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‘Key & Peele’ Ends While Nation Could Still Use a Laugh

By DAVE ITZKOFF AUG. 15, 2015

The scene is a hauntingly familiar one: A white police officer stalks an unarmed black man in a dark alley and slams the man’s head into the open door of his patrol car.

But then, rather than being taken into police custody, the man is led through a magical door [to the sunlit, upbeat streets](#) of a utopia called Negrotown, whose black populace serenades the visitor about its city, where “you can walk the street without getting stopped, harassed or beat” and “you can wear your hoodie and not get shot.”

This comic sketch is one of many that have made [“Key & Peele,”](#) the Comedy Central series created by and starring Keegan-Michael Key and Jordan Peele, a television program that is uniquely calibrated to the current American moment, when real-life examples of racial polarization and conflict

are ubiquitous, but opportunities in pop culture to process these divisions are rare.



It will be a bittersweet moment when this sketch comedy series concludes its final season on Sept. 9, after three years of fixing its satirical lens on stereotypes and social injustices. In its absence, there may be no alternative that so frankly addresses these enduring prejudices and disparities, especially at a moment when America's racial divide has taken center stage in the national discourse.

The loss of “Key & Peele” is palpable for viewers who believe that a socially conscious comedy sketch can reach a mass audience in ways that eloquent speeches and organized protests cannot. Through the safety of television, our national, nonjudgmental watering hole, powerful and provocative ideas about race can be delivered with a smile rather than a sermon.

What the history of black comedy illustrates, said Patrisse Cullors, a social activist and co-founder of the Black Lives Matter movement, is that “our lives have been so traumatic that all you can do is either laugh or cry, and laughter can be a source of resilience.”

But, Ms. Cullors said, “if you can make more than just your community laugh about

social ills, you can advance culture.”

The comedy of “Key & Peele,” she said, “pokes fun at a system that has been in place for centuries against black folks and turns it inside out, and makes nonblack people really have to look at it as well.”

“It’s a way to challenge social norms and the ways we relate to one another,” she said.

Mr. Key, 44, and Mr. Peele, 36, who are biracial, say they are ending the show by mutual agreement for the least complicated of reasons: They want to pursue other projects.

They are ambivalent about the outside expectations placed upon their show, which received an Emmy nomination for variety sketch series and earned Mr. Key, a nominee for supporting comedy actor, a place performing [alongside President Obama](#) at the White House Correspondents’ Association dinner in April.

Mr. Key and Mr. Peele said in a recent interview that they do not approach their comedy sketches with the deliberate intent of educating viewers on racial strife or bias.

“That is the prism through which we see the world,” Mr. Key said, “so we don’t know how to do the work in another way.”

However, they recognize the crucial role

that “Key & Peele” plays by giving voice to the concerns of the black segment of its audience and providing white viewers with a humorous platform to confront their ignorance.

“Institutional racism in this country is undeniable to us,” Mr. Peele said. “People need to be talking about the ways the system is skewed. We want to use our ability to make people laugh to allow them to talk about it.”

Although the show is not limited solely to racial issues, some of the sketches are direct responses to real-life people and scenarios: One that followed the death of [Trayvon Martin](#) imagines Mr. Peele walking through a suburban neighborhood, [protected by a sweatshirt](#) with a white person’s face printed on the hood.

A recurring bit casts Mr. Key as Luther, a special [anger translator](#) to Mr. Obama (played by Mr. Peele), who speaks all the blunt, vehement and furious things the president cannot allow himself to articulate.

Other sketches offer close observations of everyday figures: a scene about two black students [who become rivals](#) when one seeks to join an a cappella group in which the other is the only black member, or about the social phenomenon of “code switching,” where people [seem to speak differently](#) among members of their own ethnic group.

These character pieces are, in their own ways, commenting on race relations, said Scott Saul, the author of the biography “Becoming Richard Pryor.”

“We’re laughing at the assumptions we make about a situation, a conventional wisdom about how we judge people and put them in boxes,” said Mr. Saul, a professor of English at the University of California, Berkeley.

“They have to do with the way our culture simplifies things, the way situations in life are more complicated and dark than our shiny, happy culture wants to let us admit,” he said.

Mr. Peele said he and Mr. Key could not help but find humor in the tensions of a culture where “some things never change.”

“When Obama was elected, there was this mythology that, O.K., we’re over the racist thing — this is a postracial world,” Mr. Peele said. “And now, obviously, we’ve uncovered why that’s not true.”

Some critics see a more pointed critique, in which viewers are not only called out on their prejudices but reminded that they are at fault for allowing them to persist.

“It’s not enough to just laugh at the jokes,” said Sonali Chakravarti, an assistant professor of government at Wesleyan

University and the author of “Sing the Rage: Listening to Anger After Mass Violence.”

The comedy of “Key & Peele,” she said, “doesn’t let you off the hook — you’re implicated in it.”

Tracing the antecedents of the show is a brief trajectory, from the pointed stand-up of comedians like Mr. Pryor and Dick Gregory to the Fox sketch series [“In Living Color,”](#) the first to feature a predominately black cast and creative team.

Shown from 1990 to 1994, “In Living Color” chronicled a volatile period in which the beating of Rodney King, the Los Angeles riots and the Supreme Court confirmation hearings of Clarence Thomas all occurred.

“We were touching on subjects that nobody else had the interest, the cultural expertise or the imperative to do,” said David Alan Grier, a member of the “In Living Color” cast. “It was all around us.”

Yet it took nearly a decade for a spiritual successor to emerge in [“Chappelle’s Show,”](#) which ran on Comedy Central from 2003 to 2006 and was rooted in the comedian Dave Chappelle’s observations on race and culture.

“Chappelle’s Show” struck a mainstream

chord, its co-creator Neal Brennan said, because “white people love being let in on black consciousness.”

“Chappelle’s Show” also commented on racial division and violence, but it would be another decade before the current era of body cameras, citizen videos and social media forced these issues onto everyone’s computers and phones, Mr. Brennan said.

“Black people complained for 100 years,” he said, “and now white people are seeing it and they’re going, ‘Well, why didn’t you guys say something?’ They tried; they definitely tried.”

Mr. Key and Mr. Peele, who broke through on another Fox sketch series, [“Mad TV,”](#) have found a diverse audience with their Comedy Central series, and the Internet has exploded their reach.

Their TV series is watched by an average of 1.2 million people, according to Comedy Central, but their videos have been streamed more than 72 million times in the first four weeks of its current season. By one Nielsen metric, the show’s viewership is 74 percent white.

For the wider audience hungry for culture that puts racial issues prominently in the foreground, it is particularly vexing that the comedians would choose this delicate time to make their imminent (though not

permanent) departure.

“These voices are so needed, and when they’re not there, you really feel it,” said Donovan X. Ramsey, a fellow at Demos, a public policy organization that works in part to promote racial equality.

“When President Obama is on TV, seemingly every other week, talking about something that’s racialized and there’s no representation of that in the culture, it really feels like a loss,” Mr. Ramsey said.

If it should take a further 10 years for another comedy show like theirs to emerge, Mr. Key and Mr. Peele said, it would be too simple to blame the hypothetical biases of people who lead the entertainment industry for that outcome.

“If the viewership’s not clamoring for people of color, I don’t know what to tell you,” Mr. Key said. “Because it’s a business.”