether. Having fulfilled his wartime duties in the Army, Owens was honorably discharged in 1954 and returned to Detroit public schools, where he resumed his career as an art teacher. The year of Owens’s return to teaching was the same year as the Brown v. Board decision. Partly due to his positive experiences of having witnessed the institutional end of racial segregation within America’s armed forces, Owens was keenly aware of the rapid social changes underway and positioned himself accordingly. The issues of civic engagement, education, and racial justice, therefore, were already playing a major role in he began constructing himself as an artist.

Two years later he married, Katherine Frisby, a music teacher, who gave birth to their first child, Brian Ray Owens, in 1958. A second son, Duane Frank Owens, was born in 1960. Facing the responsibility of raising a young family and wanting to spend more time as an artist, Owens convinced the Detroit board of education to relieve him of his classroom teaching duties by creating a position for him as a staff artist in 1959. In this capacity he worked to create all of the maps, charts, and graphic illustrations of historical figures and ordinary citizens for the school system’s teaching handbooks, instructional filmstrips, and student textbooks. Despite many of the new freedoms Owens experienced as a full-time artist, the school board’s directives regarding how he could depict ethnic
images disturbed him. One institutional policy that posed artistic constraints for Owens was the Detroit public school system’s practice of basing textbook content and distribution on the city’s socially stratified ethnic enclaves. For example, illustrations of black historical figures and subjects appeared only in textbooks marked for distribution in African American school districts, whereas illustrations of notable Italians appeared only in textbooks intended for Italian neighborhood schools. Owens considered the position of the school board to be untenable, for it was his belief that all Americans should taught about the outstanding contributions of African Americans. He felt increasingly limited by the board’s restrictive policies and left the Detroit educational system in 1968 to become a freelance artist. Although Owens continued contracting with the public school systems of Detroit and surrounding areas such as Highland Park school district, this period marked another major turning point for Owens, as he was divorced from Katherine in 1968.

That same year, he produced a charcoal and ink poster entitled Picture History of the American Negro or Strong Men, which was subsequently bought by the publishers Rand-McNally for national distribution for schools throughout the United States. This was a career coup for Owens because of the way he was able to negotiate a deal with Rand-McNally in which he maintained copyright of the images. No other black artist had ever been able to develop that sort of contractual relationship with a large corporate entity before. Owens’s work was beginning to enjoy wide recognition by this stage of his career, especially in the black press, which often referred to him as the “Black Man’s Norman Rockwell.” Unlike many African American artists who did not like being
“pigeon-holed” by their ethnicity, Owens did not concern himself with racial distinctions because of the risk of limiting his professional stature. He was pleased to be recognized for his service to the African American community in Detroit and elsewhere. In 1969 he exhibited at the Detroit Institute of Art (the very space where he used to admire Diego’s murals) but, in keeping with his commitment to black American cultural identity, Owens usually chose to operate largely outside the elite art world. He continued the practice of making paintings and prints with the primary aim of highlighting “black and proud” images to middle-class and aspiring African American art consumers. Also, throughout the late 1960s and into the 1970s Owens designed numerous album covers for the Motown recording company for artists such as Diana Ross, Marvin Gaye, and the Jackson Five. He also created cover designs for Motown’s educational and cultural spoken-word label featuring speeches by Martin Luther King, Jr., Stokely Carmichael, Langston Hughes, and many more.

While most other Americans were celebrating the bicentennial, Carl Owens received special honors at the 1976 African International Art Festival in Lagos, Nigeria. With his career buttressed by his newfound international reputation, Carl Owens gained a significant following of international admirers who collected his artwork, especially in the emerging post-colonial world. Perhaps because of his training as a graphic illustrator, as well as his flair for flattering portraiture and a realistic depiction of social concerns, the work of Carl Owens was purchased for the national collections of many foreign governments, including Egypt, Grenada, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. Hailed for his ability to appeal to the aesthetic tastes of social realism through the imaginative construction of
heroic figures, the teleologically devised subjects depicted by Owens were meant to instill feelings of cultural pride among the group of global inhabitants, who were then referred to as “third world peoples.” Following this period, Owens traveled quite extensively, dividing his time between summers in Detroit and winters in Oaxaca, Mexico. Owens’s stature as a foremost chronicler of African American portraiture was acknowledged in 1987 when he was commissioned by Detroit’s Museum of African American History to render a life-size painting of Rosa Parks in honor of her seventy-fifth birthday. In 1988 Owens was diagnosed with prostate cancer, which went into remission after a year of radiation therapy. Owens divorced his second wife, Habiba, in 1994, although they remained very close friends. In 1996 Owens moved to Atlanta, where he took on a mentoring role for the many aspiring artists in that city. In 2000 he developed a partnership with the Atlanta Studioplex in the historic Auburn District and on the campus of Spelman College, he organized weekly figure-drawing classes that continued until his death in 2002 from cancer.

Regal Decor and Corporate Ideology

Also in 1976, Owens contributed two poster designs to the Anheuser-Busch corporate campaign, Great Kings of Africa. Owens created the two separate images, “King Affonso I - King of the Congo” and “King Khama - The Good King of Bechuanaland” for his personal contribution to the series. Still considered among the most effective and successful minority outreach campaigns of all time, the St. Louis based “king of beers” bottler known for its iconic Budweiser brand commissioned notable African American artists such as John Biggers, Barbara Higgins Bond, and Dean Mitchell as well as Owens
to design a series of 28 posters depicting “historical” representations of black royalty. Eventually extended to include depictions of female rulers, the *Great Kings and Queens* campaign sparked a debate that continues to this day about how corporations appropriate African American images for marketing. If recognized purely for its celebratory capacity, this poster series helped develop a visual archive of African Americanicity that featured a dignified display of African peoples. Considered more critically, however, these posters were developed in order to garner a sense of goodwill and brand loyalty from within the African American community for the beer company in anticipation of the national roll-out of King Cobra, a malt liquor targeted toward black consumers. Because the posters were designed for cultural outreach and circulated throughout American inner-city schools, they drew criticism for targeting underage (and black) drinkers.

Anheuser-Busch’s corporate campaign and black market outreach makes persuasive use of the theme of royalty as a recurring trope within contemporary African American culture. The archive of images emerging from this poster series implies that the US American populations of enslaved blacks were descended from the royal bloodlines of Ancient Egypt and Nubia. In reality, African American cultural heritage is more directly linked to the West African Congo-Niger region. *Great Kings and Queens* features ancient historical figures such as Cleopatra, Nefertari, Queen Hatshepsut, King Taharka, and even the legendary military foe of the Roman Empire, Hannibal. Accompanying these images are short biographical narratives detailing the cultural and social advances made possible by these “black” or purportedly black historical rulers.

Then suddenly the historical timeline advanced by the poster series jumps several
millennia forward and leaps across the Sahara. The poster series’s depiction of post-
antity Sub-Saharan rulerships erases the historical sweep leading up to the late 19th
century western conquests marked by the frenzied scramble for Africa’s natural resources
of gold, ivory, precious gems, and most disturbingly, actual human chattel, concluding
with the portrayal of the European colonial period as a benign era of civilizing exposure
and technical innovation, inspired by the divine magnanimity of indigenous Christian
conversion. More specifically, in Carl Owens’s commissioned posters, “King Affonso I -
King of the Congo” and “King Khama - The Good King of Bechuanaland,” the
racialogical remnants of scientific racism and imperial militarism are clearly evidenced
by depictions of architectural progress and transportation technology that provide the
social backdrop for each of the kingly figures.

Meant to imply a geo-historical relationship between contemporary African
Americans, classical antiquity, and the expansion of Christiandom, the Anheuser-Busch
campaign capitalizes on a rhetoric of racial regality that is tied to the generalized cultural
expressions of the African American ethnos. The “creative conjurings” (Gilroy 30) of this
poster series embellish the racial rhetoric of regality by downplaying the actual historical
record of cultural colonization and political conquests as it denotes the language of
royalty in its logos. To be sure, the denotative meanings of “royal” and “regal” are
dissimilar, as the former conveys a notion of absolute veracity based on the substantiation
of family inheritance, while the latter signifies the mere assumption of one’s social
position in regarding to personal appearance, carriage, or attitude. Since the ancient lands
of the pharaohs cannot be authentically tied to African American heritage, the historical
and anthropological accuracy of the *Great Kings and Queens of Africa* series is called into serious question – though Anheuser-Busch is hardly the only corporate entity to have done this.

Beyond the two posters for which Owens was directly responsible, the entire series specifically appeals to a pervasive iconography of identity politics relating to the African American desire to achieve social esteem in the face of overwhelming white racial hostility. Indeed, the rhetoric of regality has seeped so deeply into African American discourses that the term “crown” is commonly appropriated by black people to describe the architectural qualities of afro-textured hair as well as individual choices of personal style regarding headgear. Additionally, it is a common practice for African Americans to refer to one another as “my king” or “my queen” in the context of black heteronormative romantic relationships. This mythic ethnos, then, simultaneously enlists and militates against the actual history of white western patriarchy, scientific racism, and technological militarism.

As recently as 2011, the images from the poster series was redeployed as an online interactive timeline that appeared on the “AfricanAmericanBud.com” community outreach website, but have since been removed. Other corporations, including McDonald’s, Pepsi-Cola, Virginia Dominion, Georgia Power, Time Warner, Ford Motor Company, and Aetna Life, commissioned Owens’s work for corporate minority outreach campaigns, but did so through a much less exploitative pathos. However, Owens’s choice to bypass traditional artistic avenues did not mean that he had completely given up on high art, as his work has been exhibited at the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Art
Institute of Chicago, and the Smithsonian Institute. A 1979 article published in the *Detroit Free Press* quotes Owens as saying, “I guess you could say I don’t exactly fit into either the commercial or fine arts mold right now. But I’m moving more toward fine arts painting for myself and away from commercial work.” Nonetheless, Owens appreciated the professional recognitions he received for his commercial contributions and was honored by both mainstream and black art societies, including the New York Society of Illustrators and the National Conference of Artists.

**Rhetorical Cuteness and Racial Sentiments**

During the 1980s and 1990s Owens produced many of the works for which he is best known, including *Little Flower, The Quest, The Mask, Duality*, and *Legacy*. These acrylic oil paintings were converted to commercially successful prints and followed early 1990s trend of colorful, Afrocentric graphic imagery. These inexpensive prints of Owens’s work continue to decorate the working- and middle-class homes of African American people all over the United States. Common themes in his work include stylized binary juxtapositions of idealized black manhood and womanhood, as well as depictions of little black boys and girls smiling and playing. In assessing Owens’s sentimental visual images of children, it might be thought that he sacrificed highbrow acceptance for the sake of appealing to an exclusively African American market of middlebrow art consumers, desperately craving positive and “happy” images of African Americans that were once quite difficult to find. For this reason, I refuse to condemn Carl Owens for depicting “cuteness” in his African American subject matter, but will simply acknowledge the distinct rhetorical uses of cute as an appeal to sentimentality in racial
rhetorics.

David Freedberg and Vittorio Gallese (an art historian and neuroscientist) collaboratively pursue the issue of empathetic reactions to figurative images in which people are represented. Freedburg and Gallese forward the idea that a somatic response to artistic depictions of gesture and facial expression occurs among art observers and is essential to understanding the effectiveness of artistic depictions that involve “a sense of bodily resonance” (197). They attempt to identify an empirical experience of sentimentality as a cognitive stance. Almost all “high art” stakeholders, from artists to critics to curators alike, hold in common their distaste for sentimentality as among the most egregious of aesthetic errors. They disapprove of shallow emotional appeals designed to bully audiences into feelings of pity, regret, or nostalgia. Widely eschewed as a promoting modes of thought involving idealization for the sake of creating an oversimplified, distorted sense of self-gratification, as Deborah Knight explains, “the

Figure 2.2 - Little Flower by Owens remains the best selling print of all his paintings.
condemnation of sentimentality itself is an instance of sentimentality in which sentimentality ought not to exist – in philosophical discourse itself” (Knight 412). The arrogant dismissal of Carl Owens’s racial rhetoric of cuteness that is so prevalent within elite philosophical circles becomes especially evident when one considers that this rhetoric was but one among numerous strategies that Owens employed in his quest for social justice. This pathos should be understood as being fundamental to the logos of Owens’s work.

Taking the Edges Off

Perhaps one of the most intriguing aspects about Carl Owens’s rhetoric of racial cuteness is in regards to his pencil charcoal technique, which was designed to impart a hazy, fuzzy aural quality to his Rand-McNally poster-print *Strong Black Men.* Another poster entitled *Strong Black Women,* was later created using color pencil drawings and was also licensed by the mapmaking company. Both posters were intended to be shown as a complete gallery of thirty-five heroic characters and scenes, as well as individually enlarged for viewing as separate panels. Both posters were later sold to the energy company Dominion Virginia Power, and the names abbreviated to *Strong Men* and *Strong Women.* Between 1991 until 2001, Owens was commissioned by Dominion to extend the theme of African American achievement to include nearly one hundred portraits. Since 1992, Dominion has held an annual induction ceremony honoring accomplished African Americans both in person and posthumously, including Thurgood Marshall, Arthur Ashe, Rita Dove, John Hope Franklin, and Oprah Winfrey. This particular corporate relationship developed by Owens demonstrates the visual rhetoric of
cuteness as a means of gaining power.

Owens’s portraits have since inspired an ongoing Black History Month scholarship, a high school writing contest, and an annual calendar, which is freely in Virginia, Ohio, and North Carolina. Since Owens’s death in 2002, other African American artists have received portrait commissions to honor the annual inductees. Dominion’s annual Black History Month gala, writing contest, and “Diversity Calendar” continue to exist as a testament to Carl Owens’s legacy of visual design as a social response to institutional racism. Pulling from the drawing techniques learned from his formal training from his commercial influences from popular cartoons and comic strips, *Strong Black Men* works to convince mid-twentieth-century American school districts that a wider range of civic engagement appropriate for public classrooms populated by early and advanced age school children. Applying the ethos and pathos of cultural mythos to his visual logos, Owens demonstrates a/cute awareness of the qualitative dimensions of cuteness as a persuasive device that elicits feelings of comfort and familiarity. Due to the history of American racism characterized by political suppression and outright vigilante violence, against black men in particular, Owens seeks to assuage mainstream discomfort with public visual displays of African Americans. Tactically endowing black radical “Race Men” with rounder foreheads, larger eyes, and plumper cheeks taps into the affective human impulse to identify with cute creatures. This poster shows that Owens was aware of the power dynamics of cuteness and black masculinity long before sociologists identified the teddy-bear effect.
*Strong Black Men* also displays Owens’s technical mastery of *chiaroscuro*, in which the three dimensional effect of light is imparted. An excellent example of this drawing technique occurs in the portrait of Nation of Islam leader and founder, Elijah Muhammad (top row, third from right) who during his lifetime was widely considered among the most dangerous internal threats to the American way of life. Employing this aural design strategy, Owens’s objective is to reverse dominant perceptions of the separatist religious leader as traitorously wicked and morally nefarious as Muhammad’s gaze meets the viewer with confident serenity. Another notable example of Owens’s facility with sketch lighting technique also occurs in the panel featuring Fredrick Douglass. The decision made by Owens to position Douglass’s image in the top right corner makes the most out of the western sign system’s pattern of sequential arrangement from left to right. Situating the panels in this manner successfully orients the entire

![Image of Strong Black Men poster](image-url)
collection of portraits to Douglass’s signature white mane and beard, reflecting a warm
glow that emanates outward into frizzy aural wisps, eventually obscuring his beard into
the even darker background. Shaded in almost as darkly as the crisp black upon which
Douglass’s image is superimposed, the viewer’s eye is drawn outwardly to the poster’s
top left corner to which the angularly parted cowlick overtly points. The tonal contrast of
light and dark encircles the glowering facial expression of Fredrick Douglass, effectively
lionizing the seminal figure of African American literacy practices. The Douglass panel
proves that Owens chose not to use cuteness as a sign of power in every case.
Additionally, the abolitionist orator and journalist is generally considered a more
comfortable image for whites than Muhammad.

Regarding out-and-out cute rhetorics, smack in the center of the portrait
thumbnails is a portrait of Marcus Garvey, founder of the United Negro Improvement
Association for a global “Back to Africa” movement in the 1920s in response to white
mob lynching, and exploding Ku Klux Klan membership rolls. Owens’s Garvey is
depicted in a white collared shirt that blends completely into a white background, which
frames the almost cherubic image assigned to the quasi-fascist, Pan-African leader.
Utilizing the proportional design aesthetics of cuteness, Owens expertly applies his pencil
shading technique to add a reflective glow on Garvey’s forehead and cheeks while also
expanding Garvey’s forehead, thus giving off an impression of composed tranquility.
Finally, in the last column of the third row, appears the portrait of Malcolm X, whose
gaze is averted downward. Literally taking the edge off his sharply defined popular
image, the Muslim minister and human rights activist’s cheeks are faintly rounded and
his forehead depicted more prominently, rendering a figure that is more subdued and innocuous than the black nationalist leader is usually imagined.

Owens’s intention of appeasing white mainstream sensibilities is exceedingly clear. Owens’s objective of constructing a visual iconography of African American heroes designed to show African Americans in a positive light announces a clarion call that African American public visibility would continue to increase as more people of color began assuming their civic roles as major players on the American social stage. Recounting the life of Carl Owens serves as a case study as to how racial cuteness has become central to notions of American multicultural authority and power and continues to influence the popularly imagined iconography of African Americanicity.
CHAPTER THREE:
A CUTE BLACK WHITE HOUSE

“I feel real good about five-O. I’ve got a little greyer since I took this job, but otherwise, I feel pretty good... Michelle, you know, says that, you know, – she – she- she still thinks I’m – I’m cute, you know, and I guess that’s, that’s all that matters isn’t it?”

Barack Obama quips when asked how he feels about turning 50

“People shouldn’t make a decision this time based on, ‘I like that guy.’ Or, you know, ‘She’s cute’... and I’m talking about me.”

Michelle Obama discusses how voters should select candidates

Decorum Denied

The racial history of the White House is forged into its very bricks, actually molded and fired by the black people who were once banished from the positions of leadership housed in the executive mansion. (To be sure, several presidents brought their slaves with them while in office.) Even the multiple meanings of the executive residence’s official name are directly tied to race. Therefore, this chapter will not only examine the visuality of the Obamas as African American public figures, but will also focus a critical eye on the racial rhetoric of cuteness as it serves to strategically diminish the executive and ceremonial functions of the President of the United States. This diminished (i.e., cutified) Black White House deploys the visuality of race in order to recuperate the domestic operations of the office. Through the head of state’s performances of established ceremonial customs carried out within the backdrop of the White House, the Obamas must necessarily respond to many of the same rules of liberal decorum by which
presidents have long been obliged to conduct the domestic and diplomatic affairs of
government. Since this very specific paradigm of presidential behavior was set up in a
manner in which image and act are tactically linked precisely for their disjunctive
elements, Obama remains within the horizon of these same longstanding social
relationships of race, gender, and class.

Following Theodore Roosevelt’s invitation for Booker T. Washington to dine at
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue in 1901, the 26th president was forced to change the
engraving on the official stationery to read “White House – Washington” in order to
appease the majority white electorate’s racial hostilities (Seale 689). Prior to Roosevelt’s
dinner with the national black leader, the building had simply been known as the
Executive Mansion. According to The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education:

In the days following Theodore Roosevelt’s invitation to Booker T Washington to
dine at the White House, severe condemnation came from all corners of the land.
One newspaper’s headline read, “The President Dines a Darkie.” Senator Ben
“Pitchfork” Tillman of South Carolina stated publicly that “the action of President
Roosevelt in entertaining that nigger will necessitate our killing a thousand
niggers in the South before they will learn their place again.” (24)
Such was the level of antipathy against black people in America so prevalent among the
general white citizenry at the time. Although such obscenely hateful language seems
unthinkable today, Tillman’s statement speaks to the strict standard of racial decorum
held by whites whenever there were social interactions regarding black people. Of course,
the iconic Progressive Party leader, having been the one to extend the invitation in the
first place, represents white racial thinking of a more open-minded persuasion. But even so, as personally progressive as Roosevelt was as an individual dining host, the overwhelming populist sentiment incentivized political pandering regarding the racial protocols intended for the now formally named “White House.”

![Figure 3.1 - In 1904 this political cartoon by William Allen Rodgers appeared in American newspapers across the country and depicts Theodore Roosevelt as a giant among Caribbean nations.](image)

Establishing yet another meaning of “teddy bears in bear country,” Theodore Roosevelt’s endearingly gruff persona emerges as the iconographic inspiration for the teddy bear as an object and of itself. What this shows is how Roosevelt’s literal embodiment of the teddy-bear effect initiates a model that situates President Obama’s cute racial performances far beyond the microcosmic applications of interpersonal race relations and establishes the global and transnational significance of disarming mechanisms for its macrocosmic implications. While some may suggest that the positive
global response of Obama is less connected on racial thinking as in American, it is at least clear that the world community is relieved that he is not another warmongering cowboy. The rhetoric of cuteness as an obfuscation of image and act, demonstrates how Obama’s political leadership acts to reduce global perceptions of a US American military threat, while simultaneously alleviating racial anxieties and white perceptions of the internalized threat posed by minoritized populations to America’s economic stability and domestic tranquility. Theodore Roosevelt’s “speak softly and carry a big stick” diplomacy established the historical precedent and political potential for the development of an imperial presidency through the idea that American foreign policy should be based on colonial aggression and interference in the domestic affairs of foreign countries for reasons of national security using military actions if deemed necessary. Depicted as a positive leadership model, justifiably forging the way for American global dominance, Theodore Roosevelt serves as a prototype of what it means to “look presidential” through the establishment of an explicitly disjunctive relationship between the presidential image and presidential act as a means by which public opinions and political expectations are fused into a vision acceptable executive behavior and power.

Put simply, aside from the ongoing politics of American domestic racial relations, the astonishing personal power that comes with the office of the American presidency – now more than ever – must necessarily operate to attenuate global perceptions of realistic military threat. Given Barack Obama’s “teddy bear” style of leadership and presidential performance, a modification of the aggrandized image of the American presidency works to the assuage both global and domestic anxieties, which had been aroused as a result of
post 9-11, Bush-Cheney, Halliburton-styled hawkishness. The point of re/collecting, re/membering, and re/citing these histories is to trace out a fuller sense of how the decorative performance of Anglo-American etiquette, manners, and polite ceremonials operate to create a national sense of social grace and reverence for the customs ultimately associated with the crucially important diplomatic operations of American foreign policy. When superimposed onto Obama, the aspect of cuteness necessarily diminishes the perception of American presidential capacities to operate unilaterally on the world stage. While Roosevelt’s “big stick” diplomacy functioned as a corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, Obama’s “global cute” diplomacy functions as a corollary to the Bush Doctrine Patterns associated with image and act are never as tidily arranged as one might wish, and the racial rhetoric of cuteness as decorative decorum highlights how these political disjunctures can be manipulated. In the case of the American presidency, wherein the dual roles of head of state and head of government are embodied by the same office, this disjunction might seem to pose a fundamental problem for an African American White House. This calls into question the significance of spatial thinking in language because of the way the White House metonymically cutifies the formality of the office, thus driving a wedge between the ceremonial functions of state diplomacy and the bureaucratic executive functions of government administration.

For too many Americans, acknowledging this concomitant relationship is impossible to reconcile when the complications of race as a visual rhetoric and racism as a set of ideological precepts are bluntly introduced into mainstream political discussions. The conversations surrounding Barack Hussein Obama’s ethos as a “real” American-born
Christian represents the voicing of white working-class populist sentiments as they relate to race. Since executive procedures are not dispersed between the monarch and the prime minister through the division of the head of state role from the head of government role. Distinct responsibilities between the figurehead and commander in chief are simply not a part of the American tradition. The American tradition has been to invest the office of the president with the cultural patrimony and aspirations of “the people,” which are derived from the American political culture that understands its foundational basis as being a country built for white people. This explains why, although he was born in the state of Hawaii to a white mother, Barack Obama will always be seen by many white Americans as an interloper and usurper of the “American Dream.” As he is also the son of a black Kenyan Muslim (personal estrangement notwithstanding), Obama has developed unique strategies for coping with this strand of white political thinking and racial attitudes. Decades after the Civil Rights Movement (as evidenced by the Obama birth certificate deniers), the racist opinion persists that America’s non-white folk are never truly capable of realizing a fully responsible citizenship through their own merit, which justifies the reason for having to limit (or at least heavily scrutinize) the rights of blacks and others.

Unfortunately, there is the idea that the people whom we consider to be “minorities” are really not that at all. And this is obvious, especially if you think about it in terms of global demographics. In fact, the people we refer to as “minorities” here in America actually make up the majority of the world’s people. The anxieties surrounding the “browning” of Europe and America, as evidenced by the recent proliferation of reactionary anti-immigration policies, speak to this reality quite profoundly. If thought
about in these terms, we can clearly see that the term “minority” is really meant to imply something quite different and is a play on the notion of “minors” (i.e., little kids). This is a problem of ethos that addresses “cute” as far as it has been used as a self-describing term by Barack and Michelle Obama, even making national news a few times. Given the nonstop media cycle, and there being no dearth of content for blogosphere “news” coverage, I simply cannot recall this issue ever generating controversy among previous administrations. Or perhaps whenever “cute” has been uttered by previous presidencies it was never considered newsworthy. At any rate, it is an issue peculiar to this White House, which fits the pattern I am articulating, especially when considering the fact that the Obamas are already middle-aged.

**Barackward: Between Awkward and Cool**

According to Jodi Kantor, *New York Times* correspondent to the Obama administration, in the early days of Obama’s run for the White House, campaign staffers came up with a term to describe the moments of awkwardness that would occur whenever Barack seemed unable or unwilling to connect with average voters (28). The word they coined was “barackward.” To many, the image of Barack Obama sliding out of an armored limousine, wearing his signature black Ray-Bans and tailored suit, seems to personify the impression of “coolness,” and is anything but clumsy. In the edited collection, *Black Cool: One Thousand Streams of Blackness*, Rebecca Walker notes the elements of cool as the primary mode within the Afro-Atlantic aesthetic tradition (xi). According to David E. Kirkland and Austin Jackson, coolness represents:

> a unique performative act, an attitude, comportment, or way of being
characterized through verbal presentation and style… historically and cross-
culturally rooted and has symbolically served as the disposition of rebels and
underdogs, slaves, prisoners, bikers, political dissidents, and the like. (280)

As a critical cultural competency of symbolic literacy and multimodal social practice,
Kirkland and Jackson contend, coolness mediates black masculine public address and

personal self-presentation. Barack Obama’s style of communication rhetorically enhances
his ability to execute an authentic manner of calm, collected political leadership. In turn,
Obama’s characteristic passive response, unaffected manner, and detached reserve has
caused some to object this president is actually *too* cool. Coolness, like cuteness, has
multiple meanings and can become threatening. “There *he* is,” detractors complain,
“blithely boarding Air Force One, a bit *too* elegant, slightly *too* self-possessed and
nonchalant in regards to his privilege.” To attenuate this concern and avoid charges of
elitism, Obama uses cuteness as the line he walks *between* awkward and cool. At the
same time, this cuteness operates as a type of currency on the political stage with which Obama has made major rhetorical purchases.

Because of this cultural quirk in American political culture, Obama demonstrates a/cute racial rhetoric in order to convey his willingness to demonstrate his awkwardly endearing qualities of self-deprecating humor, while still communicating a supreme confidence in his personal ability to effectively lead the United States of America. Obama performed this rhetorical maneuver quite proficiently in what many consider the most pivotal speech of his political career. In March 2008 his campaign trail speech, “A More Perfect Union” was delivered in Philadelphia in order to explicitly address voter concerns about a viral video featuring Michelle and Barack Obama’s longtime pastor and family friend, the Reverend Jeremiah Wright. Living up to his name in true jeremiad fashion, the video footage captured Wright delivering a rousing sermon to a black Chicago congregation. Escalating YouTube hits of Wright’s proclamation of “God damn America!” generated media controversy began to negatively impact Democratic poll numbers across key swing states like Pennsylvania and Ohio. In context, Wright’s jeremiad should be viewed as a common rhetorical device that is central to the historical legacy of African American cultural traditions emanating from the private/public discursive zones of the black church. When Wright bitterly laments the state of society, American moral failure, and impending downfall, the serious tone and sustained invective exemplified in the phrase “… not God bless America, God damn America!” helps Wright’s sermonic delivery as a performative rhetoric of prophetic orature. Through this analysis of the video’s looping sound bite, Wright’s sermon can be
understood as a call for social justice and democratic transformation.

Designed to bridge racial boundaries, Obama Philadelphia speech begins with a somber account of his deeply personal experiences with race in America as the bi-racial son of a white American woman and a black Kenyan. Obama recounts his own coming to terms with being a black man in America. Historically framed in the sweeping language of epic national conflicts and generational struggles, Obama repudiates the “incendiary” language of Jeremiah Wright while maintaining his personal support of the cleric as a fellow Christian and family friend. At the same time, Obama reaffirms the patriotic sensibilities of white American voters who had been offended by the embattled pastor’s harsh language. Then, the Democratic hopeful acknowledges his membership in the Trinity United Church of Christ as providing the Obamas with a sense of family commitment and community belonging. By revealing his personal experience of struggling with the anti-black sentiments held by his white maternal grandmother, Obama expresses the worry that America’s potential for increased racial polarization remains present. In the words of Geneva Smitherman, Obama is “an American who is and has lived both ‘Black’ and ‘White,’ who thus is uniquely positioned to see and feel both dimensions of the Black-White binary” (“It’s Been” 187). He concedes that his regular attendance at Trinity can be misinterpreted as tantamount to the tacit approval of pulpit-sanctioned racism and accepts personal responsibility for his share of the blame for the political firestorm. At the same time, Obama asserts that he is not unlike many other Americans who have strongly disagreed with their ministers on occasion. Obama uses the opportunity of his Philadelphia speech to briefly catalogue America’s recent racial past
and contextualize his historic candidacy as being the product of gains made by the Civil Rights Movement, but also representing the challenges still unaddressed in the contemporary moment. Briefly reciting his policy positions regarding education, employment, healthcare, and the military, Obama names the various groups of Americans who have been affected by these social problems, oscillating between competing narratives as he pledges his resolve to seek solutions for the benefit of all Americans.

Towards this end, Obama confirms his faith that future generations of Americans will solve the longstanding issues his campaign hopes to address, thus ending his speech with an anecdote about a twenty-three-year-old campaign volunteer from Florence, South Carolina named Ashley. As Obama recalls Ashley’s childhood experience of almost losing her mother to cancer at age nine, the young woman is lauded for her commitment to joining the Obama campaign in support of better health care and nutrition for America’s poor. Concluding the speech, Obama highlights the young campaign volunteer’s magnanimity and praises Ashley’s ability to resist racist entrenchment and wagon-circling by seeking out multiracial coalitions for the realization of building a better country. Obama goes on about Ashley’s enthusiastic willingness to organize a series of roundtables on behalf of his 2008 campaign. After Ashley tells her own story of near loss, she then goes around the table and asks everyone else why they are supporting candidate Barack Obama. And according to Obama, “They all have different stories and different reasons. Many bring up a specific issue.” Then Obama adds:

finally they come to this elderly black man who’s been sitting there quietly the entire time. And Ashley asks him why he’s there. And he does not bring up a
specific issue. He does not say health care or the economy. He does not say education or the war. He does not say that he was there because of Barack Obama. He simply says to everyone in the room, ‘I am here because of Ashley.’ Repeating this applause line “I am here because of Ashley,” Obama ends his speech of a lifetime by closing with this lasting image of cuteness. In using cuteness by foregrounding the story of a young white girl above that of an old black man, Obama defers to a white racial rhetoric that relegates the personal histories of countless African Americans to the nameless, faceless dustbin of human experience, thereby essentially erasing the entire history of the African American struggle for acceptance in this country and subverting the entire substance of Obama historical presidential candidacy to the nostalgia-inducing sentiments of white preadolescence. Nostalgia marks this excess of cute rhetoric as significant in helping us better understand where these racialological machinations of cuteness lead when taken too far. This example, I believe, tracks of how cuteness delineates the parameters of further racializing America’s political landscape. Critical attention to this issue is imperative for the task of transcending the forces of racism in order to achieve the democratic goals of promoting social mobility and collective equality.

_Michelle O: African American Womanhood and Iconic Style_

In terms of the quantifiable predictability of cute, few families previously occupying the White House would have rated as high on the “cuteness scale” as the current one. One might argue that the presence of children in the executive mansion partially imbues certain qualities of cuteness to presidential administrations. Cuteness can also be shown
as a way for enduring first families that are not traditional power elites. In the case of poor white southerners, Amy Carter and Chelsea Clinton both lived their early and late adolescence in the White House and were both normal looking children. Unkind comedians often ridiculed the young girls for not always being perfectly telegenic. Casting nontraditional power elites as cute so they may be seen as more tolerable is also seen in the case of Catholicism. For the Kennedys cuteness took on a more glamorous form. Not since the black and white newsreel and personal home movie footage documenting the so-called “Camelot Years” has the sentiment been used so widely to describe a first family. (And even then, the quality of cuteness is used primarily in reference to the Kennedy children, Caroline and John-John – not the adults.) Nonetheless, pundits of both personal style and politics have made comparisons between this current youthful presidential couple and the Kennedys – going so far as to label the first lady “Michelle O” in reference to “Jackie O” Kennedy. Besides the obvious difference of race, class also comes into play. The social privilege and vast wealth afforded to Jackie O through her own Bouvier legacy as well as her Kennedy-Onassis connections cannot be separated from the style sense associated with the twentieth-century fashion icon.

Therefore, an analysis of the media images of Michelle Obama’s figurehead role offers a critical framework through which the White House serves as a standard bearer of American tastes and desirability. A good example of this can be drawn from the concerns raised by certain sectors of the Washington punditry, who have expressed their apprehensions about whether or not Michelle Obama hails from the proper background necessary for carrying out her ceremonial and diplomatic roles. (Some have even gone so
far as to question her ability to choose an appropriate White House china service.) This is key to my argument about race and decorum; the point is not to make a judgment of taste regarding Michelle Obama’s sense of style, but to suggest that her personal and family histories, life experiences, and social exposures ought not be undervalued as mere cuteness when thinking about the iconographic mark she is sure to leave on the visual legacy of the White House. Michelle Obama did not have a childhood of privilege and luxury. Related to this, she has gone on the public record about her awareness of the visuality and daily media exposure of the Obama White House as being inseparable from an ongoing American discourse about racial stereotypes, as they have been traditionally ascribed to African Americans regarding issues of manners, tastes, and social propriety.

By the spring of 2008, in response to popular caricatures of Michelle Obama as angry and militant, her image was being carefully edited to show her as being similar to Claire Huxtable, the mother from *The Cosby Show*. Modifying her image for public consumption was one of the main tasks for this campaign’s political advisers. Before being thrust into the media spotlight, Michelle was not so concerned with her appearance. Displaying an appropriate balance between a flawless appearance and effortless style, the creation of “Michelle O” is a process that has required expert consultation and has been deliberately designed. According to popular media coverage of the White House, the first lady is not particularly comfortable bearing this tremendous burden of representation, but she has found ways to take the fluff and superficiality usually assigned to her figurehead service role and infuse it with a profound sense of substance. This problem of not seeming to come off as though she is a modern-day Marie Antoinette had become
especially necessary following the housing and credit crash in the fall of 2008. For instance, in April 2009 during the annual Congressional Club Luncheon held by the group of spouses affiliated with the Washington political scene, the first lady seized the opportunity to refocus its purpose as more than just another fashion catwalk and photo opportunity. The president’s wife carefully considered how she could use this chance to challenge Washington’s lunching ladies to augment the amount of monies donated to selected charities and encourage volunteers to share their time loading two thousand grocery bags for a local Washington area food bank. The biographer to the Obamas, Jodi Kantor, puts it best when she says that Michelle Obama:

> was acutely aware that she and her family were the country’s, and the world’s, most important African American role models. Changing stereotypes was part of why the Obamas had run in the first place, part of why [Michelle] wanted everything to look as beautiful and refined as possible. She know how persistent negative stereotypes of African Americans were – the way she was misrepresented by the campaign only proved it – and she saw her tenure as a rare, valuable chance to correct them. (85)

Kantor’s political insider status and her position as a leading chronicler of the beltway social scene and White House politics allows for the disclosure of unique insights regarding the motivations behind the decisions made by the president and his wife. However, Kantor’s critics have accused her unfairly characterizing Michelle Obama as an “angry black woman.” This should come as no surprise as Kantor’s reliance on a number of fundamentally flawed precepts makes it impossible to avoid the familiar “black
sapphire” trope. In Kantor’s biographical account, the oversimplified prism through which the first family is viewed remains firmly fixed within a heteronormative paradigm.

Due to the unexamined biases Kantor holds as an upper-class white woman, there are few accurate mechanisms through which the motivations and frustrations of a self-made African American woman like Michelle Obama can be fully understood. Perhaps such assumptions about the first lady, for Kantor and others, is the ultimate acknowledgment of white guilt – as it takes for granted that black people should be angry, given the appalling history of white supremacy in America. If the only comparisons by which Kantor can view Michelle are all locked within the extremely narrow racial framework of
all the previously white first ladies, exactly how the president’s wife could be restrictively defined becomes rather evident.

Closely related to my discussion about the performative elements of racial cuteness are the spatial implications of proportion and proximity – especially in regards to gendered divisions of labor and body size. Through the visual representations of Michelle Obama’s anti-obesity campaign and White House victory garden, the discussion surrounding the expectations of femininity related to issues of weight and body image yields fascinating insights. Whereas African American women with ample curves have been both celebrated and chastised, thinking about what a bodily rhetoric of thinness means in the public sphere when it comes to the subject of cute race is useful. Public debates about the appropriateness of Michelle Obama donning a sleeveless dress for her official White House portrait reveals the persistence of racist opinions regarding the fit black female body as inherently deviant emerges precisely because of the burden African American women have had to bear historically in terms of issues of hyper-sexuality and indiscriminate sexual availability. It should be noted, of course, that Jacqueline Kennedy frequently wore sleeveless dresses and never received any such criticisms of impropriety or bad taste. The sight of Michelle’s biceps apparently raised white fears about black bodies being seen as overpowering. Certain totalizing stereotypes about black women’s sizes and bodily proportions can actually foreclose upon the potential for transcending race in America. In other words, the notion of “CYA” (covering your ass) is more than a catchy acronym meant to indicate the extraordinary precautions necessary for citizens and workers to protect themselves in an overly policed, litigious, and generally penalizing
society. This racial rhetoric of cute could also mean an acknowledgement among black women that the need to cover one’s ass is an imperative to be applied quite literally. The failure to appear as cute, or to conform to an explicit and intentional social performance of diminutive pleasing proportions, is more dire in cases where gender and race overlap. The hyper-vigilance needed to fend off microaggressions might actually perpetuate and reproduce the many deleterious health issues we see plaguing so many American women of color. Part of my assertion about racial cuteness is that the implications of certain social expectations are heightened in terms of the politically motivated racial realignments presently occurring and evidenced by the presidential election of 2008. The unfolding implications of this black White House, especially in regards to Michelle Obama (not to mention Sasha and Malia) as a/cutely gendered subjects, will more than certainly call for further rhetorical unpacking. Surely, the first lady’s concerns about the American obesity epidemic are also a story about the histories and memories of black women’s bodies in the United States.

*Tastes Like Chocolate*

Nell Irvin Painter in *The History of White People* tracks the judgment of taste as it relates to race, wherein she demonstrates these racial tropes and commonplaces as being based on a history of Kantian discourses, which have been thoroughly entangled with what it means to be associated with the human categories of “white” and “nonwhite.” Predicated on an Enlightenment doxa that racializes the word “black” by changing it from an adjective to a noun that is synonymous with “slave,” Painter argues that an understanding of world history can be derived from identifying the process of white racialization in
which the contemporary moment is built on the “equally confused and flexible discourses” (viv) regarding the “now familiar equation that converts race to black and black to slave” (42). According to Painter, Kant is at least partly responsible for what remains of this unfortunate patrimony, for he believed beauty ideals to be universally derived (49). Kant, Painter writes, spent a good bit of his intellectual energy attacking the idea that ideal beauty could differ by culture, as he helped popularize the concept of a singular standard for all humanity under the ethnocentric umbrella of his Germanic cultural background (50). Indeed, compounded by a popular and longstanding misunderstanding of Darwinian evolution rooted in nineteenth-century pseudoscience, a dialectic of race has emerged which holds the view that blackness equals ugliness and stupidity. Because of this combination of white western thinking that equates racist stereotypes of blackness with the primitive and uncouth, a hegemonic discourse continues. The dominance of European aesthetic values conceptualizes whiteness as signifying purity and neutrality while blackness has come to represent stigma and provocation.

The question of cuteness as a judgment of taste implicates an emotive connection to the notion of palatability as a sensory mode that determines the inclination or aversion to consume. The spectrum about responses implied by tastes, as ranging from intense craving to profound revulsion, speaks volumes to Barack Obama’s judgment of tastes regarding blackness as a legitimate quality of feminine beauty and desirability. Thus, when Barack Obama describes his and Michelle’s first kiss as having “tasted like chocolate,” a literal taste concept is captured through a commodified habitus of sensual
perceptions, feelings, and emotions. Returning to the linguistic binary set forth by Barthes in *Camera Lucida*, “I like / I don’t like” lends itself to a “secret chart of tastes, distastes, [and] indifferences” (18). The correctness of Barthes’s assertions regarding the explosion of the private into the public through the signs of tastes for the creation of new social values becomes clearer.

The rhetoric of cuteness in serving as a popular appraisal of presidential administrations that are not from the traditional American power elite by attenuating domestic concerns about class and power in regards to the high office. Spurred on by one pundit dubbing him the first female president because of Obama’s interpersonal disarming mechanisms, the popular media decries his “beta male” tendencies.³ His cute diplomacy compliments the depreciation of power now attributed the office through the geo-political leveling of American power relations presently occurring. Obama’s less aggrandized image supports the receding influence of American foreign policy and is more acceptable to other countries. In light of the Great Recession and right wing opposition to the current economic policies of this black White House, Obama’s capacity to leave a lasting cultural legacy continues to be challenged on these longstanding turfs. The lasting endowment of the Obama presidency could prove to be the ultimate constriction of American militarism and the audacity to hope for the eventual elimination of racial aggression in the United States and western imperialism on the global stage.
CHAPTER FOUR:  
AFRO AND AURA

“I watched the basketball game last night between – a little bit of Rutgers and Tennessee, the women’s final... some rough girls from Rutgers. Man, they got tattoos and – that’s some nappy-headed ho’es there. I’m gonna tell you that now, man, that’s some – woo!  

And the girls from Tennessee, they all look cute....” Don Imus

Breakage and Rupture: Black Hair Care Politics

Shifting from the visual politics of Michelle Obama, this chapter pursues the persistent legacy and pervasive impact of black hair care/politics as a spatial-racial rhetoric of cuteness. It is not the intention of this chapter to recite a complete anthropological, historical, and scientific account of black hair. Hair has significant implications for people’s sense of identity (at a very basic level) whatever the person’s racial identification. A curious person might wonder why much of the English, French, and German speaking worlds have assigned the prefix “Afro” to describe the sense of placeness associated with global populations of black people. Whether it serves as the hyphenated first half of one’s ethnic identity, an anthropological classification for language, or a catch-all term used to describe the super curly-coily quality of many black people’s hair, the word “afro” functions as much more than a prefix and has come to signify a phenomenology of blackness. Our language situates “afro” as the derivative root for the continent of Africa itself. Nowadays, one is more likely to hear the word used to designate what happens if you are black and grow your hair out, keeping it unprocessed and unbraided. The word can also be included in the popular YouTube acronym, “twa,” which stands for “teenie-weenie afro” and is the slang used to describe any black
woman’s hairstyle that is closely cropped. What is commonly called “the afro” is a common and highly recommended style for “anyone who has the genetic ability to rock it,” (Malone). The etymology is taken from the name of the Greek goddess of beauty, love and sex, Aphrodite, who is the Roman equivalent of Venus. According to Michael Bernale, Aphroditopolis was the geographic name the Greeks gave to Upper Egypt toward the interior South, which was occupied by the Nubians (65). It is not exactly clear why ancient Greeks named this population of darkly pigmented people after the venerated love deity, but the name stuck and its meaning expanded.

In the American popular imagination, the word “afro” is associated with the hairstyle popularized in the late 1960s and early 70s. In the early 1960s figures associated with the Black Arts Movement such as the jazz and folk artists Abby Lincoln, Miriam Makeba, and Odetta are generally considered to be the first public personalities to have worn the style in the trendsetting bohemian enclave of Greenwich Village in New York City. However, the hairdo soon took on more explicit political meaning, as afros became increasingly associated with the social activism of the Black Power movement. They signified a certain visuality of politics, as the media assigned them to black militant figures such as Angela Davis, Stokely Carmichael, and Huey P. Newton. The style choices of these black freedom fighters were presented to the mainstream as both glamorous and edgy. In the wake of the disillusionment following the non-violent protest politics of the Civil Rights and Anti-War Movements and the assassinations of Malcolm X, Medgar Evers, Martin Luther King, Fred Hampton, Patrice Lumumba, and others, images of black people wearing afros became an easily identifiable emblem of blackness.
and the frequent subject of media broadcasts around the globe. The afro had become an iconic fashion symbol and was emulated by entertainers in the music, television, and film industries. By the mid to late 1970s, however, the afro was less about blackness and was more about a popular technique for contouring a mass of thick, curly hair into a pleasing shape, which could be achieved by anyone with enough hair and the desire to affect the fashionable look. Even if one was not blessed with abundant hair, a wig could and would be easily purchased. Whether through the application in a beauty salon of a permanent wave or through one’s ethnically inherited phenotypic attributes, as in the case of the so-called “jew-fro,” the afro had become a permanent fixture in American popular culture.

Figure 4.1 - This 1975 paperback cover design of *Black No More* by George S. Schuyler makes use of the “afro” hairstyle image as a racial play on iconic American imagery.
The mass commercialization of this black-oriented hairstyle soon overtook its political and cultural origins and became a source for profit, as a number of large corporations began selling petroleum and mineral oil based beauty products formulated for the specific needs of afro hair grooming. Black folk, and black women in particular, proved to be eager consumers for this booming sector of the profit-driven hair care industry, which was owned and financed by mostly white people. The precedent for this niche in the American beauty market had been established as early as 1914 by Sarah “Madame CJ” Walker, the first self-made American woman millionaire of any race. By the time the Civil-rights-era had drawn to a close, products like “Afrosheen” were being heavily advertised on nationally syndicated television shows and hit primetime sitcoms such as *Soul Train, Good Times*, and *The Jeffersons*. No longer called “colored” or “Negro,” “Black” with a capital “B” became the preferred term of self-identification and racial pride for intellectual communities of African Americans. Through the institutional proliferation of cultural and ethnic studies in the American academy, “afro” with its associations to myriad people, places, and things has given way to an elongated, more formal sounding “African American” in the present. The self-determining signifier “Afro-American” fell out of favor in the late 1970s and early 1980s, as did the coiffure with which it shared a name. The Reagan years that followed functioned largely as a repudiation of the Civil Rights, Black Power, and black pride movements. Many of the gains made by black folk during that time were rolled back by neo-conservative libertarian activists, in partnership with a silent, “moral majority” of middle and working-class whites, who sensed the cultural milieu as having been besieged by the excesses of
cultural factionalism and political radicalism.\(^5\)

Mainstream attitudes about blacks representing some sort of internal national threat, however, coexisted with the pop cultural successes of crossover black super stars like Michael Jackson and Prince, as well as (rap acts emerging from the increasingly popular new hip-hop genre. These performers made the “jheri-curl” just one among the great variety of publicly visible black hairstyles (including braids, cornrows, dreads, symmetrical and asymmetrical bobs and shags, high and low-cut fades, tall and spiked, or long and flowing whether weaved or natural). Even as affirmative action was hotly debated in America’s courts and on the airwaves, an updated market of slightly less caustic lye and no-lye based hair relaxer treatments than had previously been available became more affordable and were adopted as the preferred style option, particularly by upwardly mobile black urban professional women. At this point, the afro was considered hopelessly out of style and anyone caught wearing such an “old-fashioned” style was viewed as out of touch with modern African American aspirations. The afro had become a sight gag, an accessory meant only for the socially eccentric or as part of Halloween attire when deployed as part of a basketball player costume.

For many generations of post-Civil Rights African Americans, aside from the loose associations with racial consciousness, the naturally occurring growth of their own hair is only a faint memory from childhood or a mystery they have yet to explore. This cultural estrangement from natural black hair is largely due to the gender-norming practice among men to keep their hair closely cropped and, for women, to habitually maintain a regimen of chemical relaxers or thermal straightening. Not surprisingly, quite
a few black people are just as intrigued by the physics, mechanics, and chemistry of caring for naturally occurring black hair as are many white folk. This aura of mystery, however, is not so much intrinsic as imposed by economic and political factors. The attitudes of shame and anger experienced by many black people when it comes to their hair can be attributed to the many centuries of forced migration and slavery that preceded African American emancipation. Before European colonization and slavery, the members of African societies saw hair as a sort of “media” which could be used for carrying social messages about marital status, community rank, ethnic and clan identities, as well as wealth and religion. During the colonial and antebellum periods, it was not unusual for white slave holders to mark disobedient slaves with a mangled haircut as a way to punish and demoralize their human chattel. This strategy was especially employed on rebellious female slaves as a means of white supremacist control over black bodies that would reinforce the sense of racial and gender inferiority.

This is all to say that, before arriving on American shores, the black descendants of West Africa did not have a stigmatized view of their hair. This is why the legal scholar, D. Wendy Greene, contends:

Black women’s deliberations over their hair may be shared to a certain extent by all women; however, the extent to which these decisions are emotional, personal, political, and professional (and often driven by fears of the resulting consequences) are unique to the Black women’s experience – historically and contemporarily. This experience is deeply rooted in American constructs of race, racism, and racial hierarchy out of which a particular negative stigmatization of
Black women’s hair and resulting separation, discrimination, and marginalization manifested in both private and public spheres. (406-407)

Greene makes this statement by taking into account the appellate court case of Rogers v. American Airlines, which upheld the right of employers to reject the right of employees to wear braided hairstyles in places of work. Renee Rogers, the black woman who was the plaintiff in the case, challenged American Airline’s decision to deny her promotions based on her chosen hairstyle when she argued that the airline was discriminating against her specifically as a black woman. According to legal scholar, Paulette M. Caldwell, Rogers lost the case because of her claim about the interactive effects of racial and gender discrimination (365). The court, however, chose to deny her claim based on legal distinctions between biological and cultural conceptions of race. Most significantly, the court treated the plaintiff’s claims of race and gender discrimination as issues which are somehow mutually exclusive and independent from one another, and denied Rogers’s argument that one thing (being female) had anything to do with the other (being black). Caldwell concludes, “Although Rogers is the only reported decision that upholds the categorical exclusion of braided hairstyles, the prohibition of such styles in the workforce is both widespread and longstanding” (366).

**Our 4Cs Ain’t Your CCCC**

The Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) is the abbreviated acronym that identifies America’s national professionalizing body of composition, rhetoric, and writing studies. When orally represented, CCCC is pronounced “four-Cs.” However, in the parlance of the YouTube natural hair community, whenever vloggers,
lurkers, and channel subscribers refer to “four-Cs” it is meant as the common designation for afro-textured hair types and constitutes one of the many categories of hair types devised by Andre Walker (celebrity stylist and personal hairdresser to Oprah Winfrey). In his book Andre Talks Hair, Walker charts his highly influential taxonomy of hair types. The straightest of these types is type 1, with type 4 being the least straight (Walker 30). These four types are broken down into subcategories (a, b, and c) in order to reflect the spectrum of curl patterns (or lack thereof) within each type.

- **Type 1 hair** is straight and reflects the most sheen and is the most robust of all of the hair types. It is difficult to damage and nearly impossible to curl. Because the natural oil produced in the sebaceous glands of the scalp works its way from the scalp to the ends without the interference of curls or kinks, it is the most oily hair texture of all.

- **Type 2 hair** is wavy hair and lies somewhere between straight and curly hair, imparts more sheen than curly hair, though not as much as straight hair. Wavy hair is more prone to frizz. While type 2A wavy hair can easily alternate between straight and curly styles, 2B and 2C wavy hair is more resistant to styling.

- **Type 3 hair** is curly hair and has a definite “S” shape. Depending on whether or not a person has 3a, 3b, or 3c hair the “S” shaper may be more of a lower case “s” rather than an upper case. Type 3 hair types are full bodied, become more humid according to climate, and are more damage-prone than type 1 and type 2 hair textures; improper care may result in lackluster curls.

- **Type 4 hair** is usually referred to as “nappy” or “kinky” hair, is actually the finest
of the hair types. Despite what many people may think, this tightly coiled hair is extremely fine and fragile. It is delicate by nature. In the absence of conditioning products and moisture sealants, each strand usually has a zigzag pattern. Kinky hair is prone to dryness and requires a gentle touch with minimal combing, and then only after the hair is detangled, thoroughly coated to promote slippage, and dripping wet. For the 4c type, regular combing under any other circumstances is like giving a coily-haired individual a daily, mini haircut. This is why such huge misconceptions exist about this hair type not growing at the same rate as other textures. However, it is more wiry and breaks much more readily than other textures if not intensively conditioned and treated to increase pliability and softness. This hair type must be treated tenderly, to avoiding harsh tools, chemicals, or styling techniques.

Depending on whatever environmental pressures and genetic permutations present themselves, people of African descent have hair that varies across a wide spectrum of textures, from coily to curly and wavy to straight. The phenotypic expressions for these varying hair textures appear in the package of amino acids that form the keratin proteins in hair. In most African Americans, this gene package for hair is genetically coded for tightly curled, super coily strands. James C. King details the generally held scientific knowledge of racial phenotypes in *The Biology of Race*. Hair phenotypes in African-descended populations vary widely, as the evolutionary reasons behind hair texture have been determined by the selection pressures needed for human adaptation to the earth’s tremendous geographical expanse across climates and environments (King 148). The
coily, springy quality of afro-textured hair is believed by evolutionary biologists to have been initiated due to an adaptive need for protection against the intense ultraviolet radiation of Africa. Because of and in addition to this adaptive need, afro-textured hair is relatively sparse and, combined with its springy coil structure, results in an airy, almost sponge-like appearance and feel, resulting in the increased circulation of cool air onto the scalp. Modern day human beings’ hominid ancestors, who once lived across the open savannah, are believed to have developed this trait in order to regulate body-temperature. For these reasons, afro-textured hair does not respond as easily to moisture and sweat as straight hair does and, rather than sticking to the neck and scalp when wet, tends to retain its basic springy puffiness, except when it is completely saturated. The smaller the curl pattern and more porous the hair shaft, the more quickly and efficiently the hair helps dissipate heat from the scalp, thereby keeping the body cool in extremely hot conditions. These coily strands tend to curl in on themselves when they are not spiraling up and out, and are more architectural and less flowing than other types of hair. Obviously this trait becomes less common as geographic adaptation occurs. Also, human curl patterns loosen and become less pronounced as genetic hybridization takes place. The trait may have also been kept in certain gene pools and favored for sexual selection based on visual and tactile attraction, which may have further contributed to coily hair’s ubiquity in certain regions.

Given the social and environmental influences on human cultures, along with the attendant desire to develop technologies intended to manipulate and maneuver around “nature,” hair no longer serves an immediate need for evolutionary adaptation and
survival in a modern world. Dick Hebdige shows in his seminal work *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* that the semiotics of people’s fashion choices allows us to recognize hair’s ability to convey specific social messages (117). Yet, despite the complications of history, there are those who think some black people’s preoccupation with the politics of hair should not be a subject for serious inquiry, as hair is only for ornamental or decorative purposes. This preoccupation has developed out of issues stemming from Eurocentric framings of the racialized *other*, which have been reinforced and reinterpreted through the lens of film culture.

**Refraction/Reflection: Film Techne and Black Aura**

When conducting a Google search for the terms “African,” “American,” and “cute” (without quotation marks), over a million hits are produced. The first hits are associated with black women’s hairstyles, followed by hits for baby names. As mentioned earlier, objects valued for their cottony soft, fuzzy, round, puffy, or open qualities are visual indicators of cuteness. Well cared for afro hair that is allowed to grow out evenly and untangled possess these qualities – as if resembling the shape of a halo. This type of visuality has an aural quality that, when apprehended for view by the refraction of light, transmits a hazy, luminous, glowing presence. The critical theory associated with this variation on cuteness as a visual and spatial rhetoric can be explicated through Walter Benjamin’s theory of *aura*, which may serve to de-delineate present understandings of black hair politics. In “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Benjamin argues that the authenticity and uniqueness of images, over time, become compromised as a result of their reproducibility. This reproduction gives off an aural
quality, which becomes attached to the perceived authenticity or cultural value of objects through the external attributes of proprietorship and public exposure. Benjamin makes clear that a thing’s authenticity

is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced. Since the historical testimony rests on the authenticity, the former, too, is jeopardized by reproduction when substantive duration ceases to matter. And what is really jeopardized when the historical testimony is affected is the authority of the object. One might subsume the eliminated element in the term “aura” and go on to say: that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art…. One might generalize by saying: the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. (221).

For Benjamin, as in the case of the photographic portrait of the dearly departed, aura is not only connected to the blurrings resulting from the close proximity of reproducible objects, but is defined as a “phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be” (222). Benjamin shows aura as a basic affective sense. Here is where the stylistic form of cuteness converges with the affective pathos of empathetic content and is received as sentiment. If what Benjamin reveals about objects is in any way valid, we would have to accept the category of “afro” within this constellation of cultural artifacts regarded as authentic. In effect, the afro has come full circle (all puns intended) as an object taken at face value, meaning nothing in particular, other than a mundane sign of everydayness. Since the afro’s initial appearance and subsequent overexposure from sensational media
framings of political radicalism and racial conflict, not to mention countless 
appropriations in the form of blacksploitation movies and television presentations 
featuring popular soul music icons, the mainstream might finally have become more 
accustomed to seeing black people appear in the public sphere. Currently, the affective 
display of afros are now judged almost as much for their kitsch appeal, as they are seen to 
convey a perfectly contemporary image of model minority representation that is 
altogether different from the stereotypes of militancy and social defiance once associated 
with the black people (especially black women) wearing their hair naturally.

Afro aurality, then, can be understood as an “eliminated element” (Benjamin 221) 
in American cinema culture. In American film, the classic Hollywood grammar of light 
and color mimics that of the continental European value system that is based on hoarding 
relics for their supposed intrinsic worth because the tarnish-resistant luster of gold is 
thought to maintain an everlasting good and is supposedly reflective of the unique quality 
of the sun that shines from the heavens. Through the repetition of material and political 
actions aimed at securing this end, we accept as natural and innate what has been 
histronically injected into the culture. Perhaps once it was true, under the dominion of 
the Roman Catholic Church, that “art” could only be seen as the western representation 
of the Christian God, Himself. The orthodoxy of Christian icon making created a 
tradition in which all crafted images had to be “in the image of God” or, otherwise, an 
inspiration for the singular goal of attaining heaven. For an “art” object to be ordained as 
such, it either had to be covered, framed, stitched, woven, soldered, or forged with some 
measure of gold. This was considered the “essence” by which the work of “art” was
invested with value. In order for film to achieve the rank of “art,” the idea of “beauty” it itself had to designate a cinematic sign system of images in keeping with this western belief system. The Old World cultural heritage of European Empire outlines these contours of cultural ideals associated with the Christian tradition. The framing and overlaying of religious icons with gold serves as a reflection of the western history of iconoclastic wars and the hoarding of relics for their divine properties prototypically produced presupposes the institution of worldly materiality that is free from blemish. Today, the gold standard as a system of universal exchange has largely disappeared alongside the orthodoxy of beliefs that once glorified the “nature” of currency exchange systems according to occidental predilections. World capitalism yet remains within the horizon of western metaphysics through the ceaseless commodification of all sign systems of knowledge transmission always remaining inside our perceptions even as we are beginning to realize the finite nature of what was once thought to have eternal worth. As a result, Hollywood techne mimics the previous role of the church and has subsequently installed its own pantheon of constellations in its place. In order to invent a cinema world with aura and myth, the “light” of the absolute partly returns to us through Hollywood’s racialized imagery of earthly desire.

In Film Form: Essays in Film Theory and The Film Sense, Sergei Eisenstein discusses the meaning of light and color at great length, especially as it pertains to yellow. Yellow took on special significance in western culture through the Christian tradition. It was the color associated with wanton love. Yellow was the color that Judas was often depicted in. According to Eisenstein, our present ideas of yellow connect to the
attitudes about gold, as a symbol of “highest value” and reveals the presence of a belief system that places its faith in a “higher,” supposedly eternal reality of heaven, where life after death ultimately serves the Christian principles of worldly transcendence (127). The notion of a golden horizon serves as a popular metaphor that signifies formalist associations with the sun and the stars (Eisenstein 127). Eisenstein expounds:

However, the most interesting light cast on these “symbolic meanings” of yellow comes from the fact that, essentially it was not yellow, as a colour that determined them. We have shown that in antiquity this interpretation arose as an automatic antipode to the sun-motivated positive tone of yellow. (134)

The above passage explains the value historically assigned to the blonde Hollywood starlet as emblematic of the “desired.” Few cinematic tropes are more recognized than the beautiful female protagonist played by the Hollywood starlet illuminated by the glow of radiant blonde hair.

Eisenstein, of course, is not only speaking of gold, but is also speaking in terms of other representations of yellow. He also recognizes the slippage of these positive connotations of yellow into that of decay when he argues, “on the other hand, [yellow is] extremely liable to contamination, and produces a very disagreeable effect if it is sullied. […] Thus, the colour of sulphur, which inclines to green, has something unpleasant in it” (136). Here is where yellow makes the turn to its more decadent spectral neighbor, green. This is where associations with the self-evident effect of bodily decay appear, such as in the case of jaundice, pus, mucous, bile, urine. At this point on the color scale,
Eisenstein demonstrates, correlations to the blonde body fade and are devalued as a representation of the abject, as in the case of the counterfeit peroxide blonde. These semiotic connotations of formal film culture continue on the digital screen, but cannot be imposed on everyone because there is always a level of social agency, allowing for resistance and innovation. Which is why cute black hair care/politics does not necessarily equate successful performances of feminine beauty with whoever has longest, blondest, swingiest, sun-shiniest hairstyle.

As discussed earlier, the appearance of black hairstyles are more or less mediated through traditional, hegemonic gender norms. (Though in the case of black hair care, there are always some black men who wear long, flowing styles on occasion, just as there are always a number of black women who sport closely-cropped or even shaved styles.) Baldness is a very popular style for many black women, whether lesbian or straight, and is considered an attractive look by a great deal of heterosexual African American men. Judith Butler also contributes a useful theory to map out cuteness as a performative phenomenon through her articulations of the “real.” According to Butler’s discussion of the late 1980s and early 1990s social phenomenon of black gay drag balls, in which a variety of queer black men compete in gender-bending competitions (as depicted by documentarian Jenny Livingston in *Paris is Burning*), what is defined as “realness” is not exactly a category in which one competes; it is a standard that is used to judge any given performance within the established categories. And yet what determines the effect of realness is the ability to compel belief, to produce the naturalized effect. This effect is itself the result of and embodiment of norms, a
reiteration of norms, and impersonation of racial and class norms, a norm which is
at once a figure, a figure of a body, which is no particular body but a
morphological ideal that remains the standard which regulates the performance,
but which no performance fully approximates. (129)

This passage above speaks to descriptive gender categories that exceed the male/female
binary in the context of transgender performances, thus making the case that long flowing
hair has no essential quality that makes it inherently more feminine than any other kind of
hair.

Among the most popular vlog topics on YouTube at present are the discussions of
African American women who have embarked upon their very own “natural hair
journey” or have discovered some new miracle product that has finally knocked their
kinky curls into place. In these scenarios there are already a number of recurrent tropes,
often bordering on cliché. Many posts in this genre of video blogs are structured
according to the following narrative arc: “Hey Guys! It’s me and blah, blah, blah. My
hair is blah, blah, blah. And it won’t ever blah, blah, blah no matter how much I try to
blah, blah, blah. Bye Guys!” Usually, though, the vlog channels engaging this particular
genre of African American digital rhetoric include a musical video montage of a black
woman’s hair growing cycle, beginning with her longest relaxed hair length, and
continuing through the growing out of her non-chemicalized, natural hair. Usually
featuring an event known as “the big chop” (which appears to the uninitiated as a sudden,
radically close cropped haircut), the “hair journey” is often framed by these “natural
community” hair bloggers as the culmination of some sort of trauma resulting in
meaningful transformation. Whether it is cosmetic (severe hair damage from chemicals, health, or environmental factors), social (new career, geographical relocation, or professional change), or personal (romantic transition or new baby), this narrative arc within the black hair tutorial vlog genre has become a staple. Through the reinvention of social networking options available through YouTube channel subscriptions, the fundamentally human desire to see people on screen who resemble the self is fulfilled, becoming its own genre.

According to Carolyn R. Miller, YouTube natural hair tutorials constitute a genre. For Miller, “genres serve as keys to understanding how to participate in the actions of a community” (165). Genres emerge from social contexts that are interpretable through meaningful rules along a continuum of formalist concerns of “higher” and “lower” substances. Genre is always mediating private intentions and social exigence. Genre, Miller writes, “motivates by connecting the private with the public, the singular and recurrent” (163) and is mediated by culture. In light of Miller’s notions about genre, these “natural YouTubers” are creating a framework for social action through their own video channels in order to challenge the assumptions about naturally occurring black hair growth, texture, and beauty. The cultural anthropologist Ginetta Condelario explains:

The importance of hair as a defining race marker highlights the centrality of beauty practices. Hair, after all, is an alterable sign. Hair that is racially compromising can be mitigated with care and styling. Skin color and facial features, conversely, are less pliant or not as easily altered” (129, emphasis added).
This racial “compromising” Condelario speaks of in the case of hair, has to do with a type of “trade-off” or socially agreed upon mode of exchange in which some elements are lost so that others can be gained. In the commercial beauty industry, from the training of beauticians to the development, marketing, and packaging of products, black hair care proficiency and the awareness of the mechanical techniques and application of tools and substances that bring out the optimal physical properties of the range of black hair types have been largely neglected. This should come as no surprise since the technologies of hair “artifice and alteration… are mediated by racial, sexual, class, political, and geographic cultures and locations” (Condelario 128). Thus, beauty shops function as sites of both cultural and identity production. This is especially the case for salons targeted toward black women. This racialization of the community institutions that are hair salons should be taken into account whenever we consider the centuries of global colonialism, slavery, imperialism, and neocolonialism, which paradoxically label African bodies as unsightly and undesirable while simultaneously also marking them as hypersexualized, exotic, and titillating.

The videos posted by natural hair YouTubers are aimed at reversing this negative stigma and giving fellow site users the tools for effecting the most natural, least chemically altered, aesthetically (both visually and tactiley) pleasing hair by imparting the tools and techniques found to be most effective and conducive to this goal. By and large, in the world of the YouTube natural hair care community, black women are not there to give each other grief. A good ethos is essential to contributing. What is most interesting about this is the discursive ethics of the YouTube natural hair care community,
as evidenced by the natural YouTubers’ comment threads. Invariably defying the hipster-cool cynicism, random lack of civility, and generally vitriolic commentary for which YouTube is so infamous, the etiquette of the black hair care community expresses simply, *if you cannot say anything nice, say nothing at all*. Of course, this is not to say that the conversation is comprised of banalities and bland pleasantries. In fact, the videos presented through the natural YouTube community work to implicitly and explicitly critique the dominant cultural discourses of white capitalist, hetero-normative, patriarchal culture and are dedicated to the circulation of technical, practical, and philosophical knowledge production. Otherwise known as *phronesis*, the practical wisdom of black hair care/politics are re/searched, re/covered, tested, exchanged, and evaluated in the public plural space of YouTube, thus ending the longstanding history of black women’s hair care as only occupying the quarters of homo-socially gendered, all-black zones of privacy and defying the politics that once assigned only stigma and shame.

In this genre of vlogging, anonymity is difficult if one wishes to productively contribute to the conversation. It is interesting to point out that this mode of discourse is the opposite of the general level of discourse comprising much of YouTube. Absent from the plural public sphere of YouTube natural hair vlogging are the usual blatant attacks on subscribers’ individual identities. No matter what kind of hair situation is presented, homophobic, sexist, or racist rants are summarily deleted. There exists a community consensus that trolling is not to be tolerated, though critical feedback is fine as long as it is couched within a constructive framework. Inquiry is welcome and participants are invited to offer analysis and critique that continually problematizes materials presented to
and by others. This community of black women makes possible a context where civility rules, even in a media format that is notorious for virulent sarcasm and a rancor. These black female YouTubers uphold the basic foundational decorum that all speech is not equal, nor does every opinion deserve to be espoused or promoted. If a constructive solution is not the intent of one’s comments, one is banned from participating.

Establishing identification with resemblance to oneself among other natural bloggers is an initial step in the process of participation in this hair community. In fact, for coarser hair-types (such as 3a-c and 4a-c hair categories), healthy hair can only be evaluated after first locating a “hair twin” or vlogger whose hair length and texture most closely resembles one’s own. Needless to say, hate speech is strongly discouraged and monitored in favor of supportive, affirming feedback, which is a fundamental logos of this genre.

The genre of natural black hair care tutorial vlogs fulfill a similar role of social action as the *American Negro Exhibit*, “Types of American Negroes, Georgia” was displayed at the 1900 Paris Exhibition and was assembled by none other than the seminal scholar and author of *The Souls of Black Folks* himself, WEB Du Bois. The art historian and cultural critic Shawn Michelle Smith traces the historical and visual legacy of this exhibition of photographs, which featured individual and group portraits of middle-class Georgia blacks commissioned by Du Bois and captured by the African American photographer Thomas E. Askew of Atlanta (Smith 13). Smith claims that Du Bois made a special point to showcasing Askew’s race in tandem with his technical craft through the inclusion of the photographer’s own self-portrait. By doing this, Du Bois made a point regarding African American capability, beauty, and cultural refinement as a central focus.
in the photographic representations of race (Smith 5). Also according to Smith, Du Bois sought to structure a new process of racial identification, aimed at productively resisting the hegemonic materiality of the “color line as the marker of social and economic divides engendered by slavery, segregation, colonialism, and imperialism” (Smith 1). Throughout this exhibition, the project of showing a wide range of physical types of black subjects was central to providing what Smith describes as “a counterarchive that challenges a long legacy of racist taxonomy, intervening in turn of the century ‘race science’ by offering competing evidence” (Smith 2).

In his essay “The Body and the Archive,” Allan Sekula examines photography’s effects of upholding notions of the private individual. Sekula’s reference to the honorific functions of photography makes clear distinctions between the bureaucratizing effects of photographic subjects from individuals into types through the repressive effects of criminal mugshots, licensure photos, and clinical profiles. According to Shawn Michelle Smith, it is this split between the private/public, type/individual dichotomies that marks the color-line politics of the American photographic archives and thus delineates and translates the cultural expectations associated with categories of class, color, and gender. Indeed a direct and linear line from the technology of photography as a typing mechanism exists. In “The Ethic of the Spectator: The Citizenry of Photography” Ariella Azoulay explains that signs and disputes over their meanings attest to the fact that a photograph can never speak for itself. Moreover, what is seen in the photograph is never an immediate given, as meaning must be constructed and agreed upon (as in the case of racial meaning).
As these varying theoretical ideas would have it, it is chiefly through photography’s function as a main tool of scientific inquiry that we accept socially constructed agreements about race. As Smith notes, it was not enough for Du Bois to merely frame the “American Negro” as a range of types, but specifically, he sought to mediate the image of black people against racial typing or stereotypes. As the pseudoscientific discourses of Du Bois’s day held it, blacks were seen as inherently criminal, biologically predisposed to theft, sexually loose, and incapable of fidelity. What should be clearer to us today is the idea that this obsession with the racist trope of black criminality was merely presented as a type of decoy in service to the extreme poverty afflicting African Americans’ material circumstances and used to justify Jim Crow and lynching – not to mention as a cover-up to downplay centuries of miscegenation initiated by upper-class, white male slave owners. DuBois enlisted photography to dispute these racist canards by presenting historical and sociological evidence countering such claims. Aware of the persuasive power of the photographic imagery made available through Frances Galton’s series of composite mugshots portraying the facial traits of the innately criminal as well as the ever expanding gallery of mugshots featuring black faces, Du Bois sought to intervene. In the initial selection of African Americans were those who DuBois believed could be framed most flatteringly and persuasively against the prevailing visual tropes of the day. In this first round of photographs, Askew shot his tightly framed, expressionless photographic subjects from the shoulders up, both frontally and in profile, against a plain backdrop. By posing his subjects against a plain gray background, lacking visual amenities or set decor, DuBois and Askew repeated the very same repressive
effects produced by the types of images taken for prison record mugshots.

Eventually, however, Du Bois adds significant changes to his counterarchive. He did this by incorporating elements like lacework table coverings, heavy damask draperies, signature stained glass fixtures, and other fashionable embellishments and furnishings typical of the late Victorian period most. To signify individual class propriety, dignity, and social decorum, Askew eventually developed more elaborate shots featuring the accoutrements of modern, middle-class commodity culture. Little by little, the subjects’ bodies are represented in greater quantity and detail and are surrounded by overstuffed furniture, floral carpets, and leather-bound tomes. Elegant sconces and heavy draperies become more prominently displayed. The repressive mugshot gradually gives way to the honorific portrait. His use of the aural quality of portrait photography suggests that Du Bois believed class was more important than race and that white middle-class viewing audiences could in some way self-identify with blacks on the legal basis of social relations mediated by the possession of private property.

This objectification of racial and class status as based on the ownership of property stands in contradiction to the stereotype of black women as being framed as either the completely domesticated and sexually neutered mammy) or the hypersexualized, wantonly available prostitute. This is a much less examined issue that speaks to Du Bois’s selection of the type of figure models he sought out and relates to the Negro Exhibit’s legacy of idealized black beauty and by extension the values associated with black womanhood in general. The examples of “typical” African Americans chosen by Du Bois were all rather exceptionally attractive. However, this framing of
attractiveness is rather narrowly defined, as most of the African Americans featured were extremely light skinned, with loosely curled to wavy hair. For instance, the women’s massive tresses are piled high atop their heads in the fashionable “Gibson” style buns with curls and tendrils prettily arranged while, in the case of many of the little girls, coifs are hanging past shoulder length and tied in long ponytails with expensive ribbons. The hair of the men and boys, meanwhile, is neatly parted and slicked down to a glossy shine.

It makes sense that Du Bois would want to depict exceptionally attractive models in order to display the “American Negro” in the most flattering and appealing manner, but it is also interesting to consider the fact that his models are so light with hair so straight that a great many of them could pass for “white” individuals. As Smith points out, Du Bois’s photographic assemblage of mixed-race individuals contests visual codes of his day, thereby revealing a racial taxonomy based in a fiction of images upholding the idea that “black” people and “white” people are easily distinguished and visually apprehended as separate categories (62). Since blacks and whites could be shown as not necessarily distinguishable, Du Bois employs the visuality of photographic evidence to undermine the color-coded politics of American culture. In fact, were it not for the title of the exhibit proclaiming the “Negro-ness” of the photographic the viewers would have been hard pressed to identify their racial identities. This also indicates Du Bois’s aim to confuse the racial identification of the white audiences in and of themselves, while visually appealing to European aesthetic tastes and inciting questions about the arbitrary basis upon which America’s racial caste system stands.
Paradoxically, because of this powerful regime of controlling images, the specter of the tragic mulatto/a (born of sexual impropriety and signified for her elicit desirability) is represented all throughout the exhibit, despite the pains taken by Du Bois to counter this profoundly dominant ideological structure. Du Bois’s choice to take on some of the most pernicious myths associated with black people, and black women in particular, says much about the historical legacy of allegedly insatiable black female sexuality. This has long functioned in the regime of American white supremacist discourse. Racist claims regarding black women’s “naturally” sexual deviant attitudes have historically played a significant role in the system of American labor production and have similarly been pivotal in the racialized, gendered binaries of hegemonic appropriations of femininity and heterocentric normality (Collins 83). Through the ethnographic gaze of Du Bois’s “American Negro Exhibit,” a reflection upon the motivations behind whiteness’s claims of racial purity traces out the racialized conceits supporting white supremacist thinking that maintains the idea that there would be greater racial equality if only “blacks” could become more pure like “whites.” Unfortunately, as can be ascertained by the plethora of images depicting black deviance still populating the modern media landscape, the “American Negro Exhibit” may have only served as a means of reinforcing the white standard beauty ideal. The effects of these controlling images have had the effect of situating black women in the position of having no rights that any man (let alone one who is white) ever needs to respect. For this reason, the “American Negro Exhibit” images placed in the Paris Exposition by Du Bois includes many images of African American women dressed modestly, though expensively, in the most fashionable clothing of the
day. Usually, in frames with adult women, wedding bands are prominently displayed in order to convey the social (and moral) status of the model.

The Victorian sense of sexual propriety was also emphasized through the lens of childhood. The children of the “American Negro Exhibit” are cherubically conceived, embodying the moral sentiment associated with the sanctity of the family. They are not “cute” in the modern sense but are nonetheless posed as miniature adults. However, according to Lori Merish, “[t]he modern cult of the cute has clear antecedents in the Victorian cult of the child,” indicating a spectacle of class status and display (188). In the case of the Du Bois exhibit, cuteness performs the dual cultural functions of disavowing mulatto/a erotica through “the sublimation of adults’ erotic feelings toward children” (Merrish 188) but also creating a sense of detached affection for the object that is sentimentally likeable, but sufficiently unlike the self. In keeping with this Victorian sensibility toward childhood, as Shawn Michelle Smith determines, the photographer must have been especially adept at putting [young children] at ease, for these young girls and boys appear perfectly at home in their little bodies, without the awkward gangliness of youth; their expressions are soft and composed. Even tiny children, in long baptismal gowns that swallow their limbs, appear rather self-possessed in their propped-up positions. Despite their adult composure and poise, however, the children in these photographs are supported by a much larger array of props and objects than Askew’s adults. It is as if the narrative of their lives has not yet fully developed enough to stand on its own, or to be represented by their
bodies, and need some formal scripting in order to be communicated to the viewer. (71)

In order to engage this narrative of the black body and that of the black child, in particular, Du Bois does not select all of the children featured in the “Negro Exhibit” for their very light skin tones or wavy hair patterns. Some of the child models sport kinky afro hair, in plaited or twisted styles. In the contemporary imagination, the value to the health of hair constructed into intricately twined hairstyles is not understood in mainstream American beauty culture because the range of physical textures of black hair types span such a wide spectrum of curl patterns and cuticle thicknesses and adapt to chemical and mechanical manipulation with such versatility. (Perhaps it is for this reason that natural hairstyles on some black women, for instance, can be negatively viewed as “childish” or “silly” and harshly judged as unfeminine or unprofessional.) Together, Du Bois and Askew work to refute the idea of black children being cast as so-called “pickaninnies,” condemned to a world of motherless destitution or fatherless illegitimacy.

In the words of Shawn Michelle Smith, “[t]hese children are neither frivolous nor unkempt; indeed, they are already studious, lost in contemplation” (Smith 72). Du Bois shows black children as well cared for and securely nurtured.

Much of how we perceive the body occurs through a visual (and object oriented) acquisition of images. For the most part, we “take in” our surroundings through the way our eyes’ optical cones transmit light to the brain’s visual cortex. Although hair is an external sign of the body, human beings tend to make assessments about people’s personal health and vitality by their amount of hair. On the one hand (especially from a
European worldview) healthy hair is thought of as long and flowing. Therefore, in the general discourse, talk about the “condition” of hair is done so in terms of hair’s ability to reflect light and shine. The hair of many African descended people is not flowing and does not grow long; coily hair refracts light, is more architectural, and grows wide. Throughout *Black Looks*, bell hooks argues that black visual rhetors have historically responded to the negative conceptualizations of African Americans, which have been philosophically based on the 19th century white supremacist ideology. Black visual rhetors have sought to answer this racist thinking through a collective will to “produce a counter-hegemonic art that would challenge white representations of ‘blackness’ … that would convey complexity of experience and feeling” (133). Hooks establishes the idea that a valuable counterarchive has since emerged, as she demonstrates how such African American visual agency “subvert[s] the negation of the black body that is imposed by white supremacy,” and rather glorifies it (hooks 137). Building on the works of hooks, Shawn Michelle Smith documents the ways that African Americans have seen fit to assemble a similar counterarchive of “race photography.” Smith shows how both African American photographers and archivists, in their own right, went to great lengths to show a more flattering (more realistic) range of African American visual representations. While all of humanity genetically traces its origins to Africa, African Americans are even more closely linked to the continent, phenotypically speaking, by their hair. The *techne* of black hair care was once among the most private and secretive practices of black folk life. Today, like no time before, the appearance of the ordinarily occurring growth of unbraided black hair has become completely public – even mainstream – as black women
have begun illuminating their own identities in the digital sphere. It is interesting to see how class performances and gender roles among African Americans morph and adapt, given the public plural space that comprises YouTube. How cultural values are changing and being changed through the multimodal pedagogy of black hair tutorial vlogs continues to have impact on the quality of lives for millions of African American women.

**Reclaiming Outsourced Hair Care Politics**

In Chris Rock’s satirical documentary, *Good Hair*, the comedian journeys from the black hair salons of Los Angeles to South Asia to discover the origin of the most highly prized commodity in the black hair care industry, human hair from India. Rock and his director, Jeff Stilson, provide an entry into the world of Hindu religious ritual sacrifices of hair and how it provides ample opportunity for lucrative profits on the part of global hair entrepreneurs, as they fly across the Pacific with suitcases crammed with recently sheared tresses. Instead of further investigating the “roots” of this political economy, the film’s comedic approach excessively focuses on visual gags such as the scene featuring Chris Rock awkwardly balanced atop an ox-drawn cart in downtown Calcutta. The central theme of the film focuses on black women who spend thousands of dollars achieving the appearance of long, straight, European hair through lye-based chemical relaxers. Rock and Stilson track the outrageous fortunes expended in pursuit of this singular goal. What is downplayed is the tremendous number of black women rejecting this narrow interpretation of beauty and seeking to shine a light on their own self-presentations.

In this new generation of black hair care advocates, there is a return to the “old-fashioned” concoctions that mimic the early twentieth century recipes used by previous
generations of black women in an age before thermal styling and relaxers were widely available. African American women from the agrarian world of the early 1900s through to the Depression designed and developed their own mixtures for the maintenance of their hair. During that time, there were no Walgreen’s or Sally’s Beauty Supply stores where one could simply purchase a pre-packaged product with a pretty brown-skinned model depicted on the box. Blending the right moisturizers and sealants for the hair was, for the majority of rural blacks, an extremely personal enterprise – inspired by necessity and utilizing ingredients easily found in one’s back yard or kitchen. Natural components in these beauty concoctions included eggs, honey, vinegar, milks, and teas, not to mention locally foraged plants of many varieties like rosemary, sage, and aloe. The personal care of one’s hair was often entrusted to members of the community who were recognized for their “growing hands” and respected for their know-how concerning the application of tools and techniques that would accentuate the optimal health of the range of black hair types. In fact, hairdressers were sought after as much for their technical proficiencies with hot combs as they were for their skills as an apothecary. But for the most part, black hair had a do-it-yourself ethic.

Today, most products targeted toward naturally occurring afro-textured hair consumers are marketed as “custards,” “puddings,” “soufflés,” “meringues,” “jams,” “jelly’s,” “butters,” and “creams.” Using this rhetoric of food, these products – which are often sweet to the taste and heavily suffused with agave nectars, aloe juice, avocado, botanical teas and extracts, and high quality, consumable plant oils – fulfill the promise of what their packages advertise. They moisturize, shape, seal, and define the spiraling
patterns of (super curly, coily) hair-types 3 and 4 – all for a price, of course. Fortunately, if one has the time and inclination, YouTube videos showing how many of these products can be authentically replicated are dedicated to sharing practical knowledge of how anyone may concoct their own organic, naturally derived (practically edible) hair recipes. In so doing, black women are using the plural public space of YouTube to challenge the economics of black hair care politics. Black women are reclaiming involvement with their own hair and are no longer relinquishing control of their personal and cultural well-beings to the style trends and fashion whims of the beauty marketing industry. Work that was once outsourced to “licensed professionals” has been brought back home, to the intimate spaces of kitchens and lavatories. It is thus beginning to more consciously problematize the global ethics of the human hair trade. Through these pedagogical publics of new media, many of these issues are being thrashed out in the social networks, thus indicating the potential for reclaiming the personal activity of caring for afro-textured hair, once deemed too time consuming and work intensive to become a site of leisure and community.
CHAPTER FIVE:

CUTIFIED HIP-HOP AND MULTIMODAL COMPOSITION

“Teachers who have a vision of democratic education assume that learning is never confined solely to an institutionalized classroom. Rather than embodying the conventional false assumption that the university setting is not the ‘real world’ and teaching accordingly, the democratic educator breaks through the false construction of the corporate university as set apart from real life and seeks to re-envision schooling as always a part of our real world experience, and our real life. Embracing the concept of a democratic education we see teaching and learning as taking place constantly.”

bell hooks

Cutified Composition and Race

The field of English composition has come into its own in the cultural milieu following the liberation and student movements, characteristic of the late-middle twentieth century. In this way, the subject of cuteness as a racial decorum relates quite directly to the field of English studies, as it can be readily argued that the disciplinary ethos of rhetoric and composition parallels the discursive trajectory of the Civil Rights Movement. This paradigm shift, referred to as process pedagogy, is evidenced by the field’s subsequent grappling with these cross-disciplinary concerns. In our field, the concerns of this shift are articulated most explicitly in the series of conversations between the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire and the compositionist Ira Shor in their collaborative effort A Pedagogy of Liberation: Dialogues on Transforming Education. In one particularly compelling section of the book, Shor and Freire revisit the issue of teacher-student power relations in their discussion regarding the distinction between teacher authority and teacher authoritarianism (91). In this exchange, Freire and Shor express how important it
is for educators and academics not to attempt bringing about the “liberating process” by way of an extreme relaxation of teacher-student roles that relinquishes the educator responsibility of providing a stable, dependable learning environment for her/his pupils (92). On the other hand, Freire is sure to reiterate his point, made previously in Pedagogy of the Oppressed, regarding how culturally left academics adopt a quasi-Stalinist stance of trying to impose rote memorization of “revolutionary” principles onto their students by promoting a sense of noncritical adoration for the charismatic and all-knowing “master teacher” who in actuality ends up repressing a truly liberating educational experience for students (73).

As other rhetoric and composition scholars have joined in the conversation with Freire and Shor, figures such as Mina P. Shaughnessy in her work Errors and Expectations, Geneva Smitherman in Talkin that Talk: African American Language and Culture, Victor Villanueva in Bootstraps, as well as edited collections such as African American Rhetoric(s): Interdisciplinary Perspectives (Richardson and Jackson, eds.), Rhetoric and Ethnicity (Gilyard and Nunley, eds.), and Writing in Multicultural Settings (Severino, Guerra, Butler), the disciplinary ethos of composition studies seems to be dedicated to the project of multiculturalism (to a large extent). Keith Gilyard devotes an entire volume to the issue in his auto-ethnography, Voices of the Self: A Study of Language Competence, in which he documents the various voices that he has come to possess throughout his educational and academic sojourn, as well as tackling the broader subject of historical and linguistic frames through which social and scholastic worth has come to be assessed, measured, and ultimately, evaluated.
Sharon Crowley discusses the impact of ancient rhetoric’s connection to modern democratic discourses in detail in her book, *Toward a Civil Discourse: Rhetoric and Fundamentalism*. Crowley explores the foundations of how early thinkers such as Aristotle, Isocrates, Gorgias, and Cicero all held the common idea that rhetoric serves as an application of language that “intervenes in some way in the beliefs and practices in the community it serves… [and] conceived as produced and circulated within a network of social and civic discourses, practices, images, and events” (27). For the purposes of this dissertation, I am taking up the issue of images that intervene in tandem with the Aristotelian understanding of rhetoric, as it is closely tied to the strong liberal arts educational tradition that remains the heart of our democratic system. Richard Lanham takes up the converging subject of civic and digital culture even more specifically in *The Electronic Word: Democracy, Technology, and the Arts*. Regarding the impact of diversity on democratic ideals, he wonders:

> Can we democratize the liberal arts without trivializing them? Up to now, our answer has been… don’t really democratize them; it can’t be done; proceed as we always have – what else can we do, eternal verities being our special product? – and let all these “nontraditional” students learn our ways as best they can. (103)

Trashing students for their inability to fit into traditional modes of white, upper-class, heteronormative culture is simply not acceptable and dismisses the greater purpose of rhetoric. Ultimately, Lanham recognizes that “[p]olitical and economic pressures have now become too insistent” to dismiss the nontraditional students and concludes that the field of rhetoric is “required to find really new ways to widen access to the liberal arts
without trivializing them” (103). Lanham’s affirmation helps to emphasize the disciplinary responsibility of rhetoric and composition to contribute to an undeniably democratic project. What Lanham argues connects to my contention about infantilizing students and denying access on the basis of class, race, age, and gender when we make the assumption that composition classrooms are charged with teaching a constituency of so-called “digital natives” the ins and outs of professional and public communication. Outside of the financial issues of personal access to high-speed internet and personal computing technologies, we commit a grave disservice to one of the fastest growing categories of college undergraduates. This is especially true when so many of our incoming freshmen are veterans returning from wars, single parents of young children, or career-seasoned professionals looking for a new vocation. There must be a radical reconsideration of what we think about when we picture “diversity” in higher education today. Recent scholarship in the field seeks to address this issue of how digitality has affected composition and cultural studies, as well as African American rhetorics. Adam Banks is a chief interlocutor of this discussion. In Digital Griots, Banks contributes significantly to this body of theoretical and practical knowledge. He situates multimedia technology as a temporally bound phenomenon and stakes his claims about African American rhetorical studies as a tradition of community engagement, meant for greater civic enfranchisement. With its far-reaching aspirations for a transformative composition and rhetoric pedagogy, Digital Griots challenges our notions of the basic tenets of what we consider educational equality and compels pedagogues of digital composition and rhetoric to become involved with technology issues facing higher education in
conjunction with the question of access. Banks advocates for educational content that teaches people how citizenship works, and seeks to address the problem as to why so many black and brown people are technologically disenfranchised. He urges the field to pay greater attention to content in digital culture and writing education, how it is deployed, and to what ends. Objecting to institutional mandates for academic standardization and skills-based writing assessments, which tend to overemphasize mechanics, Banks contests the academy’s role in funnelling people through the system in order to preserve the status quo. He wants to build bridges from campuses to communities by enlisting the epistemology of African American rhetoric to disrupt culturally eradicationist trajectories. Banks seeks to layer over this disruption and suture the past to the present by opening his book with a long epigraph by Paul Miller a.k.a. DJ Spooky (That Subliminal Kid), from whom he takes the idea that a continuum of past collective narrative positions the digital griot as the quintessential twenty-first century rhetor. As inheritors of the traditional roles once played by the black preacher and teller of folktales, Banks asserts, twenty-first century DJs are archivists of times past and inventors of futures imagined. Black folk, according to Banks, having survived forced migration, centuries of chattel bondage, and Jim Crow, must utilize the DJ ethos to fulfill the griotic role. Now manifest as digital griots, DJs explore the hits and investigate the misses through tactical shoutouts, crate-digs, samples, and remixes (26).

Banks believes these techniques work to freshly reinterpret the African storytelling tradition and black sermonic style through the layering and rearranging of commonplace narratives already existing in the black community. Digital griots, for
Banks, retain their rootedness in African American discursive values, maintaining an ethos of community commitment while playing a central role in continuing to forge African American identity. Whether in the form of a disc jockey of community radio or a DJ on the turntables, Banks asserts, griots serve as useful models for crafting transformative media assemblages. Through digital contexts, DJs can continue performing the crucial role of cultural bricoleurs. By isolating and blending the various bits of audio, image, and print objects made available across cultures, digital griots help formulate black survival networks, which serve to pragmatically intervene in the discussion of African American contributions to cultural and academic authorship.

Along with Banks, other scholars have sought to address the issue of new media and cultural ethos in digital spaces. In *The Rhetoric of Cool: Composition Studies and New Media*, Jeff Rice suggests a multimodal composition pedagogy that abides by the defining “cool” features of digital culture. For Rice, digital print and hypertext represent alternative conceptions of composition that signal a “rebirth” of writing, which is a mark of cool. In the words of Rice, cool encompasses “meanings different from cool’s definition of popularity, status, or fashion” that “are more reflected in the . . . choice of ironic representation, juxtaposition, and nonlinear reasoning” (2-3). According to cool rhetoric, this is where the lessons of hip-hop culture play a major role in teaching students to compose in digital spaces. Through this loose connection, Rice astutely points to the fundamental ethos of hip-hop, which involves ever shifting alias and alter-ego in support of incorporating hip-hop composition strategies into lessons. Much scholarship remains to be done in this area, and Rice contributes to this overall project by examining how hip-
hip hop provides students with a familiar composition model through which they can learn to effectively and persuasively reassign meanings and disrupt fixed categories, as they develop the many other skills multimodal compositions require. Throughout the book, Rice demonstrates how recruiting the rhetoric of appropriation through the suggestion of racial awareness can be cool. Ultimately though, through cool rhetoric, this social awareness exists only implicitly, because such ideas, according to Rice, are mere tentative juxtapositions. The issue of how the politics of appropriation work alongside hip hop’s rhetorical functions is thus problematized. For instance, one might ask why Rice raises the issue of race if it is only pursued implicitly, loosely, and associatively. In fact, one may ask the ethical question as to the benefit of mentioning race at all, if not for improving the social realm – namely, through a practice that is forth-rightly anti-racist. It should be noted, however, that academic projects encompassing an explicit, non-ironic, even linear political trajectory do not necessarily have to be antithetical to coolness. While encouraging students to become savvy bricoleurs is not at all a bad thing, it is fair to wonder why and to what end. Whether or not it is cool to promote a citizenry and future workforce of ironic juxtaposers remains to be seen.

Banks agrees with Rice about employing hip-hop composing strategies for their utility in pedagogically modeling how to combine print technologies and hypertextual rhetorics through representations of alternative cultural conceptions. However, Banks balances his praise for such enlightened educational curricula with his reservations about composition writing programs that embrace multiliteracies, while sometimes failing to attend critically to the problems of cultural appropriation. Banks demonstrates how this
procedure of “isolated ripping” (13) for the organization of thoughts and ideas through
digital appropriations of “diverse” or racialized music and images could have unintended
negative results for a profession that claims its investment in democratic plural values.
Such negative results are a significant concern, since a sufficiently critical approach to
the subject of racial juxtapositions is impossible if students are not made aware of the
initial ironies of the racialized discourses they are asked to put into play. Hip-hop
certainly provides students with a familiar composition model through which they can
learn to effectively and persuasively reassign meanings and disrupt fixed categories.
However, the rhetoric of appropriation through an uninformed awareness of the racial
other can be seen as intellectually naïve at best, and culturally insensitive at worst. I
might even take Banks’s critique further by suggesting how the precarious racial
embodiment of digitized simulacra actually makes it somewhat *more* likely that many
students will unthinkingly deliver assignments with sexist, homophobic, and/or racist
content. Taking this problem seriously is important and necessarily involves requiring our
students to pay closer attention to the subjects and objects that animate our public plural
environments – whether digital, architectural or otherwise.

Even as we bear witness to the massive shift away from traditional print to digital
media, we have also witnessed the enthusiastic and massive adoption of hip-hop
pedagogies into multimodal composition. This is a good beginning. My contention is that
this shift has occurred through what I am calling a “cutification” of hip-hop. This
cutifying process has been achieved by the same forces that had once deemed this
African Diaspora influence of black urban expression to be socially menacing. This can
be easily traced by following the successes of late 1980s rap groups like N.W.A. and Public Enemy. With their profane language and socially explicit lyrical content, rap groups originally drew harsh criticism and angry responses from a strange coalition comprised of right-leaning law enforcement agencies and conservative citizen groups, as well as liberal activists like Al Sharpton, Jesse Jackson, Delores C. Tucker and Tipper Gore. Over time however, following incidents like the beating of Rodney King and the Los Angeles riots that ensued, forces across the American white mainstream began paying closer attention to the political content of hip-hop and began realizing that beyond some of it doubtlessly problematic content there was a great deal of profound social and cultural criticism contained in this alternative African American English vernacular musical form.6

Among these shifts in the field of composition and rhetoric, including the growing acceptance of rap as a style of vocal delivery in mainstream popular music, has been the increasing popularity of the sampling and looping method across many forms of electronic media, including video. This technique soon came to dominant technique in mainstream do-it-yourself media compositions. As more hip-hop fans grew older, they began joining the academy, bringing with them the composing strategies of this urban expressive form of cultural production. In the last decade or so, hip-hop has become less identified with the African American vernacular discourses and Diasporic influences that originally gave rise to the post-industrial mode of creative expression and has increasingly become associated with a sense of nostalgia for the bygone days of youth. In this context it is frequently seen as a way to “reach back” into the general youth
subculture. For the most part, hip-hop teaching methods are generally celebrated, especially in digital form, and lauded for integrating urban literacy practices into composition and writing classrooms. No longer considered a threat to the educational status quo, hip-hop methodologies have now been firmly adapted to pedagogical approaches across the areas of both lower and higher education. Hip-hop has effectively become a racial rhetoric of cute. As rhetorics are practiced for the very purpose of interfering, interceding, and intruding on a given discourse, I advocate for a style of decorum that is not against repetitive interruptions and disruptions.

*De/composing Processes*

In the words of Paul Gilroy, “[m]ulticultural society seems to have been abandoned at birth. Judged unviable and left to fend for itself, its death by neglect is being loudly proclaimed on all sides” (1). Gilroy, however, is quick to point out “[t]he noisy announcement of [multiculture’s] demise is itself a political gesture, an act of wishful thinking…. aimed at abolishing any ambition toward plurality and at consolidating the growing sense that it is now illegitimate to believe that multiculture can and should be orchestrated by government in the public interest” (2). Within the American academy, theoretical foundations for such critiques find their genesis within the grounding of European continental philosophies and the deconstructionist discourses that have come to dominate what is regarded as the postmodern frame. Confronted with this reconsideration of the fixedness of subject/object relationships and new idioms that suggest new dealings and fragmentations between all that has come to be signified, the rhetoric/composition field finds itself searching for a means of resisting the imposition of
restrictive institutional signifiers.

Fissures have become institutionally apparent as standardization and accreditation pressures continue to impact this national model of a general education curriculum, while simultaneously threatening to undermine the very integrity of the American US academy. Scholars who have observed the multicultural issue offer resolutions to the problem and gain the attention of deans and administrators who have demanded a revisiting of this issue. This has forced rhetoric and composition scholars to consider pursuing renewed perspectives. Traditionalists from English literature, such as Stanley Fish and Gerald Graff, have taken bold stances. They both acknowledge how conservative pundits, having largely reshaped public opinion over the last thirty years against any such project like “multiculturalism” or “diversity” or “social pluralism” or “cultural tolerance” or anything else smacking of a “politically correct” pathos, claim a pronounced stifling of the flow of free speech among the democratic majority (Fish 65). This problem has touched off a series of battles within the so-called “culture wars,” leading to confusion outside the academy regarding what higher education is for, as well as a “cluelessness” within the academy itself that wants to see itself as apart from popular culture while also being integrally a shaper of it (Graff 17).

This issue has also been exacerbated by the corporate structures and mechanisms tied to American colleges and universities, which are responsible for what Henry A. Giroux has called “the view of teaching as market-driven practice and learning as a form of training” (“Introduction” 10). This has been combined with the concurrent development of academic Marxism in English literature programs, which alongside
rhetoric and composition has experienced growing popularity and prestige since the 1930s where it has become a commonplace to proclaim everything as ideological and political. And so we see, even with all of the above concerns, the problem of a postmodern cynical malaise has overtaken the entire process of education.

This has caused many to argue how university practices of political correctness might lead to a “victim studies” mentality, in which the pay-off of identifying with powerlessness and oppression is ultimately rewarded with increased power and status within the university. Chief among rhetors tackling issue head on is Victor Vitanza who has raised the question:

whether or not teaching students cultural studies and other similar studies makes them seek for a better world that is obtainable. I want to suggest to you, on the contrary, that cultural studies may lead only to cynicism. Maybe for the most part producing several generation of students who will have become cynics – more cynical than cynical. Hypercynical! Transcynical! (699-700).

Vitanza follows up his concerns with a call for longitudinal studies to assess the effectiveness and subsequent value of cultural studies methods in composition writing courses. It seems that Vitanza is echoing the insights made by Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, which explores the consequences of the lecturing teacher-subject and patient student-object mutually insisting and resisting within the panoptic system of western-style schooling (170-71). Many have misinterpreted Vitanza’s call for longitudinal assessments (which, by the way, are currently taking place) by abandoning explicitly political and cultural studies content in
writing classrooms altogether. Some have responded to Vitanza’s disquieting observations by persisting in the work of anti-sexist, anti-racist, anti-phobic pedagogies and allowing the space of writing classrooms to become sites for dismantling cultural assumptions based on logical fallacies and reinforcing strategies for strengthening students’ abilities to locate their arguments firmly within the context of the grounds, claims, and warrants normative to plural democratic values. Responding most directly to Vitanza, however, are those writing teachers who continue to challenge the boundaries of traditional essayistic discourses by encouraging students to incorporate aleatory and improvisational methods into their writings while acknowledging the risk of producing models of student writing that may be disposed to any combination of ideological inclinations whatsoever. For the most part, instructors of English composition are baffled as to how we might appropriately balance the reality of teaching meta-snark hipsters alongside increasing populations of continuing education adult learners who simply desire the practical skills necessary to acquire entry or promotion within the new knowledge economy jobs presently available for changing-career professionals.

In “Writing Offshore: The Disappearing Coastline of Composition Theory,” Cynthia Haynes joins in the fray and offers insight regarding the demands imposed by the paradoxical stance assumed by professors in order to lure students towards philosophical abstraction, even while simultaneously requiring concrete critical argumentation:

Writing instruction, caught between a rock and a hard place, seems to have unwittingly opted for both. Teaching argument amounts to sheltering students from the deep and too fluid regions of language (and Being). Yet we know (don’t
we?) that writing should be strange, that we should feel alienated, removed, and detached from our standard habits of reading and thinking. Taking a stand, we teach means adopting a critical stance. But we are unwilling to relinquish the standardization of the methods and means for doing so; and, we are not exactly eager to look into the depths of how this particular pedagogy came about. (671)

The problem of the writing classroom situation, Haynes demonstrates, rests in a rhetoric of polemics that ultimately materializes in discursive encampment zones without the recognition that fundamental human experience is one in which singular subjectivities have essentially set us all adrift (696-98). In another of her essays, “‘Hanging Your Alias on Their Scene’: Writing Centers, Graffiti, and Style,” Haynes connects students’ writing identities across “the defining markers of marginalized people such as race, ethnicity, religion, class, or gender” (697) to the liminal spaces of writing center pedagogy, in which stylistic space emerges as a design practice capable of resisting the dominant language discourses that can erase the unofficial and unorthodox.

Throughout her work, Haynes advocates for the symbolic act of writing as vital to the project of meaning-making, thereby asserting the necessary good that is born of real institutional diversity. By building on the work of these interlocutors, my dissertation hopes to contribute a teaching method that uses the combined epistemologies of race rhetorics, and multimodal screen technology to develop a pedagogical multiliteracy model that makes it possible for students to productively grapple with critical concerns of image representation and civic decorum.

*Toward De/Minoritizing Pedagogies*

When taken together, issues of race rhetoric, the pedagogical shift in English composition from print to screen, and the re-conceptualizations of what constitutes civic
decorum, we can see that a reimagining of the practices now impacting the field of rhetoric-composition is in order. More specifically, one might wonder, “How do race rhetoric, digital decorum, multimodal and Writing Center pedagogies connect?” Undeniably, even as the rhetoric and composition field has developed alongside the liberation and student movements that characterized the mid-twentieth-century, the ancient art of rhetoric makes a comeback, fused with the growing demands made upon English compositionists to meet the literacy needs of an ever more diverse American academy. One example of cultural studies’ move towards a rhetoric of “electracy,” as described by Gregory Ulmer in *Electronic Monuments*, theorizes:

> gender and sexuality confusion or blurring associated with cyberspace may be generalized in virtual reality to identify experience as such, putting all borders, boundaries, and categories in question – not to eliminate categories but to renegotiate them. The importance of this possibility … is that categories equal metaphysics: what is real, and hence what constitutes problems and solutions, are relative to the apparatus…. a new paradigm does not solve the problems of the old paradigm, it just makes those problems irrelevant. (99)

In noting the blurrifications of gender and sexuality that occur from the postmodern paradigm shift to electracy in digital screen writing, Ulmer correctly acknowledges that all other categories are necessarily queered. Though, it should be pointed out, by making this acknowledgment about the queering of borders and boundaries, Ulmer is careful not to suggest rhetoric and writing scholars become automatically absolved from meeting issues of race and class discrimination in the digital realm. In fact, Ulmer argues, certain
longstanding issues will persist, though never quite absolving us from continuously having to work on eradicating them. This constant morphing of old taxonomies through new apparatuses reminds us that these cycles of oppression and domination serve only to offer fresh opportunities to renegotiate what is possible.

I believe a radically democratic, anti-racist classroom learning environment is absolutely possible. Expecting students to engage the “placelessness” of online environments should involve equipping students with the materiality of access in a way that goes beyond mere material access. In Race, Rhetoric, and Technology: Searching for Higher Ground, Adam Banks defines digitality in terms of four stratum of access and argues, if digital computing is ever to become a tool of democratic transformation, African Americans and other minoritized communities must recognize material access as only a first step in the multi-tiered process of digital mastery. Beyond providing this most basic and fundamental level of access, digital writing pedagogues must also seek critical, functional, and experiential access (Banks 44). What Banks is arguing perfectly complements Ulmer’s analysis of the metaphysics of electracy. Also, Banks’s four steps of digital access closely parallel Aristotelian stasis theory. Material access, or simply letting students be in the same room with computers, as in the case of a computer writing lab, does not allow for the possibility of critical access. In other words, if students are to gain interpretive and analytical control of the digital apparatus, they must define their own ways of interfacing with it – free from the restraints of micro-managing domination. Once material and critical modes of access are acquired, students are able to distinguish between the virtues and vices inculcated by digital equipment, thus determining for
themselves how to apply digitality for the crafting of private creations as well as the performance of public deeds. Finally, after gaining some deliberative agency over digital tools, students derive a sense of experiential access through procedurally re/cognizing systems as codes to be cracked and circumvented for non-authoritarian purposes.

Both Ulmer and Banks offer models demonstrating the space of the classroom as a situation in which we arrive with our preceding positionalities intact, though ripe for revision. Questioning and renegotiating boundaries of categories held over from long ago in order to serve the goals of transformative access is imperative if writing teachers are to model an ethos of credibility in the architectural and digital spaces of the modern classroom. This is especially true if we expect our students to ever perform this task on their own. Paradoxically, recognizing the “authenticity” we hold as professional academics and educators resides precisely in our ability as a field to promote the opening up of new communication paths among interactive communities. In the face of institutional shifts occurring through the proliferation of communication technology platforms, the task of modeling an authentic and credible ethos for students who may not ever actually set foot on a college campus remains a challenge. Similarly, pretending we have adequately taught students how to master the tools of digital persuasion just because there is some mutual ability for students and teachers to locate each other’s electronic mailing addresses, does not mean an authentic learning experience has taken place.

This realization should clarify the notion that curricular approaches where online and multimodal coursework take place do not necessarily make place. Therefore, digitality becomes an alibi whenever we make believe it will preclude the
miscommunications and misreadings of culture or erase the differences of race. Nor does this virtual environment prevent whole sets of identity markers and experiences from being fetishized and misappropriated in the service of favorable grade evaluations. As such, the pedagogical philosophy I subscribe to in the teaching of online writing courses surrounds matters of accountability, tied to the issue of mutual trust regarding how information is designed and knowledge is shared relative to the new apparatus. In the case of the plural and diverse space that we imagine (and, hopefully, seek to enact) in writing courses, a particular accountability ought to be shared among all academic participants – whether they are male or female, white or non-white. Such a pedagogical approach accommodates the shift across academic scholarship from the object to subject, impersonal to personal, from author to audience, from product to process, and of course, from teacher to student. As a consequence of these shifts, what can be recognized as a legitimate academic persona, through digital and online pedagogies, has expanded. This is good, though not without its ironies. Postmodern paradigms and the digital environments they institute concurrently operate to challenge the actual presence of traditionally marginalized groups on our campuses.

In light of these issues, how can a postmodern perspective be translated into an effective pedagogical praxis that accommodates this disappearing presence without compromising the substantive representation of diversity in higher education? My goal is to address this matter by bringing post-process re/mediation strategies to first-year composition classrooms in order to inculcate an open-ended, non-authoritarian approach that works against a process-oriented online teaching approach, which lacks the capacity
to account for the multiplicities of student positionalities and proliferation of composing publics. Culturally positioned firmly within upper-class white male discourses, classroom interfaces relying so heavily on personal access work to impede the agency of students of color and the working-class who are continually cast as the Other. Given the situation regarding this historical marginalization, this attention to otherness is a specifically self-referential standpoint implied by the types of aleatory performances required for multimodal learning environments.

A pedagogical critique of “cutified hip-hop” presents itself because of the unique exchanges it forces us to negotiate regarding constructed notions of racial and generational identity. Since teaching hip-hop composing strategies is becoming a more or less taken-for-granted pedagogical approach, a situation presents itself whereby class access and agency is brought into view. Therefore, contextualizing hip-hop for its content as well as its modes helps form student awareness in regards to researching, reading, and writing that travels in multiple directions. Activating these metalinguistic approaches are designed to challenge assumptions and inspire personal and professional interrogations of the authenticity associated with online ethos and digital play by which students may obtain expertise and experience, thus encountering knowledge that is epistemologically and culturally authoritative.

**Press Play: Workplacelessness and Multimodalism**

Without a doubt, there are valid reasons students are increasingly questioning the value of a college degree. Integral to this matter is that of propriety regarding the tremendous complications of global labor in a knowledge based economy. Generating
mass competition for scattered resources, the effect of scarcity is created by the few through the hoarding of tremendous amounts of wealth. Writing teachers are therefore challenged to avoid reproducing a tradition of narcissistic appropriation that privileges a vertical model for worker identity, and thus unethically assigns outmoded corporate document artifacts like the inter-office memo and the fax cover sheet. In directing my critical gaze towards this subject, I am materially and socially implicating a situation in which the “workplace” as an object of discourse and analysis gives rise to a pedagogical situation that provokes the invention of writings that have not yet been anticipated.

Many have looked to game studies as a means of re[inter]vention. But even this latest development is not a panacea; as game studies researcher David Leonard has acknowledged the problem of gaming and online culture providing a means through which “racialized ideas, bodies, and structures are constructed, mediated, and presented through a safe medium” (3). My concern, though, involves how we may negotiate learning spaces that allow students to risk the safety of dull, worn out writing forms and take on the difficulty of wrestling with that which seems foreign and strange. The metaphor of gaming can be mined for its allegorical potential and looked at in order to describe the strategic moves made by digital students who seek mastery in the game of higher learning. It contributes to our understanding of the operations of schooling institutions as they are increasingly carried out in the largely privatized business and entertainment fields. Questions arise regarding what new methodologies can be devised in the study of race rhetoric alongside these emergent new media, which are redefining rhetorical studies and reterritorializing our writing spaces. Baudrillard contends:
crossing into a space whose curvature is no longer that of the real, nor that of truth, the era of simulation is inaugurated by a liquidation of all referentials – worse: with their artificial resurrection in the systems of signs, a material more malleable than meaning, in that it lends itself to all systems of equivalencies, to all binary oppositions, to all combinatory algebra. It is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody” (2).

Unfortunately, the replication of pedagogies that instruct students in the assemblage of multimodal compositions through mimicking the techniques of sampling and looping just for the sake of creating ironic juxtapositions will not entirely fulfill the critical thinking skills required for the interruption of inhumane, non-democratic social structures. In fact, multimodalism, if not attended to critically, merely serves to reinforce and reinstate the very same stereotypes and inequalities that we hope to abolish in a democratic society. Using the formal elements of hip-hop aesthetics for composing strategies in multimodalism for the purpose of teaching students how to generate a logical flow of ideas through a critical layering of primary, secondary, and tertiary references lends itself to the rupturing of totalizing assumptions and ideologies about gender, race, class, and ability.

In hip-hop studies, the notions of flow, layer, and rupture were originally articulated and popularized by the Africana and feminist studies scholar Tricia Rose in her groundbreaking book *Black Noise*, which teases out the triple conceptualization of flow, layer, and rupture as the chief design traits of hip-hop. Explaining how 1970s New York, in the interim between Lyndon B. Johnson’s Great Society and Ronald Reagan’s
voodoo economics, trickle-down privatization schemes, Rose demonstrates how black and brown youth from across the African Diaspora successfully deployed flow, layer, and rupture as a cultural tool for displacing late capitalist, post-industrial power formations. This series of actions known as flow, layer, and rupture is resonant with the ideas forwarded in *Anti-Oedipus* – having to do with allowing capital’s disjunctive synthesis to de-compose for the “transformation of human relationship in a struggle against power” (Deleuze xxi).

What both Rose and Deleuze speak to is the obvious permeability constituting racial categories, which are greater than ever and inspires us to re/vise how cuteness as a racial rhetoric of educational infantilization and civic minoritization helps define the boundaries of these class divisions. Since colleges and universities are invested in the nation-state apparatus of capital and bureaucracies and are ultimately defined by their national, ethnic, and racial identities as they relate to the “normality” of bodies for the purposes of labor and production, pedagogues must encourage students to consider the messages being sent about historical populations by the public displays on and around campus environments. Advocating for a pedagogical approach that encourages students to hold their institutions accountable for the historical and spatial representations exhibited by educational institutions under the guise of pluralism and democracy can be achieved when writing teachers accept writing across the curriculum or WAC for what is says about the concept of curricular designs as much as for how the acronym’s oral utterances – *wack* in the hip-hop slang form informs the widespread public perception that the standard schooling model has simply lost its stature and no longer holds
currency. Perhaps a new meaning for WAC could tell us more about working across contiguities. This iteration recognizes the idea that we are all related and together, regardless of how much this truth has been obscured. Through offering such pedagogies, universities can reach beyond discreetly assigned essayistic and technical writings as an occasion for producing decontextualized “schoolwork” in preparation for the bygone concept of a coherent “workplace.” A rejection of the mutual exclusion and vanishing constructs of schoolwork and workplace supports socially analytical and critical thinking citizens who must increasingly assess the intersectionality of nonverbal language systems and cultural production. By empowering students to expose these systems of display as always already being politically invested in the discourses of national, ethnic, regional, and racial identity formations, teachers of writing and rhetoric, students learn that the classroom, like history, has never “just happened” – that, in fact, the very colleges in which they are enrolled are responsible for establishing the legitimizing processes by which our class-stratified citizenry is instituted.

With the classroom at the very nexus of social and civic production that quite literally perpetuates class standings and hierarchalized political relations among and between dominant and oppressed groups, democratic educators are compelled to intervene. Facilitating an environment where students understand the multiple meanings of flow, layer, and rupture as significant to more than elegantly arranging and rearranging their “cut pasta” for the sake of a final grade, asks students to move beyond critique in order to embrace the potential for the dis/organization that ensues as a result of reinventing texts. Letting students flow between the rigors of multimodalism and
multiculturalism acknowledges how visual culture shapes institutional attitudes and the ensuing spatial designs, thereby releasing production from the oppressive technologies of educational, residential, and even digital segregation that persists today. This letting go to let flow ushers in a renewed focus on the relevancy of critical race theory to spatial and digital configurations of classroom and writing center spaces, embraces multiliteracies and allows students to write to their own languages, while developing a better understanding of others. This will better equip all students for effective collaboration on both local and global scales.

Another way this issue of multiliteracies might address the issue of multimodalism and multiculturalism involves the crisis of employment faced by many American citizens today and is closely aligned with the problem of persistent social disparities in the areas of educational, residential, and public accommodations. Refocusing on the valuable contributions of African American and race scholarship offers an opportunity for teachers of writing to rethink notions of technology and multimodal composition, beyond empty appropriations of hip-hop. With “play” being the new “work” in the twenty-first century, we must reconsider how we might instrumentalize this rhetoric of hip-hop cutification and digital ethos, while combating the infantilizing rhetoric of minority citizenship. As mentioned in this dissertation’s first chapter, Akira Asaada points out the geo-politics of the Pacific Rim style of worker-citizen horizontality. According to Asaada, transnational subjects navigate the global market for jobs and resources within an economy that privileges knowledge of software and a whimsical approach to deconstructing and reversing mature technologies. These
blurry lines of play, may be recognized as a description of *otaku* culture for its ethic of software hacking, *anime* making, and videogame playing, associated with the extension of adolescence due to the devaluation of post-secondary schooling and joblessness caused by the appearance of traditional manufacturing and many service based jobs in Japan and elsewhere. Through this idea of infantile capitalism and this topological troping on [a]cute spaces, Asaada takes into account Derridean assertions that a new class of workers are enveloped by a centerless “place” whose affective experiences are largely post-historical and often experienced in the digital realm, giving way to a “workplacelessness” rhetoric that values wordplay, parody, and childlike gaming.

Language working as play is nothing new in African American vernacular English. Geneva Smitherman defines this language sense as “semantic inversion” (21). This wordplay is obvious in the case of the word “bad” to mean the opposite notion of “good.” (A most notable example of semantic inversion involves the reversal of the slur, nigger resignified as “nigga” speaks profoundly to the reappropriation and repurposing of hurtful and damaging language into something endearing and even empowering.) Traditionally, though, African American and anti-racist rhetoricians across the fields of composition and literacy education have not engaged much with continental philosophical discourses as they are perceived as too Eurocentric or alienating to the day-to-day concerns of regular folk. By making such linkages, however, African American rhetorics can effectively appropriate the power of deconstructive discourses by advocating a *pharmakon* approach to re/mediation as applied to all areas of education and across the public sphere. Just as it is imperative that African American scholars in the
field re-engage with philosophical continental modes of deconstructive discourses more closely, it too remains the case that classical [white] traditional rhetoric should revisit African American epistemological contributions for its attributes of constituting a genuine ground for legitimate social theory. If democratically concerned rhetoricians in the field can achieve a common stasis within English composition, rhetoric, and communication studies fields, the problem of postmodern cynicism and cultural studies speaking at cross purposes with composition and rhetoric could be better addressed.

Through a pedagogical approach that understands the paradox of poison and cure, students are taught that language – not unlike the ontological substance of all things – can be instrumentalized for its transformative potential. This same philosophical commitment to opening up design and implementation of the digital field must be pragmatically applied to the fields of access and opportunity through the initiation of public education that serves the purposes of play (i.e., games and leisure), more than it serves the purposes of formal employment (i.e., work and discipline). In this way, through an analysis of the rhetoric of racial cutification, the tools and methods of multimodalism can be instrumentalized to address non-democratic and minoritizing classroom procedures, thereby reconfiguring higher education as something that is accessible to anybody who desires it and creating a more equitable world in general.
NOTES


2. Clifford Berryman’s political cartoon first appeared in the *Washington Post* in November 1902 and depicts the events of Theodore Roosevelt’s trip to Mississippi in which the president attended a local hunting expedition with the state’s governor. Through the national media sensation caused by the newspaper’s cartoon, the twenty-sixth president’s genteel but tough legend grows after he refused to shoot an American black bear that was cornered, beaten, and lassoed to a tree. The president rejected this inhumane treatment as “unsportsmanlike” and ordered the bear to be put out of its misery. While what finally became of the poor ursine creatures remains are
not actually known, “Teddy’s bear” was immortalized as it became cuter and smaller with each subsequent reprisal. By 1903 several international toy manufacturers, including Steiff, Ideal, and Günd, began the mass production of “teddy bears” as these plush children’s items represent great consumer demand.

3. After Toni Morrison dubbed Bill Clinton “our first black president,” Martin Linskey (contributing columnist for Newsweek) extends this to Barack Obama by giving him the title of “first woman president.”

4. The following excerpt is from a short website interview with Kyp Malone (KM), who is the lead guitarist of pop rock band, TV on the Radio. This exchange was published in Gothamist, a New York City lifestyle website and is attributed to Raphie Frank (RF), a white entertainment media content freelancer or self-described “business artivist.” At the time of this dissertation, Frank is no longer with gothamist.com.

**RF:** Tell us about the afro.

**KM:** I don’t have an afro. I wear my hair in a style called a natural. It’s what happens if you’re black and you grow your hair long and don’t process it or braid it, I recommend it to anyone who has the genetic ability to rock it. It is a good barometer of who I need to take seriously in regards to their reaction towards it. It’s just fucking hair.

5. The Moral Majority was an organization started by Jerry Falwell to lobby for evangelical Christians in the United States during the 1980s and founded for the purpose of injecting “pro-family,” “pro-life,” and pro-Israel platforms into American
partisan politics. The group is credited with delivering two thirds of the white, evangelical Christian vote to Ronald Reagan during the 1980 presidential election.

6. In the 1980s and numerous incidents of police brutality occurred beyond the Rodney King case, such as the police killing of Eleanor Bumpurs, an elderly Bronx resident. Also unprosecuted white youth mobs were responsible for the slayings of Yusef Hawkins and Michael Griffith, in the Queens neighborhood of Howard Beach, and in Brooklyn’s Bensonhurst community, respectively. Additionally, in the Cicero community of Chicago, white racial attacks on the homes of non-white residents occurred in the plain view of police officers who looked on without intervening. Finally, there are the separate cases of Boston’s Charles Stewart and Union, South Carolina’s Susan Smith making false accusations against fictitious African American assailants resulted in black community harassment by police forces.

7. Marcia Curtis and Anne Herrington in the CCC (55:1) 2003 article, “Writing Development in the College Years: By Whose Definition?” published the results of a four-year study suggesting a correlation between a specialized language field (e.g., psychology or cultural studies) to students’ comfort in working with theoretical concepts. What this study does not determine, however, is that cultural studies content in the composition classroom actually makes for more socially tolerant citizens.

8. Wack is defined in the online Urban Dictionary as a term used to describe anything that just plain “sucks,” or isn’t cool at all.
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