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Race in the age of tribeless youth culture: Rick Famuyiwa's *Dope* (2015) and recent shifts in African-American pop culture

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ABSTRACT

This article posits Rick Famuyiwa's 2015 film *Dope* as a site of convergence for broader shifts in recent African-American pop culture against the backdrop of post-racial ideology. Firstly, the film demonstrates how, while youth culture is now largely "tribeless," the sonic boundaries between subcultures having collapsed, the corresponding racial boundaries nevertheless persist. Having established this, it is then argued that the film's social media infused narrative, as well as its production and marketing, resonates with the broader new media strategies taken by African-American artists to create a space of power within still white-dominated media industries. Particular attention will be given to the way in which the artist-owned streaming site Tidal has subverted the politics of neoliberal colorblindness through the creative use of the internet.

Introduction

This article posits Rick Famuyiwa's 2015 film *Dope* as a site of convergence for broader shifts in recent African-American pop culture against the backdrop of post-racial ideology. *Dope* centers on Malcolm Adekanbi (Shameik Moore), a high school senior in an area of Inglewood, California, locally referred to as "the Bottoms." Seeking to attend Harvard, Malcolm finds the weeks in which his application is being finalized disrupted by a rucksack of MDMA that is first foisted upon him and which he is then expected to sell. A fish-out-of-water scenario, this nerd turned drug dealer extricates himself from this situation through a creative use of new media and other web-based technologies. In the first section of this essay, I explain how the characters depicted in *Dope* exemplify what I refer to as "tribeless" youth culture. As hip-hop fans who play punk music, for instance, these characters trounce the boundaries between what were once warring tribes of youth culture, and thus reflect the reality of contemporary pop culture, as evidenced by recording artists such as N.E.R.D., the listening habits of millennials, and the line-ups of music festivals. Given these various subcultures once delineated strict racial divisions, the tribeless aesthetic carries a post-racial connotation: the notion that racial divisions among Americans no longer persist, that the US is now "indeed a color-blind nation" (Bonilla-Silva and Childers 2014, 24). Famuyiwa's film could thus be read as pandering to such post-racial ideology, which denies institutional racism and has been effective in using the language of equality to implement racist policies that "re-center whiteness

through law" (Chin 2012, 370). However, in the second section of this article, it is argued that Famuyiwa undercuts such post-racialism by presenting these characters' status as "geeks," and the narrative situation they are placed within, as specifically informed by race. Having established this, a point of convergence between *Dope* and broader developments in recent African-American culture is then examined in detail in the third part of the article. Here I argue that the characters' use of web-based technologies to extricate themselves from their problematic situation resonates with a broader adoption of new media by African-American recording artists in a manner that exploits the post-racial aesthetic of tribeless youth culture in order to create a space of economic power for minority artists.

Tribeless youth culture

A quick opening montage establishes Malcolm's passions via shots of "Yo! MTV Raps" VHS tapes, a cassette walkman, a Super Nintendo console, and the posters of luminaries of the late 1980s and early 1990s rap scene that fill his bedroom. With its reference to Bitcoin, however, his first line of dialogue establishes that this film is set in the contemporary era. It is at this point that Forrest Whittaker's anonymous narrator announces: "Malcolm Adekanbi is a geek." His friends Cassandra "Diggy" Andrews (Kiersey Clemons) and James "Jib" Caldones (Tony Revolori) are also declared to be "geeks" upon their first appearance. The trio play in a punk band called Awreeoh and, within the milieu of the Bottoms, are

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said to be bullied because: "they're into white shit, like skateboards, comic books, and Donald Glover. And for listening to white shit, like Trash Talk and TV on the Radio. And for doing white shit, like getting good grades and applying to college."

Acknowledging that the "big lesson this movie is going for is the idea that Black people can be complex human beings," critic Israel Daramola (2015) neverthe-less argues that the film lacks nuance in its representa-tion of "blackness." Daramola reads the positioning of the protagonists as geeks as establishing a division within the black community such that "everyone who's meant to be positioned as 'different' in the film is so because they're 'book smart' and trying to get into a college"—specified as "white shit" by the film's narrator—as against the other black kids who are deemed "part of the problem" concerning African-American social mobility. As such, he argues that Dope "is a high school movie with high school-level thought processes on race that it tries to pass off as enlightened and appeases the sensibilities of existing white liberal ideas on the topic without offering any sort of self-awareness." However, while being "book smart" is certainly, and unfortu-nately, designated as "white shit" in the film, a closer look at the list specified by the narrator demonstrates how the division described by Daramola is more com-plex than it first appears. After all, Donald Glover is a black rapper who also starred in cult nerd-culture meta-comedy TV show Community (2009–2015), the cited indie band of TV on the Radio has mostly black mem-bers, while half of hardcore punk band Trash Talk are African-American, and the first American to have a full manga series published in Japan is the black Felipe Smith.[1] These figures act as signifiers for the complexity of racial representation within Dope.

What makes the characters "different" is less their book smarts than what I refer to as their "tribeless" aesthetic, an aesthetic (both in costume and charac-terization) that finds the trio breaking with the repre-sentation of young African-Americans, and African-American culture, cinematically established by the New Black Cinema—the period of independent, and later studio-backed, African-American cinema that roughly stretched from 1985 to 1995. This tribeless aesthetic relates to the pluralist interests described by Pharrell Williams, musician and executive producer of the film:

> I felt like there was a parallel between my story and what Rick was communicating in the film. … We weren't the toughest guys in the world in high school, but we also weren't afraid. And we felt like being intelligent was not necessarily a negative thing. …We have a lot of gangsters, we have a lot of drug dealers, we have rock stars, we have EDM DJ's, we have all those things, but where is the guy who has mixed interests, who considers himself a pluralist, who's good in academics but he's also into skateboarding? (Open Road Films 2015, 6)

It is this tribeless aesthetic that opens Dope to further criticism, however, for by adopting this aesthetic, Famuyiwa's film can appear to reinforce the post-racial ideology of "race-neutral universalism" (Cho 2008–2009, 1062). This is despite its narrative content emphasizing that race persists within the tribelessness of contemporary youth culture, suggesting that the film suffers the same flaw as the New Black Cinema, which scholars such as Norman K. Denzin (2002, 115) have argued had the positive effect of giving black filmmakers a voice, yet inadvertently worked to rein-force conservative, racist, sentiments.

The tribeless aesthetic presented in Dope has its roots in the early 2000s with the emergence of Pharrell Williams and Kanye West. Pharrell ran a record company called "Star Trax" and, instead of a gang sign, would throw up the Vulcan salute when performing with his band N.E.R.D., while West was the rap producer who had intended to create video game soundtracks, a self-stated college drop out in an era of hip-hop in which Mafioso pretensions still lingered.[2] While transcending any anchoring to the contemporaneously emerging rap scene of "nerd-core," and now having mostly moved on from their earlier geekiness, the impact of this nerd aesthetic has only in recent years come to be fully stated, most prominently in the form of rap collective Odd Future Wolfgang Kill Them All.[3] The group's ostensible figurehead of Tyler the Creator is an avid collector of Pharrell's Ice Cream clothing range and arguably informs the visual aesthetic of Malcolm, who is pre-sented as a fan of the group's Casey Veggies. Further, the music of the protagonists' band is in fact written by Pharrell and is very much in the mode of N.E.R.D. However, while Malcolm and his friends are charac-terized as geeks, Pharrell, N.E.R.D., old school Kanye, and Odd Future, are considered cool.

Where once youth culture was split into a myriad of subcultures—mods, rockers, punks, goths, emos, etc.—the tribeless culture is one in which their iPods, phones, laptops, or, yes, vinyl collections, are likely to run the gamut from psychedelic folk rock to under-ground hip-hop to the latest subgenre of electronic music. Writing a comment piece for British paper The Observer, Vanessa Thorpe (2011) argues that the

> past decade has seen a tearing down of the walls that separated popular genres. These were not always walls between warring enemies, but the borders separating different kinds of sound, whether reggae from ska or rock from indie, have been the site of skirmishes since the first track was laid down on shellac, and probably before.

Thorpe suggests that this "wholesale cross-fertiliza-tion of musical conventions owes a lot to new tech-nology," and the accessibility of MP3s and music video files via streaming and social media sites,

whether paid for or free, certainly attests to this, given that music seekers can easily listen to sounds that, 20 years ago, they wouldn't necessarily want to spend money on trying out.[4] Responding to Thorpe's article for *Flavorwire*, Tom Hawking (2011) suggests that while "casual listeners might get exposed to a greater diversity of genres than they used to," the "fiercely territorial tendencies of music nerds" remain. However, a report from YPulse, a research agency focused on charting the attitudes of millenials, suggests otherwise:

> Ypulse surveyed 1,000 young adults. When asked about their favourite artists, many respondents couldn't answer, not through ambivalence but because, it was concluded, "this generation is interested in so many music genres and artists." It found that while millennials are passionate about music (76% within the 13- to 17-year-old bracket said they wouldn't be able to last a week without it), 79% of 13- to 32-year-olds said their tastes didn't fall into one specific music genre. Just 11% said that they only listened to one genre of music. "It seems," Ypulse noted when it published its findings, "that millennials are a genre-less generation." (Robinson 2016)

It is arguable that the musical tribes of earlier decades have been merging together since the mid-1980s. Hardcore has long shared an audience with hip-hop heads, with the likes of the Beastie Boys who mutated from hardcore to rap, Onyx who drew such audiences, Death Grips who characterize themselves as hip-hop but perform as if a hardcore band, and the skateboarders who listen to both. Those most feted figureheads of hip-hop purity tend to be those who have most strongly incorporated jazz into their sound, from the Roots to Mos Def to Kendrick Lamar, each artist often performing with a live band of such musicians. And artists like Travi$ Scott put on hyped performances that evoke the energy of metal shows, with Cypress Hill having long drawn in such mixed audiences. That this hybridization of musical subgenres into a tribeless aesthetic has now reached its epoch is reflected in the line-ups of major music festivals around the world, where a rapper is likely to share a stage with a rock band and an EDM (Electronic Dance Music) artist.

Given that the aforementioned tribes—or subcultures—have often delineated strict racial divisions, it is easy to see why a tribeless youth culture can be confused with the post-racial ideal of a "race-neutral universalism." A useful point of reference here is Barry Jenkins's 2008 film *Medicine for Melancholy*. In one of its climactic scenes, its late-20-something protagonist Micah (Wyatt Cenac), a member of the generation previous to the millenials of *Dope*, spells out his frustration with being an African-American indie-kid in a subculture dominated by whites:

> I mean is it any surprise that folks of color in the scene date outside the race. Think about it,

everything about being "indie" is all tied to not being black. … You can call it interracial dating, but there's nothing interracial about it. 9 out of 10 times, it's somebody of color hanging on to a white person. … You never see a black girl and an Asian dude, you never see an Indian guy and a Latino girl —it's always one of us clinging on to one of them.[5]

Similarly, in *What Are You Doing Here? A Black Woman's Life and Liberation in Heavy Metal* (2012), Canadian journalist Laine Dawes and her interviewees—among them black musicians, journalists, and academics across North America—recount the manner in which they have found themselves having to navigate the racial, and racially informed gender, codes of the supposedly universal subculture of metal. Given the recent dissolution of the sonic borders between such subcultures, however, some believe that the corresponding racial barriers have also dissolved. For instance, another exemplar of such tribelessness, the rapper Lil' Wayne, considers the sometimes white-dominated audiences of his live shows as "clearly a message that there was no such thing as racism" (Undisputed 2016). He goes on to state: "When I'm coming out the bottom of the stage at my show … and I open my eyes, and I see everybody. I don't have this type of crowd or that type of crowd. My crowd has always been everybody, thank God." However, it is notable that, contrary to the reporting of this interview online, Wayne actually states that while his own experiences make him feel that "I still believe it's over," he goes on to clarify that "obviously, it isn't." It is the tribelessness of his audience, and his own lack of experience of interpersonal racism, that makes him feel, contrary to the facts that he recognizes, that racism is over; for this he considers himself, somewhat unironically, "blessed."

It is perhaps this tribelessness that makes Wayne believe that the millenials' attitude to race is such that "it's so not cool, it doesn't even matter to them." A stance that Whittaker suggests is reflected in the narrative of *Dope*: "You could take Rick's story and place it in any community because it's about a kid who doesn't fit in, who wants to fit in, who's trying to figure out how he can succeed—how he can have a normal life, enjoy himself and find a girl" (Open Road Films 2015, 5). This kind of universalism very much echoes post-racial rhetoric, as it suggests that Malcolm's story of struggle is not one impacted upon his person as a young black man by various socio-economic power structures, but is instead a personal struggle related to the individual regardless of race or race-related circumstance. However, while the broader narrative structure of *Dope* conforms to a generic story arc that has long served white filmmakers and mixed audiences, and the tribeless aesthetic of *Dope*'s protagonists resonates with post-racial rhetoric in that its cultural signifiers are

ostensibly free of racial coding, it will be seen how Famuyiwa's film communicates the persistence of race within contemporary youth culture.

Tribeless, not post-racial: the black geek

Given the above conception of contemporary tribeless youth culture, the nerd aesthetic of Malcolm and his friends essentially defines current hipster fashion trends, from the clothing to the retro video games. Even the neighborhood gangsters share in some of the nerd trio's interests; one of the Bloods, a bully during school hours, often robs Malcolm of his fashionable vintage sneakers, elsewhere the local drug dealer, Dom (A$AP Rocky), corrects Malcolm on his "golden age" hip-hop history. However, despite all this, the trio's nerd status is emphasized in the movie as much as on the film's poster, whose tagline reads: "It's Hard Out Here for a Geek." It is for their apparent nerdiness, for instance, that Malcolm is repeatedly allowed to enter his high school despite his rucksack, replete with MDMA and a handgun, setting off the school's metal detector and riling the security officer's sniffer dog. The officer, it is suggested, cannot believe that such a nerd as Malcolm would possibly be engaged in any criminal activity. Walking in on Awreeoh's rehearsals, the janitor, too, clearly finds the protagonists to be cringe worthy. This tension between the protagonists' status as nerds and the wider pop cultural understanding of nerds as hipsters is encapsulated by the narrator's introduction to Malcolm as a "geek." For the attribution is given following the teen's explanation of Bitcoin—the virtual currency that is still probably best known for its use in the trade of drugs and other illicit materials over the dark web, which renders the innovation as not entirely nerdy and, from an adolescent point of view, probably pretty cool.

Contrary to Whittaker's characterization of Malcolm as a universal-outsider figure, I suggest that the term "geek" as it is used in Famuyiwa's film is what ultimately undercuts the post-racial aesthetic of these characters. I would suggest that the characterization of *Dope*'s millenial protagonists as "geeks" is informed by the racial experiences of the writer-director's own generation, which is the same as that of both Jenkins and Dawes, whose aforementioned works recount the struggle to form heterogeneous identities in the face of resistance from both white and black communities. This is to say that here the term "geek" is founded on principles of homogeneous racial construction—to describe these characters as geeks is to question their authenticity as "black." After all, the name of their band, Awreeoh, refers to the Oreo cookie (black on the outside, white on the inside), while we recall that their "plural interests" are deemed by their peers to be "white shit." This categorization of "geek," then, is informed by their being situated within a black community that looks at them with distaste. For, as Dawes (2012, 79) writes, "[s]haring certain commonalities—like dialect, dress, dating, and music preferences—signifies to other blacks that you show pride in who you are as a black person," while holding alternative interests indicates a rejection of this conceived blackness. Dawes identifies an early origin of this homogenous mindset in W.E.B. Du Bois' 1903 essay "Of Our Spiritual Strivings," which warns against black persons "abandoning what they know to be their true selves" through conformity with white culture, while Greg Tate suggests the "fear of being consumed by white American culture" goes back to the slave experience (Dawes 2012, 81). As such, against the majority view of hip-hop as "a suitable soundtrack for black people," an identity marker forged against white American culture, "anyone who chooses not to adopt those cultural signifiers for whatever reason" finds that their "choice is seen as a rejection, even an insult" toward the black community (Dawes 2012, 78–79).

In cinematic terms, the homogenization of black identity would be enforced by the films of the New Black Cinema, in which "[a]frocentrism and nationalistic pride often inform the aesthetic frameworks" (Harris 2008, 52). In this cinema, Harris writes, "[w]hat is culturally familiar—hip-hop, rap music, commodified neo-nationalism and the cool, posed, 'endangered black man'—becomes representationally and culturally totalized as the Black Experience of the young, heterosexual urban black man, the only experience possible." As such, the "homogeneous, monolithic, and culturally familiar" signifiers of the black community—and, in particular, black masculinity—mean that those black males who do not conform to the image are deemed to be outliers; deviant and disappointing.

I suggest that the use of the term "geek" in *Dope* is a substitution of previous exemplars of deviancy from the described representational norms, such as homosexuality.[6] And it is in this way that the conceptual conceit of the film is very much contradictory to post-racial ideology, where race is deemed irrelevant to one's treatment and experiences—in *Dope* it is specifically race that shapes the characters' identity as "geeks" and their own awareness of it. Further, this racial consciousness counters any pretensions toward conceiving tribeless youth culture as equivalent to the kind of universality posited in post-racial discourse, a universality which is not so much a neutral "equality" as it is an assimilation into "white" culture.[7] It is the representation of, and self consciousness concerning, black culture that underpins the film, in a manner which succeeds in upending what Denzin identifies as the ultimately conservative conventions of the homogeneous black identity established through much of the New Black Cinema.

Though praising the filmmaking craft and intentions of film such as *Boyz N the Hood* (1991), *New Jack City* (1991), and *Menace II Society* (1993), Denzin (2002, 115) points out that such films succumb to the issue that

> is always the risk of the social problems text. In drawing attention to the hood and its problems, these movies reinforced white racist criticisms of blacks in America today. In doing so they reassured white and black middle-class audiences that their identities were stable, and their stances towards race and the hood were correct.

Certain conventions of these New Black Cinema films would result in this backfire of intent. One was the establishment of a new black masculinity that privileged the importance of male guidance and responsibility in the family, which in turn diminished the historically recognized role of African-American women as breadwinner and single parent (Denzin 2002, 120). Another was the films' critique of the 1980s crack epidemic, intended to raise awareness and offer solutions, but which, "in the public imagination, … became part of a national moral panic surrounding crack-cocaine, gang drug wars, and racial genocide in the ghetto" (Denzin 2002, 112). Further, the didacticism of some of these films, intended to provide solutions for the black community to rise above the violence depicted, instead ended up "reproducing conservative myths about individuals who get out by luck and hard work," that "[w]hile some responsibility for the hood and its problems must be located in the apparatuses of a racist society, black men and black women still make their own problems. The media are not inventing these problems" (Denzin 2002, 119). In this respect, what Pharrell Williams more recently proclaimed to be an original concept of "the New Black"—"The New Black dreams and realizes that it's not pigmentation: it's a mentality, and it's either going to work for you or it's going to work against you. And you've got to pick the side you're going to be on,"—is actually the old black of the New Black Cinema (Williams 2015).

Dope, the film Williams executively produced, on the other hand, actually works to subvert these negatives of the New Black Cinema on all three counts. As Famuyiwa himself puts it:

> I wanted to use the expectations that people have of characters like these and the conventions of the genre that I think people are familiar with when they think about films like this, whether it's *Boyz n the Hood* or *Menace II Society* or *Friday*. We've been trained in a certain way to assume how these characters will interact with each other, how they live and who they are. (Meraji 2015)

With regard to conceptions of masculinity, we are told that Malcolm has only one memory of his Nigerian father, and it is his receiving a package containing a photo of the two from when he was younger, a note stating "My favorite movie! Happy Birthday Son," and a VHS copy of Gordon Parks Jr's 1972 blaxploitation film *Super Fly*. One can conceive of this joke as a dig at the black masculinity promoted by the New Black Cinema which, "unable to engage the conflict and contradictions of the 1990s black masculine" that emerged in the post-Rodney King/O.J. Simpson verdict era, "fell into redundancy similar to Blaxploitation" (Harris 2008, 62).

In regard to a supposed hard drugs culture among the black community, it is notable that the dope in question, Molly, or MDMA, is a far cry from the crack-cocaine depicted in the urban gangster films described earlier. As Diggy points out: "We're talking Molly, not heroin. All we gotta do is find the white people. Go to Coachella, Lollapalooza …" Here the trio are dealing with a party drug rather than a substance that could ravage the community, and to further distance the protagonists, and the film, from the cycle of movies that reinforced public fears of drug wars in the ghetto, Famuyiwa even has his characters use the internet to sell the drugs. As Malcolm puts it: "We don't have to stand on any corner."

It is in respect to the last negative of the New Black Cinema, the leveling of responsibility for the problems within the black community, that we find that Famuyiwa's film again undercuts post-racial ideology. For *Dope* works to highlight the structural racism that obstructs African-Americans from achieving social mobility. These kids may be tribeless, but they're nevertheless divided by the circumstances of their reality.

Malcolm's first attempt at a personal statement for his application to Harvard is a paper entitled: "30 November 1988—A Research Thesis to Discover Ice Cube's Good Day." Malcolm believes this is a good idea as he's "talking about something that I *love*. I mean it's well reasoned, supported with historical data, it shows creativity, critical thinking. If Neil deGrasse Tyson was writing about Ice Cube, this is what it would look like."[8] Dismissing his school advisor's advice to write about his actual life—characterized by Malcolm as "from a poor, crime-filled, neighborhood, raised by a single mother, don't know my dad, blah, blah… it's *cliché*"—the African-American teacher, Mr. Bailey (Bruce Beatty), tells him:

> I'm going to be honest with you. You're pretty damn arrogant. Think you're gonna get into Harvard? Who do you think you are, hm? You go to high school in Inglewood. To the admissions committee, your straight As, they don't mean shit. … It's going to be about your personal statement, your SAT scores, your recommendations [pointing to himself], and, most importantly, your alumni interview tomorrow—are you ready?

Creativity and individuality are irrelevant, it is suggested—it is instead the purely formal process of

recorded capability and the networking component of the recommendations that will give Malcolm a chance to attend college. However, while Bailey is probably right, in the context of the film's dialogue with the New Black Cinema the reprimand takes on another layer: the student advisor fills the role found in such movies of the enemy in black skin; the racist black cop in *Boyz N the Hood*, for instance. In this respect, that Bailey's advice is ultimately correct, yet is communicated in a villainous manner, suggests that it is the structure of American education itself, rather than the black student advisor, that is characterized here in the negative. This system, the scene suggests, is one that encourages black students to aim for a sympathy vote rather than to express their precocious intelligence, to present themselves as impoverished rather than innovative. This, then, may seem a critique of affirmative-action programs, another aspect that would align this film with post-racial discourse, where such progressive policies are deemed to undermine the legal standing of equality in the US by "discriminating" against white people.[9] I would disagree with such a reading, however, as the film gives us an exemplar of Bailey's advice in the form of white slacker Will Sherwood (Blake Anderson), who we are told by the narrator spent his teenage years in prep school:

> where he smoked a pound of weed a week, skipped classes, and had a 1.9 GPA. Yet got a perfect score in his SAT. He was accepted to his father's alma mater under academic probation, which meant he had to maintain a 3.0 grade point average. So William hacked into the [censored] database erasing all the grades of the entire freshman class.

What the film is suggesting then is not so much that affirmative-action is a bad thing, but that the academic system itself is flawed, resting all of its focus on specific hoops to be jumped through—one particular exam ("a perfect score in his SAT"), recommendations of a certain caliber ("his father's alma mater")—rather than the consistency of intelligence ("your straight As") and the creativity of students who may not be able to satisfy these specific requirements for various external factors. After all, it is the attempt to satisfy these conditions, and the derailment of such an attempt by the external forces of Malcolm's neighborhood, that drives the narrative of *Dope*—the drugs just facilitate our insight into the structural issues that obstruct students from impoverished backgrounds to succeed.

When the drugs enter the picture, the manner in which students may become straitjacketed by their environment emerges. Told by Jib to dump the bag off at the police station, Malcolm emphasizes the absurdity of wanting "three niggas with a bag of dope—and a *gun*—to go to the fucking police station."

Malcolm is offered a way out by the drug dealer, Dom, who tells him to drop the bag off at the "Boys' Club." Located in a plusher part of Inglewood, Malcolm nearly succeeds in returning the drugs until chaos ensues, and he has to split for his alumni interview. Sitting in the office of Austin Jacoby, Malcolm spies Dom in a framed photo titled "Teen Enrichment Program of Los Angeles," followed by a photo of the spoilt siblings encountered at the mansion he had just departed. Malcolm thus realizes that his alumni interviewer is in fact the head of the "Boys' Club." An established businessman, Malcolm is expected to gain a recommendation to Harvard from this drug kingpin of Inglewood. The choice of casting Guenveur Smith in this role is significant—described by Thembi Ford (2008) as "Spike Lee's 'color consciousness muse,'" the African-American actor is light-skinned enough to suggest that it is only by smudging away one's ethnic edges that one can succeed in a white-dominated society.[10] Yet as he is presented as a corrupt figure within the narrative such a concealment of one's racial identity is also signified as negative, in contrast to the film's hero who is self-designated as "black as fuck." Further critiquing the credibility of an education system that places such weight upon recommendations, Famuyiwa has Jacoby rescheduling the interview for a few weeks—by which time he expects Malcolm to have sold all the drugs and brought him the money: "If you're able to do this it shows me more about you than any interview ever could. I would then make it my business to make you a man of Harvard. I want you to get out of the Bottoms, just like I did."

This encounter is followed by a ride home on his mother's bus, wherein Malcolm daydreams various figures of his life—both loved and feared—as Gil Scott-Heron sings "Home Is Where the Hatred Is." Here the obstructions of gang-life, murder, and corruption infiltrate the very system of academia itself, presenting a vicious circle that closes in—tighter. Contrary to the conservative sentiment of the New Black Cinema identified by Denzin, then, the Bottoms is presented in a manner that lives up to its name, as a place where not even "luck and hard work" are enough for an individual to rise above the obstacles to their social mobility. It is in this respect that Malcolm's outlandish journey to the end of the college application also differs from the comedy it most obviously evokes: Reginald Hudlin's *House Party* (1990). Hudlin's movie similarly presents its protagonists as good kids up against the criminal elements of their neighborhood; however this struggle is presented within a middle-class milieu. Harris (2008, 55–56) reads *House Party* as "a very deliberate film" with which, by touching on "signs of the 'black familiar,' and inverting them, the Hudlins construct a cinematic portrait of a utopian, 'imagined community,' inventing the visual meaning of a nation of black people, in

which the stereotypes are supplanted … with revised, 'positive' images." Famuyiwa, on the other hand, does not attempt to hide the harsh realities of certain sectors of the African-American milieu and instead skewers them through comedy. This approach is sometimes successful, as when a diner shootout erupts after a cross-purpose argument over "lunch," and sometimes incongruent, as when another restaurant shooting finds a geek acquaintance killed within the cross-fire, the narrator telling us that "the real tragedy is he was seconds away from defeating Ganon" on his blood-stained Game Boy. Irrespective of issues of tone, the daily dangers of life in (some) parts of Inglewood are nevertheless here portrayed in the film. And, contrary to the conservative sentiment of post-racial ideology, the film highlights the importance of recognizing the social and institutional power structures that disenfranchise marginal groups.

New black media

Contrary to Lil Wayne's experience of white-dominated crowds making him feel that "racism is over," recent accounts from black record label employees, music journalists, and musicians report on the "white micro-aggressions" experienced at venues where one comes to be, and is sometimes made to be, aware of being "a black woman in an overwhelmingly white place"[11] (Kambasha 2016). That the proposed tribelessness is still affirmed, however, is seen in how Kambasha no longer thinks to herself "what are you doing here?" as with Dawes, but instead firmly argues "why I belong." What is suggested, then, is that though youth culture has become tribeless—for here the black author feels she belongs to the once white-coded subculture of indie—in practice, as with post-racialism itself, this has mostly been to the benefit of white persons. This is to say that while white persons have been given full access to previously ethnically coded subcultures such as hip-hop, nonwhite ethnicities still find themselves restricted from supposedly white-coded subcultural spaces.

Dope doesn't place its characters into any such spaces, though, as stated, highlights how certain festivals such as Coachella and Lollapalooza are where to "find the white people," despite their culturally and ethnically mixed line-ups. Instead, *Dope* further undercuts post-racial rhetoric by showing how the characters create their own space, such that they don't need to "cling" to white people to affirm their alignment with subcultures of different kinds. This forging of their own space is communicated metaphorically through the montage in which Malcolm stands at a microphone and delivers his climactic monologue directly to the camera, with Jib and Diggy beside him and behind their instruments. Each shot finds the band placed at various locations in Inglewood; the geeks no longer outsiders to the area but having carved their own territory within it.

What informs this creation of a space for themselves is their creative use of web-based technologies. The web is presented as permeating the Bottoms as much as it does everywhere else in urban and suburban America. Stumbling upon a gang of Blood members filming a video for their YouTube channel, showing off the retro trainer they stole from Malcolm, Jib comments that someone "needs to create an app, like ways to avoid these hood traps." Elsewhere, Dom's rival dealers use an iPad to track Malcolm via the mobile in his drug-filled rucksack: "Find an iPhone—Steve Jobs is a muthafucking genius." After a local TV news report of Lily (Chanel Iman) peeing on the street, high on their supply, goes viral, along with mobile phone footage of Awreeoh's performance at a party similarly fueled by their MDMA, the two become conflated by those within their social network. The drug commonly known as "Molly" is renamed "Lily," and the meme results in the rocketing of the Bitcoin sales of their stash. And it is due to his creative use of the internet that Malcolm ultimately extracts himself from the situation he has found himself in. Malcolm, delivering the 10% cash profit of the drug deals, tells Jacoby that the rest is stored as Bitcoin currency—and that Malcolm has been using Jacoby's own shipping and bank accounts to deliver the drugs to customers. Having implicated the businessman in the illegal dealings, Malcolm gains the vantage point in a situation that was once non-negotiable; one which ensures protection for his loved ones and a recommendation for Harvard.

That the USB Malcolm uses to make his Bitcoin transactions takes the visage of a boombox stereo is significant here. The image of the boombox partly speaks to Malcolm's obsession with golden age hip-hop culture, but it also relates to the representational difference between the African-American teens presented in this film and those presented in the New Black Cinema. As Harris (2008) puts it, the black masculinities of the latter "operat[e] referentially to the popular cultural images of black men which are visibly recurring, or simply fixed, instructing homogenous, monolithic, and culturally familiar (and therefore, quite culturally consumable) constructs." Among these images of the "culturally familiar" is that of the boombox, "a combined radio and cassette player that was high-quality, high-powered, stereophonic, and portable," and which is frequently associated with hip-hop culture/aesthetics and rap music (Schloss and Boyer 2014, 401). Schloss and Boyer (2014, 400 and 408) write that "[f]or approximately ten years, roughly spanning the decade of the 1980s, the boombox was nearly ubiquitous in popular culture," and highlight how its employment in Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* (1989) demonstrates "the

subtle interplay between cooperative listening and contested listening" related to the device, as well as providing "a nuanced representation of the political dimensions of sound for certain black communities in New York." Lee's character of Radio Raheem (Bill Nunn), whose "entire essence can be described in three words: 'man with boombox',' traverses the various sociopolitical territories that constitute the space of the film in a manner that demonstrates how "the boombox was a tool with which an African American youth could challenge his assigned role in society, not only along racial lines, but also with regard to generation, class, ethnicity and arguably even gender" (Schloss and Boyer 2014, 407–8). This is because Raheem's use of the boombox as "a miniature public address system," with its blasting of Public Enemy's politically charged song "Fight the Power," and his engaging with "competing boombox owners determined to find out who had the superior machine and therefore the right to claim the area," reflects the use of the boombox in reality; the boombox as an "apparatus" that establishes a network between various heterogeneous sets of discourses (Schloss and Boyer 2014, 404–5 and 400). Under this analysis, the boombox is understood as a way of actively contesting "received notions of social space," for "by using sound to take control of their immediate environment at any given moment, [such users] are simultaneously creating a liberated zone (from their point of view) and colonizing the space (from the point of view of those who previously controlled it)" (Schloss and Boyer 2014, 406). Raheem himself becomes a mobile zone of both sound and power in his creation of a space for himself. In this respect, we note that Raheem meets his death minutes after another character destroys his boombox.

It is notable that Famuyiwa's film closes with a credit sequence that somewhat mirrors Spike Lee's opening credit sequence to *Do the Right Thing*, in which Rosie Perez, seemingly out of character, dances on a theater stage whose backdrop is a painted caricature of the actual Brooklyn block that the film's events will unfold before. The artificiality of this sequence makes it feel like a music video, just as the retro faux-VHS aesthetic of *Dope*'s closing images of Malcolm performing various nineties dance moves in a myriad of Inglewood locations abstracts it from the movie's actual narrative. However, if these sequences mirror one another, it is through a funhouse distortion; where Perez is furiously shadow boxing to the soundtrack of "Fight the Power," Malcolm is grinning and gurning as he does the running man to Digital Underground's "The Humpty Dance." This distorted semblance is another way in which Famuyiwa distinguishes his characters and film from those "expectations" established by the popular African-American cinema of the late 1980s and early 1990s, but what is

more important is the way in which the conception of space in these films has shifted from the physical territories of the boombox to the electronic rhizome of the internet signified by Malcolm's boombox USB. Beyond the dialogue with earlier African-American cinema, in its equation of hip-hop signifiers and the internet, the film points toward web space as providing a site for minority youth to claim a space of power for themselves.[12] And the utilization of the web for the subversion of the structures that oppress young African-Americans in *Dope* resonates with broader shifts in recent black culture.

One subversion relates to the earlier described break with homogeneous conceptions of "black" identity, for the tribeless aesthetic of Famuyiwa's characters is arguably the result of the millennial generation's exposure to a broader range of music via the web. Where Schloss and Boyer (2014, 409–10) consider the demise of the boombox as the loss of the "public space [as] a site of collective listening" that ran parallel with "a cultural turn toward self-centeredness: American society became more individualistic and controlled," Dawes (2012, 78) points out how the "family stereo" was a major source for the homogeneity of black identities. "Thanks to portable music players and wireless laptops, parents have less control over what their children are listening to," and, exposed to the wider range of music available online, the millennial generation is in turn exposed to broader conceptions of the self. This has been demonstrated by the Afro-Punk movement, which emerged via the 2003 documentary film of the same name and resulted in the forging of spaces for a wider community through the establishment of an associated website and message board. As the film's director James Spooner recalls:

> That film seemed like a manifesto for all of these people. [People] were calling and identifying themselves as afropunks. I remember "afropunk" being used as an adjective and being like "No, no, no, we're doing the thing we were fighting against." Eventually, I just had to like succumb because it belonged to everybody. Clearly the people who were saying that needed to identify as or with. For the first three or four years, the film was all there was. There were parties, but it was the film that created a safe space for those parties to happen. (Kameir 2015)

With Matthew Morgan, Spooner would found the 2005 Afro-Punk festival in Brooklyn, New York, a musical endeavor which has since been hosted at various sites across the US, as well as in the UK and France. Reporting on the London Afro-Punk festival of 24 September 2016, Leonie Cooper (2016) writes that its message is loud and clear on the banners beside the stage: "No sexism. No racism. No ableism. No ageism. No homophobia. No fatphobia. No transphobia. No hatefulness." And if the "safe spaces" of

Afro-Punk align with the forging of Malcolm, Jib, and Diggy's own spaces by the end of Famuyiwa's film, it is because both emphasize the importance of the internet in creating such breaks from existing racial structures. It is the innovation of this impoverished student, Malcolm's manipulation of power structures via the alternative structures of the internet, both Dark Web (for the sale of the drugs) and mainstream (viral advertising of his product), that ultimately gets him into Harvard, rather than the specific requirements of one test and a set of recommendations; those requirements so often made difficult by the social forces and political systems post-racial ideologues wish to deny exist. And it is here argued that Malcolm's subversion of racially striating power structures resonates with what might be called "New Black Media"—the utilization of the web best exemplified by the experiments and travails of Tidal.

In keeping with the tribeless tastes of the millennials, Tidal's highly publicized launch event presented it as a streaming service co-owned by artists as diverse as Kanye West, Jack White, Deadmau5, Madonna, Daft Punk, and Coldplay. However, the site was initially acquired by Shawn "Jay Z" Carter, and it's most vocal proponents certainly regard it as an African-American endeavor. For instance, in her critique of racism within the music industry, co-owner Nicki Minaj (2015) responded to derisive commentary of the streaming site, stating: "Taylor [Swift] took her music off Spotify and was applauded. We launched Tidal & were dragged." As Diana Ozemebhoya Eromosele (2015) puts it, Minaj

> articulated a legitimate paranoia held by many blacks: the idea that the powers that be will always try to trivialize, nitpick or sabotage the efforts of black people who are trying to amass real wealth. I'm not talking about getting rich; I'm talking *wealth* with a capital "W." Bill Gates wealth. Steve Jobs wealth. Black people who are trying to create the next Facebook, Apple or Twitter—or launch a music-streaming service like Spotify.

At a time when corporate streaming services—Spotify, YouTube, iTunes—offer minute royalties to the artists who attract the users that make these companies millions, the importance of Tidal is that it gives African-American artists full control over the distribution of their art, and the financial benefits that come with it.[13]

Production has never been much of a problem for hip-hop artists, given its beginnings in the depression battered South Bronx of the 1970s, but distribution has been. For instance, in the early 1990s, there was the censorship that found some record stores refusing to stock products bearing the Parents Resource Music Centre advisory sticker many rap records were made to carry (Potts 2016). More significantly, G. Thomas Wilson (2001, 106) outlines how, across several

decades, the policies of the Federal Communications Commission, combined with the "Economic Development Administration, lending institutions, and advertisers' policies and practices, have, in general, discouraged the sustained growth rate of Black and other minority ownership of broadcast stations." The Telecommunications Act 1996 was especially important, for though its "amendments were worded as inclusive documents," in practice this major deregulation of US media ownership allowed corporate "group owners enough capacity to absorb "failed" minority-owned stations (without "mergers" with the minority owners) and to accommodate those minority- and nonminority-owned stations acquired through hostile takeover" (Wilson 2001, 95 and 103). The output of such stations became constrained by corporate governance, resulting in the abandonment of community programming and the marginalizing of musicians who would air political views from within an independent space:

> For stations like KMEL-FM in the Bay Area, whom prided themselves on being a "people's station" by engaging in social issues affecting the San Francisco community, this meant being bought out and merged with competing stations; playlists became nearly identical, specialty shows were cut, local personalities were fired, and local or underground artists "unable to compete with six-figure major label marketing budgets" were left without a venue. (Ide 2013)

Derek Ide (2013) conceives of this corporate consolidation of the media as "facilitat[ing] the crystallization of apolitical, socially devoid gangsta rap into mainstream pop culture," as against the autonomy and range of critical black voices that had emerged via independent record labels and the independent radio stations that would play their tracks. It is important to consider how Black Entertainment Television (BET) figures within this context, for as a major media corporation in its own right—the first black owned company to be listed on the stock exchange no less—Robert L. Johnson's BET Holdings, Inc. survived the adverse effects of the 1996 Act (Barber and Tait 2001, 117). Barber and Tait describe BET's expansion by the end of the '90s as encompassing publishing, restaurants, banking, and new communication and information industries. Yet BET did not enter the field of radio, even though music videos made for 77% of its Black Entertainment Television network's programming (Barber and Tait 2001, 114). Given that it was their already broad African-American audience that was BET's major draw to such white-dominated corporate partners as Telecommunications, Inc. and Time-Warner, Inc., it appears Johnson was more interested in brand expansion rather than his company's merging (or at least absorption) of smaller minority-run radio and TV stations, given that their audiences may have already comprised, or competed

with, part of BET's own. Following Ide's line of thought, and given that BET's audience was at that time 60% non-African American, BET would thus be one such limited avenue of distribution that would result in the homogenizing of hip-hop culture into a form of mainstream pop; an apolitical commodity (Barber and Tait 2001, 112).

Tidal, I suggest, demonstrates a new approach to the distribution of African-American art and culture, one which takes advantage of the internet in order to gain independence from the kind of white-dominated corporations BET relied upon. Emmanuel K. Ngwainmbi (2005) argues that the internet has historically aided black entrepreneurs due to the relative inexpensiveness of setting up and running an e-business, and the avoidance of the "financial (capital incursion) difficulties" related to credit histories and loan applications that traditionally restricted minority business owners in the United States. (Though it should be noted that the costs of running a streaming site are astronomical, and it is the artist-owners' already accrued wealth that allowed for their investment in the case of Tidal.[14])

While its first year of trading as an artist-owned enterprise had found Tidal suffering a loss of $28 million (Verbergt and Gauthier-Villars 2016), and the botched release of the latest Rihanna album in January 2016 found one music publication going so far as to characterize the project as "tragicomic," it was just weeks later that the true potential of Tidal was revealed (Noisey Staff 2016). On 14 February 2016, Kanye West's *The Life of Pablo* was released for exclusive streaming on Tidal, with its album cover bearing the intriguing, and repeated, statement of: "WHICH/ONE" beneath its similarly repeated title. While the statement plays upon the title—which Pablo, Escobar or Picasso or Paul; which life, that of decadence or art or God—it also plays upon the form of the album itself. Describing the project as "living breathing changing creative expression" West had come up with a way of making streaming essential, for he would be constantly updating the album (Doyle 2016), with new versions of the tracks, and sometimes new additions entirely, being uploaded as he saw fit (Jenkins 2016). This project both harnessed the possibilities of art in the age of the internet— when music can be distributed without the constraints of physical production, why not keep the track list fluid?—and also managed to make Tidal's relatively high subscription costs worth paying for, given that any pirated download would soon become out of date, leaving the listener missing out on a record still in process.

Earlier that month, Beyoncé had issued a provocative video for her song "Formation." Reflecting upon the video's various perspectives on "the black experience in America in 2016," the *New York Times* describes "Formation" as "among the most politically direct work [Beyoncé has] done in her career, with implicit commentary on police brutality, Hurricane Katrina and black financial power" (Caramaca, Morris, and Wortham 2016). Though garnering much publicity—whether positive or negative, as in the case of those who considered the video to be antipolice and "racist" for highlighting state discrimination against African-Americans, in keeping with the post-racial discourse described above—it is notable that though the video was made available on both the subscription based Tidal and the free-to-access YouTube, in the case of the latter it was uploaded in an unlisted format (Shaw 2016). This meant that one could not search for the video on YouTube itself and so could only initially access the video via a link on the artist's website (Weiss 2016). As with West's *Pablo* project, here Beyoncé demonstrates a strategy for directing the flow of web traffic, money, and discourse itself. If rightwing critics want to spit venom at her art, they would have to pay her to gain access to it in the first place.

Both records eventually wound up being sold on Apple's iTunes store, which demonstrates the limitations of such approaches—the artists presumably needed a wider mainstream audience to embrace their records in order to make the associated arena tours possible. It is also notable that while this strategy of exclusivity may work for already successful artists, it is the opposite approach—that of free access via the internet—that has helped to establish upcoming African-American artists. The aforementioned Odd Future, for instance, gained listeners, concert and festival bookings, and major press coverage, through their choice to release a number of mixtapes online as free downloads (Gopalan, 2011). However, following their early, self-made, success, the various members of the group would sign album contracts with various record labels, including Odd Future Records, founded in 2011 by the group's figurehead of Tyler, the Creator as an imprint of Sony Music. The draw of established record labels was once their distribution power, in this case Sony's subsidiaries of RED Distribution and then Columbia Records, but when the artists have demonstrably harnessed this power for themselves via their creative use of the internet it seems redundant to have their royalties siphoned off by major corporations. The Tidal model, which came a few years later, is one that offers a far better deal to these millennial artists who find fame on the internet in the first instance in any case. It is in this respect that I suggest the recent Tidal releases mark early steps toward a new media strategy

of black entrepreneurship, one by which the direction of both profits and discourse are directed by the artists themselves.

Returning to Famuyiwa's film, I would suggest that the production itself could be conceived of as partaking in the broader economic strategy described above. For along with Whittaker's Significant Productions, *Dope* was co-produced by the new media nodes of i am OTHER and Revolt TV. The former is run by Pharrell Williams, and its YouTube page states that it is: "dedicated to Thinkers, Innovators, and Outcasts. By celebrating creative people and pursuits of all kinds, we showcase architects of global culture, music, fashion, and the arts" (Staff 2015a). The latter is run by hip-hop entrepreneur Sean "P. Diddy" Combs, and describes itself as:

> focused on expertly curating the best of the best in music and engaging youth in social conversation, the multi-genre, multi-platform network offers breaking music news, videos, artist interviews, exclusive performances, and original programming. Attracting over 50 million young adults through television, digital properties, social and mobile, REVOLT is accessible 24/7—anytime, anywhere, any screen. (Staff 2015b)

Aside from the initial financing, Famuyiwa's engagement with these two companies has been of much help in promoting the movie to an alternative audience of music and fashion lovers, where mainstream cinema audiences may otherwise gloss over a small comedy starring unknown African-American actors as kids in a "ghetto."[15] Open Road Film's distribution of *Dope* found it placed in the theaters of AMC Entertainment and Regal Entertainment Group (the two major cinema chains that own Open Road), but given that this is not enough to guarantee the success of similarly budgeted movies on their roster, we can consider the promotion on these dedicated sites of Revolt TV and i am OTHER, along with their associated social media profiles, to have helped the $7 million budgeted film to gross over $17 million in the US.[16] By directing the flow of web traffic and of discourse around their art to a racially diverse audience, the distribution of *Dope* partakes in a broader strategy by African-American artists that finds them exploiting the post-racial rhetoric of films and sounds for all, while simultaneously undercutting the very real racial structures that would ordinarily limit their profit-base.

The endeavors of the African-American culture-makers cited above—Tidal, Pharrell, Combs, et al—may not aim for the redistribution of their wealth, their operations very much embodying neoliberal individualism, but the point is that they were never meant to benefit from the politics of neoliberal colorblindness. The Telecommunications Act 1996 is just one instance among others whereby proponents of neoliberal individualism support supposedly color-blind policies that disenfranchise minority communities by minimizing state support and allowing for wider privatization (Omi and Winant 2014). Without such supporting infrastructures, minority communities largely fail to benefit from this burgeoning free-market as they are unable to access it from their impoverished position within the sociopolitical framework of the US. In this article, however, we have seen how African-American artists are subverting the politics of neoliberal colorblindness intended to suppress and limit the thriving of nonwhite Americans; these artists draw on its aesthetic of post-racialism in order to carve a space of power for themselves.

Conclusion

Rick Famuyiwa's *Dope* resonates with a broader moment in African-American pop culture that is informed by, and a reaction to, notions of post-racial universalism. In particular, it has been seen how Famuyiwa's film both demonstrates that racial barriers are very much in effect within a youth culture that is now largely tribeless, and how the film's social media infused content and distribution reflects new media strategies taken by African-American artists to direct the discourse and profit concerning their art within still white-dominated industries. As a site of convergence, it is not suggested here that all of these resonances of the text were intended by the writer-director in order to produce the specific points identified. Instead, *Dope* is an instance, among many others across various fields of art, in which a work may speak to broader movements in culture; the circuit between text, culture-makers, and society creating a site of intensity, of various forces that determine its substance and effects.

Notes

1. See Casey Brienza. 2013. "Beyond B&W? The Global Manga of Felipe Smith," *Black Comics: Politics of Race and Representation*. Edited by Sheena C. Howard and Ronald L. Jackson II. London: Bloomsbury. Glover has more recently found notable success with his excellent, idiosyncratic, television series *Atlanta* (2016).
2. N.E.R.D is an acronym for Nobody Ever Really Dies —arguably a sci-fi trope if there ever was one, as Thomas Pynchon (2000) has pointed out: "when the space and time have been altered to allow characters to travel easily anywhere through the continuum and thus escape physical dangers and timepiece inevitabilities, mortality is so seldom an issue."
3. In 2013, Kanye West would spit scorn on his earlier persona: "Pink-ass polos with a fucking backpack/ But everybody know you brought real rap back" (West 2013).

4. Thorpe (2011) cites comments from Jeremy Pritchard, of alternative rock band Everything Everything, on this matter: "before the internet, when I was becoming aware of music, there was quite a limited selection available. … But our lead singer, Jonathan Higgs, led the way on this for us, really. He liked all that R&B, but he also liked Blur and Radiohead and Nirvana. I hope that, just as the Beatles had their ear to the ground with black American music, we are doing a similar thing on a small scale because we like listening to Drake and Rihanna."

5. The drunken stuttering and reiteration of phrases by the character has been edited out for clarity.

6. It should be noted that the character of Diggy is openly queer, yet her sexuality doesn't pose any issues for her within the film. There is a brief comic flashback that finds her dolled up in a dress as a church congregation attempts an exorcism at her grandmother's request, but even that sequence ends with Diggy eyeing the legs of one of her tormentors, demonstrating the character's confidence concerning her sexuality.

7. For instance, consider Gregg Araki's discussion of racial casting for his 1992 film *Totally F**ked Up*: "The parts are not written in any sort of ethnic way. Their ethnicity was completely interchangeable. The ethnicity of the characters was like wardrobe, essentially …, all the characters are totally assimilated into the 'white' culture, as I am. [The half-Asian lead] is not different culturally than of the other characters. He doesn't have all the kind of 'identifiers'. … He doesn't eat with chopsticks, and he doesn't take his shoes off when he comes into the house. He's like all the other kids, he talks about sex and drugs, music, whatever. … I have this thing about filmmakers who are very race specific, what I view as a kind of reverse-discriminatory, elitist view of race. And they make movies that are wholly Asian-American, or African-American. And I think that those films are ultimately boring and retrogressive. And really destructive. In my own life, race is not really an issue. … These black films or Asian films or Latin films, where there are Asians and Asians and blacks and blacks, are representative of a separatist attitude. … Personally, I don't like blacks who hang out with blacks because those are the only people that relate to them, and that they feel at home with. That's racism in a bad way." The suggestions of racism and reverse discrimination here align Araki's thoughts with contemporary post-racial discourse and the notion that highlighting race, or the importance of race to one's identity, somehow undermines equality. But, most interestingly, Araki also acknowledges that his model for universalism is "white" culture (Chua 1992).

8. One assumes that in the world of the film, skateboarder and comedian Donovan Strain (2012) hadn't already written his blog post pinpointing the exact day referred to in Ice Cube's 1993 rap song "A Good Day."

9. Laws that aim to benefit disenfranchised groups are characterized by post-racial ideologues as "partial and divisive, and benefiting primarily those with 'special interests' versus all Americans," which thus "injures whites in order to benefit people of color" (Cho 2008–2009, 1602).

10. "[I]n films such as *Malcolm X, Do The Right Thing*, and *Get on the Bus* … Smith's racial ambiguity is used to to [sic] highlight racial tensions, make a point about skin color in the black community, or simply represent the shade spectrum of black folks" (Ford 2008).

11. The journalist referred to above is Britt Julious, and the musician is Solange Knowles, whose accounts of such microaggressions are linked to in Kambasha's (2016) article.

12. Hip-hop is further equated with the internet by way of the Casey Veggies downloads referenced to emphasize the generational difference between the protagonist and the old school gangster Jacoby, who Malcolm implies is outdated when he refers to the purchasing of CDs. It is also notable that, as stated earlier, Jacoby is played by a regular of Spike Lee's films.

13. For artists on Spotify, "the average 'per stream' payout to rights holders lands somewhere between $0.006 and $0.0084" (Plaugic 2015).

14. The enormous costs of maintaining the kind of web-based platforms described here is demonstrated by the financial losses of the kind seen by Tidal being shared by Spotify, the largest of the current streaming services. "Spotify, while also recording a net loss in 2015, expanded much faster than Tidal, doubling its revenue to 1.95 billion euros ($2.19 billion)" (Verbergt and Gauthier-Villars 2016).

15. As a small comedy, *Dope* could not benefit from the kind of awards season buzz that aided the success of Jenkin's stunning 2016 drama *Moonlight*, which was similarly led by a largely unknown African-American cast.

16. The other films featuring a lead African-American actor to have done as well or better than *Dope* for Open Road Films are *A Haunted House* (2013), *A Haunted House 2* (2014), and *Fifty Shades of Black* (2016)—low-budget parody comedies starring and co-produced by Marlon Wayans. The success of these films arguably rests upon the actor's reputation/brand as established by the *Scary Movie* franchise and other successful parody films that stretch across the past two decades and a half.

Notes on contributor

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Disclosure statement

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