THE OSCARS SLAP: PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS, BLACK MASCULINITY, AND SEMIOTIC DISRUPTION

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ABSTRACT

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Why was the public so briefly obsessed with the Oscars Slap? In trying to answer this question this paper turns both to the allure of semiotic disruption as a marker of the unscripted, and therefore the seemingly authentic, and to the pervasive power of parasocial relationships in American culture. In examining the most relevant parasocial personalities to the event (Will Smith and Chris Rock), questions of authenticity and performance became crucial, and an exploration of black masculinity became important as well. The analysis finds that both Will Smith and Chris Rock, in creating "bankable" and beloved public personas and personalities that made them "household names" in both black and white homes, took different approaches to complicating and resisting black masculine stereotypes. This paper explores how Smith, especially in his early career as a hip-hop artist and sitcom performer, explores black masculinity as a matter of performance rather than authenticity. This paper examines how Chris Rock's own exploration of black masculine celebrity focuses on the perils of self-commodification. Smith's and Rock's different approaches to self-branding eventually led them to be positioned differently in relation to #Oscarsowhite and that may have contributed to their eventual conflict at the 2022 Oscars. All of this supports the conclusion that the complexity of modern parasocial relationships intersects with the burdens of black masculinity in ways that both ameliorate and heighten certain burdens.

To: Sarah, Jonah, and Solomon who are my rock, my purpose, and my joy.

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INTRODUCTION

"Being famous as a black guy is a little bit different than being famous as a white guy. Tom Hanks is an amazing actor. Denzel Washington is a *god* to his people. Denzel has a responsibility to his people that Tom Cruise and Liam Neeson don't have. They just make their art. No one says 'Hey, Tom Cruise stay…white. Don't forget your whiteness.'" – Chris Rock

"Is there any place you are not recognized?" Wayne Brady asks David Hasselhoff. "Well, I found one." Hasselhoff proceeds to tell a curious tale about how he was feeling "burned out" by being recognized everywhere and by tabloid coverage. Hasselhoff took his family to rural Kenya and, at first, was pleased when the local Maasi warriors did not know who he was. But only two days into this experience he started to feel "withdrawal." He needed to find fans. "'You're sick', my wife said." They traveled to a local camp to find individuals who watched television and therefore had seen *Knight Rider* (Knight Rider Historians Official).

Kevin Bacon told a remarkably similar story on Graham Norton's show. He too felt a need to move through the world anonymously again. Instead of flying to remote parts of Kenya, he had a professional make-up team disguise him and went to a packed shopping mall in California. He, too, quickly found anonymity overrated. He said of his experience being just one of the crowd: "This sucks, man. I'm going back to [being] Kevin Bacon ASAP." Bacon said that being recognized is "99.9% a good thing" and added, "Who doesn't want to be loved" (The Graham Norton Show)? And yet, why the effort to experience being not famous even if just for a moment? Why the apparent contradiction?

Richard Schickel in *Intimate Strangers* highlights the fundamental problem with parasocial relationships which is the asymmetry of emotional investment. You may have profound feelings, even a kind of love for someone who quite literally doesn't know that you

exist. The "love" Bacon describes can come with strings attached. Those most invested in parasocial relationships want nothing less upon meeting their heroes than the erasure of the "para" in parasocial.

In the immediate aftermath of the Oscars Slap, in those hours between the broadcast and before I went to bed in which the slap could legitimately be described as having a metaphorical chokehold on the internet if not the national zeitgeist, I, too, was mostly preoccupied with the ethical question about Smith's and Rock's respective behaviors. But, within a week or two, I began to question the animus and even hatred some had for Will Smith in the aftermath of the event. It became clear that their investment went beyond a detached ethical judgment. At some level, people felt personally betrayed. This emotional grievance, this investment in one's "relationship" with Will Smith reminded me of Schickel's first chapter, in which he describes John Hinckley Jr.'s obsession with a young Jodi Foster.

My attention shifted away from who was to blame and why, and toward why we cared so much? And then why we seemingly moved on just as quickly? Clearly, the public is unable to turn away when celebrities make mistakes. Then the very attention given the incident causes others to suspect that the purported mistake was actually staged for attention. This pattern of disproportionate attention followed by inevitable misplaced cynicism tells us much about the American attention economy and why we are so susceptible to the hypnotism of bad celebrity behavior packaged as real news.

In trying to answer this question I turned both to the allure of semiotic disruption as a marker of the unscripted, and therefore the seemingly authentic, and to the pervasive power of parasocial relationships in American culture which I examine in chapter one. In examining the most relevant parasocial personalities to the event (Will Smith and Chris Rock respectively),

questions of authenticity and performance became crucial, and an exploration of black masculinity became important as well. Belle hooks argues that "Negative stereotypes about the nature of black masculinity continue to overdetermine the identities black males are allowed to fashion for themselves" (xii). My analysis finds that both Will Smith and Chris Rock in creating "bankable" and beloved public personas, personalities that made them "household names" in both black and white homes, wrestled with that overdetermination and took different approaches to complicating and resisting black masculine stereotypes. In chapter two I explore how Smith, especially in his early career as a hip-hop artist and sitcom performer explores black masculinity as a matter of performance rather than authenticity. This exploration of performative black masculinity spoke to white audiences' own insecurities about masculinity in a manner that forged a strong parasocial bond, but also made the Oscars Slap feel so off-brand for Smith. In chapter three, I explore how Smith's own relationship with a masculinity of dominance and performativity is more complicated than that of his early career on-screen persona and how the dissonance between the two may have caused the public's apparent shock at the Oscar's Slap. In chapter four, I examine how Chris Rock's own exploration of black masculine celebrity focuses on the perils of self-commodification. I also look at how Smith's and Rock's different approaches to self-branding eventually led them to be positioned differently in relation to #Oscarsowhite and how that may have contributed to their eventual conflict at the Oscars. All of this supports my conclusion that the complexity of modern parasocial relationships intersects with the burdens of black masculinity in ways that both ameliorate and heighten certain burdens.

While this analysis focuses a great deal on black masculinity, it does not aspire to capture the essential aspects or essence of black masculinity. Rather, the analysis focuses primarily on trying to understand how black masculinity was marketed and perceived by a predominately

white audience. Nevertheless, my own subjectivity being raised as a middle-class white male has certain limitations when approaching the subject. There are undoubtedly nuances in the difference between black masculinity as it is marketed and as it exists in reality which I have failed to capture. However, having been raised as a white male and coming of age in the '90s, the crucial period during which Smith and Rock became two of America's brightest stars, has given me an acute knowledge of how white audiences were experiencing a black popular culture renaissance. While Rock and Smith have evolved since the '90s, I argue that that crucial period set the template for their respective public personas, and those personas are still the core of how many fans perceived them before the Oscars Slap.

As part of this process, I have endeavored to avoid unsubstantiated rumors about Will Smith (tantalizing as some may find them). Where I bring in his life experiences and/or personality, I cite statements he has made about himself in interviews or his autobiography. Most of us cannot know Smith (or Rock for that matter) personally, but every moment they are in front of a camera or make a statement to the press can be read as a deliberately crafted text. A text just as, if not more, important than any fictional character they might portray.

For a brief romantic moment, David Hasselhoff and Kevin Bacon may convince themselves they want to experience anonymity, that they want to move freely in a crowd with the comfort of their own thoughts rather than the din of admiring fans. But their own thoughts betray them in the actual moment of freedom, solitude amongst the masses is highly overrated. They want, they need their existence to be reaffirmed, it is for them in Kevin Bacon's own words "ninety-nine percent a good thing." For such beloved and privileged celebrities, the world is a mirror of their own perceived value. My analysis finds that black male celebrities have a more complicated relationship with both their white and POC fans. As Chris Rock states, white male

celebrities as members of unmarked categories are simply allowed to make their art. Black masculine celebrities are doubly burdened by expectations from black fans and stereotypes (the majority of which are largely pejorative) from white audiences. The intense parasocial relationships Smith and Rock have forged with their fans come from their ability to both fulfill and complicate certain black masculine stereotypes. The public's intense investment in the Oscars slap, brief as it may have been, was fueled both by the way in which the moment was a rupture with the semiotic coding of the evening itself, the Oscars, but also with the celebrities the audience had falsely believed to be known commodities, Will Smith and Chris Rock.

CHAPTER ONE

WHEN THE DEVIL COMES FOR YOU: ATTENTION CAPITAL, LIVE TELEVISION, AND SEMIOTIC DISRUPTION

Should I describe an event that was so momentarily unavoidable? So pervasive and yet so ephemeral? Fifteen minutes of shame for Will Smith and something to fight about for the rest of us. The Oscars Slap was, for a brief moment, the raison d'être to be on the internet: the assault that launched a thousand think pieces. And yet so many of those think pieces acknowledged that the incident was not worthy of this much attention, a truth belied by the think pieces' existence, like Cathars taking up arms to defend the belief that all matter, including arms, are inherently evil. What was it about this incident that demanded so much (even if momentary) attention?

Live Television and Semiotic Disruption

Robert Allen and Ellen Seiter argue that if we analyze the semiotic messaging of television broadcasts of the Challenger explosion (1986), we can see real-time shifts in the responses to the event. Before the Challenger exploded, the shuttle was a symbol of American ingenuity and technological progress, our desire to conquer new horizons: manifest destiny in space. When the Challenger exploded, suddenly the messaging required adjustment, lest we doubt our ingenuity or ability to conquer worlds unknown. Quickly, the discourse switched to discussions of the shuttle not as a symbol of something greater but as an acutely physical object that could be flawed and even dangerous despite good intentions. Finally, following a lead set by the White House, the media settled on a narrative of noble sacrifice and tragic loss of life, but not of future American ambition.

We might argue that the events of 9/11 created a similar semiotic shift (at least some of which was clearly intended by the terrorists). The World Trade Center was the tallest building in

the world in 1973 and therefore a symbol of American technological and financial superiority, beliefs we could not abandon simply because the towers fell. As with the Challenger explosion, a new narrative was required, and again the tone was set by the White House. President Bush shouted into a bullhorn: “I hear you, and pretty soon the people who knocked down these towers will hear you too.” A call to action, just as phrases like “Never Forget” were not really just promises to the dead but rallying cries to support the war on terror.

Although trivial compared to the Challenger explosion or 9/11, the Oscars Slap was an unexpected event that disrupted a series of carefully selected signs. What were the signs meant to communicate before the disruption? What happened after?

Oscars as Meta-spectacle

The Oscars embody importance in its projected visibility and create a hierarchy between the hoi polloi viewer at home and the elite in attendance. “The spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images” (Debord 12). The Oscars and the stars gathered there present themselves as “an enormous positivity, out of reach and beyond dispute” (Debord 15). The glitz, the glamour, the pre, post, and during coverage of the event proclaim: “Everything that appears is good; whatever is good will appear” (Debord 15). Like the Emmys, Grammys, and other entertainment award shows, the Oscars are a meta-spectacle, a fantasy about the fantasy makers: the glamour, importance, and visibility of their lives and work. Their undeniable capacity to entertain by wit, beauty, and/or talent. The awards themselves are fiercely competitive, but the presentation of them creates the appearance of congeniality and community among the attendees. Comedians/hosts tell jokes that would appear to viewers to be good-natured ribbing, and presenters of the awards are sometimes individuals who have worked together on projects, but other times appear to be random pairings.

On one hand, this implied community invites the viewer in. After all, every televised moment has two parallel audiences: one at the Oscars and one viewing at home. The cinematography, format, and lighting all work to make the television viewer no less a witness to the proceedings than Samuel L. Jackson in the second row. The light is soft and intimate. The cinematography is shot from angles that viewers in live audience would see but the cameras almost never catch each other, (as they often do at sporting events where the message is that the camera crew is working in solidarity with the athletes to put on a show for you.) Hiding the instrument of mediation itself (the camera) gives the viewer the illusion of direct access. On the rare occasions when the cameras do go backstage as part of a joke set up by the comedic host, they are most often at eye level, again suggesting not that the camera is backstage but that you the viewer have wandered backstage. The program is presented with commercials, naturally, but the proceedings pause during said commercials and we now know from this incident people may get up during commercials but return to their seats before the cameras start rolling. The program is meant to suggest to the casual viewer that reality in the theater, or at the very least the important glamourous parts of it are paused during commercial breaks. All of this works to make the viewer feel like watching the Oscars is like getting a ticket to the live[i] and in-person show itself.

But at the same time, the red carpets, gilded theaters, and high fashion formal wear all remind the viewer that this world is more glamorous than their own. The proceedings embody the parasocial paradox of much celebrity news, the escapist fantasy is a world within view but far grander than the average viewer's, a world the viewer would love to slip seamlessly into if only they could secure the elusive invitation. Yes, the Oscars help to market the specific films that

have been nominated but, more importantly, they signify to the viewer an evening so glamourous they will never be invited to it, and so important that they should ever be aware of it.

But Will Smith, for better or worse, disrupted that. All of it.

The Slap Itself

The spectacle itself, the moment which garnered so much attention began with Chris Rock telling a joke about Penelope Cruz and Javier Bardem. It is typical crowd work at the Oscars: "Javier Bardem and his wife are both nominated. Now if she loses, he can't win." Rock's voice booms around the punch line. The camera cuts back and forth between Rock and the couple. This is standard procedure at the Oscars to show the celebrities being joked about and if they react with proper *self-awareness* and laugh typically the camera stays on them. But if their faces sour in a manner that suggests genuine offense, often the camera will cut away with alacrity. It is important to maintain the appearance of congeniality and comradery. Rock then adds, "He is praying Will Smith wins. Like please, Lord." The camera then cuts to Will Smith who is laughing, ebullient. The camera cuts back to Rock who points to make emphasis. "Jada, I love ya. *GI Jane Two*, can't wait to see it. All right." Smith chuckles. Jade grimaces and then rolls her eyes, impossible to know if her reaction is due to the joke alone or also the audience's (including Smith's) enjoyment of it. Smith's distinct laugh can be heard clearly. (Reddit users have speculated about if he was mic'd or can simply be heard by general audience mics, used at award shows and some sporting events to capture live audience reactions.) The camera cuts away from the couple, perhaps due to Jada's disapproval, Smith still laughing. With the camera back on him, Rock joins the crowd's laughter, with his also distinct, but more high-pitched chuckle. Rock, apparently observing Jada's discomfort, shrugs his shoulders and raises his palms, miming confusion at her reaction. Then adds, "It's…that was, that was a nice one," with a one-handed,

smoothing-things-over gesture, palm down, like brushing a horse. Rock starts to transition away with “Okay, I’m out here…Uh oh.” Rock sees that Smith has left his seat. The camera cuts to a wider shot, stage right of Rock and we see Smith approaching intently, back to the camera. As Smith approaches, Rock looks downward and laughs, arms behind his back as if expecting some friendly shenanigans.

Smith enters Rock’s personal space briskly and then uses a rather quick and compact wind-up, smacking him across the face. The audio of the blow is palpable. Rock’s head pops almost 45 degrees to his right (Smith’s left) rapidly. Smith used his dominant right hand. The camera cuts immediately after the blowback to the center cam rather than the stage right cam. Rock raises his arms for the briefest of moments, almost as if to prepare for more blows. But Smith turns to leave almost as quickly as he struck and Rock proclaims, “Oh, wow.” Smith tugs the waist of his jacket as he walks back to his seat, straightening his clothes.

Rock shakes his head, arms now down at his sides seeming to recover rather quickly. He proclaims, “Will Smith just smacked the shit out of me,” as Smith retakes his seat. The crowd actually laughs, thinking it’s a bit. But the crowd’s laughter dies as Smith shouts, “Keep my wife’s name out your fucking mouth.” The camera cuts to a close-up of Smith as he yells. He is not joking. “Wow, dude,” Rock says. “Yes,” Smith replies. Smith’s face tightens. You can see Lupita Nyong’o’s look of growing concern in real time just to the left of Smith. “It was a G.I. Jane joke,” Rock says. And Smith winds up again shouting even louder: “Keep my wife’s name out your fucking mouth.” Nyong’o’s face now has a look of grave concern, perhaps even suppressed terror. “I’m going to, okay?” Rock says as the camera cuts back to him. The room has gone silent. Rock shifts his gaze away from Smith and into the audience, but not upon anyone specifically, a distant inward look crosses his face. He looks humiliated and genuinely flustered

for the first time. He mutters “Oh I could…oh..okay…” Swallows whatever he could say perhaps deciding not to escalate things further. He shoots a quick glance over his right shoulder. “That was…uh…the greatest night in the history of television,” Rock says. He seems to have recovered his composure but not his dignity. The audience laughs. He takes a few deep breaths and says, “Okay, okay…” Rock then struggles through the presentation of the documentary award, keeping composure but also clearly shaken (Guardian News).

What happened next was almost as brooded over and commented on as the slap itself. The proceedings cut to commercial. And video footage taken from inside the theater confirms that during the break, Denzel Washington and Tyler Perry consoled Will Smith. Bradley Cooper joins them. Denzel is said to have told Smith, “At your highest moment, be careful, that’s when the devil comes for you” (Oscars, Will Smith).

P. Diddy was the only presenter to verbally acknowledge the altercation. He said, “I didn’t know that this year was going be the most exciting Oscars ever. Okay, Will and Chris, we are going to solve that like family at the gold party. But right now, we are moving on with love. (The audience begins cheering loudly. Lupita Nyong’o claps but still looks visibly uncomfortable. Will Smith claps and laughs hardily.) “Everybody make some noise.” (The crowd obliges.) (Best Video Clips).

And then if you didn’t know better, if you didn’t have social media accounts and joined the program in progress you might have thought nothing happened. Smith stayed seated in the front row and appeared to enjoy the proceedings. Many of those who did know what had just occurred found Smith’s presence, and his nonchalance, a bit unnerving.

For the many commenters who felt that Will Smith had just committed assault on camera, the proceedings and Smith rolled forth in this strange state of seeming denial. Smith is in the front row laughing at jokes just as ever.

Until Smith is awarded Best Actor. The slap radiates through Smith's speech. He appears to be processing the events in real-time, and in a somewhat recursive fashion, moves from defending his actions to acknowledging he made a mistake and finally apologizing, but not to Rock himself. What Smith does and does not apologize for and to whom is quite telling. At first, he defends his actions by comparing himself to Richard Williams, "a fierce defender of his family." But when the camera cuts to the Williams family, they stare ahead awkwardly, seemingly at least a little perplexed as to how they should feel about all of this. Smith makes a few grandiose claims about his divine calling. He is "to be a river to his people" and shine forth both "light" and "love." He keeps emphasizing his role as a protector of all of the different women in his life. He suggests that this is a perception problem when he further compares himself to Richard Williams by saying that art imitates life and he now looks like "a crazy father." (Richard Williams released a statement after the Oscars condemning and distancing himself from the incident (Hernandez).) Smith also appears on the defensive as he declares that "love will make you do crazy things." Smith eventually seems to acknowledge that his decision was a poor one as he states that "in this business…you gotta be able to have people disrespecting you and you gotta smile and you gotta pretend like that's OK" (Will Smith Wins). Smith here is acknowledging the unwritten rules, the messages the Oscars are meant to communicate to the public. He knows the illusion he is tasked with helping to create when he attends the Oscars, and Smith even eventually apologizes to The Academy for breaking that illusion, but not for slapping and threatening Chris Rock. To apologize to The Academy but not Chris Rock is to apologize

not for assaulting Christ Rock, but to apologize for undermining the carefully crafted spectacle that is the Oscars.

Smith received a standing ovation when he won the Oscar. Mila Kunis said that she and her husband Ashton Kutcher remained seated as a matter of principle and that they were shocked and disappointed that so many stood.

Broken Arrow

A sampling of television and Youtube commentary given by fellow celebrities in the weeks that followed (most of which came in the first week after the incident) showed how celebrity commentary on the incident was largely intended to be a condemnation of Smith's behavior, but the discourse often revealed tacit assumptions about how the Oscars are a meta-spectacle of great importance and how Smith's behavior disrupted the messaging of that spectacle.

Smith's slap broke the illusion of comradery and congeniality. ("Everyone saw an assault take place," said Nikki Glaser (The Howard Stern Show).) The slap also diminished the glamour. ("This is just a really clear indication that we are not the cool club anymore," said Jim Carrey (Extratv).) It called into question the knowledge we have of celebrities and their private lives. ("Do you remember when Tom Cruise jumped on the couch on Oprah's show, and it was just hard to look at him the same afterward? Like, what happened with this guy? And that point on there was an authenticity piece you would just struggle with. What's real? What's not real? What's going on with this guy?" said Bill Simmons.) It called into question the superiority of celebrities and their virtues. ("Hollywood is spinless, on mass," said Jim Carrey (Extratv).) The slap called into question the superiority of the work they do. ("This is a guy who has been lobbying to win the Academy Award forever and the night he is going to win what does he do?

He ruined the moment" said Robyn Diangelo (The Howard Stern Show). "…But he ruined his own moment," said Nikki Glaser (The Howard Stern Show). "It's a big deal when you get to host the Oscars—it's a bucket list when get to host the Oscars. And for something to happen like what happened with Will and Chris, it takes away from so many things. It took away from Questlove's win on the documentary, it took away from the Willliams sisters," said Ellen DeGeneres (The Ellen Show). And finally, the slap revealed that the Oscars are not inherently glamorous but a pro forma event where people are going through a ritual like any other. ("For us this is the Oscars, for Will Smith this is a cookout. And I'm not diminishing the Oscars but those are your people, that's your world…I think that is part of the reason many of us were so shocked. It's a lauded event, it's bigger than life, whereas many movie stars are at the Oscars like, hey nice to see you again, good to be here good to be back," said Trevor Noah[ii] (The Daily Show).) Clearly the slap ruptured the messaging of the Oscars in a manner which could not be recovered for the rest of the evening's festivities. ("This just sends the wrong message, said Wanda Sykes" (The Ellen Show).)

An Exacerbation of Existing Insecurities

Americans hold two insecurities concerning parasocial celebrity relationships. The first is asymmetry. You know so much about Brad Pitt, but he knows nothing of you. Richard Schickel describes this insecurity:

> Some part of these people has been in intimate contact with the well-known individuals for years. Secrets, hopes, and dreams have not exactly been shared with the celebrity, but he is somehow bound up in them. Another part of the approaching stranger's mind is, of course, aware he is totally unknown to the

> celebrity. He resents that unyielding fact. A chip grows on the shoulder. An undercurrent of anger is felt (4-5).

For most, this asymmetry will never be satisfactorily resolved. They can't get Brad Pitt to know or like them or often even know of their existence. Strangely this leads some only to learn more about the celebrity in question. It is a bit like the old cliché about eating potato chips, the sensation only increases one's appetite. This is all well and good for those who make potato chips or *People* magazine, but the resentment that builds just beneath the surface can cause backlash under certain circumstances.

The other major insecurity is of authenticity, when every moment of *interaction* with the celebrity is mediated, how do we know what is real and what is just an image crafted to persuade? Rojek describes it:

> Everyone would accept that the foundation of attention capital is trust. Few would maintain that the personality-based trust is copper-bottomed. It comes with the suspicion that the setting of trust may not endure because the visibility of personality is nothing but a paper clip holding the social order together which conceals inner aspects of presentation as well as separate features in the setting that permit us trust to obtain in the first place (79).

Much of what we know about the world beyond our immediate circumstances is mediated to us and as such, "We live in an age of chronic uncertainty. We live in an imperfect market of knowledge about reality. As such, it is better to be a doubting Thomas" (Rojek 80). The insecurity of our imperfect knowledge lurks beneath the composed surfaces of our

personalities. Seldom do we repent when what we thought we knew turns out to be false. And seldom when a celebrity behaves in a manner contrary to their public persona do we chastise ourselves for having put emotional investment into what is at the end of the day a sophisticated marketing campaign. Rather our previous admiration sours to resentment of the celebrity rather quickly.

While a certain amount of the attention paid to the Oscars Slap is simply the sum of the highly effective attention-generating parts: Will Smith, Chris Rock, Oscars, violence, etc. But beyond these parts, the force that propelled this attention-generating machine forward with such great thrust was the moment's disruption of a carefully selected set of signs that have been ritualized into reverence. In disrupting this spectacle, this usually clear signal, the slap exacerbated the aforementioned deeply held insecurities around parasocial relationships.

The crucial context here is that the overwhelming majority of televised or streamed content promotes, not questions, para-social relationships. They work to push these insecurities further beneath the surface of conscious thought. Celebrity X sells us soap, or the Oscars, or America itself and we are often happy enough with the sales pitch that we don't give as much thought as we should to the product itself. Celebrity X is so charming.

The exacerbation of these insecurities which were just beneath the surface can lead viewers to don cynicism as a defensive armor against not just what you do not know and might not ever know, but against that which, at some level, has been emotionally invested in knowing that could never know, invested in part because they could never know. Cynicism, in this sense, need not get us any closer to the truth because it allows us to persuade ourselves that, whatever our emotional investment in parasocial relationships, we are not dupes. This particular brand of cynicism is well-documented and often associated with the postmodern condition. Andrejevic

paraphrasing Gitlin says, “The logic of savviness works in a conservative direction, naturalizing the status quo in the very attempt to not be duped by it” (135). Gitlin describes it as a “Postmodern fascination with surfaces and with the machinery that cranks them out, a fascination indistinguishable from surrender” (Andrejevic 133). The surrender comes with avoiding the difficult questions we might ask if we were to peruse more complicated questions about the slap and our own relationship to the incident. Yes, this stance imbeds a certain awareness of the world of spectacle and the domination of our surrounding appearances, but it often goes no further in its critical analysis. As the critic Jacques Rancière writes that Debord’s ideas were:

> [S]upposed to denounce the machinery of social domination in order to equip those challenging it with new weapons. Today, it has become exactly the opposite: a disenchanted knowledge of the reign of the commodity and the spectacle, of the equivalence between everything and everything else and between everything and its own image (32).

Ideology and self-interest warp the public’s response just as they did with the Challenger explosion and 9/11. Few ask if we hold the Oscars too sacred, or if Smith’s actions were so unnerving because we, too, have pent-up rage beneath our surface, or if the cutting remarks of stand-up comedians are part of a market of cruelty we help to create. Rather, we ask if Will Smith deceived us. Or conversely, our cynicism that Will Smith’s kindness is a façade is confirmed. Or more cynical still we assume the slap itself was staged to create ratings. These questions and their underlying assumptions point outward rather than inward, asking Will Smith why he has disappointed us, asking Chris Rock why he cruelly mocks Jada Pickett Smith, or

asking the Oscars why they have failed to entertain America without retribution and violence, rather than asking why we must live on an IV drip of bemusement, celebrity gossip, and mockery.

It is worth noting the celebrity moments to which the Oscars Slap has been compared: Mike Tyson biting Evander Holyfield's Ear (1997), the Superbowl Nip Slip (Justin Timberlake/Janet Jackson) (2004), and Tom Cruise jumping on Oprah's couch (2005). Each of these moments broke both the intended semiotic messaging and the parasocial contract the celebrity in question had with the public before the incident. Audiences were left shocked but then forced to turn deeper into negative feelings towards the Benedict Arnold celebrity in question and/or an attitude of general cynicism as a way of telling themselves they were never really invested or deceived in the first place.

For many Americans cynicism is an attitude and not a philosophy or refined interpretative mode. Cynicism is a healthy emotional response to our uncertain and market-driven (read: self-serving) environment, but like all emotions (as Aristotle once observed), if it is to serve us, and not rule us, it must be educated to be productive. We must learn to ask the right questions.

CHAPTER TWO

PARENTS JUST DON'T UNDERSTAND: THE SUCCESS OF WILL SMITH'S HIP-HOP SAFE PERSONA

"I just want to say to all my fans out there: I never killed nobody in none of my records, I don't use no profanity in none of my records, and still I managed to get up here. Peace."

-Will Smith's acceptance speech for an MTV VMA award

"'Will Smith don't gotta cuss in his raps to sell records.' Well, I do. So fuck him and fuck you, too." -Eminem

When asked about the above diss, Eminem explained that it came in response to the above speech by Will Smith. Not everyone is as happy as Will Smith, Marshall Mathers (AKA Eminem) said, and that if you feel strongly about a sentiment, you might put a little profanity before it, adding: "He dissed a whole *gender* [sic] of rap music, he dissed gangster rap music." Em's use of "gender" rather than genre (or subgenre) is telling. That hip-hop is synonymous with black masculinity is a truism worthy of exploration and complication. That hip-hop is synonymous with certain urban black masculinities is perhaps more accurate, for reasons which will help us contextualize Will Smith's public persona and why for many, the Oscars Slap represented such a stark departure from the Will Smith they had imagined in their minds, not the least of which being that many today would consider Eminem more authentically hip-hop than Will Smith.

Miles White states that

> It is not so much that the notion of an authentic urban black identity is encapsulated in hip-hop culture as a whole since even urban black

> identities are quite diverse, but that the culture of the street does provide social texts that make sense to black male youths who dwell in urban environments and who identify with the codes and meanings that emulate from various subcultures within hip-hop, for example, prison culture, street gangs, and hustlers (33).

Candice Jenkins argues for hip-hop as a kind of discourse of black masculinity in the Foucauldian sense of discourse, clarifying: "U.S. hip-hop, can be understood as black American identity or even black masculinity, but given the way that hip-hop has by now come to dominate national and global youth culture, we might more usefully think about the topic of hip-hop discourse as a particular relationship between Blackness and Americanness, more a kind of metacommentary on the shifting position and fortunes of the marginalized 'Other.'"

The nuances drawn by White and Jenkins are important particularly when we consider urban or cosmopolitan hip-hop audiences, who are more often aware of the diversity of black masculinities. But much scholarship (including that of Crystal Belle, Steven Netcoh, and Miles White) highlights that white Americans and especially those without black friends or neighbors experience hip-hop, and gangster rap in particular, as Foucauldian discourse of black masculinity in a narrower sense. As Stuart Hall once described it, Foucauldian discourse is "a group of statements which provide a language for talking about—a way of representing the knowledge about—a particular topic at a particular historical moment" (qtd in Jenkins). On the topic of black masculinity, in a moment which lasted from roughly the mid-nineties into the early aughts for many white Americans, gangster rap was the defining discourse, and the black masculinity which it defined filled white Americans with equal parts excitement and fear. As White, quoting Dawn Norfleet, argues during the rise of gangster rap, the association between harder styles of

rap music and violence came to be embodied by the young black male, who was seen "'as exotic, dangerous, and feared, yet simultaneously appealing and marketable'" (25).

This condition of simultaneously finding a fantasy of escape from suburban boredom in commodified black masculinity while also having a certain amount of fear for actual black males was satirized in the opening scene of Mike Judge's 1999 film *Office Space*, in which a white male middle-class character, Michael, on his commute to his boring office job raps along to Scarface's "No Tears." He shouts along enthusiastically:

> I've got my pistol pawn cocked
>
> Ready to lick shots nonstop until I see your monkey-ass drop
>
> And let your homies know who done it

But then a black man selling flowers on the median approaches. Michael locks the car door sheepishly and turns the music down, intimidated. Only after the black man has passed does he turn the music back up and continue his performance:

> I got this killer up inside of me
>
> I can't talk to Mother so I talk to my diary

The juxtaposition between the swagger the character displays as he raps and his apparent cowardice at the flower salesman exposes his comfort with black masculinity when commodified for his consumption and his discomfort with black males in actual physical space. As White states quoting Jafa, "[t]he historical love of black music by whites in the United States has always been troubled by blackness itself, by 'the trauma provoked by the introduction of black body of white space'" (10). Michael, like many suburban males, craves this authenticity and fears it. Black masculinity becomes a loaded commodity, freighted with desire and trepidation. Suburban white males can purchase it but they cannot obtain it. It is a perfect commodity in this

sense, one that can be sold over and over again because it can't ever really be obtained by the intended audience. Deborah Root contends that "increasingly uneasy about the emptiness and commodification of mainstream 'white-bread-culture" causes many whites "to look elsewhere for meaning and cultural and aesthetic integrity" (qtd in White 19). White argues commodification is linked to stripping culture of valuable context: "Commodity culture replaces people with objects and their histories with hegemonic narratives that obfuscate colonial oppression so that consumption becomes guiltless" (20).

Commodity culture reinforces hegemony by allowing ideals that we might otherwise question to slip into what the anthropologist Grant McCracken calls displaced meaning. Ideals of masculinity need not be questioned as long as grizzled urban survivalists like Ice Cube and Ice T achieve them for us. White male suburbanites, feeling that their potential masculinity is underdeveloped by steady white-collar work and access to housing and education, fear they have become soft. Gangster rap came to dominate hip-hop in the mid-nineties because it commodified masculinity as an ideal that some white Americans felt they were losing. Will Smith found "cross-over appeal" via a different route toward the commodification of hip-hop and black masculinity. Rather than making black masculinity an unachievable but enviable ideal, Smith's brand was not only hip-hop lite but hip-hop safe.

Here I argue that understanding hip-hop safe is crucial to understanding Smith's personal brand and the strong parasocial relationship he has forged with his extensive fan base, and also why the Oscars Slap was so "off-brand" for Smith. Hip-hop safe consists of two crucial elements: First, Smith kept the swagger and confidence of hip-hop but avoided the more subversive elements. Second, and more importantly, he sympathized with his white audience by framing black masculinity not as a matter of authenticity but of performance. I argue that Smith,

by exploring black masculinity as a matter of performance rather than authenticity, forged a strong bond with white audiences who felt their own insecurities around masculinity and racial politics.

I will also argue that the gangster rap that would come to dominate the market after Smith's hip-hop career caused many to retroactively frame Smith and his music as soft. And that gangster rap, which was the most dominant form of hip-hop from the mid-nineties to the early aughts, framed black masculinity as a matter of authenticity while Will Smith, in both his hip-hop career and sitcom, explored black masculinity through a framework of performance.

Others have explored how Smith made hip-hop, and by extension black masculinity safe and approachable for white suburban audiences. Magill analyzes Smith's early film career and how he was both already perceived and marketed to white audiences as being safe, "Smith's persona works to defuse the racial threat so as to claim a safer masculinity that still 'keeps it real'" (127). He traces how many of Smith's 90's and early 00's blockbusters were often black/white buddy films (or in the case of Independence Day a multiracial and ethnic ensemble) which often give Smith an older white mentor. The over dynamic often being, "Will Smith cracks jokes and fights for truth and justice while a white man takes the position of guidance and/or superiority." While I agree with Magill that "Smith's black manhood draws on a set of characteristics that map well onto both black and white anxieties about masculinity" (127), I believe that it is the performative aspect in his exploration of black masculinity that is most effective at alleviating those anxieties. Therefore, Smith's performative stance towards black masculinity in his earlier hip-hop/sitcom career will get greater attention in my analysis.

No Profanity in None of My Records

Even Smith's explanation for why he did not use profanity in his records smacks of a deference to authority that seems unhip-hop. In Smith's words:

> Like most young kids emulating their hip-hop idols, I had been writing verses full of curse words and slick, slangy vulgarities, and I had accidently left my book out in the kitchen.
>
> Gigi found it and read it. She never said anything to me, but she wrote me a note on the inside front cover.
>
> Dear Willard,
>
> Truly intelligent people do not have to use language like this to express themselves. God has blessed you with the gift of words. Be sure you are using your gifts to uplift others. Please show the world you are as intelligent as we think you are.
>
> Love,
>
> Gigi
>
> Lying in my bed, I was overcome with shame. Had I used my words to uplift others (64)?

Smith resolves to make his words a force for good going forward. And in later albums he did have songs that promoted positive values, but that is not the emotional ballast of his first two albums. They don't seem like conscious efforts to promote something positive as much as they feel like a deliberate effort to sanitize something dangerous and sell it to those individuals whose parents still have some say in their purchasing decisions.

In his autobiography, Smith recounts his decision to avoid profanity and crime as being authentic to his background and not a marketing choice:

> My middle-class upbringing contributed to the constant criticism I took early in my rap career. I was not a gangster, and I wasn't selling drugs. I grew up on a nice street in a two-parent household. I went to a catholic school with mostly white kids until I was fourteen. My mom was college-educated. And for all his faults, my father always put food on the table and would die before he abandoned his kids. My story was very different from the ones being told by the young black men who were launching a global phenomenon that would later become hip-hop. In their minds, I was somehow an illegitimate artist; they would call me "soft," "whack," and "corny," a "bubblegum rapper" (8).

The bubblegum rapper label sticks. The diss describes Smith's early work with a certain precision, the obvious pop appeal and by the treacly nature of his content. As stated in the previous chapter, it caters to teenage rebellion in the gentlest of ways. In "Girls Ain't Nothing but Trouble," Smith seeks casual sex with the curious failings of the inexperienced and is rewarding with only pain. The song takes the safe position of thematic ambiguity, the prurient nature of Smith's quest is carefully balanced with just desserts of having undertaken it. The songs often feel as if they are not genuinely subversive so much as marketed towards teenagers who would like to feel subversive. Mark Crispin Miller once described this marketing tactic:

> Often times there is a kind of official and systematic rebelliousness in media products pitched at kids. It's part of the official rock video worldview, it's part of the official advertising worldview, your parent are creeps, teachers are nerds and idiots, authority figures are laughable. Nobody

> can really understand kids, except the corporate sponsor (qtd in Goodman).

The authority figures in Smith's work, the titular parents who just don't understand, match Miller's description, they are not the antagonists in a meaningful intergeneration political struggle, but simply aging killjoys—responsible adults. Looking back at Smith's first two albums they have a corporate feel, a Madison Avenue endorsed, ersatz hip-hop for a suburban audience. This corporate feeling comes not just from the lack of profanity but from the efforts made to authenticate hip-hop in spite of the absence of subversive content. Without profanity, violence, or political critique, the Fresh Prince is still "in effect," boisterous and flamboyant even. Smith, modulates his voice's volume and pitch, making it both pop and bellow. And while the Fresh Prince might avoid profanity his use of slang otherwise communicates a kind of urban authenticity. Smith also uses other signifiers of hip-hop in his music videos and dress to communicate authenticity. Graffiti backgrounds and fonts in his music videos and in the opening credits to his sitcom. All of this feels like an overcompensation for the lack of an actual resistance to the politics and values of the dominant culture. It's precisely the sort of thing one might expect from a marketing team appropriating actual counterculture, commodifying it as described by Miles White, replacing "histories with hegemonic narratives" (20).

But when the first album was recorded, corporate powers were just beginning to sense hip-hop's potential and DJ Jazzy Jeff and the Fresh Prince were not yet signed to a major label. In the decades that followed Smith's early hip-hop career the culture industry became increasingly efficient at identifying and co-opting youth culture, so perhaps these judgments of Smith are retroactively unfair. Perhaps the choices Smith made before meeting Russell Simmons were really just middle-class and white influence making his aesthetic once more palatable to

middle-class white audiences. Smith who is sometimes rather candid in discussing self-promotion and even sometimes how market calculations informed his aesthetic choices, writes simply his early work with DJ Jazzy Jeff, "We were seeking our sound, but we found ourselves" (84).

Smith's descriptions of his upbringing practically sounds biracial, an internal unresolved conflict is ever present:

> At school, it was impossible to not feel like an outcast. I didn't dress like the white kids. I didn't listen to Led Zeplin or AC/DC and I *never* got my head around lacrosse. I simply didn't fit in. But back in the neighborhood, I didn't quite fit in either. I didn't talk like the other kids or use the slang they did—My mother didn't even allow us to say "ain't" at home (43).

Smith's discussion of his homelife sounds resistant to hip-hop aesthetics and values and yet Smith seems to identify not just himself but all young black people as members of the hip-hop nation:

> I am not exactly sure when I became "a rapper." Back then, hip-hop wasn't something we did—it was what we *were*. Hip-hop was not just our music—it was our dance; it was fashion, street art, politics, social justice. It was everything; it was life; it was us (59).

Smith is making a claim here both about the scope of hip-hop not just being a musical genre but a culture and about hip-hop being black and vice versa blacks being hip-hop. And in this sense, one could argue that the dominance of gangster rap did a disservice to rap by narrowing the scope of black subjectivities presented and confirming stereotypes to whites who were cultural tourists to hip-hop. As Miles White contends, "What gets lost behind the imagery

and masculine desire involved in the fetishization of the hip-hop gangster is the extent to which these representations of black masculinity depend upon and perpetuate the imagined malevolence of black males generally" (23).

Authenticity and Performance

First, let us conceptualize both authenticity and performance. Authenticity is a much-debated concept within musical fan circles. Justin Williams sees authenticity as a part of bounding of culture within an imagined community. Williams acknowledges that this bounding of "objects and concepts" is in reality not complete, but those who participate in the culture often perceive this authenticity to be the genre's essence. In other words, when, say, a member of the heavy metal community enters a cultural space they look for cultural signifiers to identify if the space is authentically heavy metal and perceive these objects and concepts as the essence of heavy metal. Objects outside of their boundaries will be perceived as inauthentic to heavy metal. Gangster rap became so linked with black masculinity within the white imagination that the two served to authenticate one another. Hence liking or playing or rapping gangster rap was displaying one's blackness at this time and for a white person who wanted to join this musical community and be fully accepted they would need black friends. The two authenticated one another in the white imagination. As Miles White contends, "For white adolescent males coming to terms with issues of masculinity and identity, the image of the swaggering black male in hip-hop videos is an appealing figure that has become iconic of an authentic and desirable representation of masculinity to be emulated" (23).

Gangster rap and black masculinity are not the only musical genres and conceptual frameworks to reinforce one another in this manner. Punk has become so strongly associated with a certain brand of anti-authoritarian politics that the two often serve to authenticate one

another in the minds of many punk fans. Two other notes about authenticity: one, it is often mapped onto masculinity, and two, it is in the eye of the beholder or, better yet, in our hyper-capitalist society, in the eye of the consumer. The artists do not get to declare themselves authentic, the approving crowd does.

Performance as defined by Richard Schechner is "twice behaved" behavior or "restored behavior" (qtd in Micu 46). And much has been written about tension between repetition and difference in performance. In this sense whenever we imitate others, we can be said to be giving a kind of performance and it is easy to see how this might inform notions of masculine behavior. The related concept of performativity as I will discuss them in this paper originated with J.L. Austin's work *How to Do Things with Words* (Micu 10). In this work, Austin looks at the different kinds of work words do in everyday life. He finds that much of language is used descriptively (i.e., these words attempt to describe things in the world as they are) but Austin also finds words which do not describe the world but create things within it, such as wedding vows; you are married at the moment you say, "I do." Austin says that this language is not descriptive but performative, the words do the work of creation (Micu 10). Judith Butler takes Austin's concept of performative language and expands upon its work in creating gender Not just words, but body language such as gestures and also clothing create gender. Gender is performative, Bulter argues (Micu 11). And to understand the relationship between the two, Elin Diamond has argued: "that performativity is always materialized in performance and that without attention to performance, performativity risks becoming an abstract theory without much ground in people's lived experience" (qtd in Micu 60).

I am arguing that masculinity in gangster rap is not viewed as performative but rather as an authentic and natural way of being in the world. Yes, a world that is harsh and unjust plays a

role in shaping the men of gangster rap but the masculinity and hardness born of it are not framed as a matter of choice. Any other choice is often perceived as a kind of surrender leading to being dominated or to death itself. One does not perform hardness, one is hard. This was particularly true of hip-hop as imagined by white suburban consumers at this time. Bell hooks states, “While we often hear about privileged black men assuming a ghetto gangsta-boy style, we rarely hear about the pressure they get from white people to prove they are ‘really black’” (42).

Parents Just Don’t Understand

To understand with greater nuance how Smith’s brand of hip-hop safe framed black masculinity within a framework of performance rather than authenticity, let use consider four objects: two songs and two episodes of the *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*. One, Smith’s most popular song, “Parents Just Don’t Understand,” two, “I Think I can Beat Mike Tyson” (probably the most popular song from his second album), episode three of season one of the *Fresh Prince of Bell Air* “Clubba Hubba,” and, finally, episode seventeen of season one, “The Ethnic Tip.”

The first verse of “Parents Just Don’t Understand” (PJDU) is about his mother buying him clothes that are affordable but outdated. Smith suffers humiliation at his mother’s attempt to save money. And while this may seem small it is interesting to consider the honesty on display here. Contrast Run DMC’s “My Adidas” with Smith's admission that his mother would not buy him Adidas and bought him Zips instead. This might be framed as simply a negation of cool rappers wear cool name band clothes/shoes but could also be seen as an unpacking of how it is one does or does not acquire Adidas. In other words, the song “My Adidas” is a celebration of Adidas and having them. Having them is cool and therefore cool people have them. But listening to PJDU as an adult we become aware of more than just the lameness of parents but also the cultural capital and financial capital behind such decisions, and how a song like “My Adidas”

attempts to mask all of this as “cool” being a thing that already always is. Rappers wear Adidas of course. Smith cannot perform black masculinity properly in his Zips and is therefore mocked by his peers.

The second verse is even more interesting to consider performative masculinity. In this verse Smith “borrows” his parents Porsche while they are out of town. He pretends to be having an important conversation on the car phone when he spies an attractive woman. He honks at the woman and asks her to take a ride with him. She demurs, pointing out that she doesn’t know him and that he could be a “deranged lunatic.” Smith persuades her by arguing “Would a lunatic have a Porsche like this?” He had taken the car to act out a fantasy and is now asking her to join him on the grounds that the car is a sure sign that the fantasy is real. Ala Debord, their interaction is scripted via the image of the commodity, namely the Porsche.

After getting McDonald’s (being the good American consumers they are) they are pulled over as Smith was speeding because she was running her hand up his thigh. It is then revealed that Smith does not even have a driver’s license and that his love interest is a twelve-year-old runaway. She too was playing a role, perhaps acting out a fantasy, following a script which the Porsche gave them permission to act out. While the first verse might be contrasted with Run DMC’s “My Adidas,” the second calls to mind Prince’s, “Little Red Corvette” (“Baby you’re much too fast.”). In gangster rap, as in many other aspects of American culture, possessions such as name brand sneakers or sports cars are used as signifiers of status and achievement. Whether originally intended or not, PJDU reminds us that these same commodities in America are just as often used by those who would like to play those roles. Their purchase might mark achievement, but more likely simply signals aspirations or even a roleplay which might be abandoned at one’s convenience. Smith has a Porsche with a car phone and his paramour has her “bodily

dimensions" both of which turn out to be misleading: the second verse of PJDU deconstructs an escapist sexual fantasy by highlighting the mendacious performances of the participants, both of whom may have not detected the other's lies because they were working to conceal their own.

If in PJDU commodities become a passport to masculine performance, then in "I Think I Can Beat Mike Tyson," discourse among men becomes the ticket. In fact, almost the entire song is a series of calls and responses among different men. The song begins with two elderly men discussing Mike Tyson and his feats of physical prowess. One old man exaggerates and the other fails to remember (reality and masculine bragging part ways from the very beginning of the song). This prelude is followed by the first verse in which the Fresh Prince and DJ Jazzy Jeff are having a similar conversation while watching Tyson fights. But instead of responding to Tyson's prowess by exaggerating it, Smith moves in the other direction and claims he could beat Mike Tyson. This bragging then moves to the absurd step of actually booking a fight with Mike Tyson. The rest of the song DJ Jazzy Jeff continues to encourage Smith, but every other man Smith talks to tells him Tyson will kick his ass. No one seems to do so out of a sense of concern for Smith's well-being but rather as a kind of shit talking, which seemingly makes it impossible for Smith to back down. As in PJDU, this all climaxes in an embarrassing reality check for Smith, who "releases his bowels" when punched by Tyson and then proceeds to punch his own cornerman to escape the fight. Smith explains that a "good retreat is better than a bad stand any day" but by then it is clear that he figured this out too late to save face. The song looks at masculine performance which results from social pressure, especially in the form of guy talk.

The song's very premise invites us to contrast Smith's masculinity with Tyson's. Iron Mike Tyson is a synonym for black hardiness. bell hooks praises Muhammad Ali for speaking, for playing against the stereotype of the silent black man. By being both vocal and charming Ali

recast the black athlete in the minds of many Americans. Tyson did not have Ali's gift for gab, and in fact, he spoke with a distinct and oft-parodied lisp. Tyson's silence, steely demeanor, and viscous series of knockouts solidified him as a dangerous black man in the public's perception; Smith's decision to contrast his own masculinity with Tyson's reflects Smith's willingness to brand himself as a different kind of man.

There are repeated references to Smith running in the song, to him being elusive rather than obdurate. For every fistfight that breaks out in a schoolyard, dozens are avoided by someone having the good sense to back down but this backing down is rarely praised or even acknowledged. This is a masculinity that many can identify with even if they do so silently. Dave Hickey once wrote of Liberace's gay-until-you-explicitly-ask-him-if-he-is-gay politics, that he "democratized the closet." That in essence those who had eyes to see and ears to hear knew that Liberace was gay. Smith is almost doing the same with not being hypermasculine. Making it a little more acceptable to know you cannot beat Mike Tyson but have a tendency to fantasize about it anyway.

Just as clothes and cars are an ever-present masculine signifier in rap, so is braggadocio and Smith here positions himself not as someone with authentic braggadocio but the opposite, as an individual whose attempts at braggadocio got out of hand and exposed him to ridicule. There is an ever-present tension in reading Smith's work as a critique of the values of hip-hop because on one hand this is all clearly intended to be self-deprecating humor. Smith is usually the butt of the joke and therefore we must see to some degree these songs as ultimately reaffirming these values. On the other hand, the Fresh Prince still comes across as likable and deeply relatable (he is still the hero of the story and a kind of adolescent trickster figure who is still learning to actually get away with his tricks). Smith is threading a fine needle. He is reaffirming dominant

patriarchal values while winking at the audience and letting them know it is okay if they fail to live up to such high ideals of masculinity. He fails to live up to them, too. But it is still fun to try, to pretend to be the manly man they hope to one day be. Notice the similarity between the way Will Smith is positioning himself, vis-a-vis Tyson, and the way Tony Jefferson does in his own reflection on Iron Mike and masculinity: "I am probably like many men: drawn in by the discourse of hardness; utterly incapable of living it." This unique-in-media-common-in-reality positioning via black masculinity allowed Smith to forge an intense parasocial relationship with white audiences who strongly desired the swagger and authenticity of black masculinity but had trepidation about the danger and/or insecurity toward the high bar of hardness.

In "Clubba Hubba" (season one, episode three) we see similar themes of the Fresh Prince putting on different masculine roles but failing to achieve the desired effect. The family is at their exclusive country club when Will spots and becomes smitten with Mimi Mumford, a wealthy young woman whose thoracic surgeon and polo-playing father, aka Dr. No, won't let anyone near his daughter because no one is worthy of her. Will hatches a plan to pretend to be the kind of career-driven elitist Dr. No would approve of. Carlton, Philip, and Jeffery the butler work to Eliza-Dolittle Will into a perfect gentleman. Will invents a new identity, Kip Smithers, a Connecticut transfer from Andover to Bel-Air academy who has come to row crew. The plan works in converting Dr. No. But a new obstacle emerges when Mimi informs Will she wants nothing to do with Kip Smither or any other man her father would approve of: "I want a real man, someone dangerous, someone exciting, someone from the streets." Will, then out of earshot of Dr. No, tries to tell Mimi the truth about his actual upbringing in West Philadelphia. But she's not buying it, adding that his accent seems fake to her. Will recuperates from Mimi's rejection by creating another fake identity, this time of a criminal from the Bed-Stuy area on the run from the

law. Will plays this new fake identity for Mimi while still putting on the old Kip Smithers personality for her father who returns intermittently to create complications for Will. Mimi appears to gain interest when Will tells her that he told her father, "Back up, old man." Mimi seems excited at the possibility that this new persona will liberate her from her father's strictures and comes on to Will. But before they sneak off to a dangerous liaison, Mimi asks Will to rap for her. It is during the act of rapping for Mimi that her father returns one more time and the double ruse comes crashing down, leading Will to confess that he is neither the Princeton-bound crew member nor the dangerous scofflaw he pretended to be. Will shouts, exasperated, that no woman is worth this amount of trouble, but then chases the next one he sees out of the room.

Mimi Mumford represents that ever-present cultural tourist, the "me—me!" American consumer of rap music doing so to defy her father and feel alive for a moment. Tellingly, she cannot recognize Will for his real background from West Philadelphia. She craves the authenticity of the streetwise swaggering rapper but the very factors that make her desire it also make her a terrible judge of it. She asks Will to rap for her as a final request before they are to run off together because rap as an act is synonymous with the very urban authenticity and danger she craves. "Clubba Hubba" is a natural extension of the themes that Smith began to develop during his rap career but now with a crew of professional sitcom writers working with him, the themes of positioning himself as a young man struggling to fulfill the difficult and at times contradictory demands of black masculinity are explored more deeply. The dual roles Smith tries to pull off call to mind the "double consciousness "of W.E.B. Du Bois as well as the *Black Skins White Masks* of Franz Fanon: the question of whether one tries to get ahead by beating the dominant group at their own game or reject the game wholesale. "Clubba Hubba" is not unique in its exploration of performance and black masculinity. Many episodes of *The Fresh Prince of*

Bel Air explore performance and many also explore the contingencies of identity most often along the lines of race and class. Often these issues intersect with gender in one or another, as they do in "Clubba Hubba."

What is unique about "Clubba Hubba" is how explicitly it positions Smith as being caught between conflicting expectations. The cracked mirror of Smith's art reflects a divide in his own life. In his autobiography, he writes:

> At Catholic school no matter how well-spoken or intelligent, I was still the black kid. In Wynnefield, no matter how up I was on the latest music or fashion, I was never quite "black enough." I became one of the first hip-hop artists who was considered "safe enough" for white audiences. But with black audiences, I was labeled "soft" because I wasn't rapping about hard-core, gangster shit. This racial dynamic is something that has plagued me in various forms my entire life (44).

The Fresh Prince of Bel Air is a natural extension of the themes raised by the Fresh Prince's lyrics but deepens and expands upon those themes. In each of these three narratives, Will Smith, the Fresh Prince, is a streetwise trickster figure. Whom young white suburban males might admire for his cunning, passion, and humor. But what makes him relatable, even more so than admirable, is that he fails over and over again at a task white suburban males also find insurmountable, namely becoming the confident, swaggering, hard-as-nails hip-hop icon they both admire and fear. Smith is loved anyway by the end of the story in spite of his inability to be that character and yet he will try again.

"Clubba Hubba" finds clever ways to explore the different kinds of cultural capital needed for Will to pull off both of his fake personas. While Will is pretending to be Kip, Will teases Carlton by pretending to think Andover is "bend-over." Later, when Will is teaching Carlton the backstory for his felon alter ego, Carlton confuses the "state pen" with Penn State, explaining "I thought Penn State was bad enough."

The plot of "Ethnic Tip" begins with Will failing a history exam. When his aunt and uncle scold him, Smith protests that history class might be more interesting to him if more black history was taught. Uncle Phil thinks Smith is just making excuses, but Aunt Viv thinks he has a point and the two set out to improve the curriculum to include more black voices. Aunt Viv even volunteers to teach the course and the lazy history teacher accepts this without complaint, "a month off!" he exclaims. Will and Carlton come to history class on Aunt Viv's first day thinking they will have a decided advantage on this subject matter but are quickly disillusioned. Aunt Viv gives them extra work and holds them to a higher standard than their white peers. Meanwhile, the white students love Aunt Viv and even start a petition to have her become the permanent history teacher. They are two signatures short of the required amount and ask Will and Carlton to sign the petition in front of the whole class. The two awkwardly hesitate, insisting the other sign it first. Aunt Viv picks up on their hesitancy and resolves the dilemma by saying her usual employer, the university, will not allow her to take on the role permanently. Later, she has a heart-to-heart with Will and Carlton and essentially makes explicit that she was holding them to a higher standard. I will not comment on the ethics of a black teacher holding black students to a higher standard in a sitcom vis-a-vi the black audience, but when we consider what themes a white audience might take away from this episode there are some aspects which appear problematic by today's standards. A white audience would find the episode comforting, and

probably contributed toward their admiration for Will Smith and his personal brand of hip-hop safe. Once again Will is being positioned here as not black enough but not white either. Smith has failed to do the work that qualifies him to speak to the black experience meaningfully in the episode. His and Carlton's own lived experience of being black is never acknowledged as contributing to their understanding of black history and it is implied that this does them a disservice by giving them a false sense of confidence. Furthermore, the episode implies that Will's motivation for wanting to learn more about black history is just sloth taking a political guise. Given debates at this time about ethnic studies in the classroom, this theme seems dubious and even dangerous.

Conclusion

The decade of the eighties birthed a commercial audience for rap. The midwife to this labor being efforts both to define and market the genre. As Simon Frith writes, "The underlying record company problem…how to turn music into a commodity, is solved in generic terms. Genre is a way of defining music in its market or, alternatively, the market in its music" (76). In the late eighties/early nineties, when Smith released his first two albums, transitioned to sitcom acting, and became a household name, rap music had a formula, as Smith describes it, "MC+DJ=Hip-Hop." But the content that filled the formula was more varied than it would become only a few short years later when gangster rap would dominate the market. Smith captures this variety by recalling his first national tour: "You couldn't have found three more different groups to put on the same stage than DJ Jazzy Jeff and the Fresh Prince, Public Enemy, and 2 Live Crew. But hip-hop was like that back then" (114). Smith recounts rapping his tales of teenage romance and mild rebellion alongside, 2 Live Crew simulating sex acts and Public Enemy burning klan members in effigy. Another group which was not on this tour but was

releasing albums of their own at this time was NWA and it was their content which would become the blueprint for the genre going forward.

Which is not to say that DJ Jazzy Jeff and the Fresh Prince did not set their precedents for the genre. As Smith recalls: “Russell Simmons was orchestrating the global destruction of all barriers to hip-hop. And me and Jeff were one of his battering rams. We were the ‘clean’ group, the ‘respectable’ group—for Russell, we were the perfect weapons against all naysayers. We were at the tip of the spear” (133). Smith goes on to recount that they launched *Yo! MTV Raps* and were one of the first hip-hop acts allowed to do live radio and to rap live on air. They were the first hip-hop act allowed to stay at the Four Seasons while on tour. They opened doors for hip-hop by being safe. Smith does not connect this safety with the fact that they were the first hip-hop act to win a Grammy but it’s likely that safety played a role in the decision.

But does that safety mean that the music lacked authenticity? Jeff Chang in his book *Can’t Stop, Won’t Stop* links hip-hop as a genre with the hardships that helped to birth it. Hip-hop was born in 1970s New York when poverty, violence, crime, and civil neglect of the region were at an all-time high. For Chang this hip-hop, the hip-hop that was never marketed and, in many cases, not even recorded, is the most authentic hip-hop. Chang argues that the early gangster rap of Los Angles was similarly conceived of social struggle, oppression, and neglect. By Chang’s standards, Smith’s hip-hop is inauthentic in that it lacks the urgency of the oppressed finding a voice. However, rather than simply accepting Chang’s standard, we can hold it in tension with Candice Jenkins’s broader view of hip-hop, “hip-hop provides a language for and a way of conceptualizing (black) American subjectivity.” Even if Smith’s raps fail Chang’s standard that doesn’t necessarily mean the music lacked a legitimate expression of black subjectivity.

Gangster rap, like action film, is a fantasy of masculine power obtained by strength, courage, cunning, and violence. And as such it rarely asks us to question the protagonist's decision making. If we contrast a song like "Regulate" by Warren G and Nate Dogg with "Parents Just Don't Understand," the actions of Warren G and Nate Dogg are reported so matter-of-factly, a series of events narrated with a focus on actions and not actors and their respective subjectivities. We are meant to identify clearly but also simply with Nate Dogg and Warren G, to fantasize that we might be so decisive under threat. But In PJDU, we have these lines that invite us to consider the Fresh Prince's ill-begotten decision-making process in borrowing his parents' Porsche:

> I'll just take it for a little spin
>
> And maybe show it off to a couple of friends
>
> I'll just cruise it around the neighborhood
>
> Well, maybe I shouldn't
>
> Yeah of course I should

The dramatic irony being we know that this plan will almost certainly not play out to the narrator's plans and that he is making a mistake. Opposite the gangster rapper and the action hero, the distance between the audience and the speaker is not one of the audience aspiring to be the speaker, but the audience knowing the speaker is making a mistake. Yes, perhaps a relatable one but a mistake nonetheless. Similarly, in "I Think I Can Beat Mike Tyson," the audience sympathizes with Smith, but knows that the doubters are right. Likewise, in "Clubba Hubba," Smith asks advice from those around him about courting Mimi Mumford and the men, predictably for a '90s sitcom, give terrible advice. The only voice which has any wisdom is Aunt Viv who unsolicited tells Will to "be himself." The audience knows this is what Will should do

all along before the final act and his ultimate embarrassment. The structure of Will failing repeatedly to make his performances convincing and of the listener/viewer knowing before the stories' end of its failure seems a tacit (or perhaps cathartic) acknowledgment that the goal has entered the realm of displaced meaning. That the masculinity hoped for is forever deferred. That we suburban white males damn well know we can never fully possess the swagger of the hip-hop star, the hardness of the urban black man of our minds, that these fantasies are fun but futile, and that's okay because Will Smith makes such aspirations look cool.

CHAPTER THREE

WILL SMITH PERFORMS PERFORMANCE, PERFORMS PERFORMITIVITY, PERFORMS WILL SMITH

Smith credits his co-star Alfonso Ribeiro with persuading him to name the protagonist of *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air,* Will Smith. Ribeiro's reasoning was simple: the part, the character, would be how Smith would be known to millions, might as well give him Smith's real name. This decision contributed to a conflation on the part of said millions between Will Smith the actor and Will Smith the character. Will Smith the character was largely inspired by the experiences of Benny Medina, but with material from Smith's life and even music thrown in as well. Even those in the audience who were aware that Will Smith the actor's biography was distinct from Will Smith the character's story largely assumed that Smith's character and personality were largely one and the same[iii]. There is then perhaps some irony to the fact that for a period Will Smith struggled to play the role of Will Smith. Smith recounts when he took his first dramatic film role as Paul Poitier in *Six Degree of Separation,* he dove unrestrained into method acting and unintentionally became so immersed that he returned to the set of *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* having lost his comedic abilities. It took him months to recover, and his marriage was hurt because he fully believed himself to be in love with Stockard Channing.

Will Smith, in this state, must have known things we may never know about the character of Paul Poitier because the character of Paul in *Six Degrees of Separation* is an enigma. We know far more of what we presume are his hopes and aspirations than we know of his actual biography. And even what we know of his hopes and aspirations is tainted by the question of how much are they a performance for his audience. The film never even reveals his true name. He remains an unnamed Rumpelstiltskin, a legendary question mark, who almost makes off with

the baby because no one can pin down his true identity. Furthermore, Paul's spins not yarn into gold, but imagination into false identities. Paul is a gay con man who found a rich lover to teach him all the shibboleths of wealthy Manhattanites, in addition to their dirty laundry. He shows up at their homes claiming to be the son of Sidney Poitier, the ground-breaking black actor. He is good at leveraging what he learned to convince these wealthy elites that he is an acquaintance of their children, but even more so he has the confidence man's knack for knowing what his targets want to believe, want to believe about themselves, and about their lives. Paul Poitier is the perfect vehicle for so many of their desires to become manifest. He is wealthy, well-mannered, and well-connected, but at the moment of arrival in their lives, he has fallen into extreme need. In helping him, the wealthy get to be charitable sans the indignity of having to see how the other half lives. In addition, Paul tantalizingly hints that knowing him may prove adventitious to his marks. They may meet his father or even be an extra in one of his films. He is black but not poor or common. He is exemplary and for the generation of wealthy white men that Paul cons, Sidney Portier was an Obama-like figure: someone whites could support to show their own anti-racist virtue, however, some in the black community questioned Poitier on the grounds that his popularity with whites came with taking a humble, grateful and nonconfrontational rhetorical posture. A posture Smith himself at times has been accused of.

When Paul is first taken in by the Kittredges (Flan and Ouisa) he claims to be writing a thesis at Harvard, a key theme of which is that "The imagination…makes the act of self-examination bearable." And yet, as the film repeats, the Kandinsky has two sides. Is Paul using his bold imagination for self-examination? Paul's description of Holden Caufield also describes himself: "The boy wants to do so much and can't do anything. Hates all phoniness and only lies to others. Wants everyone to like him, is only hateful, and is completely self-involved…a pretty

accurate picture of a male adolescent." Rather than using the imagination to examine himself, Paul's efforts are directed toward a kind of grandiose self-avoidance, the sort of self-reinvention that psychologically necessitates itself. The confidence man has no proof in his pudding, has no pudding even, and thus descriptions of the pudding by necessity grow bolder and bolder. The confidence man convinces his marks not by offering what is likely or reasonable, but rather an illusion that is emotionally needed, psychologically irresistible, the mirage of water in the mark's emotional dessert. Paul often tells his marks about kind and admiring statements their children make about them when they are not around, but later in the film, when we meet these children, it becomes clear they detest and resent their parents; these lies are believed not because they are reasonable but because they are desired.

In certain aspects Smith sees himself as being similar to Paul Poitier. Smith says "My first impulse is to always clean up the truth in my mind…I redesign it and replace it with whatever suits me. Or really, whatever suits *you*:…it's my *actual* job. The 'truth' is whatever I decide to make you believe, and I *will* make you believe it: That's what I do…I live in an ongoing war with reality" (17).

Indeed, Smith has a kind of theory of performativity, of how the self is constructed in response to external forces and we only wish to believe that there is something consistent and essential within it. Smith writes,

> We tend to think of our personalities as fixed and solid. We think of our likes and our dislikes, our beliefs, our nationalities, our political affiliation and religious convictions, our mannerisms, our sexual predilections, et cetera, as *set*, as *us*. But the reality is, most of the things that we think of as *us* are *learned* habits and patterns,

> and entirely malleable, and the danger when actors venture out to the far ends of our consciousness is that sometimes we lose the breadcrumbs marking our way home. We realize that the characters we play in film are no different than the characters we play in life. Will Smith is no more "real" than Paul—they're both characters that were invented, practiced, and performed, reinforced, and refined by friends, loved ones, and the external world. What you think of as your "self" is a fragile construct (226).

Notice the striking similarity between what Smith is saying here to what Jane Blocker, writes of performative identities: "Performative identities are not false; they are not the function of the kind of artifice or masking that implies a hidden or 'real' self; rather they challenge the coherence of that presumed real" (70 qtd in Alexander, Bryant).

Additionally, Smith, like Judith Butler, is aware that gender is a locus of performed identity, that cultural demands are gendered and shape behavior. At one point in his biography Smith returns from tour and visits his then girlfriend at her parents' home and she confesses that she has cheated on him with another man. Smith recounts his reaction:

> *What to do when somebody cheats on you?* I knew I had to do the storm out thing. But I also knew I had to do something violent to punctuate my departure. I scanned the room for possibilities. Next the fireplace I noticed one of those forged iron pointing things that you poke the logs with. But what will I do with? *I sure wish I had some emotion to give me a little direction*…I guess I smashed about 12, maybe 15 [windows], before I felt I had sufficiently done my performative duty as a cuckolded twenty year

> old….It was about a twenty-two minute walk. I could not believe I had broken all of those windows. I couldn't locate where it had come from within me. It seemed so strange to break things because I thought I *should*, not because I was emotionally impelled to do so. This discordance was hilarious to me. Out of nowhere I began to chuckle, replaying the scene in my mind. I was thinking, *Will, you are an absolute lunatic*. And that made me laugh even more. This whole shit was hysterical (138-139).

Smith experiences his performance at this moment not as authentic to his own emotional desires but as a response to a cultural expectation. As he states he did not do so because he was "emotionally impelled" to do so from within, but because he "thought [he] should." He seems almost to, in hindsight, dissociate from his own violent actions, the "discordance" and the "whole shit was hysterical." He recounts the moment almost as an actor making decisions about a performance, wanting an "emotion to give me a little direction." He smashes the windows because he has been taught that this is an expected reaction to being cheated upon, that this is how Smith believed a *man* behaves in such a situation. Vijay Hamlall and Robert Morrell assert that violence and threats of violence are conceived of as boundary enforcement within cultural understandings of masculinity. Smith's girlfriend Melaine has violated their agreed-upon boundary of monogamy and Smith responds with violence to Melaine's property which also implies a threat of violence to her person. Yet, Smith struggles with this performance and does not find it convincing to himself[iv]. What he is asserting about himself, he himself does not believe.

However much Smith may agree with literary theorists and academics about the moldability of the self, he is not postmodernist on the subject of brute facts. Those exist

absolutely and can undermine one's self-delusions at any moment as Smith writes, "The bigger the fantasy you live, the more painful the inevitable collision with reality. If you cultivate the fantasy that your marriage will be forever joyful and effortless, then reality is going to pay you back in equal proportion to your delusion."

A key revelation in *Six Degrees of Separation* comes when the marks of Paul Poitier go to the bookstore and read Sidney Poitier's biography to discover that he has many daughters but no sons. They never learn who Paul Poitier really is, but they do learn that he is not himself. At this moment Paul becomes an interesting party anecdote to Flan, but to Ouisa he seems to only grow larger in her mind, to become more intriguing by being less known and having less cultural capital. Ouisa seems to be realizing that if what Paul was selling was fantasy and, in hindsight, she should have known it, then what he was selling says more about themselves than it does about Paul. "How do we have experiences without reducing them to anecdotes?" she asks, as her husband seeks to precisely do that: to reduce the fact that he was duped by Paul to an anecdote.

When Ouisa confronts Flan about his life and whether he can truly account for it, he retorts/confesses that he is a gambler by nature. But what is becoming clear to Ouisa is that he risks only pieces of paper and nothing of himself. He is, in the end, a commodifier. Flan recites facts and even at times speaks eloquently about art but really, he is only selling it (there are even remarkably parallel moments of Flan reciting key works and dates for Cézanne and Paul reciting a similar list for Poitier). When the living art of Paul's performance attempts to teach Flan something of value about his own life, he wants nothing more to do with it than to have an amusing story to tell at parties to charm potential buyers and future marks. Ouisa wants to take art off the pedestal of commodification and learn something from it. She recalls being allowed to slap the Sistine Chapel fresco, to metaphorically high-five the hand of God. The two sides of the

Kandinsky represent chaos and control. To really give into the art, you must experience the chaos it might create within your sense of self and not just the control.

In the final scenes of *Six Degrees of Separation*, Ouisa and Flan drift further apart on the subject of Paul. Flan, having gained an amusing anecdote, can acquire nothing else of value from Paul, but Ouisa still has something to learn and even seems determined to "save" Paul in some way. When Paul and Ouisa talk over the phone they are doing a strange dance, a negotiation of boundaries and realities. Ouisa knows he is not Paul Poitier, and he knows she knows, but the charm and even allure of playing these roles is still there for both of them and Paul knows this. Ouisa tries to coax Paul into an admission of the truth but must play certain games to keep him on the phone, games we suspect she wants to play; authentic sentiments mix with known lies so readily. Paul informs Ouisa that the time he spent with the Kittridges was more rewarding than time spent with the other marks. Is this flattery or a small admission? Could it be both? Is Ouisa a fool to stay on the phone with him? In one sense Paul's performance has failed. It no longer fools Ouisa's frontal cortex, whatever the more primitive lizard brain may desire. And yet when one continues to engage in a "failed" performance it reveals the irresistible power and complex motivations that compelled the performance in the first place.

Smith first began to perform at a young age in hopes of quelling his abusive father's rage[v]. If he could keep his father laughing maybe, he would never hit his mother again. This shaped his personality fundamentally as Smith acknowledges:

> In acting, understanding a character's fears is a critical part of understanding his or her psyche. The fears create desires and the desires precipitate actions. These repetitive actions and predictable responses are the building blocks of cinematic characters.

> It's pretty much the same in real life. Something bad happens to us, and we decide we're never going to let that happen again. But in order to prevent it, we have to be a certain way. We choose the behaviors that we believe will deliver safety, stability, and love. And we repeat them, over and over again. In the movies we call it a character; in real life we call it personality.
>
> How we decide to respond to our fears, *that* is the person we become. I decided to be funny (14).

Smith recalls his desire to keep his family safe by keeping his father entertained: "I wanted to please and placate him. Because as long as Daddio was laughing and smiling, I believed, we *would be safe*. I was the entertainer in the family. I wanted to keep everything light, and fun, and joyful" (15). Of course, this was the plan of a child, who never should have to bear such a burden to begin with. And like so many plans children have made to stop their parents' abusive behavior, this plan eventually stopped being enough. Smith recalls, at the age of nine, watching his father hit his mother so hard she collapsed and spit blood. Shortly thereafter she leaves his father. But Smith kept entertaining and made a multimodal, multi-genre career of it.

We can draw parallels between three failed performances: Paul Poitier on the phone with Ouisa, playing the role, knowing she will never consciously believe him to be a Poitier again. Will Smith as a child striving to be so charming and entertaining that his home is filled with laughter and not fear. And Will Smith, post slap, seated at the Oscars, laughing at the jokes the comedians are telling. Each performance, in hindsight, is doomed to fail at its stated objective, and yet each is revealing and compelling, something is being said, ever so quietly, about the innermost desires of both the performer and the audience.

A More Complicated Relationship

The persona created by and for Will Smith the rapper and Will Smith the sitcom character, is the comedic antithesis to Mike Tyson. He is charming and charismatic, but still boyishly so. He is not threatening or violent and he is unintentionally comedic when he attempts to be so[vi]. Will Smith the actor has a more complicated relationship with both violence and a masculinity of dominance.

While Smith certainly describes himself as "unstreetwise" in a number of ways. His friend and bodyguard often let him know when he needs to leave a party because he cannot read the room. On his first day of public school, Will talks trash to the wrong student and is knocked out. But He also makes choices that suggest a desire to have a connection with gangster culture and to exercise a kind of physical dominance over others. He describes his decision to fraternize with drug dealers thusly:

> When you're a twenty-year old rapper from the inner city of Philadelphia who's just made his first million dollars, the only people who can afford to hang with you are other rappers, professional athletes, or drug dealers.
> I picked drug dealers (144).

This description is so lacking in specifics as to beg speculation. But like Paul Poitier, in the absence of biographical knowledge, we are left with inferences about desires and aspirations not to join the thug life but to have some connection to it, experience with it, to be more than what critics accused him of being, a "bubblegum rapper," Smith makes it clear such criticism began to get under his skin and even spoke to his friend/bodyguard about the matter: "'Jus' punch the muthafucka in the *face*!'" Charlie would say. "'He won't say that shit next time.'

"So, with him having my back, I started doing exactly that: If somebody talked shit, I punched them in the face…(and then jumped behind Charlie)" (131).

Much like Smith's description of his decision to socialize with drug dealers, this anecdote raises more questions than it answers. The joke structure of this tidbit begs us not to consider this recollection too seriously, to assume it comedic hyperbole, but that would be at best an assumption. Charlie, Smith's streetwise friend and bodyguard, plays one of the thugs who chases Will out of Philadelphia in the opening credits to Fresh Prince. In fiction, Smith runs from men like Charlie to find a better/safer life. In reality, Smith smacks critics and hinds behind Charlie.

Smith shares two more stories that are more specific and cannot be reduced to comedic hyperbole. He recounts being called into the office of an NBC executive who did not like the license Smith was taking in improvising on *Fresh Prince*. The executive tried to be intimidating but Smith and Charlie reacted by intimidating back, only their style of intimidation implied physical aggression. The executive was frighted and shocked.

There is also the aforementioned moment when Smith discovered that his girlfriend was cheating. Later on, he went to her workplace to confront the cheat-ee. Smith assaults the cheat-ee but is dragged from the department store by Charlie. There is little explanation of the incident otherwise, but Smith does say that he hopes to be good enough for Melanie going forward.

Are these throwaway jokes meant to be built on hyperbole or are they admissions meant to spin behavior which, if completely omitted from the biography, might cause others to accuse Smith of being selective or outright dishonest. Taken collectively they paint a picture of an individual caught between conflicting masculinities, but also an individual, which if we looked at more closely, we might not be as shocked to find publicly slapping Chris Rock in response to feeling affronted.

CHAPTER FOUR

CHRIS ROCK AND QUESTIONS OF WHAT IS FUNNY?

A natural entertainer, Will Smith, from an early age, noticed a difference in what white audiences and black audiences find funny:

> My white friends tended to lean into my bigger, broader, moments, when I was light and silly and displayed a cartoonlike physicality. One of the white boys in Lourdes once tried to light his fart in the bathroom; I thought that was a little far to get a laugh, but it worked. They also liked puns and word play, witty sarcasm, and they *demanded* a happy ending—everyone had to come out OK.
>
> My black friends preferred their jokes more real and raw and demanded a gritty slice of truth at the core of the comedy. They saw my silliness as weakness—I would have got the whole shit kicked out of me if I tried to light a fart in Wynnefield. They responded better when my humor sprang from strength, from more of a battle mentality—putdowns, insults, disses, and nothing played bigger than smashing somebody who was talking shit. They loved it when someone got what was coming to them—karmic justice—even if the somebody was *them*. As black people, we love laughing at ourselves. When we can joke about something—our pains, our problems, our tragedies—it makes them just a little more bearable.
>
> I learned to move between these two worlds (44).

Notice the way Smith connects black and white humor with both lived experience and cultural meaning. Black humor is a means of coping with suffering and a defensiveness is still present, even in moments of levity, one must be on guard. White humor is the result of privilege, a naïve belief that everything should work out okay and humor need not say anything particular, but just provide amusement for its own sake. Humor is both the result of socioeconomic positioning and is ideological in nature. Each of these worlds Smith alludes to are both reality and internalized perception.

In contrast, in his own career, Chris Rock grew tired of moving between those same worlds. Toward the end of his 3rd season on *Saturday Night Live*, Rock found his talents underutilized and still more often playing a supporting role and being pushed towards the broad humor that had made Eddie Murphy so famous on the show. Rock made the risky decision to leave SNL for the edgier and more diverse (in writers, cast, and subject matter) *In Living Color*. Rock said of the move: "I wanted to be in an environment where I didn't have to translate the comedy that I wanted to do" (Alexander, Brenda.). Rock not only performed but was a writer and producer on the show as well. He was finally getting some of the artistic autonomy and recognition he had worked so hard for. The show was canceled only 6 episodes later. Rock's risk in leaving SNL had come up bust and he needed a new plan, a way to sell himself all over again.

In the '90s and even into the early '00s, Will Smith and Chris Rock took different approaches to navigating the parallel constraints of self-commodification and black masculinity. While Will Smith formed a strong parasocial bond with his fans by exploring black masculinity as a matter of performance rather than authenticity, Chris Rock's strategy was to make the constraints of self-commodification, while being a black man, a matter of explicit thematic exploration within his work. Smith branded himself as having hip-hop's swagger while being

less threatening and being more approachable. Rock branded himself as being a fearless racial truth-teller, the man who says what others in the room might be afraid to speak aloud. The difference in these approaches might lead one to conclude that Rock's ultimate position is more in line with a black politics of resistance, but we will see in this analysis that Rock, especially in the '90s, often doubled back his critical gaze by critiquing whiteness but then also returning to a critique of black Americans he perceived to be embarrassing or disappointing to the black community. He thus often partially affirms, or at least compromises with, bourgeois middle-class white American values.

Two objects that show how Chris makes the constraints of self-commodification and black masculinity explicit are the films *CB4* (1994, Rock starred and co-wrote the film) and *Top Five* (2015, Rock co-wrote, directed, starred, and produced this film). Both are thematically preoccupied with the difficult question of how one maintains personal integrity and artistic authenticity while vying to be reified as a black masculine commodity.

Rock co-wrote *CB4* after *In Living Color* was canceled. His desire not to have to translate his humor deferred, Rock writes a screenplay about Albert, a young middle-class suburban black man who desires nothing more than to become a rapper. Albert and his friends (Euripides and Otis) love Hip-Hop of an older variety; Run DMC, Biz Markie, and Grand Master Flash are all shown in the opening credits photographic montage while The Show by Doug E Fresh and Slick Rick plays. Albert and his friends love to rap but they can't seem to break through the noise. A big-time producer tells them: "You guys can rap, but you ain't got nothing I can see. [Gestures with his hand at their appearance.] If you get your act together, call me." The same producer says of one of his most successful acts, "[He's] not just a rapper, he's an entertainer." Albert and his

friends may love the art of rap, but if they want to practice it commercially, they must package themselves more enticingly.

When a local gangster named Gusto is arrested while being cheered on by the community, Albert realizes the cultural capital that comes with a criminal record. Since Gusto is going to jail, Albert reasons Gusto doesn't need his name, and that he can borrow it and pay Gusto back later.

Like Rock, Albert's middle-class parents have worked hard to break out of poverty although Albert's neighborhood is distinctly more suburban than Bed-Stuy where Rock spent most of his childhood. Albert and his friends fake criminal backgrounds to gain street cred and launch their rap careers. Cell Block 4 is born with Albert playing MC Gusto, Euripides is Dead Mike and Otis becomes Stab Master Arson. This being a comedy, hijinks predictably ensue as the real Gusto breaks out of prison and seeks revenge. The film is in many ways a crude satire of early gangster rap that could generously be described as being uneven in quality. Certain plot threads go nowhere, and the comedic tone is wildly inconsistent. Rock was a young comic and even more inexperienced screenwriter at this point in his career, but in the midst of these shortcomings there are some sharp observations about black self-commodification during the rise of gangster rap as well as a thematic affirmation of middle-class values that was de rigueur in the '90s and early '00s "edgy" comedies[vii]. Perhaps most importantly, *CB4* and *Top Five* together show us Rock's evolving perspective on the challenges of being a black male celebrity.

Whenever Albert leaves the symbolic Oikos and enters the Polis, everyone is commodifying themselves or others. Albert's friend Euripides/Dead Mike (Allen Pain) works at a phone sex call center where he tells gay men canned phrases like, "Yeah, I'm licking your balls" with all the enthusiasm a straight man seeking only a paycheck can muster. Back-up

dancers bring to mind Laura Mulvey, as they brag to one another, “My ass is behind M.C. Hammer’s head in ‘U Can’t Touch This.’” And another replies, “My left breast was prominently featured in Eric B’s last video.” A black revolutionary in Kente cloth, Brother Baa Baa Ack, sells Euripides/Dead Mike a spiritual/black empowerment text for $14.9,5 plus sales tax. When Albert asked him, “How come this black empowerment shit costs so much money?” He replies, “Because the revolution must be marketed.”

Albert and his friends, particularly Euripides (who is increasingly swayed by Baa Baa Ack’s message of black empowerment) are not at peace with the messages they are promoting. Albert monologues “I knew what we were doing wasn’t totally right. But it was definitely time to get paid.” Bell hooks in *We Real Cool* outlines the oppressive factors that lead many young black men to turn to crime as a profession. And there is one that clearly describes what Albert, Otis, and Euripides are experiencing: A lack of employment that offers opportunities for advancement or work that is meaningful to them. Work that pays well enough to support yourself and to achieve some measure of self-actualization. Faced with these dim prospects the trio turns not to crime but to faking a criminal record for the social capital that comes with it, to exploiting a pejorative stereotype of black Masculinity for fiscal gain. As hooks writes, “Lots of young black men are walking around assuming a gangsta persona who have never and will never commit violent acts. Yet they collude with violent patriarchal culture by assuming this persona and perpetuating the negative racist/sexist stereotype” (56).

The film is careful to highlight that CB4 and their manager are not the only ones exploring the exploitation of stereotypes and objectification. Virgil Robinson (Phil Hartman) is a white politician whose son embraces CB4 as a form of preteen rebellion and Robinson sees the group’s rise as an opportunity to ride a reactionary wave to office. He stages rallies and uses his

son as an exhibit of the pestiferous effects of rap music on youth. Robinson and the cops arrest the group when they sing their popular song, “Sweat from My Balls,” in violation of public decency laws. Both Virgil Robinson and the band’s manager, Trustus Jones, are clearly a little too excited about the arrest, for both of them it is the perfect publicity for the product they are selling.

However, the film’s perspective is not socialist so much as it is advocating for a healthy compartmentalization around labor. We all have to sell our labor and, often in ways that are tiring, but the pernicious effect of parasocial commodification is that it can convince both the audience and the celebrity in question that what they are selling is their authentic self. The symbolic Oikos is represented by Albert’s modest girlfriend, Dahlia (D for short), and his voice-of-common-sense father, Albert Sr., both of whom try to remind Albert that MC Gusto is just a role that he is playing. D pleads with him to return to himself, “Take a look in the mirror, Mr. MC Gusto.” Albert Sr. is more blunt: “You ain’t from the street. I’m from the street and only someone who wasn’t would think it is something to glorify.”

The film draws a simplistic line between the authentic and the inauthentic, the idea that you can find something of value about yourself while playing a role, is not explored with any depth. More specifically, the idea that gangster rap might connect with something authentic, even if many of its practitioners inflated or invented their criminal backgrounds, is not explored. As Rock himself said while promoting the film: “The real hard guys are in jail. Anybody that, you know, made a demo tape and shopped it around and got a lawyer and hired a publicist, probably ins’t all that tough.” And the film does ultimately affirm bourgeois values, giving a somewhat reactionary take on gangster rap as a whole. At Albert’s personal turning point, he thinks to himself: “My life was messed up. I turned into a monster. I’d lost my friends. I’m using the word

'nigga' like it's my last name. Walking around calling women bitches and hoes. That's not right. My own mother won't speak to me." Albert reconnects with the feminine, as he and his friends trick Gusto by having Albert dress in drag. Gusto is sent back to jail and Albert and his friends perform as CB4 again but this time returning to the old-school hip-hop the film posits as being more authentic.

In this sense, while the film does critique whiteness largely via Virgil Robison and his preteen son, it lacks depth and development in this critique (with some small exceptions I will discuss below) and devotes more of its run time to a somewhat reactionary critique of would-be gangsters within the black community. We can see how this rhetorical positioning, this both-sidesism, helped Rock to become perceived as a fearless racial truth-teller without entirely alienating white consumers in the '90s. Rock developed this rhetorical position not just in *CB4* but also in his stand-up and on the Chris Rock show on HBO[viii].

One of the key thematic moments in *CB4* occurs in the lobby of a posh hotel while the group is on tour. MC Gusto is nursing a forty and talking to Dead Mike. The only white characters in the film with more than a single speaking line are Robinson, the self-serving politician, his preteen rebellious son, and the documentary filmmaker who is sincere but naive in his love for gangster rap. The role of white audiences and of white financers in the world of gangster rap goes underexplored. However, in this scene, Albert/MC Gusto has a telling conversation with Euripides/Dead Mike:

> Albert/MC Gusto: Man, you're crazy with that I-don't-eat-pork-shit. Personally, I'll eat a pig's ass if they cook it right.
>
> Euripides/Dead Mike: Beloved, it's against everything I now believe. You see pork is the white man and the white man is pork….

Albert/MC Gusto: …you mean to tell me that if I was getting ready to get thrown out of your apartment, right, and a pig offered to pay your rent you wouldn't take that money?

Euripides/Dead Mike: No.

Albert/MC Gusto: Shit, I'd be a money taking from a pig.

Euripides/Dead Mike: Well, that's the difference between you and me.

Albert/MC Gusto: Yeah, I got a place and you live with your mother.

Notice how pork becomes the white man and then is suddenly paying one's rent rather than becoming bacon. The pragmatism of Albert/MC Gusto's final response suggests the necessity of white patrons if one is going to achieve financial viability. There were some black-owned and operated hip-hop labels but often, when they generated any national success, they were bought by a larger label. In the film, Robinson is white and Trustus the manager and industry insider is black. In reality, they were often both white (or white and Jewish in the case of NWA). And in entertainment of any kind (hip-hop, comedy, etc.) a high level of fiscal success depends upon the acceptance of a larger and affluent white audience.

Next MC Gusto, shambles over (not fall-down drunk but definitely buzzed and drinking more as he goes) to his girlfriend D. While, Chris Rock, especially at this point in his career, is not an actor of great subtlety, he does manage to communicate that Albert in this moment is not drunk on the forty alone. He is drunk on the image of himself holding the forty, on the dark denim clothes, the jerry-curl-beneath-knit-cap hair, the brown paper bag draped loosely around the bottle in the same way his own body slumps in the lobby of a five-star hotel with a perfect

posture of indifference. To be a successful gangster rapper is to rebel against all of society's strictures and to have arrived financially at the same time: the mythical "bad nigger" made incredibly rich. It is this image, the fact that he has become this image in the minds of others, that Albert is drunk on. D refuses to drink from MC Gusto's forty (or to swallow his celebrity/self-importance). In response to her decline, Albert embraces self-indulgence over communion with a shrug and "Well, more for me." D tries to have a conversation with Albert instead, to draw attention to what is missing in the moment. The Albert she cares for is gone. It is in this moment that, in a theme we will see repeated in *Top Five*, she invites Albert to "look in the mirror."

In response to D's pleading, Albert tries to imagine him and D in the cinematic cliché used to communicate young love and romantic striving, namely him and D running toward each other with open arms in a pastoral setting. For the briefest of moments, Albert can still imagine this, but he is dressed as MC Gusto and soon his gate becomes awkward in his all-black denim outfit with jerry curl and knit winter cap. And as soon as he stumbles, the weight of his intentionally disproportionate gold chain sends him crashing to the ground and Albert wakes from this daydream of a future with D with concern for their relationship. This is a simple visual gag, a cheap laugh that happens to drive the plot a little forward, but at the same time, the premise of the joke reveals something about the discourse around each of these visual clichés and their mutual discordance: the gangster rapper can perform postures of indifference or aggression, but vulnerable romantic striving and pastoral innocence are out of his milieu entirely. "[The spectacle] is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images." (Debord 12) If we read all three scenes in the hotel lobby as a thematic sequence then Rock is suggesting that the images are selected and financed by white men, and they undermine meaningful relationships and mutual respect between black men and women. Bell hooks has also noted that

the form of masculinity Albert is aspiring to in the hotel lobby will inevitably undermine his ability to have meaningful intimacy with D: “Taught to believe that a real man is fearless, insensitive, egocentric and invulnerable (all traits black men have in movies) a black man blocks out all emotions which interfere with this ‘cool pose.’ Yet it is often in relationships with females, particularly romantic bonds, that black males experience a disruption of the cool pose” (hooks 61).

The thematic preoccupations of *CB4* and *Top Five* overlap to such a degree that it is tempting to read *CB4* as a rough draft of the more refined *Top Five*. Made twenty years later *Top Five* is more nuanced, subtle, and self-assured than *CB4*. Rock who wrote, starred in, and produced many films in between, brings a maturity of craft and a more developed sense of what he wants to say about the subjects of black masculinity and self-commodification in *Top Five*.

It is the story of Andre Allen, a middle-aged black comedian and actor who has lost himself to the industry in multiple ways. Andre is an alcoholic who fears he can’t be funny since having become sober. He is trying to stretch into being a serious actor, but the public is avoiding his serious films with great indifference and critics are panning them with great relish. Rock captures neatly the limited roles Hollywood has for black men: Allen has starred in three disgustingly profitable Hammy the Bear movies, about a cop who wears a cartoonish bear suit whilst fighting crime. On the other end of the spectrum, the project he is currently promoting is a painfully serious biopic of Dutty Boukman, the Haitian revolutionary who killed many white men before being executed himself and having his head paraded through the streets to scare other would-be revolutionaries. In Hollywood, black men can be comedic or tragic, jesters or martyrs, but they cannot be taken seriously on their own terms and live to tell the tale.

Anytime Allen goes in public, strangers shout “Hammy” and occasionally ask for autographs. But these voices are never shown in the center of the screen and more often they are disembodied altogether; they are nuisances in Allen’s life, like bad weather or mosquitoes. They shout at Allen not to hear what he might say in response but to be heard, to assert their own existence against the larger-than-life presence of his celebrity, to create for a moment of symmetry in what up until now has been an asymmetrical relationship of Hammy the Bear having been shouted at them by seemingly ceaseless marketing campaigns. But Andre Allen isn’t moving in public spaces to assert his celebrity. He is performing simple tasks or doing his job. “The individual who in the service of the spectacle is placed in stardom’s spotlight is in fact the opposite of an individual, and as clearly the enemy of the individual in himself as of the individual in others” (Debord 39). Naturally, Allen has come to resent Hammy the Bear. After being asked repeatedly by the press and fans when he will do another Hammy movie, he tells an interviewer, “I hate Hammy the Bear. I want people to take me seriously. I want people to stop coming up to me and making bear noises.” But he is powerless to change this dynamic and in fact suffers a mental breakdown when shopping in a supermarket and discovering that in spite of his own struggles with sobriety, the marketers have released a product called, “Hammy the Beer.” “The spectacle…erases the dividing line between true and false, repressing all directly lived truth beneath the real presence of the falsehood” (Debord 153). Allen attacks the Hammy the Beer display, but the product is already in thousands of other grocery stores and Allen’s behavior captured on cell phone by a “Hammy fan” is given no context by the media, framed simply as “Andre Allen Arrested.” Allen is impotent in the face of Hammy the Bear as Debord states, “Wherever representation takes on an independent existence, the spectacle reestablishes

its rule" (17). Allen is not Hammy, nor can he control Hammy, and so in his own way he is subject to Hammy the Bear even more than the average fan.

The film gives a great deal of attention to the downside of celebrity. At one point, Allen's car is rear-ended in traffic. Once the passengers find out everyone is okay, they flee the scene to leave the driver to deal with the legal aspects. Allen explains that if the other driver finds out Allen was in the car, the driver will sue. He is also in studios or on the phone being interviewed by journalists constantly. He is a commodity that must be sold even if that involves marketing the same platitudes over and over again. The film also waxes at length about the vigilance celebrities must exercise to avoid flattering grifters (the most memorable of which is portrayed superbly by Cedric the Entertainer). Parallel to the hotel lobby scene in *CB4*, Allen's low point comes in a hotel in Houston, where once again our hero is caught drunk both on booze and self-importance.

The long shadow of white hegemony comes this time not in the form of a reference to pork as white men, but a framed portrait of George W. Bush hanging in the hotel room. This portrait stands in contrast to a similar one of Barack Obama in an apartment in the Marcy Projects were Allen's childhood friends rib him and respect his boundaries around sobriety. These friends once again represent a symbolic Oikos that keeps Allen grounded. In contrast to Cedric the Entertainer's Houston hustler character, his Marcy childhood friends are not seeking to commodify him. While they have demands of him, one friend often borrows (but never pays back) money and an ex-girlfriend clearly regrets their breakup, these demands are not based on deception. Allen feels comfortable telling them both yes and no depending on the request. They are authentic with one another. They tell the sort of jokes Will Smith describes at the beginning

of this chapter, the kind of jokes that keep self-flattery and deception at bay. No one asks him to perform Hammy the Bear. But they do admonish him, "Stay black."

Another pair of scenes in which 4 feels like a rough draft of five, both involve negotiations with women journalists. In *CB4*, Albert/Gusto meets Eve Edwards, a black woman and reporter for Source magazine (Theresa Randle). Albert/Gusto crudely hits on and objectifies Eve. But Eve reads Albert the riot act:

> I am not a groupie, I'm a journalist. I take no shorts and I do my research. Now I can do a nice puffy feature that reports exactly what you tell me, or I can delve so deeply into your background with an eye for every inconsistency that your mother would disavow any knowledge of your birth. Now which would you prefer, Albert?

Sadly, Eve has only one more speaking line in the film, even though there is clearly a lot of animus around her character. She calls Albert towards authenticity but not from the comfort of the Oikos. She would transform him, not back into a child, but a man. Sadly, this plot line is abandoned by the film. But in *Top Five*, the figure of the woman journalist who demands something more of the protagonist, who makes him account for his life without self-flattery or deceit returns. Only this time a more mature screenwriter, Chris Rock, makes her the love interest.

Chelsea Brown (Rosario Dawson), a Latina and reporter profiling Allen for the Times, is simultaneously his love interest, his antagonist and a voice calling him back to both personal and artistic authenticity. Allen who has been repeatedly savaged by the Times critic James Neilson is reluctant to allow the paper to profile him. But his agent informs him that he may soon be in

Dancing with the Stars territory. Allen agrees but remains guarded when Brown gives him a remarkably similar ultimatum:

> I'm not here to hurt you. I just want a decent story. You give me a couple of really great honest things, stuff that you haven't told everybody else, some real inside stuff, some rigorous honesty stuff, and I promise you I will be more than fair.

Rock clearly finds these journalistic negotiations compelling. Beyond the fact that these behind-the-scenes negotiations are rarely revealed to the public, they represent the Foucauldian negotiation of power/knowledge in the promotion/regulation of celebrities to the public. The celebrity who has commodified access to himself enters into exchange with journalists who have positive coverage to exchange. This sets a tone for the courtship of Brown/Allen. One in which Brown establishes that she has some power within their exchange, but Allen must learn to trust that her tough love is indeed love, that what she wants for him is, in fact, best for him.

Brown represents a kind of interlocuter for Allen. She asks him repeatedly for how he feels and prompts him to return to stand up. Her foil is Allen's fiancé Erica Long (Gabrielle Union), a reality television star who is milking her wedding to Allen for every ounce of spectacle that can be sucked from it. At one point she asks Allen for a kiss and he demurs asking if they can kiss off camera, to which she replies, "If it's not on camera it doesn't exist." Where, in contrast, Brown writes her more sensational work under pen names and thus creates the kind of healthy compartmentalization around labor that Albert could not create around Gusto and Allen cannot create around Hammy. Brown gets along well with Allen's Marcy friends; Long will not invite them to the wedding. Brown encourages Allen to leave his bodyguard behind and be

himself with her; Long is always with her personal assistant and a camera crew. Brown often asks Allen how he is feeling; Long tells him his reactions are misguided. At one point Allen jokes that one should never make important decisions after a blow job, “let the effects of the blow job wear off and then decide what you want to do.” Long, when she is particularly frustrated with Allen, says that she always gives him blow jobs in hopes of changing his behavior, “After every time we have been separated, the moment I see you, the second you walk through the door, I suck your dick. Every time. Do you think I wanted to do that, Dre?...What I am saying is I sucked your dick for us. I sucked it for us because I knew sooner or later I was going to need you to do something for me that you didn’t want to do.”

Brown is a creature of NYC and wants to create the art she loves. Long is Hollywood and wants to be famous for being famous. At one point she confesses to Allen that she needs him to marry her and that she seeks constant drama and attention because she has no discernable talent otherwise. Reality television is clearly posited as the lowest form of entertainment because, in claiming to show us the real, everything becomes fake. There can be no privacy, intimacy, or self-exploration. To riff off Debord, to film your life for the entertainment of others ensures that all that was once directly lived becomes mere basic cable and the former unity of life is forever shattered by commercial breaks.

The twist to Brown being Allen’s interlocutor comes with the crisis at the end of the second act when Allen discovers that James Nielson is just another one of Brown’s pen names. This crisis, at some level, does feel like little more than a plot device because while the film suggests that Brown/Nielson was vitriolic in tone, she was not wrong about Allen’s true talents being wasted in mediocre films. And it is Brown/Nielson that gets him to return to the stand-up stage despite his insecurities, which are overcome during his performance. She helps him recover

his artistic authenticity. Both *CB4* and *Top Five* suggest that artistic genius is not solitary but communal. The West (a conceit too big to be useful in many contexts) has long been haunted by the notion of solitary masculine genius whose creative process is accomplished alone. Rock in both *CB4* and *Top Five* resists this notion. Rock suggests that one of the greatest threats to an artist's work is self-delusion. When Cell Block 4 breaks up due to artistic differences, they are reduced to one-note parodies of themselves. Stab Master Arson spins records with voluptuous dancers around him but the fly beats go nowhere, with no one to rap on them. And Dead Mike fully embraces his militant black nationalism and in his solo music video he shouts out "I'm black y'all. I'm black y'all. I'm bligity-bligity-bligity black y'all." These parodies establish that CB4's best work is dialogic. Likewise, Allen is flattering himself, but pleasing no one else, with his attempts at dramatic roles.

When Allen goes to a theater to witness firsthand the audience's reaction to his Dutty Bookman biopic, there is little audience to be found. The nearly empty theater, framed by the cinematography as quiet and cavernous, is in contrast to the Tyler Perry film next door which is packed. Only at the end of the film, when Brown gets him to return to stand-up, do we see him connecting with an audience with his art in a meaningful way. Rock suggests that authentic art is not simply pandering to an audience, ala Hammy the Bear or Tyler Perry movies, but at the same time he also holds Vygotsky's notion that It is "through others that we become ourselves." But not just any others, after all the broad masses love Tyler Perry films and Hammy the Bear, but a select few who truly see the artist. In *Top Five*, Chelsea Brown and Silk are the two characters who can truly see Allen, that, at times, appear to know him better than he knows himself.

When Brown asks Allen why he got back on the stage, he confides that while he was briefly locked up for trashing the Hammy the Beer display, he was in jail with DMX (cameoing

as himself). And that DMX complimented him on not being boxed in by the industry. Then DMX begins to sing (not rap) a song for Allen, “Smile” from Charlie Chaplin’s *Modern Times*. The performance would be painful if it were not laughably bad. The captive audience of prisoners yell at DMX to shut up or beg him to rap instead. The camera cuts to Allen’s face as DMX sings. Allen looks truly pained, the pain of self-recognition, the artist who deceives himself cannot create meaningful art.

The cameo by DMX seems to hint at the complications of attempting to be a symbol of black masculinity in reality. The only rapper perhaps more synonymous with hip-hop masculinity and hardness is Tupac. But even DMX longs to sing other songs, songs which are bad art to be sure, and DMX's behavior, much like Allen’s raging against Hammy the Beer, has landed him likewise in jail. Having Rock, who is widely more praised for his stand-up than his acting, and DMX, who had a reputation for allowing legal entanglements to undermine his music production, take these roles in *Top Five* exercises the kind of self-awareness that Hollywood loves. True that such “self-awareness” might be considered a misnomer by a strict individualist, some might argue it is not about knowing yourself so much as it is knowing how others perceive you. But remember that Rock views art as being communal in nature, it is the audience who decides what is authentic in the end. While the film does land on the conclusion that DMX’s singing is painful to hear, it is more thematically multivalent about how DMX has landed in his present situation. Throughout the film, Allen and Brown debate if America has made meaningful social progress during the Obama era.

The film opens in medias res; we don’t know who Allen and Brown are yet, but we see them arguing about if Obama is a sign of meaningful progress or a token/scapegoat. Brown is hopeful and Allen pessimistic. To demonstrate his point, Allen steps out into the road to hail a

cab as a black man, but to his surprise, a cab comes to a sudden halt and we are left wondering if things have changed or if it is Allen's celebrity that caused this small measure of respect.

Allen and Brown, while exploring New York together, have a conversation about *Planet of the Apes* and how racist the film is. Allen goes so far as to point out that the film was released the day before the Martin Luther King assassination. Brown doesn't flinch: "Sometimes it's just a movie." Allen replies that it is never just a movie. Brown and Allen's arguments over social progress function as an unresolved dialogic in the film, each, at times, making points that are credible and at other times ridiculous. Allen's more pessimistic view of progress in America hints at an alternative understanding of why DMX is in prison crooning unharmoniously, not as a cautionary tale of artistic self-delusion, but of an unwillingness to cater to the white hegemony. (Remember that DMX sings a Charlie Chaplin song when earlier in the film Allen praises Chaplin as the OG comedian.)

Similarly, the moment before Brown's ultimatum in which she persuades/coerces Allen to cooperate with the interview, Allen says: "if you are going to just cut my head off and parade it around the square, I don't need to help you with that." Allen's statement comes only a minute after Brown reminds Allen that Dutty Boukman's head was paraded by the French around Haiti as a warning to other revolutionaries. In Brown's own words, "Dutty did not shut up and play nice." Allen's implied choice to leave Long to be with Brown is him rejecting the faux art of Hollywood for his real talent of standup and maintaining ties to his New York background by being with someone who is also striving for both healthy compartmentalization around their personal life and authenticity in their art in the same way. However, underneath this hopeful personal progress for Allen, there are notes of a larger societal context in which Allen and all people of color must make compromises with power that their white counterparts need not make.

These texts (*CB4* and *Top Five*), read together, reflect a set of propositions about celebrity:

1. Compartmentalization is necessary to maintain personal integrity.
2. Show business is the business of buying and selling images of individuals.
3. Art is collaborative in nature and necessitates an audience but an authentic artist must learn which counsel to take and which voices are best ignored.
4. Each of the above propositions intersects with racial politics in ways that often place an extra burden on persons of color. The white audience is a somewhat removed but ever-haunting specter in both of these films.

In 2015, Smith and Rock found themselves, due in part to the way they respectively positioned themselves, one as a bankable leading man with crossover appeal and the other as a hilarious racial truth-teller, on opposite sides of #OscarsSoWhite. Smith parlayed his earlier success in summer blockbusters into a career as a serious character actor. Smith and his wife Jada boycotted after he was not nominated for *Concussion*. And Rock's reputation led the Oscars, which had a PR nightmare on their hands, to tap him to smooth things over in hosting the program. Rock, to his credit, spoke openly about his perception of racism in Hollywood. Stating that Hollywood is not "burning-cross racist" or "fetch-me-some-lemonade" racist but rather sorority racist ("We like you, Rhonda, but you're not a Kappa.") Rock also made it clear that white actors like Leonardo DiCaprio get opportunities every year that black actors like Jamie Foxx are afforded only once or twice in their lifetimes.

Rock is also someone who knows how to position himself to entertain and persuade white audiences. He strategically puts the current fight for greater black representation within the larger context of racist oppression, answering the question about why black people care now by joking

"If your grandmother is hanging from a tree, it is pretty hard to care about best documentary foreign short." Rock also knows that to manage his ethos with the audience he must "hear both sides." And so, he makes some concession jokes which are largely aimed at the Smiths, "I get it, it's not fair that Will was not nominated…but it is also not fair that Will was paid twenty million dollars for *Wild, Wild West*." Rock told one joke in particular aimed at Jada Pinkett Smith, which would cause many to later speculate about Will Smith already being angry about Rock telling jokes about his wife. "Jada boycotting the Oscars is like me boycotting Rihanna's panties—I wasn't invited."

Hammy the Bear is likely based on Marty the Zebra from the *Madagascar* film series. Interviews Rock did to promote *Top Five* have a certain meta-quality to them. We are seeing one of the things the film critiques (ridiculously superficial press interviews that feign a kind of intimacy or at least familiarity with the press) being done to sell the film itself. An Australian interviewer seems a little embarrassed to admit that she learned from the film not to ask Rock if he was the class clown in school. But then she rather unselfconsciously asks him about the role of Marty the Zebra. Rock barely manages to suppress an eye roll and then glances off camera (to a manager?, publicist?, friend?) as if to subtly nod, *Can you believe this?* "That's the one," Rock says and is then asked to perform Marty's most famous line, the song "Afro-Circus" (a little ditty set to the beat of carnival music that Rock improvised for *Madagascar 3: Europe's Most Wanted*). Rock has acknowledged in multiple interviews that he is asked to perform the song often, at his daughter's school for instance. Rock, ever the professional, sings a few bars for the Australian journalist. "Bah-da-Da-da-Da-Afro-Circus, Afro-Circus..." For Chris Rock, who has done insightful political/racial commentary both in his stand-up and on his HBO television show, and who has made thoughtful films about the black experience like *Top Five* or his documentary

Good Hair, it is easy to see why singing "Afro-Circus" might feel minstrelsy; a white audience that only wants to laugh at black jokes but not be forced to reflect on a troubling history.

The complex intersection of celebrity and black masculinity is also shaped by the approach that the individual star takes to publicly perform their celebrity. Smith's and Rock's approaches mirror those of their characters Paul Portier and Andre Allen. Who, respectively, could be described as having an ethos of sincerity vs an ethos of cynicism, which has nothing to do with whether or not one is honest, but more the attitude one has towards the truths or lies that they tell. Paul is a habitual liar but he appears to sincerely want to believe the lies he is telling so much so that he keeps telling them even when it has undeniably fallen apart. Allen is ever aware that this is just a role he is playing. He views the parasocial as a means to an end. He believes that compartmentalization around the role of his public persona is necessary and healthy. It is a tradeoff, one that he is weary of on one hand, and perhaps too comfortable with on the other, but he has learned the hard way never to fully believe your own story and that it is, at the end of the day, an exchange.

Similarly in the aftermath of The Slap, Smith is interviewed by Trevor Noah on *The Daily Show* and cries. He says the tears are the result of jet lag, but no one believes him. He seems to be having trouble reconciling his self-image of Will Smith with the anger/disappointment some feel toward him now post-slap. Chris Rock knows everyone wants him to talk about the incident and shrewdly holds out for a lucrative deal for a Netflix special. In said comedy special Rock explains why he did not hit Smith back, "My parents taught me 'don't fight in front of white people'" (Rock). The white gaze has shaped Smith's and Rock's respective careers just as it shaped the Oscar slap and the public's response.

Smith once famously said, early in his career, that Hollywood is not racist. But then years later supports the boycott of the Oscars when one of his deserving performances is snubbed. Rock, rhetorically savvy, tells Hollywood it is sorority racist. Smith wants to believe the myth he is creating about himself. Rock is clear-eyed that everything in America is a matter of exchange. Smith forgot how to be Will Smith because he became so wrapped up in playing Paul. After the film wrapped, he was still in love with Stockard Channing. Rock rolls his eyes when asked to sing “Afro-Circus” and then sings it anyway. It is a trade-off he is willing to make.

CONCLUSION

"[T]he commodity contemplates itself in a world of its own making." –Guy Debord (34)

Hooks contends, "Black males who refuse categorization are rare, for the price of visibility in the contemporary world of white supremacy is that black male identity be defined in relation to the stereotype whether by embodying it or seeking to be other than it" (xii). Smith and Rock have made that trade-off and have portrayed characters who fulfill certain aspects of black masculine stereotypes, but they have also both used their immense talents to complicate and, even at times, undermine certain stereotypes. The Fresh Prince of Bel Air pursues, chases, and flirts with women constantly. He is also considerably better at basketball, dancing, and rapping than his white classmates. But as we saw in this analysis he explores masculinity as a matter of performance and that comes with a certain amount of vulnerability and, even at times, a willingness to ask for help (as when everyone in the family gives him advice about pursuing Mimi Mumford). Albert from *CB4* dreams of being a rapper and thereby getting rich quickly but shows us that not every gangster rapper is really gangster. His ultimate character arc is to reject the toxic masculinity of gangster rap and reconnect with the feminine and his family. While it is fair to say that these characters complicate black masculine stereotypes by reaffirming bourgeois middle-class American values, they still reject the violent hyper-sexual thug stereotype in positive ways.

While in many ways Smith and Rock used their celebrity and talents to complicate black stereotypes, but ironically in order to subvert the racial expectations of white audiences, they had to delude the same viewers into believing that they knew and understood Smith/Rock, knew/understood their personality and motivations at some level. This basic faulty assumption might have helped to complicate the audience's understanding of black masculinity vis-a-vis

Will Smith but then also left the same audience sorely bewildered when Smith behaved in a manner completely unexpected. This rupture of the parasocial contract between Smith and his fans fueled the intense public interest in the event.

In the first chapter, I also described the Oscars Slap as a semiotic rupture. It most certainly was a rupture of signals being sent that evening, but did it rupture something within the larger cultural parasocial ecosphere? Did it change our relationship to celebrity beyond Will Smith in some way? No. If anything, recent indicators all point to the power of celebrity and parasocial marketing only increasing. In 2021, Ryan Reynolds and Dwyane the Rock Johnson released the film *Red Notice* on Netflix. The film features gratuitous screen time for both Reynolds' Aviation Gin and the Rock's Tequila brand Teremana. Reynolds and Johnson are not simply spokespersons but part owners of the brand. The power of celebrity has become so great as to seize control of the means of production.

As of the date that I am writing this in October of 2024, many pundits are opining that if Kamala Harris wins the Presidency, it will be because Taylor Swift endorsed her. Voter registration of crucial younger voters surged by hundreds of thousands after Swift posted her endorsement[ix]. It appears we are far removed from the time when Paul Newman on the floor of the Democratic convention apologized if his "voice carried more weight than his credentials allow."

In July of 2023, the rapper Doja Cat got into an argument with her own fans on social media over calling themselves Kittenz. When a fan asked Doja to say that she loved her fans, she responded, "I don't though cuz I don't even know y'all." There was intense backlash to the now-deleted tweets. The press coverage framed Doja's comments rather negatively for simply acknowledging an undeniable truth, she does not know these strangers. The coverage reminded

me of Andre Allen being framed as having gone crazy for objecting to Hammy the Beer. But the press was not nearly as vitriolic as fans who felt Doja had personally betrayed them. They were owed some gratitude because without them Doja would be nothing. As some of the tweets became quite specific in describing how sad Doja's life would be without them, sounding like something John Hinkley Jr. might tweet at Jodi Foster, filled with a psychological desperation for a symmetry in their relationship that simply does not exist.

In contrast to the neediness of the rejected Kittenz, the 2024 digital guillotine movement cultivated greater systemic awareness of parasocial hegemony. Hailey Bailey posted a video of herself dressed decadently to attend the Met Gala (an exclusive meta-spectacle) in which she said, "Let them eat cake." In addition to swift backlash in the comments, videos were soon being released contrasting the Met Gala with scenes of post-apocalyptic destruction in Gaza. Shortly thereafter, posts encouraged users to block celebrity accounts that were not using their platforms to bring awareness to injustice with hashtags like #digitalguillotine and #digitine. There was understandable discourse about if the focus should be more on elected officials and less on celebrities and if this was just more online performative activism. However, what most likely kept the movement from greater impact was a lack of establishment media coverage which effectively trapped the movement largely within a certain subsection of the online left.

The shortcomings of the digital guillotine movement beg the question of what, if anything, will change American perceptions of celebrity. One often-proven certainty is that the bad behavior of a particular celebrity will not. So many who initially expressed shock at the Oscars Slap have now moved on to other scandals to obsess over. The television ratings for the Oscars only increased the year after. The host that year, Jimmy Kimmel, read a tweet from former President Trump (his petty criticism generated more laughter from the crowd than any of

the pre-scripted jokes Kimmel told). Donald Trump may be the ultimate proof that our culture's obsession with celebrity is unhealthy and even dangerous. His launch into the highest office not from the governorship of our most popular state, as the actor Ronald Regan did, but straight from the *Celebrity Apprentice* to the White House reaffirms that "all that is seen is good and that which is good is seen." Trump is not honest but is undeniably perceived by many Americans to be authentic. Americans have always loved the real fake thing. Whether those who have tired of his shtick outnumber those that believe him a political messianic figure in seven swing states may well decide our next (and perhaps final) President. And on that dour note, it is clear that the Oscars Slap encapsulated so much of what is wrong with 21st century America. A fake spectacle being briefly broken by bad behavior only to be reabsorbed by the spectacle. No matter how reprehensible the bad behavior of any one celebrity it will not overhaul the system.

Since the 2022 Oscars, P. Diddy, the only presenter who acknowledged the slap, has been arrested on charges of rape and sexual assault. And Ashton Kutcher and Mila Kunis who spoke out about refusing to stand for Smith's standing ovation have suffered a scandal of their own when it was revealed they wrote a letter of support for their former costar Danny Masterson who was convicted of rape. Scandal, even if connected to real crime is but another facet of the spectacle. The Oscars Slap was a small thing by ethical comparison, but it was on a big stage and connected by association to so much of what ails our current society.

Smith and Rock will always be linked to The Slap, a fate neither of them seems happy about. Like Andre Allen and Paul Poitier, Rock and Smith have marketed and sold themselves over and over again, in ways both big and small, seeking certain results, only to be remembered by many for a moment that they would just as soon forget. The audience, and not the artist, decides what is authentic. The creators of celebrity (those who thrust celebrities like Smith and

Rock into the limelight) have so much power over what we see and give attention to, that even the smallest crack in the towering façade of spectacle is clung to by the masses. Even a seemingly random, unscripted moment becomes a talisman of potential meaning.

The Slap will be seen as part of their careers just as much as any joke they tell or film role they play. The Slap, acknowledging it, being asked questions by reporters about it, being roasted by other comedians about it, is now part of the unwritten contract of being Will Smith/Chris Rock. It will likely be, at least briefly, mentioned in the press clippings released at their deaths. “Black males today live in a world that pays them the most attention when they are violently acting out” (hooks 57).

While they are no longer on speaking terms post slap, Chris Rock and Will Smith share some distinct, if rough, biographical similarities. Both grew up in black neighborhoods while attending white schools and with parents who worked hard to join the middle class and who were active in their lives and still together for a significant portion of their childhood; a parental profile they both remark upon as being significant compared to their peers. Of their experiences at majority white schools Smith says, “If I could make the white kids at school laugh, I wasn’t a nigger” (45). Rock says of being both skinny and black that he was double bullied. “I got called a nigger every day.” He recalls being beaten, spat on, and sexually molested by his white school mates. He says he was only once invited by a classmate over to play (Fly on the Wall). Smith believes that entertaining others became a survival strategy for him in a number of contexts. Rock too used humor defensively but received greater abuse from his white classmates. Nevertheless, both men came to view performance as a mitigation strategy against racism; they learned to perform for white audiences whose antagonism grew more subtle undoubtedly as they aged but remained no less constraining.

END NOTES

[i]Many of these awards shows are now shot on a five-second tape delay, censorship being important after all. However, there was a time when they were actually live, and the word live was often used extensively in the marketing. Live meant you were having the genuine experience. The five-second tape delay has become a kind of compromise with the censors, but the Oscars slap shows the censor's limited abilities to hide certain undesirable events, especially since the other countries show a true live broadcast and via the internet those images can be shared with the American audience. We actually got to hear Will Smith say "fucking" because of Australian viewers.

[ii] This is an exception to the aforementioned time frame for these quotes. This was given during Will Smith's first big recovery tour for his reputation on *The Daily Show* on Nov. 29, 2022.

[iii] Audiences often have expected greater authenticity from musicians than actors, but with Smith playing himself, leading men and women often play roles that fit within a tight boundary of their public persona and serious character actors often leave themselves mysterious. Smith, then for the nineties, was not unique in the assumption that his on-screen character and real-life personality were quite similar, but it does appear that factor was even greater for him.

[iv] Smith's violent and disassociated behavior in this moment likely stems, at least in part, from the abuse he received from his own father. As hooks writes, "Black boys who are repeatedly subjected to humiliations, shaming, embarrassments or random punishments by grown-ups learn that they can relieve this pain by repression and dissociation."

[v] Hooks writes of the "need to prove their value through performance" (94) of young black boys and Smith himself recalls, that at a young age, he learned to associate "performance with love" (Smith 142).
[vi] Ribeiro's Carlton plays a key role that was lacking from the Fresh Prince's music: a comedic foil to Will Smith who is in many ways "uncool" personified. Carlton Banks is studious, privileged, naive, and a suck-up. In Carlton's presence, Will can struggle with masculinity and becoming a man but the audience can identify with him without concern of being unmasculine, thanks to the foil of Carlton Banks. Will may be struggling to achieve the robust masculinity and hardness of Iron Mike but such cool masculinity is still his North star, his highest aspiration. Carlton has a broken compass which makes Will look all the better in spite of often falling short of masculine ideals.

[vii] Comedic films from the '90s and '00s, particularly those aimed at teens with the promise of sexual content, often reinforced relatively conservative values. Monogamy and the importance of romantic love as the basis of healthy sexuality are often thematically affirmed even as the film's marketing suggests subversive sexual titillation. Films like the *American Pie* series, *The 40-year-old Virgin*, *40 Days and 40 Nights*, etc. are not actually promoting sexual promiscuity or even experimentation but rather reaffirming that the best sex, the most meaningful sex, comes from finding one's special someone. How much of this comes from the complicated relationship our culture has with sexuality as described by Foucault in his *History of Sexuality*, one in which sex is made more appealing by the very labeling of it as forbidden or taboo. Or wanting not to trigger systems of censorship, both official ones like the MPAA, or soft ones such as critical reviewers, partnerships with government, and distributors, etc. Either way, it is easy to see how *CB4*, being made in the early '90s when the white power structure is both nervous and titillated by gangster rap, would try to thread a similar needle of appearing to explore subversive content but then ultimately reaffirming bourgeois values.

[viii] The most famous roughly eight minutes on Rock's most popular stand-up special, *Bring the Pain*, is a bit commonly referred to as "Niggas vs. Black People" in which Chris Rock contrasts and lambasts what he calls "niggas" as opposed to black people. Rock begins by asking the audience if black people or white people are more racist. He surprises the audience by saying black people are more racist because they hate everything white people hate about "niggas" but only more. He then proceeds to discuss how black people are not actually like the stereotypes many whites hold of them, but "niggas" are the very embodiment of those stereotypes and black people despise them even more for it than whites. He then discusses crimes (home theft and ATM stick-ups), laziness in the form of welfare dependence, and an aversion to reading and acquiring new knowledge in favor of keeping it real. He does acknowledge, in this part of the routine in which he discusses welfare, how many whites are on welfare in rural areas and gives a stereotypical description of white trash in support of his point. At the end, he talks about complaints he gets from black audience members about this routine and how many state that the media is the cause of this perception, to which Rock replies that the media is not the reason he has multiple guns in his home or why he looks over his should when using an ATM.

This bit fails to address the structural reasons for the problems being addressed and therefore could be argued to be quite problematic, especially for a white audience unaware of the systemic inequalities at play in the behaviors described by Rock. There is also the argument that Rock was bringing a tension hidden within the black community to a larger audience in a way that did service the community. For one thing, each of these pieces of comedy do destroy the myth of the black monolith and also shows that black people share many of the same fears of crime and violence. It reframes the meta-narrative of black criminal/white victim to "nigga" criminal/black victim.

On the Chris Rock show, Rock once aired a segment called "How Not to Get Your Ass Beat by the Police" which gave instructions to black Americans on how to not get beat by the police. The instructions included: 1. Obey the law. 2. Use common sense. 3. Stop immediately (when the police pull you over). 4. Turn that shit off (loud rap music when getting pulled over.) 5. Be polite. 6. Shut the fuck up. 7. Get a white friend. 8. Don't ride with a mad woman.

The skit seeks to hold a fine line between reactionary humor and satire. Once again it is devoid of systemic response to police brutality and fails to acknowledge those who have been the victims of police brutality while not breaking any of the above recommendations. The sketch can be fairly critiqued as victim blaming. More police work should involve de-escalation rather than outbursts of horrible violence, whatever the supposed reason. Also, it is fair to ask if white people are beaten at the same rate when they engage in the same behaviors. At the same time, there is an almost slapstick nature to how the police beating is acted, and the suggestions are presented in an over-the-top manner. The sketch appears to be polysemic depending upon one's politics around police brutality, one could find support for what they are advocating.

These comedic bits could be given greater analysis but my primary purpose here is to establish that Rock is careful to position himself in ways that are perceived as bold and risky but still do not go too far in offending white audiences.

[ix] Although it should certainly be noted that such celebrity endorsements did not push Hillary Clinton over the line. On the night of the election, she was at a campaign rally in Pennsylvania with Jay Z and Beyonce.

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