

Black Jeopardy Hella Loves Wakanda: Celebrating and Reframing Frequencies and Voices from the Black Fantastic Cultural Imagination

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In order to understand the context of this essay, we offer two clips that emphasize different imaginations and visions of Black life using humor as a rhetorical tool for difference and reconciliation among the Black Diaspora and beyond.

Saturday Night Live, Black Jeopardy Apr 7, 2018 with Chad Bosman (as King T'Challa, Black Panther)

Saturday Night Live, Black Jeopardy May 15, 2016 with Drake (as Black Canadian)

'Black Jeopardy' has been a recurring sketch type on Saturday Night Live (SNL) since 2014. It has been performed five times with a similar formula. The sketch type involves a game show called 'Black Jeopardy'. The host and two of the contestants are firmly situated in a particular black American culture. These three characters are the cultural insiders. They are the people that the show –but not necessarily the sketch– was intended for. They can communicate in a short hand, they agree on the categories and the answers, they pick up on the same cues, and they support each other. The interesting part comes from the 3rd contestant, the outsider. The outsiders have been: a white professor of African American studies, a white woman who dated a black guy and 'doesn't see color', a black Canadian, a white Trump supporter, and T'Challa King of Wakanda. Through its dialogue with these characters, particularly in the shows with the Black Canadian, played by the celebrity Rapper Drake, and with T'Challa King of Wakanda, played by Chadwick Boseman, we see two different varieties of Black imagination reflecting past trauma, present hustle and glimpses of reconciling liberation. Tracing this imagination requires a rhetorical toolkit composed of two concepts: Richard Iton's the Black Fantastic and Reverend Collin's Astro-blackness.

For Iton, tracing the Black Fantastic identifies the: "Minor-key sensibilities generated from the experiences of the underground..." and on another level tracing the Black Fantastic means to recover past counter futures, sprouting them into the present while reading their *radically hopeful possibilities* into a future *augmented with progressive values infused with more Black soul*.

In the dialogue with the Black Canadian, we see more expressions of the Black Diaspora than normally portrayed in mainstream media although the Black Canadian is definitely “othered” and ostracized for his deviation from the standard satiric media depictions of working-class Black Americans offered in the skit. In the parallel circumstances on the show, T’Challa though just as out of sync with his responses, the host embraces T’Challa’s “otherness” as endearing and as a signal of his uncolonized African nation and therefore exalted status as the King of Wakanda.

The varieties of these cultural imaginations express themselves through marked cultural differences. One of the more interesting things about the series of Black Jeopardy sketches on SNL is the relationship between the cultural insiders and the cultural outsider. In one sketch, a white professor of African American studies tries to reframe the discussion into areas where he has expertise and ends up demonstrating areas where he is culturally uninformed, offering commentary on the relationships between academics and black culture. In another Black Jeopardy episode, a white woman who dated a black guy and ‘doesn’t see color’ approaches the whole thing with tolerance and a little familiarity but no cultural understanding. In another contrasting sketch, a white Trump supporter portrayed by the actor Tom Hanks shows surprising similarities between the insiders and the outsiders but reminds the audience of certain key differences. In the sketch with Drake that we will analyze, a black Canadian played by the rapper Drake, who is both Jewish and Black, offers a commentary on the multitude of black cultures and how they treat each other:

[Host] What up? what up? what up? I’m your host, Darnell Hayes. Our contestants today are...Amir.

[Amir] what up, bro bro.

[Host] Keely.

[Keely] Hi.

[Host] And Jared.

[Jared] Yeah, it’s actually really good to be here dog. I couldn’t take the TCC but I made it over anyways. So I’m excited dog.

[Host] What’s going on with your accent there, Jared?

[Jared] I’m Canadian, from Toronto. I’m ready to, I came to play. So let’s do this, all right?

[Host] Wait, you are a Black Canadian?

[Jared] Obviously dawg, I mean, like yo, there’s thousands of us. Sure you met a few of us before.

[Host] No. Never met one.

--(Saturday Night Live, Black Jeopardy, May 15, 2016).

Drake as Jared and as a Black Canadian in the sketch is immediately othered as a Black outsider within the Black Diaspora. Ironically, the Canada black community has embraced Afrofuturism with as much and arguably with even speedier fervor than in the United States. The Black Speculative Arts Movement, an annual series of conference festivals celebrating the Black imagination has developed a strong foothold in Canada (Indongo: Sep 23, 2017). The character Jared on Black Jeopardy is repeatedly challenged in terms of his black identity:

[Jared] Stay with ‘bruh’ for \$400.

[Host] ‘Bruh’. He has been playing for a while now but still putting up big numbers. Jared.

[Jared] This one is easy, dawg. Who’s my man: Jamir Jagr.

[Host] Say what now?

[Jared] Come on, dawg. He’s a hockey player. The man won the Art Ross Trophy four years in a row.

[Host] I know you are speaking English. but it ain’t my English. the actual answer was, Dirk Na-bisquit (Dirk Nowitzki).

[Jared] Come on, dawg, black people live all over the world, G. You can’t just put us in one category.

[Host] Maybe, so, Jared. I will let you go ahead and tell that to our American police.

--(Saturday Night Live, Black Jeopardy, May 15, 2016).

Despite this persistent challenge to what the host upholds as Jared’s questionable blackness, the host and Jared finally arrive at a core part of their identity seeking to highlight and reflect different visions of blackness among its insiders and outsiders:

[Host] Yeah. The board is still yours.

[Jared] All right. Let’s go to ‘oh snap’ for 8.

[Host] All right. oh, snap. His new album just dropped and it’s fire.

[Jared] Who is, Kardinal Offishall.

[Host] Excuse me.

[Jared] Come on, a rapper, nominated for a Juno award G.

[Host] It’s like you landed here on earth from a space ship. Look, no good rap comes from Canada. Okay.

[Jared] Dawg, what about Drake?

[Host] Who are these people you keep mentioning? Jared, I think Canada has messed with your blackness.

[Jared] Yo, why do I have to be your definition of black, huh? You’re judging me before you know me. It is making me so angry inside, dog!

[Host] You just said the secret black phrase of the day, Jared. You win the game!

--(Saturday Night Live, Black Jeopardy, May 15, 2016).

The daily anger of living into someone else’s imagination of what being black means or translates into “why do I have to be your definition of Black?” is still a continual struggle. This

repeated trope presents a continual challenge to enlighten those within and outside of the Black Diaspora of the multiplicity of expressing African heritage especially after that heritage was intentionally denied by colonial oppressors. Afrofuturism offers a lens to reframe the Black Diasporic past as a science fiction horror story of a people dispersed that denied them their use of their unique superpowers of language, ritual and song. They had to reconstitute and mask their superpowers and translate them into new forms and imagery, through the spirituals and adaptation of Christianity into new songs imagining an uncolonized world in the future. What the Black diasporic experience reveals is the perennial superpower to hold simultaneous truths and a range of juxtaposed dimensions of being. The fictional super metal of vibranium that helps power Wakanda is the vibranium of spirituals that currently translate into the varieties of ubiquitous global black musical forms including humor today from rap to house music to to humorous reflections on the Black experience offered in Black Jeopardy.

So, what is shown when the King of Wakanda, King T'Challa of the *Black Panther* film is the outsider on Black Jeopardy SNL sketch series? *Black Panther* is a 2018 film that has been a success financially, critically, and culturally. The film is produced in the context of the greater Marvel cinematic universe which includes over 20 films and over 10 television series. *Black Panther* is noteworthy in this context due to its success and because it is written by, directed by, and stars black artists. It would be a mistake to not see its success and cultural associations as connected. Part of this connection is Afrofuturism, a field that combines science fiction and fantasy to reexamine how the future is currently imagined, and to reconstruct futures thinking with a deeper insight into the black experience, especially as slavery forced our African ancestors to confront an alien world surrounded by oppressive colonial technologies.

The term 'Afrofuturism' is usually traced to 1993, though the concept that it represents—a black conception of the future—goes back much further than that. However, because Black Panther has been so successful, because it is a product of black artists, and because it tells the story of Wakanda—a never colonized technologically advanced African nation—it has been repeatedly credited as bringing Afrofuturism into the mainstream. There have been many takes on Afrofuturism and the relationship between it and Black Panther, the emphasis we are concerned about here is a cultural one. The film often contrasts the culture of the real world, specifically the city of Oakland, California with the culture of the fictional nation of Wakanda. The response to the nation of Wakanda has been exceptional. Shouts of “Wakanda Forever” have become a regular thing have become more of a common greeting or signal of solidarity among its fans and political supporters. (Brown, 2019). “Since the film’s release, the phrase ‘Wakanda forever’ from “Black Panther” has taken over social media. Star Winston Duke, who plays M'Baku, told *Variety*, “It’s taken on a life of its own” (Variety Interview, 2018). Oakland artists and former Black Panther party leaders have dubbed Oakland ‘Okanda’ in solidarity as well.

Immediately after the introduction of T'Challa the host comments that “this might be the blackest Black Jeopardy yet.” If this claim is in comparison to the other sketches, then it identifies T'Challa as likely blacker than the other outsiders. If this claim is about the show in comparison to its implied fictional run of greater than five episodes, then it identifies T'Challa as likely blacker than the insiders. In either case there is a deviation from the traditional formula here. When T'Challa answers his first question, he gives a different answer than the insiders, but rather than being criticized for his wrong answer he is praised, “That’s really nice. It’s wrong, but it’s really nice.” During the next question T'Challa confesses he does not know the answer, he is again treated as different but still supported and told, “That’s all right, you’ll get there.”

The next question he tries to answer gets him the following reply, “Okay. Well the answer we was looking for was ‘out my damn house’, but you know what? I’m going to give it to you T'Challa.” T'Challa continues his streak of answers that are treated as different but not wrong. This is a contrast since the black Canadian was treated as wrong since his answers were different.

When T'Challa answers his next question and asks, "Is this correct?" he is told by the host, "I mean, it should be. But, uh, I'm thinking you haven't spent much time in America." Again, T'Challa's answer is different, it is clearly the answer of an outsider, but it is not treated as wrong.

T'Challa's final answer is the one he gets right, in fact as he adds details to his answer it is confirmed around 10 times. While T'Challa is not an insider, he can think like one, just as the responses to his earlier answers demonstrated that the Black Jeopardy insiders could think like him. In this case the insider/outsider division fails to capture what is going on here. The sketch offers a careful balance between right and wrong, same and different, insider and outsider. T'Challa may be a cultural outsider but he is not so different, he is on the same side as the insiders. The Trump supporter gives the same answers but is not on the same side. T'Challa is not judged based on the similarity of his answers, something deeper is going on. The groups, specifically the cultural groups, that this sketch relies on are more complicated than just insider and outsider.

Cultural Kinds

We divide things, including dividing people into groups. I might divide people who have been to a cookout from those who have not, or those who put raisins in potato salad from those who do not. We use these groups to make generalizations and inferences. Different groupings support different inferences or conclusions based on evidence.

A cultural kind is used to make inferences based on a perceived cultural grouping that supports those inferences and its implications in popular culture and psychology are frequently discussed (Guthrie, 2015; Hall, 2006; Harris, Nakata, & Carlson, 2013; Hirschfeld, 1998). Some might reject the idea of cultural kinds entirely, like the white woman in the SNL Black Jeopardy skit who dated a black guy and doesn't see color. However the whole idea of the Black Jeopardy sketches is establishing various cultural kinds and contrasting them based on their cultural inferences about similarities and differences. The sketch introduces the cultural kind of Black stereotypes by parodying them while simultaneously paying homage to the historic character of black striving and imagination associated with Black Jeopardy and makes jokes about that cultural kind. The ingenuity of managing with less is highlighted right at the opening of the skit as it celebrates its 'hustling' in doling out prize money:

[Host] Yeah, All Right, What up What up.

Welcome to Black Jeopardy. The only Jeopardy where our prize money is paid in installments. Alright, I'm your host, Darnell Hayes.

-- (Saturday Night Live, Black Jeopardy, Apr 7, 2018).

The sketch introduces an outsider cultural kind and makes jokes about it:

[Shanice]-Let's stick with "Fid'Na" for four hundred.

[Host] All Right. This is the reason your cable bill is in your grandmama's name. Oh, T'Challa.

[T'Challa] -What is "to honor her as the foundation of family".

[Host] Hmmm. That's real nice. It's wrong. But's it's really nice. Anybody else? The reason your cable bill is in your grandmama's name. Shanice.

[Shanice] -What is "'Cause I'm fid'na to get a car and I don't need all that on my credit."

[Host] I feel you. That's right. I feel you. Yeah, your grandmama ain't gonna need all that good credit too much longer. [chuckles]

-- (Saturday Night Live, Black Jeopardy, Apr 7, 2018).

Finally the sketch makes some jokes about the interactions between the cultural kinds of black embodied culture in the Black diaphora and the imagined vision of Wakanda. There is always an underlying comment about the relationship between these cultures:

[T-Challa] I am ready. Let's go to "White people". For \$400.

[Host] - Okay, let's try it. "Your friend Karen brings *her* potato salad to *your* cookout.» Uh-oh, T'Challa.

[T-Challa] - I think I'm getting the hang of this. But, before I answer, a few questions. This woman, Karen, she is Caucasian, eh?

[Host] Yes.

[T-Challa] - And she has her own recipe for potato salad, yes?

[Host] - Yep. Yep.

[T-Challa] -Ah, I understand. It is noble that she would volunteer to cook for everyone. And, although I have never had potato salad...

[Host] - Yeah, of course.

[T-Challa] - I sense that this White woman does not season her food.

[Host] - That's right.

[T-Challa] - And if she does, it is only with a tiny bit of salt....

[Host] - That's exactly right.

[T-Challa] - And no paprika...

[Host] - No paprika. No.

[T-Challa] -And she will probably add something unnecessary like 'raisins'.

[Host] - I know, right.

[T-Challa] - So, so, something tells me that I should say....

[Host] Say it!

[T-Challa] - -Aw, hell, na Karen. Keep your bland ass potato salad to yourself.

[Host] Yes!! Yes!!

You got it T'Challa.

[T'Challa] - In your face!

-- (Saturday Night Live, Black Jeopardy, Apr 7, 2018).

This Black Panther Black Jeopardy Sketch is different from the others because the persistent underlying message is one of connection. Despite the fact that the two groups are different, give different answers, speak differently, and have different experiences, they seem to have the same underlying values and can understand where the other group is coming from in a rich manner. This could be described in a number of ways, they could be related cultural kinds, they could be cultural sub kinds of the same super kind, they could be the same cultural kinds with different experiences, or some other organization of cultural kinds. The important thing is that the sketch allows disagreement without disconnection. There are two different but connected voices.

Multiple Voices

Some have suggested that Afrofuturism is a big deal because black voices are underrepresented in science fiction and it provides one. We wish to go further and suggest that black voices are usually treated as singular and Afrofuturism provides a second voice in multiple frequencies. This is what we see as the impact of the movie Black Panther and what we see the Black Panther Black Jeopardy Sketch as drawing attention to.

The standard perception of black culture is a narrow one. Consider the variety of associations with white culture as contrasted with black culture. Consider the variety of foods associated with white culture and the associated sub cultures. Contrast this with the cultural perceptions about food and black culture. The perception of white culture admits of greater subcultures with great variety. The perception of black culture is painfully narrow. This applies generally to black culture and perhaps nothing demonstrates it better than the common error of treating Africa as a country. This narrow perception reduces black culture to a single voice.

Consider the harm of being reduced to a single voice. If a culture has a single voice then that voice can be freely applied to all of its members. A single voice can be determined by any member of the culture because the culture has only one voice. If a culture has only a single voice then it seems very easy to understand, since you only need to be aware of that single voice. If a culture has one voice then any deviations from that voice must be treated as evidence of internal conflict because that is the only way to understand a single voice that disagrees with itself. In short, black culture has been reduced to a single voice and it is not a single voice.

One of the main advantages of Afrofuturism is that it provides an alternative *frequency* (Ellison, 2016) through which the exploration of nuance and perspective in the idea of cultural kinship and connection can be freed from the historical constraints of a narrative disconnect that blurs unity and cohesion within black culture; opening the possibility for mutual exploration and engagement of the variety of black experiences that emphasize mutual interconnection while defying disunity.

In his novel *Invisible Man* (2016), Ellison's narrator proclaims: "Now I have one radio-phonograph; I plan to have five. There is a certain acoustical deadness in my hole, and when I have music I want to *feel* its vibration, not only with my ear but with my whole body. I'd like to hear five recordings of Louis Armstrong playing and singing 'What Did I Do to be so Black and Blue'—all at the same time" (7-8). When the Wakandans meet the Californians that is a powerful moment in the film. When T'Challa bonds with the Black Jeopardy insiders that is a powerful moment in the sketch. Both of these moments connect multiple black voices and expand the Black Fantastic and potential Black speculative futures rising above a colonial mentality to reach Astro-Blackness.

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