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# ‘Black Lives Bladder,’ other dumb things Eric Andre said at the RNC, and why they bladder, I mean matter

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‘Black Lives Bladder,’

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When comedian Eric Andre went to the Republican National Convention (RNC), he attended Alex Jones’ speech. He stuck his microphone on the end of a long stick, and pushed through the crowd, until finally, Alex Jones said, “Let’s bring the Daily Show guy up here.”

“They keep attacking me and I just wanna sign up for the open mike,” said Eric.

“I know, the democrats are never violent, like the Black Lives Matter movement and attacking the Trump people,” Alex replied.

To which Eric said, “I’m not a democrat either, I’m a nihilist” (“Eric at the RNC”).

This interaction, and Eric’s other various tactics, allow him to use comedy and nihilism to break through the trenched discursive battle between left and right in the United States, a battle that has been waging and generally stagnated for years, with only a black stormtrooper and president to show for it. Footage of Eric at the convention demonstrates gender parody, vulgarity, and absurdism that represent an incisive turn from political satire of the past, making Eric’s specific brand of nihilistic political satire acutely equipped to destabilize the nonsensical banter between “left” and “right” that has become modern politics.

Political talk programming has roots in journalism, not comedy, and early commentators were supposed to be political experts aiming to educate the public on all things political (Jones 44). However, as competition over airtime worsened, so did the quality of televised political discussion. Quickly, these journalists proved to be expert talkers rather than expert thinkers, and we found ourselves in what Jones dubs a punditocracy: “a nation where the mediation of opinion

by important and highly visible media figures is paramount” (45). Pundit talk shows, represented by programming on Fox News, MSNBC, CNN, and CNBC, have become largely reactionary; political discourse now includes name-calling, physical threats, interruptions, and put downs (Jones 45-46). It is in this media landscape that Alex Jones has found a home, and it is in this media landscape that Eric Andre’s comedy is so relevant.

The audience for this ‘punditocracy’ is well situated to consume Eric’s nihilistic humour. In *The Cultural Set up of Comedy*, Julie Webber describes the post-9/11 American cultural consciousness:

“Contrary to all the predictions of the anti-irony crowd who longed for seriousness in American cultural life prior to 9/11, the media did not ‘return’ to a sober, reflective mode of information transmission, politicians did not earnestly make policy designed to improve the lives of their constituents (by and large), and Americans did not demand intelligent, thought-provoking news and cultural programming. Instead, most Americans got exactly what they wanted: the Michael Bay version of America on a daily loop on Fox news and other competing networks” (3).

I quote Webber in length here because the picture she paints of American politics portrayed through media contextualizes the post structural irony of *The Eric Andre Show*. Reagan brought the ‘common sense’ discourse of politics into the public consciousness, and since then, this has been the only way to appeal to the majority of citizens; a populist anti-politics movement appeals to “a public... increasingly finding the political arena repugnant” (Jones 49). Trump has taken advantage of this public, using vulgarity to state political truths in layman’s terms, while writing policy that is no more extreme than other Republicans. While others might say, “national security is a fundamental priority,” Trump says, “ban all Muslims” (A’Lee Frost). The ‘common sense’ political rhetoric has carried us from Reagan through to Trump, and any political opposition will have to match the vulgarity that Trump and his pundits are exhibiting.

It is tough, though, to describe Eric Andre as political opposition to Trump when he so clearly states that he is not with either the Democrats or the Republicans, that he is a nihilist. In an interview with *Fader* in which he is wearing a shirt that reads, “Atheist,” Eric explains, “I throw up my hands at politics. I think they’re all sociopathic murderers that are controlled by the oligarchy of war profiteers that run the fucking world” (Darville). I mention the shirt because Eric has created a following based on his religious beliefs (or lack thereof), and his show often revolves around themes of nihilism and atheism. Nihilism “is the philosophy or state of life characterized by a lack of meaning or purpose,” and in the realm of politics nihilism undermines claims to dignity of human persons and democracy as an idyllic form of government (Hibbs ix). This philosophy appeals to the post-9/11 youth described by Webber, in that Generations following X are beginning to come of age as all of the political and social supports of the previous generation’s middle class family ethos are crumbling, political action is seen as the result of self-interest, and college graduates are living in their parents’ homes with an average student debt of \$25,000. Webber dubs these “dark times” (129). An even stronger appeal to nihilism could be made by the racialized youth in this demographic who, in addition to all of the above issues, can see that democratic claims to human dignity are failing over representationally for racialized people.

In comedy, nihilism and postmodern irony go hand in hand. Postmodern irony embraces lack of meaning, blurred lines between reality and appearance, and general incoherence or absurdity (Colletta 856). Eric Andre’s embrace of postmodern irony serves him and his audience well, revealing the absurdity of American politics through satire and mimicry. Beginning after Eric Andre finally establishes to Alex Jones that he is not Trevor Noah from *The Daily Show*, their conversation is as follows:

Alex Jones: “You seem like you’re upset.”

Eric Andre: “I want you to have sex with my wife.”

Alex Jones [to the audience]: “He’s trying to be shocking.”

Eric Andre: “No, not at all, really, here’s my hotel key, I want you to have sex with my wife.”

Eric is then escorted off the stage and pushed around, repeatedly saying, “I’m on your side” (“Eric at the RNC”).

Immediately, this exchange is appealing because it is funny, and, as Alex Jones says, shocking.

However, there are underlying political reasons why Eric’s plea to be cuckolded is actually extremely clever and politically charged.

Eric Andre describes the division within conservative politics in the states as “conservatives and... neo-cons, and they’re not actually the same thing. Neo-cons dupe uneducated conservatives into thinking that they’re on their side, and they sucker uneducated people into voting against their own self-interest” (Darville). Lately, neo-conservatives have solidified division within conservatism on Twitter by coining the term “cuckservative” to describe those conservatives who disagree with Trump’s policy specifically and notions of white nationalism generally (Weigel). Put concisely, “the term has emerged out of the white supremacist movement as a term of abuse for white conservatives deemed race traitors unwilling to forthrightly defend the interests of white America” (Heer). A “cuck” is a slur deriving from a genre of porn in which a man, often white, watches his wife have sex with another man, often black (Heer). So, as the title of Heer’s article “Conservatives are Holding a Conversation About Race” suggests, Trump supporters and neo-cons are talking about race, and it is vulgar, but it still lacks the very common sense that their beloved everyman narrative is built on, relying instead on the historically entrenched trope of the black man as sexual aggressor.

Racial tropes reify race by metonymically grouping people using observable, phenotypic traits (Gilbert and Rossing 95). Race becomes a topic that provides taken-for-granted discursive

patterns to which people turn in order to make sense of culture and history. Political conservatives often play on race, relying on racial tropes to trivialize racial discourse or provoke white voters (Gilbert and Rossing 96). Specifically, Alex Jones takes advantage of the political distrust and anti-politics movements to racially “divide American politics without evidence, making it nearly impossible for academics, journalists, and researchers to bridge the divide because of the systematic distrust” (Higdon 7). Journalists describe exhaustion from talking with Alex, as he spits out sentences as if reporting crimes to the police yet relies on unverified Internet sources for his claims (Higdon 3). He often resorts to the name-calling, physical threats, interruptions, and put downs of the punditocracy, while self-admittedly not rooting his claims in factual evidence (Higdon 5). Alex Jones argues so much in a space of unreality and non-truth that it is unsurprising that he has adopted cuckservative and the accompanying myth of the black male sexual aggressor.

Alex Jones has situated himself so that he cannot be refuted using facts, rationality, or academic language. Eric Andre’s parody and vulgarity represent what Jamie Warner calls “political culture jamming:” a tactic to beat Alex Jones at his own game. In a disinformation war, battles are fought with absurdity. Warner’s political culture jamming follows Alex Jones’ lead in abandoning facts, rationality, and academic language, and instead turns the political technique of trope and emotion back on itself through “rhetorical sabotage” (19). By adopting the trope of the cuck, Eric Andre demonstrates the rhetorical absurdity of cuckservitism. Culture jamming aims to jolt the viewer into reexamining the dominant message by taking a “leverage point,” or logical contradiction in the dominant messaging, and presenting incongruous imagery (Warner 22). As a racialized man clearly demonstrating sexual passivism and taking on the role of the white man in the cuck trope, Eric is disrupting the dominant message.

A critical viewer might point out that this could be coincidental. Eric Andre is a big fan of poop jokes and runs around screaming “legalize ranch;” he hardly presents himself as a political semiotics and linguistics expert. However, I would point to other examples of Eric’s work that also present critical parody, as well as his interview responses as proof that he knows exactly what he is doing. From the same footage of Eric at the RNC comes another excellent example of critical parody: “Freedom Girls.”

The Freedom Girls bit involves Eric and another man dressed in American flag dresses with bows in their hair. Their dresses show a striking resemblance to the ones worn by the young girls that Trump had singing “the Donald Trump song” at his campaign rallies. Eric and the other man (the Freedom Girls) run around the RNC saying, “not everyone likes freedom as much as we do,” and “freedom ain’t not free” (“RNC: Freedom Girls”). The gender parody presented here demonstrates both the absurdity of Trump rallies’ rhetorical ploy on emotion (having young girls sing about him while literally representing freedom by wearing the flag) and the absurdity of tropical black male aggressors. In his Fader interview, Eric says, “what both white people and black people, what their expectations of the black community are, we try to hopefully shatter that or switch things up. It’s a celebration of the evolving black experience in America” (Darville). Eric Andre may seem clinically insane on his TV show, but it is deliberate insanity that disrupts an already nonsensical dominant political narrative.

From cuck to fuck, vulgarity is key in all of Eric Andre’s work, and this only contributes further to his deliberate attempts to turn political discourse in on itself and disrupt racial tropes. In a discussion on libelles (illegal slander pamphlets distributed leading up to the French Revolution), Amber A’lee Frost mentions that vulgarity is key to class consciousness. She describes how political japey has always been a rhetorical weapon of the politically excluded,

and even cites a script libelle for a play in which King Louis XVI is impotent and cuckolded by his brother. These themes, along with fragile masculinity, are not new, and leftist rejection of vulgarity only plays into the right's tropic image of left elitism. A'lee Frost continues:

“Reclaiming vulgarity from the Trumps of the world is imperative because if we do not embrace the profane now and again, we will find ourselves handicapped by our own civility. Vulgarity is the language of the people, and so it should be among the grammars of the left, just as it has been historically, to wield righteously against the corrupt and the powerful. We cannot cede vulgarity to the vulgarians; collegial intellectuals will always be niche, but class war need not be.”

Although Eric Andre is resistant to picking a political “side,” he is speaking the language of the people. His vulgarity is a necessary weapon against the vulgarity of politicians who arguably use dirtier words: not just cuck, but genocide, whether that be the neo-con's blatant exclamation or the democrat's quiet extermination.

I think at this point there is value in jumping back to Alex Jones' misidentification of Eric Andre as Trevor Noah from *The Daily Show*. There is something painfully telling and humorous about Alex Jones' mistake: he has mentally ‘othered’ racialized people to the point where he can no longer tell them apart. It is not just the racial misidentification that interests me, also the TV show misidentification. I wonder if Alex Jones had known that it was *The Eric Andre Show* he was inviting on stage, and not *The Daily Show*, would he have done it?

*The Daily Show* is also political satire, and also uses political culture jamming to turn mainstream political discourse in on itself. It began as a resistant text, often making viewers and guests on the show uncomfortable, yet as of 2005 *TDS* was garnering approximately 1.3 million viewers a night, and winning Peabody Awards (Warner 23). It was so successful that also in 2005, spinoff show *The Colbert Report* made its debut, referred to by Webber as *The Daily Show*'s “second act” (140). In this essay I will not elaborate on the resistant nature of these shows because it has already been written about extensively (Colletta, Gilbert and Rossing,



Hibbs, Jones, Warner, and Webber). However, it is notable that *TDS* has been often mistaken for a real news show; one of the Peabody Awards mentioned earlier was the award for “Outstanding Achievement in News and Information” (Warner 24). In a punditocracy, all opinions are valid, even if they are coming from a TV show that makes no secret its fabricated nature.

Here lies the value for Alex Jones. *TDS* is a fake news show, but it still plays by the rules of the game – it keeps intact the structure of a news segment so seamlessly that it can be mistaken for real news and even win an award meant for real news. Alex Jones knows how to deal with people who play by the rules, he exhausts them with baseless arguments, yelling, and interruptions, giving the appearance of triumph when his opponents cannot get their rational arguments across. *The Eric Andre Show* makes no attempt to follow conventions. The show begins with the destruction of the set to present no illusions as to the fact that what follows will be nonsensical. Since *TDS* and *TCR* have become strikingly similar in rhetorical strategy to “legitimate” news shows like *The O’Reilly Factor* (Colletta 861) (and Alex Jones’ *InfoWars*), it could be argued that *The Eric Andre Show* is a sort of “third act” for the previous satires, pulling farther and farther from reality in order to be able to still make light of decidedly “dark times.”

The potential for this type of comedy remains to be seen. As of now, Eric has been able to disrupt the coded racial dialogue between neo-cons and movement conservatives, and the reaction of the RNC to his comedy demonstrates his power. At the end of the Freedom Girls bit, the cameras show Eric and his comrade being squished into an elevator with at least seven uniformed police officers (“RNC: Freedom Girls”). Another bit Eric filmed outside the convention consisted of Eric asking people’s thoughts on the 2<sup>nd</sup> Amendment, and then having a mascot character jump in and start singing before they could speak (“RNC: Peppercorn Bing Bong”). The video ends with the camera panning to a group of uniformed officers with their

hands on their guns staring at Eric and his mascot friend (basically a children's character). Eric was also arrested and spent a night in prison for a sketch he filmed in season one and has had ideas shut down by the network for legal reasons (Darville). The French libelles were also heavily policed. Little drawings of Marie Antoinette revealing her pussy would be confiscated and burnt, and the possession of libelles resulted in imprisonment (A'Lee Frost). A'Lee Frost asks us to consider: "if nasty little libelles weren't that much of a threat to power, why suppress them and punish possession with imprisonment as you would revolutionary philosophy?" The constant police surveillance of Eric Andre may be contributed to his racialization, but I would argue he is also being strictly policed because of the power that comes with his resistant, vulgar satire, and the accompanying opportunity to disrupt dominant discussions of politics and racialization.

Despite Eric Andre's nihilism, his satire remains inherently hopeful. Colletta claims that satire in and of itself is hopeful; "it suggests progress and the betterment of society, and it suggests that the arts can light the path of progress" (860). Some critics of political satire have suggested that it makes its viewers cynical, but in "dark times" and with political stagnation between an increasingly divided left and right, viewers are already cynical. Webber points out that political satire can make educated youth feel necessarily superior (115); satire not only has the ability to de-stagnate discussion, but also to animate youth into a sense of superiority that could lead to political action. This sentiment is echoed by Eric Andre: "This is a new day, a new generation. It's the 21st century. We should look towards the future. I want to prove to America that black people are the most diverse, creative group of people and we can express any way we want" (Darville). Why would Eric want to change America's historically simplistic, tropic image

of black people if he truly believed that life is meaningless? Eric Andre may practice nihilism in that absurdism makes great comedy, but it is a hopeful nihilism, still with an eye for the future.

In his appearance at the RNC, Eric Andre demonstrates how post structural irony and vulgarity can act as destabilizers for stagnant political discourse. *The Eric Andre Show*, in all of its destructive, absurd, seemingly meaningless glory, can act as a motivator for youth experiencing “dark times” and embracing nihilism. In Darville’s *Fader* interview, Eric Andre concludes better than I ever could: “Holy shit, that sounded pretentious and high horse-y as fuck. Sorry! Can you fucking put a fart sound in?”

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