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“What, a Black man can’t have a TV?”:

Vine Racial Comedy as a Sociopolitical Discourse Genre

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis analyzes the generic features and social significance of Vine racial comedy, a genre of sociopolitical humor on the video-sharing social media platform Vine. Comedy is the most popular category of videos on the platform, and for the majority of Vine’s existence since its launch in 2013, comedy has been dominated by King Bach (pronounced “batch”). Andrew Bachelor, the actor and producer behind the King Bach persona, is a 28-year-old Black comedian with more than 16 million Vine followers (as of October 2016), making him the most followed comedy Viner and the most followed Viner overall. King Bach has created a dominant form of Vine racial comedy, a unique style of audio-visual comedy that incorporates features of both face-to-face and online discourse genres and adapts them to the affordances of the Vine platform.

Multimodal discourse analysis on a data set of 30 vines in which King Bach performs racial comedy demonstrates that King Bach’s Vine racial comedy draws on the traditions of Black stand-up and sketch comedy and the online discourse genres of reaction GIFs and hashtag activism. Black comedians have used comedy to celebrate Black culture as well as bring attention to the negative racial ideologies and racial inequality that permeate the lived experiences of Black Americans. As a genre of online discourse, Vine racial comedy is also heavily influenced by the visual/textual medium of reaction GIFs, in which a moving image

is used to represent the poster's embodied reaction to an event or situation. By utilizing the affordances of Vine to highlight social inequality, Vine racial comedy is also generically similar to hashtag activism, which emerged when social media users began using Twitter for grassroots social activism.

Vine's affordance of a six-second length limit has resulted in semiotically dense videos that rely on both audio and visual semiotic features to convey their message efficiently. Like in other subgenres of racial comedy, racial, cultural, and linguistic stereotypes are often employed for this purpose. In Vine racial comedy, King Bach constructs stereotype-based characters through the stylistic use of language, particularly African American Language. Visually, characters' identities and social roles are constructed by embodied behavior — facial expressions, gesture, and other forms of body movement — and highly indexical attire (e.g., pastel polo shirt to index preppiness).

The affordance of a title/caption for each vine allows King Bach to direct the audience's interpretation his comedy, which is particularly important for comedy like his that addresses complex and contentious racial ideologies, stereotypes, and forms of discrimination in the U.S. In the two examples analyzed in this study, audiences are confronted with racial profiling, police officers' targeting of Black men, the idea of "playing the race card," "white fragility" in racially motivated interaction, stereotypes of Black speakers, and derogatory representations of African American Language.

As a genre, King Bach's innovative racial comedy uses performance and technology to challenge colorblind ideology, which asserts that acknowledging race only increases racial discord, and discourses of a racial digital divide that warn of Black Americans being left behind in a rapidly advancing technological society. With multiracial casts, his vines

demonstrate that addressing race can actually bring people of different ethnoracial backgrounds together and that race is not solely the concern of people of color. By centering race in his comedy and using social media as the medium of expression, King Bach shows that, rather than being oppositional, race and technology can be complimentary, and Black people are taking advantage of the affordances of social media to address racial issues in their own lives.

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Introduction

Sociopolitical humor, a subgenre of sociopolitical discourse, has long had mass appeal in the United States. As a genre, it engages with history, social and political ideology, and sociocultural difference or inequality based on identity features such as gender, religion, nationality, and race (Briggs & Bauman 1992; van Dijk 1993). In mainstream U.S. media such humor ranges from TV sitcoms and satirical news to stand-up and sketch comedy. Otto Santa Ana (2009) identifies two primary types of sociopolitical humor: hegemonic and anti-hegemonic (also referred to as counter-hegemonic humor). Hegemonic sociopolitical humor “reinforce[es] the audience’s belief that the status quo is natural and appropriate” (Santa Ana 2009:38) and typically centers socially disadvantaged groups (e.g., women, racial minorities, the poor) as the targets of the humor. It often promotes stereotypes and minimizes or erases the macro-social processes that cause these groups’ disadvantaged status to become the norm. As an example of hegemonic humor, Santa Ana (2009) points to former late night talk show host Jay Leno, who made derogatory jokes about Mexican immigrants in the U.S. without acknowledging the political, economic, or social conditions that may have motivated them to immigrate. Anti-hegemonic humor, on the other hand, simultaneously represents and mocks hegemonic discourses, directing the audience’s laughter at people and institutions with social power by exposing their biases and faults (Gilbert 2004; Santa Ana 2009). Targets of anti-hegemonic humor include white men, political leaders, corporations, and wealthy Wall Street bankers. The long-running satirical news show *The Daily Show* (1999-) — formerly hosted by comedian Jon Stewart and currently hosted by South African comedian Trevor Noah — uses anti-hegemonic sociopolitical humor to bring attention to “factual errors, logical contradictions, and incongruities in both the dominant political

discourse and the media that disseminate it” (Warner 2007:32). The show openly criticizes U.S. government officials, world leaders, domestic and global policy, and news outlets such as Fox News and CNN. As discussed above, anti-hegemonic sociopolitical humor must represent dominant discourses and beliefs in order for them to become objects of critique; the people who produce this humor must do so in a way that clearly conveys that they do not ascribe to the ideologies they present. They must also create space for themselves to perform their own alternative or non-hegemonic viewpoint. As a result, anti-hegemonic sociopolitical humor tends to be more complex than hegemonic sociopolitical humor, particularly when it addresses contentious topics. In the U.S., race is perhaps the most contentious sociopolitical issue, making racial humor, by extension, the most complex and controversial form of humor.

In this thesis I examine *Vine racial comedy*, a genre of racial humor that has emerged over the last three years on the video-sharing social media platform Vine. To establish the genre’s sociopolitical content and generic features, I analyze the Vine videos of King Bach, the 28-year-old Black male comedian who is the most-followed Viner and the originator of this genre of comedy. Specifically, I determine how King Bach has adapted features of existing discourse genres to the affordances of the Vine platform to construct a unique form of online audio-visual comedy. These generic influences include Black stand-up comedy, animated reaction GIFs, and hashtag activism as discursive tools for taking a stance on racial issues. King Bach’s anti-hegemonic racial comedy¹ tends to center around issues that affect Black Americans, but his style of comedy has garnered attention from Viners of color (of

¹ Although my analytical focus is on anti-hegemonic Vine racial comedy, the videos in the genre can be and very frequently are instances of hegemonic humor.

different ethnoracial backgrounds) and white Viners alike, who have not only collaborated with him but also adopted the generic features of his Vine racial comedy to address racial issues in their own comedic Vine videos.

Racial humor

Stereotypes of minoritized racial groups are typically the foundation for hegemonic racial humor. For example Consuela, the Latina housekeeper on the FOX animated comedy *Family Guy*, is portrayed as having limited English proficiency. Anti-hegemonic racial humor aims to contradict or complicate these types of stereotypes by constructing alternative narratives and providing the information that essentializing hegemonic discourses about racial groups erase. Anti-hegemonic racial humor also subverts racial dominance by constructing whites, the racial group with hegemonic power in the U.S., as lacking many desirable qualities in other aspects of U.S. culture.

Although currently prevalent in a variety of media, anti-hegemonic racial humor has historically been restricted to only a few forms of performance as a result of minoritized racial groups being excluded from participating in mainstream media performances. In the 1970s, stand-up comedy became a primary medium for humor to challenge dominant racial discourses. With live shows that were recorded and reproduced for sale, Black stand-up comedian Richard Pryor pioneered a new brand of stand-up comedy that demonstrated the power of comedic performance as a form of critical sociopolitical commentary, “ground[ing] his outrageous humor in the harsh realities of American racism” (Carpio 2008:72).

As Glenda Carpio (2008:75) discusses in her analysis of Black comedians’ use of dark humor to address racial issues that have plagued Black Americans, Pryor “[brought] to life the most vulgar aspects of racism, often by flaunting stereotypes of race,” and forced his

audience —Black and white members alike — to face their beliefs in these stereotypes head-on. His humor highlighted the illogicality of racial taboos such as interracial sexual relationships, and he maintained a narrative perspective that represented Black Americans' world views (Carpio 2008). One of Pryor's best established comedic tropes was comparing Blacks and whites — their styles of interaction, their social and political ideologies, and their relative social practices. Other commentators have noted that compared to his lively and clever Black characters — “humanly and culturally rich survivors who will ‘make a way out of no way’” — Pryor's “middle-class [white] characters appear...foolishly and narrowly logical and analytical, naïve, and in sum, ineffectual” (Rickford and Rickford 2000: 66-67, 80). By openly portraying Black Americans' stereotypes of whites, embodying stereotypes of Blacks and reframing these as positive attributes, and addressing racial issues that often go unspoken, Pryor rejected “the pressure to sanitize Black culture in the name of integration” (Carpio 2008:89). The success of his racially explicit and often shocking humor opened the door for future stand-up comedians of all racial backgrounds to talk about race in critical ways.

The tradition of Pryor's racial humor can be seen in recent comedians' content that celebrates otherwise marginalized cultures, critiques dominant cultural and racial discourses, and uses narratives to create feelings of shared experience with audience members of similar ethnoracial backgrounds. For example, Mexican-American comedian George Lopez has used comedy to positively affirm Latinos' “otherness” in the U.S. by praising the aspects of Latino culture (e.g., music, food) that keep them from blending into hegemonic American culture (Avila-Saavedra 2011). In doing so, Lopez pushes back against dominant assimilationist discourses that advocate a homogeneous national culture. Although most white comedians

rely on hegemonic racial humor, some, such as Louis C.K. have taken up Pryor's tradition of racial critique. In his show *Live at the Beacon Theatre* (2011), C.K. critiques whiteness and the history of white supremacy in the United States in a segment about the disastrous effect of white British settlers on the lives of Native Americans. He begins the segment by stating, "Everything that we introduce to the world is shitty. [We] meaning white people." This type of overt racial critique follows directly in the tradition of Pryor's work.

Pryor's racial comedy and its emphasis on the Black American experience also crucially created a framework that later Black comedians could adapt to reflect the experiences and issues they found most pressing in their lives. As the racial demographics, race relations, and overall sociopolitical landscape of the U.S. have changed alongside technological capabilities, the anti-hegemonic racial humor created by Black comedians has also changed. Dave Chappelle, on whom Pryor's influence is well recognized (Carpio 2008), utilized both stand-up performances and a televised sketch comedy series as outlets for his humor. On Comedy Central's *Chappelle's Show* (2003-2006), he used costumes, sets, props, and other actors to create outrageous characters and plotlines (e.g., Clayton Bigsby, a blind, Black supporter of white supremacy) to examine American racism and racial ideology in more elaborate ways than he could in narrative stand-up comedy alone. *Chappelle's Show* addressed everything from racial stereotypes to Regan-era social policy to more lighthearted issues of topics in Black culture (e.g., in one sketch musical artist Prince challenges comedian Charlie Murphy to a basketball game). The combination of stand-up and sketch comedy, and the breadth of topics that *Chappelle's Show* covered, demonstrates that there is no single way to use racial comedy as a form of political commentary, and, crucially, that comparing Blacks and whites does not have to be a central feature of Black humor.

Keegan-Michael Key and Jordan Peele, two Black-white biracial comedians, incorporated this latter aspect of racial humor into their own Comedy Central show *Key & Peele* (2012-2015), which imitated the style of *Chappelle's Show* with its combination of stand-up and filmed sketches. With regard to content, however, *Key & Peele* is part of a “new direction of African American humor” that humor scholar David Gillota (2013:18) describes as “express[ing] little or no desire to speak directly to or for the so-called ‘black community.’” On the surface *Key & Peele* may appear to have diverged from the tradition of sociopolitical critique established by earlier Black comedians like Pryor and Chappelle since “rather than interrogating broad social and systemic inequalities, [the show] approach[ed] race either through the lens of personal experience, or...treat[ed] it as absurd” (Gillota 2013:18). In actuality, the show’s sociopolitical critique came in the form of a large number of characters who upended racial expectation while demonstrating a Black subjectivity. Many of these characters reflected Key and Peele’s experiences as biracial Americans, and drew on stereotypes of Black and white culture in various ways (e.g., “Biracial Penis”, “Soul Food”). The range of Black characters that they created challenged static and essentialized stereotypes of Black people by representing a variety of individuals’ experiences being Black in the United States. These included performances of hypermasculinity among Black men (“I Said Bitch”), intersections of race and sexuality (“Office Homophobe”), and day-to-day experiences that have little to do with race (“Turbulence”). In some of their later sketches, Key and Peele did begin to perform content reminiscent of Pryor and Chappelle’s overtly political styles. For example, their sketch “Negrotown” (2015) begins with Key being harassed and arrested by a white police officer; bumping his head while getting into the police car causes him to imagine a musical sequence in which Peele describes the “utopia for

Black people” where, among other great characteristics, “you can walk the street without getting stopped, harassed, or beat.” Thus, Black racial humor has developed to include the outlandish, the explicit, the subtle, the societal, and the personal — all equally effective styles of sociopolitical humor.

Social media and genre creation

Black comedy writers’ and performers’ success at attracting large audiences to sociopolitical humor has indirectly affected Black content creators who do not participate in mainstream media. In addition to television and stand-up comedy, online social media are primary sites of sociopolitical humor in a variety of creative forms. This is due in large part to social media’s conduciveness to the creation of new genres and subgenres of discourse through the process of “remediation”: as the technology available for content creation advances and proliferates, new technology “appropriates the techniques, forms, and social significance of [earlier] media” (Bolter & Grusin 1999:65). In other words, content online cannot be separated from the technologically-mediated content that came before it since the former builds upon the latter stylistically as well as intertextually and interdiscursively. This relationship between online content and other technologically-mediated content also applies to online and offline content. Just as the inspiration for characters in Pryor’s stand-up and on *Chappelle’s Show* and *Key & Peele* often came from real people and dialogue, racial humor online is shaped by the discursive practices and racial ideologies that the content creators experience or enact in their offline, day-to-day lives (cf. Akkaya 2014).

The different ways in which Black comedy creators — and online content creators generally — produce content on various online platforms are determined by technological affordances (Hutchby 2001), that is, platform features that allow and restrict particular types

of interaction and content production, such as affordances of text, image, and/or audio. Many individual affordances are shared across platforms, but it is each platform's combination of affordances that makes it unique; as a result, some discursive practices and genres only exist on specific media platforms and others are shared more broadly across different types of media. For example, the searchable hashtag feature is an affordance found on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook, but it is the combination of hashtags with the affordances of image editing and adding a location to photos that makes Instagram a one-of-a-kind photo-sharing platform.

Affordances shared across platforms have led to the emergence of discourse genres that are distinct to online content but are not necessarily limited to a single platform. On platforms with the affordance of combining images and text, one shared genre of discourse is that of reaction GIFs. GIFs, or images in Graphics Interchange Format (.gif), are short (typically 1 to 5 seconds), silent, continuously looping images that are most often excerpts taken from popular media (e.g., television, film, news, YouTube). Because there is no audio, speech may be superimposed as text on the moving image, similar to a subtitle (Figure 1).



Figure 1.
GIF created from Amber Rose's appearance on Late Night with Seth Meyers (June 2016)
GIPHY.com

The specific genre of reaction GIFs is constituted by GIFs that are used to represent the poster's embodied reaction — positive or negative — to a situation that is established

through a caption or text prior to the introduction of the GIF. Reaction GIFs are a remediated iteration of reaction shots on unscripted television broadcasts such as game shows and sporting events; in fact, in some cases the GIF used comes from one of these broadcasts. Initially, the text accompanying a reaction GIF was limited to a few generic structures, such as “My reaction when X happens,” “How I feel/That feeling when X happens” or simply “When X happens” (Figure 2). As the reaction GIF has become more widespread and easily recognizable as a genre of online discourse, the generic textual structure is no longer required to achieve this same discursive purpose (Figure 3). Huber (2015: paragraph 10) states that reaction GIFs have “ unique ability to capture and isolate bodily gesture...bringing...the meanings carried so powerfully and elegantly through bodily actions” in face-to-face communication (see also Bucholtz & Hall 2016; McNeill, Levy, & Duncan 2015) back into what is otherwise a text-based mode of communication. By recontextualizing images from other sources, creators of reaction GIFs make their content explicitly intertextual, bringing offline discourse and interaction into online spaces. As these examples illustrate, reaction GIFs can be humorous representations of a range of experiences, including ones based on race or ethnicity as in Figure 2. Thus, humorous reactions GIFs that engage with racial issues constitute a subgenre of racial humor and a subgenre of online humor.

In addition to cross-platform genres, some genres of online discourse are unique to specific platforms precisely because of the platform’s particular combinations of affordances. With its affordances of short posts (due to a text character limit), rapid updates, grouping of posts by topics using hashtags, and display of “trending” topics, the Twitter platform is an ideal site for breaking news and is conducive to grassroots social activism (Bonilla & Rosa 2015). By creating a hashtag and including it in tweets until the topic garners attention from



Figure 2.
“When X happens” reaction GIF format
Twitter: @MarcusMEAddict (posted 6/13/16)



Figure 3.
Non-generic reaction GIF format
Tumblr: *whatshouldwecallgradschool* (posted 6/21/16)

both social media users and mainstream media producers, Twitter users are able to bring attention to social issues that they feel are inaccurately or inadequately covered by mainstream media, such as wealth disparity (Juris 2012), gender discrimination and sexual assault against women (Brandt & Kizer 2015), and police brutality (Freelon, McIlwain, & Clark 2016). The success of such “hashtag activism” on Twitter has contributed to the emergence of online social activism in different forms on other platforms, including Facebook, the blogging site Tumblr, and the newer, video-based platform Vine.

*Vine as a social media platform*²

The video-sharing social media platform Vine was created by Don Hofmann, Rus Yusupov, and Colin Kroll in 2012 and acquired and launched by Twitter in January 2013. The website and smartphone app allow users to post and view videos up to six seconds in length that play in a continuous loop. In a 2014 interview in the *New Yorker*, Yusupov says that the length limit was chosen because “nobody’s going to be mad that you wasted six seconds of their time” (Friend 2014). These videos, called “vines,” can be on any topic that the creator chooses within the limits of Vine’s content boundaries, which restrict the publication of content such as pornography, graphic violence, and misleading impersonations.

A vine may be original content created specifically for Vine or reproduced content from other sources. There are three primary ways that content is reproduced. First, users may “repost” a vine that they originally posted on an earlier date. This is often part of “Throwback Thursdays” (#tbt), a common weekly practice across social media platforms in which users repost old content or photos of themselves when they were younger. The second option is to “crosspost” content from another social media profile, such as a six-second excerpt of a YouTube video. Third, users may post media from another source in its original form or with their own edits, such as a six-second clip of a televised newscast.

When posting a video, users have the option to add it to one or more of the platform’s “channels,” pages that are curated by the Vine programmers based on video content and appear on the Vine homepage. As of October 2016, between 20 and 25 channels have been

² *Vine* (capitalized) refers to the social medial platform. *Viner* (capitalized) refers to someone who creates videos on the platform (analogous to *Youtuber*). *Vine video* and *vine* (lowercase) are synonymous and refer to the videos produced on the platform.

available at various points in time. When 25 channels appear, the first three are a “Vine Spotlight,” in which the videos of an up-and-coming Viner are selected by Vine and “featured” in a dedicated channel; a channel dedicated to vines of current events, such as “May the 4th Be With You” (Star Wars-related vines posted on May 4th) or The Academy Awards; and a channel dedicated to vines that are connected by a shared hashtag and content, such as a weekly #SongCollab when different users remix the same audio clip. The other 22 channels are constant and include a range of topics from “comedy” (which has 2 channels) and “K-Pop” to “scary” and “food.” Videos are not searchable within channels, but the platform has a search function that can search the totality of vines by username, caption text, and hashtags. The website also maintains a programmer-curated “Vine playlist” of 20 vines that are pulled from one of the two rotating channels described above, typically the 20 most-viewed. New, highly viewed vines are featured on the “Popular Now” playlist (Figure 4).

When the Vine platform first launched, vines were intended to be first-person snippets of users’ everyday lives. Until April 2013, video recording within the app was restricted to a phone’s outward-facing camera, which allows users to record their surroundings. When “video selfies” became an option with the app’s addition of a front-facing camera, the style and popularity of vines changed dramatically (Friend 2014). With its meteoric rise in popularity over the past three years, Vine is now recognized as a social media platform with social influence. Large corporations including Dunkin Donuts, Coca-Cola, Budweiser, and Verizon have sponsored popular Viners to create vines as advertisements for their products.

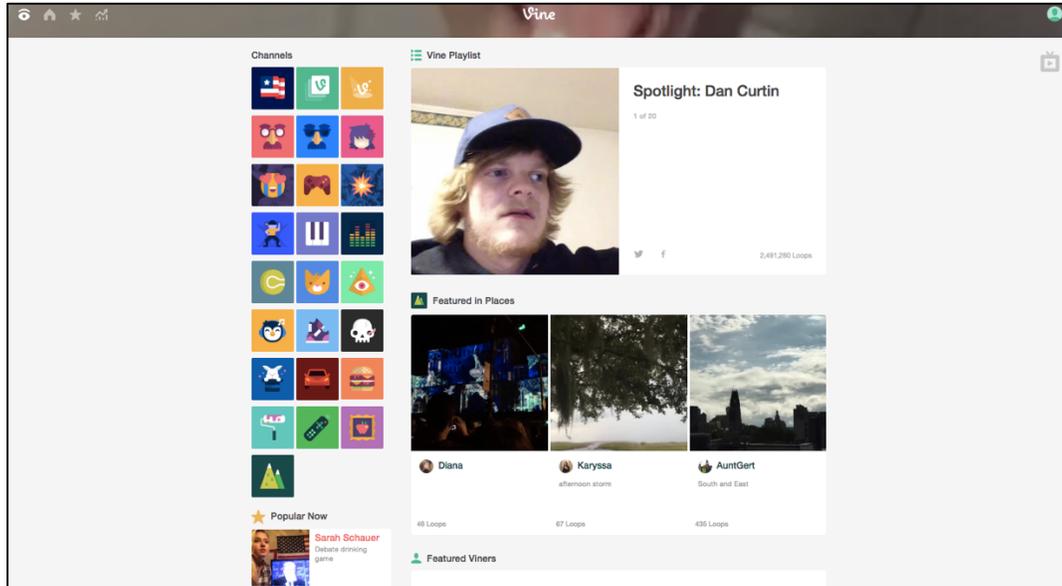


Figure 4.
Vine website homepage (Vine.co)

Numerous celebrities have made cameos, including actor Don Cheadle, music producer/DJ Steve Aoki, and First Lady Michelle Obama. Additionally, many YouTube stars have added Vine to their portfolio of social media profiles. To maximize their presence on Vine, Viners often collaborate and make appearances in one another's videos.

Features of the Vine platform directly and indirectly influence the production and reception of vines in various ways. Affordances for evaluative responses (Jones, Chik & Hafner 2015) allow users to immediately evaluate the content that they see. For example, users can “follow” Viners who they find particularly entertaining so that new videos that each Viner posts appear automatically on their personal home feed (Figure 5). They can also “like”, “revine” (post the video to their own profile, similar to “retweeting” on Twitter), or comment on an individual vine. To share a vine with others, users have the option to share directly to Twitter, Facebook, and Pinterest through the site, embed the video in a blog, or retrieve the vine's URL to share through other media (e.g., email, messaging).

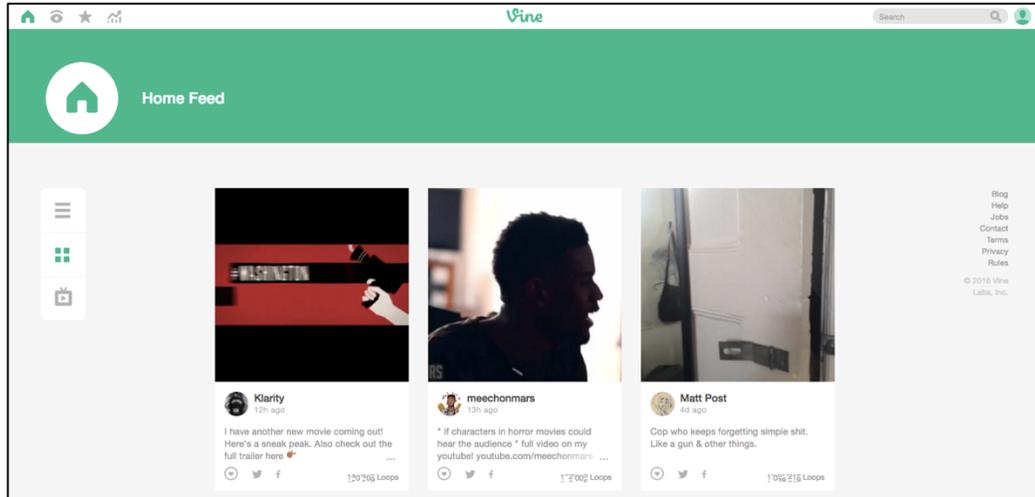


Figure 5.

The author's personal Vine home feed
 Videos posted by Viners that a user follows appear on this page automatically.

The potential to achieve celebrity status within the domain of social media — i.e., to become “internet famous” — and “use the [internet] as a launching pad...to break into the off-line entertainment world” (Gamson 2011:1066) incentivizes Viners to make vines that will garner high numbers of positive evaluations, which act as a visible signal of their popularity to others (Figure 6). Attempts to make popular vines results in both innovation and imitation in video production. Because Vine allows for a wide range of video editing, as discussed below, users have many options for creative video production. While creating unique, memorable vines is one way to stand out among millions of Vine users, new, unfamiliar content is not guaranteed to be popular, since other users may not be sure what it means or how to interpret it. To avoid this issue, many users creatively imitate or adapt the style of existing vines that are part of the same channel and have high numbers of positive evaluative responses.

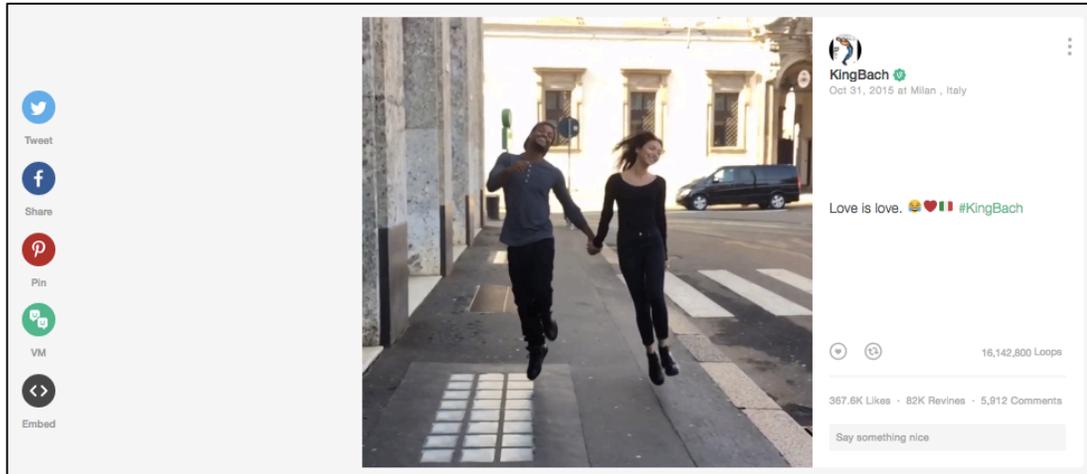


Figure 6.

Individual vine “post page”

Options for sharing are indicated by the icons on the far left.

Counts of evaluative responses (likes, revines, and comment) are in the bottom right corner.

The practice of imitation or riffing off another Viner’s content is so common on Vine that Viners have developed conventions for crediting the origin of an idea. The original vine that is being imitated is typically referenced in the caption of the video by including “IB” (“inspired by”) and the username of the original Viner or by including a hashtag that references the original vine or Viner in some way. When users do not know if there is a single Viner who started a trend, but they know that others have posted similar vines, they may include #remake in the caption to signal that they are not trying to present their content as wholly original.

This process of imitation has led to the emergence of recognizable vine genres and created a distinction between vine genres that are unique to individual Viners and genres that have been adopted to varying extents by other Viners. For example, Zach King has created a genre of three-dimensional magic tricks and visual illusions that is so distinct that as of this writing he has garnered 4 million followers and produced commercials in the same style for the corporations LG and Charter. Thomas Sanders’ “storytime” vines, in which he narrates

the activities of people he passes on the street, have propelled him to 8.2 million followers. The most popular and widespread genre is #relatable vines, which are reminiscent of the platform's original "everyday environment" vines. These vines are comedic enactments of everyday events or emotions that most viewers can relate to, such as nervously trying to talk to a romantic interest. Although these vines are representations of people's lived experiences, they are not reality and their production requires scripting and pre-planning, relying heavily on the material affordances of Vine that allow these often socially complex experiences to be compressed into an entertaining six-second video.

As a video-based medium, Vine has both audio and visual affordances for video production. Visual cues that can be incorporated in the initial filming stage include clothing, props (e.g., food), and the actors' gestures and facial expressions. Audio cues that can be incorporated in the initial filming include speech and sounds from objects in the environment (e.g., phones, computers). Vine allows users to upload videos from other sources, such as a video previously recorded on their phone) and it also has in-app editing capabilities; this set of tools results in a wide variety of special effects. Text, computer-generated characters, visual effects, slow motion, background music, sound effects (e.g., sirens, drums), and narrator voiceover are just some of the effects that are possible. Vines can also be filmed in stages rather than as a single continuous shot, so changes in scenery, costume, and actors are also possible within the six-second limit. Besides needing technological savvy to produce their videos, vine creators and other vine viewers also need to be well-versed in Vine's representational conventions and have the ability to watch rapidly paced content in order to interpret the semiotically dense videos that they see.

With 16.2 million followers as of October 2016, Viner King Bach (pronounced “batch”) has clearly demonstrated his mastery of vine production and consumption. As the most-followed comedy Viner and the most-followed Viner overall, Bach’s large global network of viewers makes him a role model to other Viners for how to gain Vine popularity. His social media success, however, is not solely the result of familiarity with Vine. Andrew Bachelor, the 28-year-old African American man behind the King Bach persona, is professionally trained in both film and comedy. He attended the New York Film Academy, produces his own YouTube channel (BachelorsPadTv), and has appeared in multiple television comedy series and movies since joining Vine, including “The Mindy Project” (2015) and “We Are Your Friends” (2015). Because the Vine community is generally oriented away from the “traditional celebrity system” and favors grassroots “microcelebrities” who are relatable to everyday viewers (Gamson 2011:1067), King Bach does not reference his professional training prior to Vine anywhere on his Vine profile or in any of his videos. Rather, he has steadily crafted a distinct style of Vine comedy — with regards to both production style and content — that has been imitated by other Viners seeking internet success. The comedy that King Bach produces and the social significance of his Vine presence are the focus of this thesis.

Methodology

Data selection

My analysis of vines in this thesis is based on two years of online ethnography. I engaged in participant-observation that included the recording of platform-specific cultural practices such as language in order to situate them within larger online culture and “offline” social practices (Boellstorff et al. 2012; Kozinets 2010). I joined Vine in the fall of 2013 for

personal use and began viewing vines as potential data in the fall of 2014. I visited the site several times a week to browse new videos on the comedy channel and new videos that appeared on my personal homepage from the Viners that I followed. I perused comments on vines to compare my reaction and interpretation of the content to that of others viewers, compared remake vines to the vines that inspired them, and kept up to date with Vine trends using the “Trends on Vine” and “Popular Now” playlists. I collected vines of interest by revining them to my personal profile, and I maintained a spreadsheet log detailing the reasons why I took note of each one. Although I have participated in Vine almost exclusively as a consumer, I developed knowledge of the basics of vine production by creating my own test posts, filming with my phone and using the app’s various editing tools. Because I had a year of experience using the platform by the time I began participant-observation for data collection in 2014, I was already familiar with popular Viners, the interactional affordances of the site, and common features of different styles of comedy vines — all of which provided a starting point for data collection and analysis (cf. Lindlof & Shatzer 1998).

I eventually singled out King Bach and his videos for analysis because of his status as the most-followed Viner, the frequency with which he appeared in other Viners’ videos as a collaborator, and the high number of his vines that I personally found interesting or entertaining compared to those by other Viners. I created my data set through exhaustive sampling of videos posted by King Bach between July 2013 (his first post) and October 2015. Only vines that King Bach posted on his own profile were considered for analysis, and only those that were created specifically for Vine. Like many other viners, King Bach crossposts excerpts of videos from his YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram accounts to his Vine profile. He also posts clips of himself appearing on television shows and videos of

himself encouraging his Vine followers to follow his other social media profiles. These types of videos were excluded from the data set because they were not made for Vine.

My initial video selection process was based on the goal of comparing King Bach's vines to the narrative stand-up comedy of prominent Black comedians. My initial data set consisted of 30 videos that each contained at least two features of Black narrative stand-up comedy as identified by Carpio (2008), Rahman (2004), and Rickford and Rickford (2001). Once I created my data set, I found that this comparative framework was too narrow and did not allow for in-depth analysis of the creative aspects of King Bach's vines. One important aspect of his comedy that this selection process did highlight, however, was the centrality of race and ethnicity to the humor of many of his vines. Based on this observation, I conducted a second exhaustive sampling of the videos from the same time frame. In this second round of sampling the criterion for selection was that each video must engage with race or ethnicity in some way, which is often, though not always, discernable from the title of the Vine (e.g., "When White Boys Go to the Hood"). My final data set after the second exhaustive sampling consisted of 30 vines, including seven that were part of the first data set.

Coding and transcription

Each of the 30 vines was coded in an Excel spreadsheet for the following features, which were determined based on what emerged as analytically salient during my periods of personal use and participant-observation.

1. Metadata: Caption/title of the vine, any hashtags included after the title, and the date the video was posted.
2. Main idea: What is the main point or the joke of the vine? (This is often the same as or indicated by the title.)
3. Characters: How many characters appear in the vine? Who are they/what are their roles?

- a. Demographic information: What is the gender and race/ethnicity of the character(s) being portrayed (which are not necessarily the same as those of the actors)?
- b. Do any of the characters have institutional roles (e.g., teacher, salesperson)?
- c. Are any of the characters based on racial tropes or social stereotypes (e.g., Black criminals, racially insensitive whites)?
4. Linguistic features of interest: Are certain aspects of the language or dialogue integral to the plot or humor of the vine (e.g., style-shifting, particular words or phrases)?
5. Relevant effects or editing (e.g., background music, costume changes).
6. Other notes: relevant features of the video not covered in the above categories.

Because the study involved analysis of audio-visual rather than audio-only data, the transcription of the data must represent embodied as well as spoken action without making non-speech features appear secondary to speech (cf. Luff & Heath 2015). It must also be conducive to multimodal discourse analysis (O'Halloran 2011). In order to allow for close analysis of both linguistic and non-linguistic features, the transcription conventions needed to account for movement, facial expression, dress, background scenery, and scene changes as well as capture their simultaneity with language. Taking into account the ways in which transcription decisions influence readers' perceptions of the speech event and participants (Bucholtz 2000; Ochs 1979), I have transcribed the data using a three-column system. From left to right the columns represent: actors (including non-speaking actors); gesture, expression, scene description or other visual cues (such as dress or background activity); and speech. Descriptions of nonverbal features are placed in the center column for two reasons: first, to set the scene for the readers before presenting what the actors say, and second, because, as a visual medium, if a scene in a vine does not have both verbal and non-verbal action it is far more likely to have only non-verbal action.

Speech was transcribed in a form that primarily follows the conventions of Du Bois et al. (1993), which uses standard orthography and a wide range of symbols to capture non-linguistic sounds (e.g. throat-clearing). In cases where non-standard pronunciation is relevant

to the linguistic or character analysis but phonetic transcription is not necessary (e.g., *yo* for non-rhotic *your*) or where standard orthography would standardize the speech in a way that would inaccurately represent what was said (e.g., *going to* instead of *gonna*) the most common American English orthographic representation was used. These transcription conventions permit comparison of verbal and non-verbal content across videos and represent spoken language in a way that captures pronunciation while maintaining readability.

The transcription of each vines is between ten and twenty lines. Although the videos are generally the same length, there is variation in the amount of total dialogue, the number of actors, and the number of scene changes, which all influence the total number of lines of transcription. I used these transcriptions as an analytical tool, but they were never analyzed without the vines that they represented, which remained the primary data. As with any attempt to represent speech in the visual medium of text, the transcriptions of the vines are not, and cannot be, exact replicas of the speech events (Jaffe 2007). In this research context, the frequent use of African American Language (AAL; Lanehart 2015) creates additional concerns about representation, since using nonstandard orthography to represent features of AAL risks invoking linguistic and racial stereotypes about the speakers being represented (Jaffe 2006). It is important to note, however, that the characters in the vines in the data set are very often overtly stereotype-based, the actors are performing scripted interaction, and they chose to post the vines as they are. Thus, I operated under the assumption that the ways in which characters and their speech are portrayed are intentional, and I transcribed the scenes in the manner I believed most accurately represents characters as Viners have chosen to create them.

Vine racial comedy in King Bach's videos

In this analysis, I first discuss the features that are shared across vines in the data set and constitute features of the Vine racial comedy genre as created by King Bach. I then analyze two examples from the data set that exemplify many of these features.

Features of existing discourse genres in Vine racial comedy

By engaging with the topic of race through comedic enactments of lived experiences, all of King Bach's videos in the data set are examples of sociopolitical discourse in the form of racial humor. His videos address a range of topics from explicit forms of racism in interaction, such as racial and linguistic profiling, to institutionalized and systemic racial inequality (e.g., wealth disparity, crime rates in racially segregated neighborhoods), to microaggressions and the many everyday forms of discrimination that "the law can't touch, [that] won't be easily proved or disproved, [and] can't simply be criminalized and deemed unconstitutional" (Jackson 2008:87). Many of the vines in the data set critique the people and institutions responsible for these phenomena, most often white people, making the videos not just a general form of racial humor but specifically anti-hegemonic racial humor. Other videos make sociopolitical commentary not through explicit anti-hegemonic humor, but rather through in-group humor based on cultural knowledge or experiences shared specifically among viewers from minoritized racial groups. For example, one vine that highlights issues of colorism within the Black community ("Lightskin Selfie Tutorial") consists of an all-Black cast and does not explicitly bring whiteness into the comedy at any point.

Though the Vine platform is new and unique, several features of King Bach's Vine racial comedy are features of existing online discourse genres that were first created on earlier

platforms. Like reaction GIFs, many of the storylines in his vines are reactions to or descriptions of a specific event with a generic “When X happens” title (e.g., “When Your White Friends Get Too Comfortable”). The visual influence of GIFs — with their short, repetitive movements and prioritizing of facial expression and gesture — can be seen especially in the camerawork. Zooming in and out to capture all relevant facial expressions and body movement (e.g., eye twitch, clenched fist, heaving chest) is very common. Additionally, like hashtag activism, the sociopolitical critique that Vine racial comedy offers is a form of online social activism that utilizes the affordances of the digital platform on which it occurs.

Semiotic features of Vine racial comedy

With only six seconds to convey a storyline, Viners must create each vine strategically to get its message across efficiently. As a result, comedy vines draw heavily on cultural, racial, and linguistic stereotypes to construct their characters with easily identifiable social roles and meanings. Unlike hegemonic racial humor, however, King Bach’s vines often include stereotypes in order to subvert social expectations and critically comment on the stereotypes themselves (cf. Hall 2013). The construction of these stereotype-based characters depends on both auditory and visual semiotic features.

The most important auditory feature of King Bach’s Vine racial comedy is the stylistic use of language, a key feature of stand-up comedy generally and racial humor especially. For Black stand-up comedians the voice is the primary means of distinguishing Black and white characters and constructing them in the particular light in which the comedians want these characters to be viewed by their audiences (Rahman 2004). On Vine, even when actors of different ethnoracial backgrounds fulfill the character roles, language remains crucial to

character construction. King Bach stylistically uses all aspects of AAL, from lexicon, syntax, and intonation (Green 2002) to interactional practices such as pointed indirectness (Morgan 2002), marking (Mitchell-Kernan 1972), and playing the dozens (Smitherman 1977). The contrast between African American Language and Standard English or other ethnoracial or regional varieties is one of the key ways that King Bach conveys Black cultural knowledge and, at times, directs his humor to Black viewers.

Facial expressions, gesture and other forms of body movement, and dress are the most frequently significant visual semiotic features in vines. As discussed above, one of the affordances of Vine is its audiovisual format; this allows embodied action to be as central to any performance as linguistic or other auditory content — in some cases even more central. Facial expressions may be used to convey an emotion instead of words; gestures (e.g., hand-waving) and body movement (e.g., walking, shrugging shoulders) can function as indexes of characters' social identities. While many vines are filmed with actors in everyday clothing to reflect the everyday interactions they represent, many characters require special costumes or attire to index their roles or the social setting. Superhero characters (e.g., Spiderman), institutional occupations (e.g., police officer, cashier), and characters that embody racial stereotypes (e.g., Black gangsta, white prep) typically have full costumes or otherwise highly indexical items of clothing, such as a nametag, gold chain, or pastel polo shirt. These semiotic features, along with other characteristics of sociopolitical discourse, anti-hegemonic racial humor, and reaction GIFs, can be seen in the following two examples.

Examples of vine racial comedy as sociopolitical discourse

In Example 1, “Getting Out of Situations Using the Race Card,” two Black men (King Bach and Jerry Purpdrank) carry a television out of a building; when they are stopped by two

Example 1. Getting out of situations using the race card (https://vine.co/v/Mg201XVlqYw) Posted 5/12/2014			
Line number	Actor	Scene, gesture, expression	Speech
1	CL & CD	<i>two white police officers standing in a parking lot outside of a building</i>	
2	KB & JP	<i>two Black men carrying a television out of building into parking lot, wearing Tshirts and shorts</i>	
3	CL	<i>points to KB & JP</i>	Wha:t're you do:in.
4	KB & JP	<i>stop walking</i>	
5	KB & JP	<i>close-up on angry faces</i>	
6	KB		What=
7		<i>JP looks down then up</i>	= <rising pitch> a ^Black man can't have a TV? </>
8	CL	<i>eyes closed</i>	No,
9		<i>CD turns to look at CL</i>	<high pitch> You can be </> ^Black and have a T ₁ V].
10	CD	<i>turns to look at KB & JP</i>	[₁ Ye][₂ ah::]
11	KB		[₂ Yeah]=
12		<i>begins shuffling toward parking lot, carrying TV with JP</i>	=<fast speech>We gon put these ^masks on</>,
13		<i>pulls black ski mask over face</i>	cause it's ^cold [out].
14	CD	<i>nodding head</i>	[Fo sh]-
15	CL	<i>nodding head</i>	Yeah.
16	CD	<i>bumps fist against chest</i>	<clears throat>
17			Fo sho.

white police officers (Curtis Lepore and Christian Del Grosso) the Black men use race to get out of answering one officer's question. The title of the vine guides the audience's interpretation of the action that unfolds, "select[ing] one out of the many possible meanings from the [action], and anchor[ing] it with words" (Hall 2013: 218; see Barthes 1977).

It informs viewers that the Black men's actions are intentional and should be understood from the Black men's subjectivity. Here King Bach and his collaborators use transgressive humor and broad satire to address several social issues: racial profiling and targeting of Black men by police, white accusations that minoritized racial groups use race to "get ahead" in life, and white Americans' discomfort with race and racially charged interactions.

The vine begins with a shot of two white men in positions of institutional power: police officers, recognizable by their uniforms. When the two Black men enter the scene carrying a television, one officer (CL) immediately assumes the men are doing something questionable. By explicitly asking the men what they are doing (line 3), the first officer creates "the situation" that the title refers to (i.e., being caught in the midst of a criminal act) and invokes the racial stereotype of Black men as criminals (Figure 7). While the interrogative form of the officer's utterance, his pointing gesture, and his attire all index authority, his Southern American accent (line 3) undermines his apparent high status, since the dialect is often interpreted as an ideological index of lower intelligence and/or racist beliefs (Lippi-Green 2012).

Rather than displaying deference in response to the white officer's institutional authority — remaining polite, affectively neutral, and compliant — the Black men in the vine overtly display indignation and anger at being questioned. Through their facial expressions (line 5), they are able to negatively evaluate the officer's utterance even before they speak (Figure 8). In addition to expressing negative affect in response to the officer's racial profiling, King Bach's character challenges the officer's authority by not answering the question that is asked. Instead of providing a response such as "I'm taking my TV to my car," Bach's character points out the racial bias implicit in the officer's question (lines 6-7).



Figure 7.
Lines 1-3: “What’re you doin?”



Figure 8.
Lines 5-7:
“What, a Black man can’t have a TV?”

Prosodically, the question is asked with rising pitch that culminates in falsetto, functioning here as both an interrogative challenger (Alim 2004) and an index of moral indignation (Nielson 2010). By asking “What, a Black man can’t have a TV?” Bach also explicitly brings race into the interaction, a violation of popular colorblind ideology that “discourag[es]

discussions of racial matters and presum[es] that the best practice is to ignore the realities of racism” (Wise 2010:18). As a result of this ideological perspective, the introduction of race into a context where it “should be irrelevant” is treated as an action with ulterior motives, i.e., “playing the race card.” The metaphor implies that members of minoritized ethnoracial groups treat life as a game and mention race only when it is convenient for them to imply racial bias on the part of their interlocutors, thereby discrediting their interlocutors and creating an avenue for their own advancement (Ford 2009).

As previously mentioned, the title of this vine directs the viewer to understand the series of events from the Black men’s subjectivity: in this instance, they are, in fact, “playing the race card” by strategically pointing out race as a potential motivating factor for the officer’s questioning. However, the successful deployment of the “race card” in this scene depends on the officers being the type of people who both want to avoid engaging in a conversation that involves race and fear being accused of racial prejudice — that is, white people. DiAngelo (2011) describes white Americans’ discomfort in situations of racial discord and their fear of being labeled racist as “white fragility.” In lines 8-9, the officer who questions the Black men displays the defensiveness characteristic of white fragility, using high pitch to index moral indignation in the same way King Bach’s character did in the prior utterance.

As soon as the officers have admitted that “you can be Black and have a TV,” King Bach’s character and his partner begin to walk away from the officers. The immediacy of their action suggests that they predicted the officers’ reaction and are confident that, regardless of what they themselves do next, the officers will not risk a second public scolding — potentially in the form of an explicit accusation of racism — by again questioning the Black men’s possession of the television. The exaggerated nature of the satire becomes

apparent when the two men then pull black ski masks — a widely recognized index of criminal behavior — over their faces and claim that they are doing so “[be]cause it’s cold out” (line 12-13). The actors’ short-sleeved shirts and the sunny background allow the audience to confidently conclude that this is a lie, but the officers do not say or do anything to stop the men in light of this new information (Figure 9). In other words, the men have just revealed themselves as criminals who are stealing the television, but they have ensured that they are immune from actual accusation.



Figure 9.
Lines 12-13:
“We gon put these masks on cause it’s cold out”

In addition to looking foolish for being too sensitive to race to competently do their jobs, the white officers become the target of the vine’s humor when they attempt to “be cool” — that is, attempt to “act on symbolic incidents and subtle varieties of cultural practice with eloquence, skill, wit, patience, and precise timing” (Morgan 2002: 40) — by using gestures and linguistic features strongly associated with Black speakers. CD bumps his fist against his chest as a sign of solidarity with the Black men (line 16) and uses the post-vocalic non-rhoticity (*fo sho*; lines 14, 17) that is a phonological feature of African American Language

(Green 2002). After their apparent social faux pas of offending the Black men, the officers attempt to make amends and show affiliation through communicative accommodation (Giles, Coupland & Coupland 1991). Their effort, however, simply comes across as two white men appropriating Black language and using it poorly, failing in their attempt to “be cool.”

King Bach incorporates key features of Black stand-up comedy into this six-second sketch, cleverly touching on several major race-related issues while doing so. Most obviously, this sketch turns the table on the reality of many interactions between Black men and police — particularly white officers — by having the Black men not only resist but explicitly challenge the officers’ authority and still leave the interaction unharmed. The first officer’s Southern American accent and the Black men’s ability to “get out of the situation” are examples of “portray[ing] Blacks as more astute than whites and more capable of vigorous self-defense or self-assertive talk” (Rickford & Rickford 2000:61) as well as the “venerable tradition of the Black trickster” who uses his wit to defeat others (Watkins 1994:19). The Black men display their wit in the interaction by using the very thing that gets them profiled in the first place — their race — to end the interaction on their own terms. Though the Black characters portray the negative social stereotype of Black men as criminals, which is widely used in hegemonic humor, they subvert the expected social roles by becoming the protagonists of the sketch. As viewers’ comments on the vine indicate, the audience laughs with the robbers and at the officers, making remarks like “stupid ass cops,” “lol cause it’s cold out,” and “I’m so gonna do that.” Thus, King Bach follows the tradition of Black comedic pioneers by manipulating stereotypical perceptions of Black men in order to remind his audience that negative racial ideologies and attitudes about Black Americans are socially constructed.

In Example 2, “What THEY Hear When WE Talk,” King Bach uses stereotype-based humor to address a different type of racial profiling: expecting someone to communicate in a particular way based on their race. Three of the same actors (King Bach, Christian Del Grosso, and Curtis Lepore) portray a scene that conveys the sociopolitical significance of the relationship between race and language and its effect on social perceptions and interaction. In his title, “What THEY hear when WE talk,” King Bach immediately sets up a difference in perspective. The audience can infer that “WE” refers to a group of people to which both King Bach and the target audience belong (e.g., men, Black men, Black people, Los Angeles residents) and “THEY” refers to people outside of this particular group. The capitalization of the pronouns makes clear the significance of this group distinction even before the groups themselves are made clear. When the actors are introduced in lines 2-3, the only obvious visible distinction between them is their race, so the most reasonable conclusion is that “WE” refers to Black people and “THEY” refers to non-Black people, specifically white people in this context. Given King Bach’s use of racial humor across his vines, viewers familiar with his comedy could also potentially interpret this meaning from the title.

King Bach first presents his character displaying behavior indexical of propriety, politeness, and approachability in mainstream society. He shakes hands with his interlocutors (as opposed to offering a high-five or giving dap) and greets them with an affectively neutral address term, using an extremely formal register of Standard English (line 2; Figure 10) (Lippi-Green 2012). King Bach could have approached the two men with “Hey, what’s up?” or addressed them as “you guys” instead of “you two fine gentlemen,” but he instead uses the

Example 2. What THEY hear when WE talk (https://vine.co/v/OVJPKOFJ2Me) Posted 3/16/2015			
Line number	Actor	Scene, gesture, expression	Speech
1	KB	<i>wearing casual clothing, standing in what appears to be a parking garage</i>	
2	KB	<i>extends his right hand and shakes hands twice, the other people remaining offscreen</i>	<slow, even pace> How are ^you two fine gentlemen doing this evening?
3	CD & CL	<i>CD and CL appear on screen, both in casual clothing CD: eyebrows furrowed, lips thinly pursed CL: eyebrows raised, mouth “scrunched” with lips folded inward</i>	I was wondering if you'd like to — </>
4	KB	<i>KB appears on screen again, indicating perspective change</i>	
5	KB	<i>Raised eyebrows, bulging eyes, mouth wide and teeth bared Slowly rocking left to right, turns chin slightly to left</i>	<rapid pace> ^Ay man,
6		<i>Whips head back to center, flaps elbows slightly at side</i>	I #shush,
7		<i>Slowly rocking left to right, tilts head right then center Raises elbows to chest level, flips hands upward from waist toward chin in front of torso then back down</i>	< slurred> I would ^knock yo fat ass </slurred>= [wə] ^[nɑ?] [jɔʊ] ['fæ:r æ]
8		<i>Lowers eyebrows, closes eyes Tilts head to left, contorts mouth to right</i>	=bruh.
9		<i>Winks right eye, mouth still contorted slightly to right Whips head to right, hands move slightly upward with palms facing torso</i>	I #came,
10		<i>Tilts head left to right</i>	I was like,
11	CD & CL	<i>Appear on screen while KB continues to speak</i>	
11	KB	<i>CD: eyebrows furrowed, mouth slightly open CL: eyebrows raised, eyes wide, mouth slightly open</i>	^#shit.
12		<i>CD: turns head to left, then back to center CL: eyes wide, looks left then back to center, closes mouth and purses lips outward</i>	You gon ^gimme yo num, [number]
13		<i>CD: looks to the right over shoulder CL: turns eyes downward, lowers chin</i>	bruh. </>

more formal terms. Despite the formality and propriety of King Bach’s embodied and linguistic behavior, his white interlocutors appear annoyed by his attempt at interaction with them — based on their pursed lips and expressive brows, it is an unwelcome and inappropriate advance (line 3; Figure 11).



Figure 10.
Line 2:

“How are you two fine gentlemen doing this evening?”



Figure 11.
Line 3:

White characters’ embodied responses

King Bach’s reappearance on screen (line 4) and the beginning of a new stretch of discourse (line 5) that appears unrelated to his truncated utterance in line 3 indicates a change in perspective. As the vine continues, it becomes clear that lines 2-3 portray objective reality, while what is portrayed in lines 5-13 is what “THEY” — the white people who looked so disgruntled by King Bach’s attempt at polite interaction — perceive.

From this new perspective, King Bach’s register is very informal (“Ay man”), portraying the widespread inaccurate perception that Black speech is always informal and primarily slang (Pullum 1999). (This stereotype is also conveyed by his use of the informal address term *bruh* in lines 8 and 13.) At the same time, Bach’s facial expressions change — eyes

wide, eyebrows raised, and teeth bared while he speaks — and he begins to exaggerate his body movement (Figure 12).



Figure 12.
Line 5: “Ay man”

His next utterance (line 6) is unclear, and when he restarts in line 7 his words are more intelligible, but it is clear that they are pronounced with exaggeratedly non-standard phonology. The final consonants are not pronounced in *would*, *knock*, or *fat ass*, and *your* is pronounced in the non-rhotic form *yo*, making the words sound slurred together. The non-rhotic *yo* suggests that this perceived speech pattern is not simply informal register but is some variation of African American Language, and this is confirmed by grammatical and phonological features in line 12. In the construction *You gon gimme yo num*, *gon* is a shortened form of *going to/gonna* that is most widely associated with AAL, and grammatically *you gon* is an instance of zero copula, in which an optional form of *to be* is not overtly expressed (Green 2002). In other words, in Standard English the phrase would be uttered as *you are / you're going to* where in King Bach's speech it is *you Ø gon*. Moreover, although it is not a feature of AAL as a variety, the extreme reduction of the word *number* to *num* is also significant. The random reduction of syllables and consonants is common in

racist representations of AAL as the “lazy speech” of people who simply choose not to pronounce words “correctly” (Ronkin & Karn 1999).

In addition to grammatical and phonological features that are, in fact, part of AAL, King Bach’s language includes lexical items that did not originate in AAL but have been ideologically mapped onto it as a result of negative perceptions of Black speakers. Specifically, the use of *fat ass* (line 6) and *shit* (line 10) reflect common perceptions of AAL as containing frequent or excessive use of profanity (Spears 1998). The imperative *you gon gimme yo num[ber]* (line 12) rather than a request also indexes aggression and rudeness; and beyond this verbal pushiness the character’s willingness to “knock [someone’s] fat ass” (line 7) suggests a propensity for physical violence. Thus, while the speech that King Bach’s character produces in the scene framed as the white interlocutors’ perspective is recognizable as AAL based on certain grammatical and phonological features, the content and style of the utterances are heavily shaped by negative linguistic and racial stereotypes. This misrepresentation of the Black character’s speech as a result of negative ideology makes it a mock version of AAL (Hill 1998; Ronkin & Karn 1999) – a distortion of reality at two levels since King Bach’s character uses Standard English and not AAL to begin with.

Overall, King Bach produces a series of utterances that do not appear to form a coherent speech sequence. It is unclear if *yo[ur]* in line 7 is directed at one or both of the two white men present or at the unknown interlocutor he refers to in his narrative in lines 10-13 (marked by the quotative *I was like* in line 10). There is also no indication of whether the two utterances are related or what was taking place in the narrated interaction besides King Bach threatening his interlocutor(s). At the same time that he is producing these incoherent utterances in Mock AAL, his gestures and facial expressions become increasingly

exaggerated: flapping his hands and arms up and down, winking, and contorting his mouth (Figures 13-15).



Figure 13.
Line 7: “I would”

Figure 14.
Line 7: “knock yo fat ass”

Figure 15.
Line 9: “I came”

Compared to the calm, measured demeanor and language seen in lines 2-3, King Bach here is transformed into a man who lacks the ability to control his own body or language for “proper” comportment. The two white men’s furrowed and raised eyebrows and sideways glances convey great confusion, making clear their perception of King Bach’s speech as utterly incomprehensible (Figure 16).



Figure 16.
Line 12

White characters’ confused facial expressions

In this contrastive performance of reality versus perception, King Bach is able to concisely portray several social stigmas that Black speakers face. By beginning the scene with his character speaking in Standard, highly formal English, he challenges the beliefs that all Black people are monodialectal AAL speakers who do not know Standard English and that Black speakers who are bidialectal do not know the “appropriate” contexts in which to use each variety. The drastic contrast between King Bach’s behavior in the first scene and the white men’s perceptions of him conveys the extent to which white people’s preconceived notions about Black people and Black speakers can influence their perceptions of reality.

While the potential for racial stereotypes to lead listeners to perceive accents that are not present has been well demonstrated by researchers (see Fought 2006 on “accent hallucination”), King Bach takes this phenomenon to a new level. Linguistically the white men “hallucinate” more than just accents and perceive an entirely different variety of English, and they also “hallucinate” embodied representations of stereotypes of Black people. This vine exemplifies the racialization of minoritized ethnoracial groups in the United States — how they are seen as dangerous people, and their cultural and linguistic differences from hegemonic white American culture and language are understood as problematic and disorderly (Urciuoli 1996). Even when people of color exhibit normative hegemonic cultural practices — as King Bach does at the beginning of the vine — their racial difference from whiteness creates the constant potential for racialization. For Black speakers, this means that no matter how formal or standard their speech is, it is still very likely that they will be perceived negatively. A well-spoken Black man is an exception rather than the rule in American racial ideology, and even the supposedly exceptional examples are not enough to overcome people’s racist expectations (Alim & Smitherman 2012).

Although this vine follows the Black stand-up comedy traditions of using humor to highlight the incongruities of dominant racial discourses in the U.S. — stylistically contrasting mainstream English and AAL (Rickford & Rickford 2000) and intentionally exaggerating salient social indexes (Rahman 2004) — it differs quite significantly from stand-up in the way that the Black character is portrayed. Rather than highlighting his characters’ strengths or making his character racially unmarked as Black stand-up comedians do (Rahman 2004), King Bach performs a minstrel-esque caricature of Black people — the “coon” — in order to make a point. The image of the coon has persisted for nearly a century through media representations of Black people as “the eye-popping piccaninnies, the slapstick entertainers, the spinners of tall tales, the ‘no account niggers,’ those unreliable, crazy, lazy, subhuman creatures, good for nothing more than eating watermelon, stealing chickens, shooting crap, or butchering the English language” (Bogle 2001:8). The representation of the coon’s speech as “butchered English” is clear in King Bach’s vine. Because Black stand-up comedy produced by and for the Black community emerged after decades of movement away from socially and ideologically contentious blackface minstrelsy (Lhamon 1998) — a style of performance often viewed as embodying a passive acceptance of white sociopolitical dominance (Chude-Sokei 2006) — reverting to a caricature like the coon is risky for a stand-up comedian to attempt. King Bach, however, uses Vine affordances such as the title, controlled camera angles, and multiple actors to make it obvious to his audience that the coon character’s portrayal is embedded within a critique of whites’ distorted perceptions of Black people as a result of racist stereotypes that are embedded in American cultural consciousness through television, film, and other media (Bucholtz & Lopez 2011). Thus, despite its differences both from example one and from classic Black

stand-up comedy, “What THEY Hear When WE Talk” still represents a form of racial comedy that forces King Bach’s audience to “wrestle with the social construction of [Black] bodies in particular contexts” (Taylor 2003:29) and in doing so brings attention to the numerous ways that racial discrimination occurs in the United States.

Discussion

The success of King Bach’s style of Vine racial comedy as a form of sociopolitical discourse is evidenced by its adoption by other Viners of color. For example, “Chinese Waiters Have It Rough” (<https://vine.co/v/eLTbbTXhzlF>), posted by Chinese Canadian Viner Esa Fungtastic, portrays the negative experience that non-native English speakers can have in English-dominant spaces. In the vine a white restaurant patron uses a mock Asian accent (Chun 2004) when placing his food order, but the waiter gets the last laugh and makes the white customer the butt of the joke by plotting to defecate in his soup. Rudy Mancuso, an American Latino Viner, has produced vines titled “Racist Glasses” (<https://vine.co/v/OXE0Azr5jre>; <https://vine.co/v/iO6aMvwaHr2>) and “Racist Elevator” (<https://vine.co/v/MLeqaI1J9UU>). In these variations of reality versus perception (similar to example two), each actor transforms from his nondescript everyday self into a racial stereotype: a Black weapon-toting gangster; a shirtless, sombrero-wearing Latino, a goat-owning Middle Easterner, and an Asian ninja. By labeling these images of people of color “racist,” Mancuso directs the audience’s laughter at the absurdity of the stereotypes themselves, simultaneously “diffus[ing] their power of humiliation” and criticizing people who perpetuate them (Carpio 2008:86).

King Bach’s status as the most-followed Viner and the style of performance that propelled him to that position are significant for many reasons. In addition to having the

social platform to produce a new genre of sociopolitical discourse, his use of social media and the stylistic features of Vine racial comedy as a genre challenge earlier conceptions of online media, Black Americans' technology use, and how their online practices intersect with the reality of white public space in the "offline" world. Early theories of online technology that were developed based on text-based platforms (e.g., discussion forums, listservs) claimed that disembodied identity formation would be the future of online communication (Nelson 2002), but the centrality of embodied action in vines shows how the affordance of audio-visual recording has drastically shifted predicted styles of online communication. The move away from textual communication, however, is not motivated solely by the introduction of new technological affordances; rather, the "indirect, nonverbal, and extralinguistic modes of communication" seen in King Bach's vines have been part of the Black communicative repertoire since the time of slavery, when it allowed meanings to be hidden in plain sight from those who were not intended recipients (Conquergood 2013:49). The specific medium of Vine may be new, but the style of communication that King Bach employs — i.e., the full repertoire of African American Language and embodied communication — is not, and this allows some aspects of his humor to function as a type of counterlanguage, understood only by Black viewers who have the cultural knowledge to interpret the messages that cannot or should not be said explicitly (Morgan 1993).

Conclusion

Vine racial comedy is the latest iteration of using humor to make discussions of socially contentious topics like race more palatable to mainstream audiences (cf. Perez 2013). Like the content of *The Daily Show*, Vine racial comedy "jams the uninterrupted stream of...dominant [racial] images through the proliferation of humorous dissident images...that

exploit leverage points” such as hypocrisy and factual inaccuracy of dominant images (Warner 2007:32). Despite the variation in actors, topics, scripts, and more, separate instances of Vine racial comedy are “nonetheless framed, repeated, and recognizable” as related cultural performances (Conquergood 2013:20) stemming from King Bach’s pioneering style of Vine comedy.

Compared to media such as television and film, humor on Vine is particularly conducive to addressing race-related topics because people of color use social media at disproportionately high rates compared to whites (Duggan 2015). The collaborative, grass-roots nature of vine production also makes Vine racial comedy distinct from other forms of humor, including the single (wo)man shows of stand-up comedy that have influenced King Bach’s style. Moreover, the co-constructed user-generated content on Vine, along with the immediate feedback through evaluative responses, creates a public space distinctly different from other social media platforms (e.g., Twitter) and from face-to-face interactions. Content cannot be immediately rephrased or redacted in response to interlocutors’ reactions, but it can be shaped over time by millions of viewers’ responses, and in collaborative vines multiple viewpoints converge in the process of constructing and performing the chosen storyline.

Research in the late 1990s and early 2000s on the “digital divide” was crucial to bringing attention to the generally unaddressed underlying factors that lead to disparities in access to and use of technology by different social groups across the United States (e.g., Foster 2000; Selwyn 2003). Despite good intentions, however, this research tended to frame race and technology as oppositional, and the deficit discourses that emerged from this research still circulate today (Nelson 2002). Vine racial comedy challenges this static understanding of the relationship between race and technology by centering race in the online content and being

created and performed predominantly by people of color. While the “divide” itself is the result of structural racism that has historically hindered Blacks’ and other communities’ access to technology, the increasing accessibility of technology such as inexpensive smartphones is changing the demographics of online participation in the United States.

Technology’s role in “reiterating tropes of Blackness in the cultural arena” (Catanese 2005: 701) is now being critiqued by Black people themselves, who are using social media to destabilize these tropes and insert their own narratives, very often through humor (Brock 2012; Calhoun 2015). Black social media users are subverting the idea that “the disempowerment resultant from racial oppression keeps people from imagining or, more importantly, enacting themselves as empowered subjects...[who possess] a full spectrum of social and cultural agency” (Batiste 2011: 3). King Bach’s presence on Vine as the most-followed Viner makes Black people, Black experiences, and Blackness hypervisible not only to a dominantly white American public that has resisted non-white points of view in both online and offline spaces for decades, but also to a global audience with members who may not have exposure to Black culture and experience except through online media.

Unlike other social media platforms that have racially segregated sub-communities (e.g., Black Twitter, Black Tumblr), Vine is neither a racially segregated online space nor a non-white space. Crucial to the success of Vine racial comedy is the fact that Vine is also not white public space in which whiteness and practices indexical of whiteness, such as the use of Standard English, are privileged (Hill 1998; Page & Thomas 1994). The titles of the vines direct viewers to understand them from the subjectivity of the Black characters, creating instead an online Black public space, particularly in vines with all-Black casts (cf. Black

Public Sphere Collective 1995). As Adam Banks describes in *Race, Rhetoric, and Technology: Searching for Higher Ground* (2006:8):

African Americans can make cyberspace an “underground” that counters the surveillance, censorship, and suppression that always seem to accompany Black people speaking, writing, and designing in more public spaces — spaces that often seem to say that whatever oral traditions one might bring to the classroom, workplace, or cyberspace...English is, and will be, White by definition.

In King Bach’s collaborations with white Viners — and in multiracial collaborations across comedy vines more generally — his voice and perspective are not marginalized by those of the white Viners. Rather, the white Viners participate as “supporting actors,” often performing stereotypes of white Americans in order to critique whiteness and white privilege (deMello 2000) and challenge the perception of whiteness as an unmarked norm (Frankenberg 2001). Thus, rather than fostering racial tensions as proponents of colorblind ideology posit, King Bach’s focus on race via Vine racial comedy is a way of discussing race that fosters cross-racial cooperation and creates a space for examples of critical whiteness. This potential “to induce self-knowledge, self-awareness, [and] plural reflexivity” (Conquergood 2013: 19) on the part of both actors and viewers is what makes Vine racial comedy both political cultural performance and a sociopolitical genre of discourse.

Though it may make white audiences and sometimes even other people of color uncomfortable with its use of stereotypes, King Bach’s Vine racial comedy is still skillful social critique, and at a broader level it enables audiences “to get at the contours of political significance in black art, seeing its processes as personal, communal, and something other than and in addition to activism” (Batiste 2011: xvii). King Bach is continuing the traditions of Black humor while using the affordances of Vine to change what that humor can look like. Vine racial comedy utilizes performance to give voice to ongoing racial issues and creates

an easily accessible cultural forum for initiating dialogue about race between people of different ethnoracial backgrounds, something that is increasingly needed in the U.S.'s constantly shifting racial landscape.

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