

Clap Along If You Feel Like Happiness Is the Truth

*Pharrell Williams and the False
Promises of the Postracial*

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I don't live my life trying to be black.
—PHARRELL WILLIAMS, *Oprah* interview,
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Eerily echoing Bobby McFerrin's Reagan-era breakout hit, "(Don't Worry) Be Happy," in both sentiment and sound (light, melodic pop), Pharrell Williams's hit single "Happy" similarly celebrates personal happiness as an assumed social good in which a positive attitude lifts all burdens. In interviews, Williams disregards the persistence of race as a social fact and political category. Yet race's persistence in the United States is easily recognized in the statistics that render the deleterious material effects for individuals and groups racialized as nonwhite in black and white (Alexander 2011; Lipsitz 2006, 2011; Shedd 2011; Wolfers 2015). We need look no further than, for example, the statistics outlining the maintenance of inferior educational, health, and economic conditions for aggrieved communities within the United States (Darby and Saatcioglu 2014; Haslanger 2014).¹ More tragically, the deadly interactions across the United

States between black and brown individuals and police officers, coupled with the kinds of consequences that follow in their wake—I am thinking beyond the nonindictment of police officers to highlight, for example, the situation of Ramsey Orta, the jailed videographer of Eric Garner’s death—are bald instances of systemic structural racism that remain effective despite individual declarations of “can’t nothing bring me down.”²

Given these social conditions, the global success of a song titled “Happy,” which encourages listeners to “clap along if you feel like happiness is the truth” given that “can’t nothing bring me down” may be unsurprising. As Theodor Adorno famously argued, modernity’s alienated subjects have sought emotional and psychic reprieve in the ephemeral refrains of popular song because it offers simplistic assurances in naturalized (as Adorno would underline, formulaic) musical expression. Williams tapped into a need for emotional uplift in a time of rising precarity, widespread recognition of social inequality, and a sense of the material transformation of the planet in ways that directly impact human possibilities. For example, indigenous and other marginalized populations are feeling the direct effects of global climate change the soonest, linking global climate change to the underlying racism institutionalized in the political and economic structures invested in the status quo.

Similar to the ways in which “clean coal” and natural gas are promoted as green alternatives to conventional fossil fuel resources in an effort to keep fossil fuel economies in place, Paul Taylor concludes his critique of postracialism by noting that the term “postrace” does not signal a postracist society at all but merely a “shift to the latest in a *series* of evolving—but not necessarily *progressing*—racial formations” (2014, 23; emphasis in original). This latest shift in the series, as Taylor describes it, is another adaptive formation by vested interests to keep race an invigorated part of social identity even as its (real, materially realized) presence is denied, a social parallel to global climate change denial.

In this essay, I begin by placing pop music in relation to other genres to think through the way in which Williams’s song *as pop song* epitomizes a postracial political stance—a twenty-first-century blend of consumerist choice with a politics of respectability that seeks to bypass “race” as a diversion on the road to a postracial utopia. By tracking Williams’s brash assertions for the power of claiming Otherness to change the world for the better through the song “Happy,” as well as his commercial brand Other, Williams uses the language of the postracial to skillfully elide the very conditions of oppression to which simply “being happy” is an inadequate response. Understood this way, Williams’s invocation of Otherness in the cloak of individualistic

entrepreneurialism undermines his jubilant musicking, revealing it as less the radical credo he suggests and more of a tacit support for the continuation of the very racial logics he hopes to oppose. Williams's happy entrepreneurialism rests on a postracial logic that ultimately fails in determining any (new) path to a *postracist* society.

In Williams's articulation of a "politics of ambivalence," following Sarah Banet-Weiser, in which he merges identity and alterity as a brand logo for his commercial offerings, he promises his customers—his fans, his audience, his Others—a world without politics, beyond race, beyond conflict, beyond "bad news." Reinventing Otherness as individuality fully realized through entrepreneurship, Williams mobilizes alterity in the service of "wealth" acquisition, reinscribing the subordinate positioning of subaltern Others as "winners" in a capitalist game of self-promotion. I conclude the essay by contemplating two iterations of "Happy" from the 360 versions performed during the twenty-four-hour video (each version clocking in at a tad under four minutes, with a few seconds spent fading between versions) and a final few thoughts on why simply advocating "feeling happy" falls short as an anti-racist agenda.

Pop Matters

From spirituals to hip-hop, black musicking has articulated alternative perspectives to US social norms (while blacks have contributed, albeit little recognized, to the formation of those very norms).³ Certainly not all nor all of the time, and with varying successes and failures. Still, a significant amount of black soundings have been used to call into question social inequalities and to provide sonic templates not only for individual expression but also for collective action. Black musicking has imbued social dance with political resonance, public singing with social significance, and commercial music with subversive subtexts. The discourse of the postracial eviscerates the very claims black musicians have been seeking to establish for the value of their music, including those based on its social impact and widespread influence. Importantly, by offering individualized notions of "attitude adjustment" (usually involving some form of consumption that used to be called "conspicuous"), the logic of the postracial undermines black musicians' ability to continue to catalyze, inform, and motivate mass audiences to act, to organize, to dream of social transformation.⁴ It is in this broad sense that the failure of Williams's "Happy," particularly in view of his efforts as a one-man brand marketing individual empowerment for economic profit, is heard most clearly.

“Happy” is not a piece of dance music per se; it is a pop song, a category of music “accessible to a general public (rather than elites or dependent on any kind of knowledge or listening skill)” and “produced commercially, for profit, as a matter of enterprise not art” (Frith 2011, 94). Williams, however, first gained widespread notice as part of the Neptunes, a production partnership with Chad Hugo, which became one of the most commercially successful production teams in hip-hop and dance music beginning with N.O.R.E.’s “Superthug” in 1998 and including Mystikal’s “Shake Ya Ass” and the team’s first global hit, Britney Spears’s “I’m a Slave 4 U” in 2001. “Happy,” written for the animated “family-friendly” comedy film *Despicable Me 2* (2013), was an unforeseen hit for Williams as a solo act and is notably distinct from older hits such as “Lapdance” and “She Wants to Move” in lyrical content and musical aesthetic. Adhering more to a pop-dance rather than a hip-hop sensibility, it is perhaps unsurprising that “Happy” crossed over in a way that “Lapdance” has not.

Pop, in any case, is not hip music. “Adult pop” such as the music of Josh Groban or Celine Dion carries with it the whiff of the musically lowbrow or middlebrow (C. Wilson 2007), and little of it ages well except for fans. Norma Coates argues that the relationship of pop to rock, a fundamental schism in popular music discourse, revolves around issues of authenticity: “Rock is metonymic with ‘authenticity’ while ‘pop’ is metonymic with ‘artifice’” (1997, 52). Simon Frith is even more succinct, calling pop a “residual” category consisting of what remains once “all the other forms of popular music are stripped away” (2011, 95). We can substitute rap for rock as the two genres both occupy more artistically legitimate, even prestigious, positions vis-à-vis pop.

The song’s pop status helps explain why the statistics on the discrepant education, employment, and health outcomes for blacks and whites fade into the distance throughout the twenty-four hours of the “complete” video, underlining Williams’s argument that happiness is its own good. But, as Sara Ahmed (2010) reminds us, Williams’s call to “be happy” rests on the unacknowledged unhappiness of others. This is the reason I call out those uncomfortable bodies in portions of the video—those figures who walk hurriedly past the cameraperson and dancer(s), who do not appear happy to be included in the video but without the need to bother with confronting or “actively resisting” their own involvement—and those bodies who *should* be uncomfortable but are not, such as a gas station attendant and a chicken-suited dancer I discuss in the concluding remarks. Even so, “because I’m happy!” is, with its rising melodic line, a great hook to sing out, alone or with others. Who doesn’t want to be happy?

Ahmed tackles the question of why happiness—or the state of “I’m happy!”—is desirable. Who benefits from normative assumptions regarding the equivalence of happiness to a “well lived life” or even a “desired state of being”? Is happiness predicated on its eternal deferral? Writing “from a position of skeptical disbelief in happiness as a technique for living well,” Ahmed acknowledges her debt to “feminist critiques of the figure of ‘the happy housewife,’ black critiques of the myth of ‘the happy slave,’ and queer critiques of the sentimentalization of heterosexuality as ‘domestic bliss,’” which “taught me [Ahmed] most about happiness and the very terms of its appeal” (2010, 2).

Consequently, Ahmed is critical of “the recent science of happiness,” particularly as described by “happiness tsar” Richard Layard with his reliance on self-reporting of levels of individual happiness, which “presumes the transparency of self-feeling (that we can say and know how we feel), as well as the unmotivated and uncomplicated nature of self-reporting” (2010, 5). Layard’s larger problem, however, is his presupposing “happiness is already understood to be what you want to have,” so being “asked how happy you are is not to be asked a neutral question . . . [but is an evaluation of] their life situations through categories that are value laden” (2010, 5).

In mulling over this issue, Ahmed reminds us that “within classical [Greek] models, the forms of happiness that are higher are linked to the mind, and those that are lower are linked to the body” (2010, 12). A similar high/low culture, mind/body divide lies behind the rock/pop binary in which rock is perceived as a serious musical genre, whereas pop is the commercial dreck manufactured for musical naïfs (N. Coates 1997). Additionally, it is a truism that “pop in the record industry is a euphemism for white [while] R&B means black” (Lanza 2005, 5) as it is through the imagined performing and listening bodies that music genres signify racially. In the case at hand, Williams wags his finger at the music industry: *au contraire*, he admonishes, being happy transcends those old colorized generic lines, blurring them in the interest of sharing happiness through singable and danceable product appealing to the mass consumer(s) but in ways that enable them to imagine themselves as individual(s) and not as a faceless member(s) of an aggregate marketing demographic.

Pointedly, Williams figures personal happiness as the zenith of political achievement, stripping aggrieved communities of their histories of struggle for liberation and social equality, which effaces, in turn, those communities of their values, efficacies, and hard-won though often partial victories.

In the wake of the success of “Happy,” Williams launched *i am OTHER* as a “creative venture and way of life . . . a diverse group of optimistic, bright minds connected by technology and a desire to make our mark, who together can advance culture and even humanity,” as declared on the *iamother.com* website, and marketing it through a *courant* retail clothing vendor Uniqlo.⁵ Warning that positive psychology’s mantra (“to feel better is to be better”) too often and too easily aligns with neoliberalism’s key incentive (“to profit is to be better”), Ahmed notes the ways in which personal happiness becomes an economic as well as ideological good. What follows, Ahmed asks, “from the idea that we have a responsibility to be happy for others, or even simply from the idea that there is a necessary and inevitable relationship of dependence between one person’s happiness and the happiness of others” (2010, 9)?

In this context, how should we read Pharrell’s clothing line declaring “*i am OTHER*” and “the same is lame”? When masses of individuals are all wearing the same T-shirt declaring “the same is lame,” how has the “unique individual” been redefined?

Is “*i am OTHER*” a clever reversal of the power dynamics between identity and difference, at least lexically, notationally, and symbolically? Reading “identity is Difference” through the typographical inversion, in which identity becomes subsidiary to Difference (though still prioritized syntactically, which raises the question of just what this phrase is supposed to actually accomplish), the inversion of Identity and difference can be considered co-terminous, dialectical, co-constitutive, binary poles, but the point of antiracist work is not to erase difference but to erase the differential opportunities, privileges, and penalties among the complex play of intersectional identity/difference formations active within a given social and historical conjuncture.

On his *i am OTHER* website, Williams posted a manifesto, declaring, “OTHERS are not defined by demographics or geography. OTHERS believe individuality is the new wealth. Whoever is the most individual wins.”⁶ Williams practices what he preaches as a one-man brand whose commercial offerings extend from music production into various high-end prestige consumer items—“redefining cool for a new generation,” as claimed in the catalog description for his book, *Places and Spaces I’ve Seen*. More interesting and less commented on is Williams’s inverting of the conventional meanings of Otherness by dismissing “demographics and geography” as nondeterminate. Is Williams seeking to reverse or simply ignore the power differentials inherent in practices of Othering?



Figure 9.1 Pharrell Williams posing in his cap and T-shirt Uniqlo offerings © Uniqlo 2014.

How, indeed, does individuality, freed of demographics and geography, translate into wealth, to use Williams's words? One T-shirt provides no answer despite offering a dictionary-styled definition, which reads: "oth•er \ˈo-thər\ Adjective 1. Different; Not the same 2. Being the ones or one distinguishable from that or those which is or are the uniform / Synonyms distinct, distinctive, distinguishable, diverse, dissimilar, nonidentical, opposite, different, unlike, unlike." Popular culture—with its pop song choristers leading the charge—has long traded on rebellion as individual expression for products aimed at the youth culture market, cosseting those oppositional urges into profitable consumption. Similarly, "Happy" imagines a self-aware Subject announcing her happiness through song, nonchalantly claiming Otherness as a position of power rather than subordination. In his Othering, Williams offers consumption as empowerment rather than escapism and marked as conscious rather than conspicuous by an agentive rather than passively compliant consumer. In another twist on the promotion imitating art imitating life meme, Williams can point to another of his T-shirt offerings, which states in simple block letters across the front, "The Same Is Lame."⁷ Yet Williams's entrepreneurial consumerism aligned with its idiosyncratic reversal of Other-ing practically guarantees that the "same will remain."

Postrace, Postpolitics

In 2013, Williams, in collaboration with the French filmmaking duo We Are From L.A., produced the world's first twenty-four-hour-long music video for "Happy."⁸ The video loops the music as a sound track to feature a number of lip-synching dancers, most of whom appear nonprofessional, though a sizable number clearly have some sort of dance training or performance experience and are meant to be representative of diversity—young, old, female, male, black, white, Latinx, Asian, multiracial, multisexual, variously attired, coiffed, and accessorized suggesting divergent class and gender positions including cameos by celebrity entertainers—giving physical expression to the song, shot in a high-gloss guerrilla style at various locations throughout Los Angeles. Williams appears in versions at the top of each hour. However, as the video approaches noon and moves into the late evening, sequences begin to trouble the sunshine-filled narrative as bemused middle-class tourist onlookers give way to the homeless and night-shift or off-shift laborers gazing quizzically at or awkwardly interacting with the dancers (or, most often, avoiding the camera crew and the dancers as much as possible). The juxtaposition of the happy dancers and these other, more perplexing participants, especially in the late, wee hours of the video, highlights the incongruencies of Williams's "feel-good" politics.

Williams's song is certainly a textbook example of an eminently pleasurable "summer single."⁹ The song's insistence that "bad news, give me all you got, I'll be just fine," simply because "I'm happy, can't nothing bring me down," resonates sympathetically with his public statements on race. As I detail later, Williams claims that social norms have moved us past considerations of race and that simply "being happy" will help move us past racism. Williams's descriptions of the contemporary moment as "postracial" evince a disingenuous optimism for an *individualist* agency often expressed by the aphorism "Be the change you wish to see in the world."¹⁰

Williams's belief in individual rather than collective happiness as empowering is both an advertisement industry award-winning campaign (Jardine 2014) and his way of promoting positive change in the world.¹¹ In this sense, Williams does not shy away from using his song politically; indeed, he weaves both his consumerist politics and a call to world peace into color-blind entrepreneurial cloth. As reported in a *Rolling Stone* article in 2014: "I'm really upset they're not letting the press out here right now, so we could show them what it looks like for 100,000 people to be happy," said Pharrell, going on to suggest that problems in the Middle East could be alleviated if only they'd

see that mass happiness was possible, or something. His later call for ‘more female coders, more female doctors, more female artists’ was considerably more effective, especially because there were more women onstage during his set than at any other time throughout the [Made In America 2014] festival’s run” (see G. Edwards and Rosenthal 2014).

Progressive gender politics reduced to counting bodies notwithstanding, Williams’s advice that the political problems of the Middle East are solvable by “mass happiness” confronts difference and, more significantly, the power differentials embedded within relationships of difference with a dancer’s smile. Since the election of US president Barack Hussein Obama, the “post-racial” entered the public vocabulary as the discourses of multiculturalism and color blindness devolved into a rhetoric of diversity.¹² In considering David Hollinger’s argument that current “ethnoracial vocabularies are theoretically and ethically inadequate,” Paul Taylor (2014) pushes further, noting that while Hollinger’s “ideological postracialism” recognizes the continuation of racism, Hollinger’s concurrent assumption that racial hierarchies have disappeared leads to blaming individuals for any inadequate achievements due to their purported inability to take advantage of the opportunities now available to them (which Hollinger agrees was denied their forebears).¹³

In the wake of the deaths of unarmed young black men and women, however, the idea that race no longer matters has been given the lie. Race matters, to quote Cornel West, and identity and identification seem to matter more, not less, in a world in which death haunts the lives of black- and brown-skinned people, collective as well as individual, regardless of class position, educational achievement, or public prominence as evidenced by the 2009 arrest of Harvard University professor Henry Louis Gates Jr. in his home.

The killing of unarmed black individuals whose killers face little to no consequences, even as their communities are demonized for grieving the loss of their daughters and sons and, more significantly, for demanding justice and equality under the law, speaks back to the limits of individualized self-empowerment in the face of systemic racialized violence. What matters an individual’s sense of agency when her life can end abruptly, “inconsequentially,” thanks to judicial rulings that belittle the lives that expire at the hands of law enforcement officers who have been able to (re)move themselves “beyond the law” and, it appears to many, for little reason other than being black or brown?¹⁴

In an *Ebony* interview that took place shortly after Michael Brown’s killing in Ferguson, Missouri, Williams was asked if he had seen the video footage of Brown in a convenience store shortly before he was killed. Williams admitted

he had, asserting, “It looked very bully-ish; that in itself I had a problem with. Not with the kid, but with whatever happened in his life for him to arrive at a place where that behavior is OK. Why aren’t we talking about that?” While acknowledging that larger social forces were also at work in Ferguson that day, Williams notes, “The boy [Michael Brown] was walking in the middle of the street when the police supposedly told him to ‘get the fuck on the sidewalk.’ If you don’t listen to that, after just having pushed a storeowner, you’re asking for trouble.” Williams admits that Brown should not have been killed, but rather than protest the killing, he reasons that “displaced anger is a brushfire and the media is the wind” and advocates instead that for “every individual who gets killed, someone should build a school or teach a child.”¹⁵

Williams’s call to a politics of respectability, with its judgmental prescriptive agenda, echoes Bill Cosby, who Williams cites immediately following the preceding quotes. Linking the politics of “being happy” to his successful music career, Williams’s understanding of consumerism as the answer to social and political tensions can be tethered to his reading of Cosby, a black comedian who, as Williams reminds us, “had all of us wearing Coogi sweaters [in the 1980s]. You’ve got to respect him.” Because Williams praised Cosby prior to the elder comedian’s legal troubles over allegations of serial rape, I want to remain focused on Williams’s sympathies for Cosby’s politics of respectability. Voicing his support for Cosby’s public denuncements of the “hip hop generation” in the same interview in which he discusses the Brown killing, Williams affirms, “I agree with him [Cosby]. When Cosby [blamed black youth for their lack of achievement due to inadequate adherence to (white, “colorblind”) bourgeois norms] back then, I understood; I got it.” Williams continues, “Cosby can talk that talk because he created *Fat Albert* . . . [and] he portrayed a doctor on *The Cosby Show*,” remarkably citing a comic character and a television situation comedy role as support for his endorsement. It may not be surprising, then, to note that Williams turned “Happy” into a children’s book “filled with photos of children around the world ‘celebrating what it means to be happy’” (Contrera 2015). In line with his admiration for Cosby’s influence on fans’ sweater choices and in keeping with his belief in the power of consumer choice as a means to a progressive politic, Williams’s commercial offerings include *Comme des Garçons* fragrances, Adidas sneakers, Billionaire Boys Club high-end streetwear, and Louis Vuitton jewelry.

The multiple accusations of serial rape currently haunting Cosby tarnish his once prominent advocacy of the politics of respectability, and Williams has had his own legal entanglements concerning popular music songwriting and publishing rights, which I discuss later. While the two men are involved

with distinct kinds of legal, moral, and ethical breaches that are not equivalent, they reveal, at the very least, the limits of a consumer-driven politics of upward mobility in which individual achievement, particularly in economic terms as displayed by brand-name loyalties, is the sine qua non of black liberation. As Banet-Weiser puts it, “Despite the social change rhetoric framing much commodity activism, the empowerment aimed for is . . . most often personal and individual. In this context, . . . the individual is a flexible commodity that can be packaged, made, and remade—a commodity that gains value through self-empowerment” (2012, 17).

In this light, Williams has clearly set a transformative agenda for his commodity-cultivating cultural moves, to use Herman Gray’s apt term to describe “the shape, shifts, and effects of black struggles over identity, recognition, and representation” (2005, 3). I will grant that Williams’s proclamation of moving to a space beyond race is *meant to be liberatory*. However, as Gray argued in 2005, while individual black achievements make visible black contributions to national and global culture, “they are no guarantors of progressive projects for racial justice” (186). I quote Gray at length as his prescient description glosses our present moment, conveying the complications and unintended uses of black achievement, including those “used to support political projects that deny any specific claim or warrant on the part of black folk to experiencing disproportionately the effects of social injustice, economic inequality, racism, and so on. As state and national campaigns for ‘color blindness’ and against affirmative action indicate, black visibility is often the basis for claims to racial equality, the elimination of social and economic injustice, and *the arrival of the time for racial invisibility*” (186; emphasis added).

Gray describes the twin-edged wedge of black achievement: “Liberals use media representation of black achievement (rather than images of, say, criminality) to persuade constituents of the importance of diversity, while conservatives use the same representations to celebrate the virtues of color blindness and individual achievement.” The stakes are clear: “This state of affairs expresses the contested nature of representation, and shows why representation remains an important site of cultural politics” (2005, 186). Writing these words several years before the first election of Barack Obama to the US presidency, Gray’s words continue to echo.

A current example: despite the presence of a former black US president and two consecutive black attorneys general, the list of publicly known names of blacks, including minors, who have been killed by police continues to grow as of this writing (April 2015).¹⁶ This statistic is not attributable to gang warfare or random street violence, nor is it restricted to black male youth. Police

officers, sworn to serve and protect the public, are directly involved in these deaths. Yet despite live-action video taken of the events, sometimes from multiple sources, the individual officers involved in the incidents have had little to say publicly—or been made to say—and that is saying *something*. What color as well as how much skin one might have in the game, so to speak, matters.

The point, in other words, is not to imagine an equitable social world in which we see (or hear) “*past skin color*” but to fully inhabit one “*with skin color*”—*but* without any social stigma (or prestige) or systemic disadvantage (or advantage) attached to any particular tint (or rhythm, timbre). Kathryn T. Gines writes, “*The ultimate goal is not denying the existence of racial categories or eliminating the idea of race, but rather the eradication of systematic institutionalized racism*. It is neither necessarily pathological to have a willful attachment to racial identities nor altogether undesirable to maintain race and ethnic based communities—even in the absence of racism and ethnocentrism” (2014, 84; emphasis added). That’s quite a trick, however; indeed, the need to reconceive a social order in which hierarchies are constantly put under question is only one issue, let alone the fundamental need to address the seemingly inherent antagonisms within normative notions of identity/difference relations.¹⁷

In contrast, Ahmed argues that colonialism—a project justified by notions of the racial and cultural superiority of Western imperial power—set in motion the dynamics of race deeming non-European Others as requiring the civilizing effects of happy submission to colonization. Indeed, the “civilizing mission can be described as a happiness mission. For happiness to become a mission, the colonized other must first be deemed unhappy” (Ahmed 2010, 125). Williams’s attempts to reverse this logic by proclaiming one’s personal happiness offer little to challenge the idea that Others, in the eyes of power, are inherently *unhappy*. This logic figures people of color as pathetic, if not pathological, victims of their own inability to achieve happiness as productive citizen-consumers of the capitalist state. Is Williams convinced, in fact, that a police officer at a late-night traffic stop *won’t* shoot him because he’s a “billionaire playboy” convinced that “the same is lame”?

Dancing through the Intersectional

Williams actively transforms US racism’s painful legacy in his response to an interviewer’s question about whether “someone who is Black and in [his] income bracket still encounters racism,” answering, “Yes. I think [racism] affects everyone. But I’m really concerned about how it affects my culture.

Here's the thing, though: *We're going to start seeing that it's actually less about race and more about class in the future. . . .* After all, our commander-in-chief is Black, right?" (K. Hunt 2014; emphasis added). Ignoring the lived reality of the poor, a majority for whom "race is the modality through which class is lived" (Hall 1980, 341), Williams seems unaware that much of the sharp criticisms from the Right against President Obama are explicitly racialized as when anti-Obama protesters carry signs with altered photographs suggesting he is a non-*Homo sapiens* primate.¹⁸ By focusing on class, Williams devalues race or any number of issues subsumed beneath the still deeply divisive term "identity politics," viewing them as counterproductive diversions. Yet, pace Williams, as George Lipsitz demonstrates throughout his powerful study *How Racism Takes Place*: "In nearly every aspect of life, from the frequency and duration of layoffs to the location of branch bank closings, *race proved to be a more decisive variable than class*" (2011, 8; emphasis added).

Further, Williams displays a remarkably tin ear to the ways in which class positioning articulates social hierarchies, particularly as they intersect with other registers of identity, including race. Race, in other words, has not left the building. Williams argues, "As much as we complain about the establishment discriminating against us, we're going to start seeing that more of us are already in the establishment," erasing the assimilative nature of belonging to "the establishment." In other words, as Pierre Bourdieu (1984) argues, becoming part of the bourgeois "establishment" involves socializing into its allowable and available range of performative positionings (including certain transgressions, iconoclasm[s], and contrarians allowed to be visible and even valued at times), ideological perspectives (including certain allowable heterodoxies), and social relationships (including vocational, familial, and political) while accomplishing little to transform the differential power relations between majority and minority positionings. It encourages the reification of those power relations, in fact, by naturalizing them, layering another level of ideological sediment to the social strata.

With the inauguration of the forty-fifth president of the United States of America, the rhetoric of the nation moving beyond race has largely faded from public discourse, further obscuring the fact that the historical achievement of a black presidency has been reduced to an individual rather than a collective triumph. Indeed, raising the melanin quotient at the country club has not meant that social equality has been achieved. While Williams certainly recognizes this condition of impossibility—of black sound's inability, in other words, to begin from a superior (let alone equal) positioning—even

as he celebrates entering the clubhouse through the front door, the final result is a disquieting truism: be careful what you wish for.

Conclusion

Some of Williams's Teflon-coated postracial stance may be revealing dings and scrapes. In March 2015, a jury awarded Marvin Gaye's estate \$7.4 million, deciding that Robin Thicke and Pharrell Williams had plagiarized Gaye's music in creating "Blurred Lines," their 2013 hit. Perhaps tellingly, Pharrell and Thicke had initiated a suit as plaintiffs in August 2013 in an attempt to foreclose any action by Gaye's children, who hold the rights to their father's compositions ("Marvin Gaye's Family" 2015; Wood 2015). "Blurred Lines" sold more than 7.3 million copies in the United States market alone, earning Williams and Thicke more than \$7 million apiece, according to court testimony (McCartney 2015).¹⁹ News articles report the award was based on non-notational musical similarities, including attention to elements such as timbre and rhythmic style instead of note-for-note melodic or harmonic similitude as in previous court cases—a move from sheet music to recording as legal evidence.²⁰ In much of the reporting of the court case, Williams has purportedly earned more than \$100 million. If the profits from the sales and licensing of his nonmusical business ventures are added to his already-considerable holdings, he has moved several steps closer to his dream to join "the establishment."

Before concluding, I offer a possible counter to all I have written here. Is it possible to hear "Happy" as ironic, as a signifyin(g) gesture, using a declaration of happiness not to register one's true emotional state but to shield oneself from the micro- and not-so-micro-aggressions of the day? Is it the sound track to a stance that says, "Don't let them think they're sweating you"? A twenty-first-century update of performing hep or cool (read, black) indifference, insolence, or irony?

I am almost convinced by a single iteration of "Happy" from the entire twenty-four-hour version (I watched all 360 iterations at least once initially from February 2 through 14, 2015).²¹ It occurs relatively early in the video's day (beginning at midnight), at 12:20 AM, when a middle-aged black man, a gas station attendant in a previous iteration, moves from behind the cash register counter to begin his time with the song. He keeps things simple, avoiding some of the breathless quality of almost every other, usually younger, dancer's ending (including the following two dancers, who are forced to lie down on the ground to catch their breath as the song continues to churn, happily, beneath them at various points). He begins reservedly and, again in

contrast to a majority of his “dance partners,” ends his sequence with a slight *buildup* of energy throughout the latter part of his rendition. Bouncing in place, alternately clapping and snapping his fingers rhythmically throughout the song, he embodies “being happy” in a disarmingly open-hearted way. He lip-synchs well, offering us witty facial expressions and clever hand movements as gestural accompaniment to his “vocalizations.” He is one of the few dancers in the entire twenty-four-hour period who is able to comment on as well as enact specific lyrical content by synchronizing deft and often comic hand patterns and subtle head nods, with competing eye, heel and toe, and hip and knee movements in a continuously graceful flow.

It is the loose, comfortable relationship he enjoys with his body that is remarkable. An otherwise unassuming figure, it is his joyous relationship with the song apprehended through his body that captivates. I return to his performance periodically and am always transfixed by the magic of it, which is no less enthralling with repetition. The affect is always a warm, pleasurable enactment of an individual’s sense of “being happy.” The scare quotes are warranted because his reality—low-wage worker, even if franchise owner, at a gas station with long, boring hours at a counter, engaged in mostly tedious interactions with others, and the issue of safety, particularly at an hour such as 12:20 AM—does not provide the conditions, one assumes, for human fulfillment, let alone happiness. And yet he never stops moving his hips, knees, or feet, his arms and hands in constant motion. His dance is more than an ironic rejoinder to the oppressive conditions of his material life; it is a celebration of the body and its joys, truths, and sheer *physicality* as a supplement to the logic of economic determination in the final instance. His head remains still, relative to his body’s kinetic energy, exposing, perhaps, the reason for this ability when he temporarily abandons dance for a display of the “sweet science,” shadowboxing with surprising dexterity. Can we see his brief pugilistic display as actively, physically, resisting his material condition and positioning? His happiness as agentive, purposeful, *significant*? His ending is the sharpest of any of the versions (Williams’s included), miming the recording’s abrupt ending with a wink while pointing directly to us, grinning slightly before folding his shoulders in and breaking his dancer’s pose, no longer the happy dancer but the graveyard shift gas station attendant, break time over. Yet throughout his dance, his body is a study in contrary motion, conveying the pleasures of the flesh under conditions he did not create. Happy yet unhappy, in motion, yet still.

Perhaps, however, we should return to Sara Ahmed’s cautionary aside mentioned earlier about presuming the subaltern’s unhappiness. Nor do I

mean to presume the gas station worker's obliviousness to the material conditions of his life, that he is a preternaturally happy soul who always glimpses the silver lining. Rather, I am suggesting that the attendant is simultaneously signaling pleasurable and critical responses to the song through facial expression and coordinated body movement that is not "about" race but is effective *through* race. The brief hint of pugilism is leavened by the slow-cooked dancing surrounding that moment, building its complexities through a continual stirring, just barely boiling physicality, bubbling in its joy. Still, anyone familiar with the sweet science knows the grace of a boxer's hands is often matched with speed and, most important, effective power. This gas station attendant's facial expression and comic timing indicate another sort of effectiveness, a kind of diffident resistance, and it is worth noting that most of his performance is a sly dance in this mode.

In contrast, at 8:48 PM a chicken-suited dancer is preening in a supermarket, as manic as the gas station attendant was fully in control. Is this the post-racial body, a costumed simulacrum of physical presence? In a reverse mirror performance of the gas attendant's pugilistic skill, the dancer transforms a move to avoid dropping her "chicken head" into a gesture of abandonment and glee. The performance is leavened not only by the ridiculous chicken suit but also by the dancer's obvious pleasure in moving through the supermarket hidden beneath a ridiculous chicken suit. The suit frees the person "inside" to express herself in a number of very un-chicken-like moves: grabbing her crotch, rolling in the aisles, twerking, rearticulating gender from sexuality, feathers from skin, masks from flesh. It is a refutation of pessimism and passivity, enjoining us to a manic sort of happiness, a fevered relinquishing of decorum, a ridiculous chicken-suited clown hamming it up in front of a camera.²²

Allow me one final word from Ahmed, expanding from Audre Lorde's position that "we should not be protected from what hurts. We have to work and struggle not so much to feel hurt but to notice what causes hurt, which means unlearning what we have learned not to notice. We have to do this work if we are to produce critical understandings of how violence, as a relation of force and harm, is directed toward some bodies and not others" (2010, 215–16). The chicken-suited dancer's energetic performance is a refutation of the killing, packaging, and marketing of the animal body for literal human consumption, items she dances past with obvious joy, abandoning inhibition, wings and legs aflutter. Her dance suggests that one cannot have happiness without its opposite. Happiness embraces many kinds of truth, including the jester's truth as she, free in her chicken skin, dances toward the butcher's cleaver.

Still, I remain unconvinced by these dancers, in the end, because Pharrell Williams wants us to hear—*insists* that we hear—“Happy” as “postracial.” Seemingly deaf to the ways in which institutionalized, systemic racism results in the periodic recurrence of deaths, not to speak of all of the less-than-mortal disregard, of everyday black and brown citizens throughout the United States, Williams explicitly links political ideals to commercial consumerism. In 2014, as *Rolling Stone’s* headline described it, “Producer [Williams] encourages fans to donate to humanitarian fund while promoting global hit ‘Happy’” (J. Newman 2014). Partnering with the United Nations Foundation to help celebrate the International Day of Happiness on March 20, 2014, while pursuing publicity for “Happy” as the sound track to an ideology of “happiness conquers all,” Williams encouraged his fans to upload their interpretations of his song to his YouTube channel, garnering free content for a commercialized ideological pitch. The UN proclamation for the day brought attention to the “need for a more inclusive, equitable and balanced approach to economic growth that promotes sustainable development, poverty eradication, happiness, and the well-being of all peoples” (J. Newman 2014) while avoiding the language of difference (race, ethnicity, nationality) or offering substantial policy advice or direction. Lipsitz sums up the situation: “In all areas of US life, we now confront the presumption that color-bound injustices require color-blind remedies, that race-based problems should be solved by race-blind remedies. As a result, more than four decades after the civil rights activism of the 1960s, and nearly one hundred and fifty years after the abolition of slavery, *race remains the most important single variable determining opportunities and life chances in the United States*” (2011, 15; emphasis added).

To return to “Happy,” a hit pop song:²³ Williams has stood as proxy for postracial discourse, which has a complicated decades-long history. So I will end with the image of a yellow chicken with bright red wings and comb, dancing in the aisles of a supermarket somewhere in Los Angeles, twirling in a beautiful circle, lip-synching “Clap along if you feel like happiness is the truth!” I clap along because I do, in fact, feel “like happiness is [a] truth.” But we are all struggling in a world of often overwhelming *unhappiness* (recall those dead chicken bodies being danced past in that supermarket, the factory farms from which they arrived, and the desensitization necessary to labor in their production and consumption). As we come to the end of the second half of the second decade of the twenty-first century, there is an almost palpable *absence of happiness* in large parts of the world, evincing the real tragedies just beneath the surface of many peoples’ lives.²⁴ The fact that it has

always been thus is laughable as solace and pathologically tragic if meant to belittle all the individual and collective struggles for self-realization, achievement, and personal fulfillment. And, meanwhile, the climate changes, bringing its own set of complications and requirements for coordinated human action.

Indeed, given the existential and mortal dangers with which our current social order confronts us, we do not need a postracial world so much as a post-*racist* one. As Kathryn Gines cautions, “We should not conflate *post-racialism* (the idea that eliminating racial categories or ignoring race will make racism go away) with *post-racism* (the antiracist struggle to identify and dismantle systems of racial oppression, especially institutionalized racism)” (2014, 79; emphasis added). The reason for the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement and the reactions to the movement and its *raison d’être*—that is, the continuing war on black and brown bodies by police and their enabling alliance with the legal establishment—continue to engulf the racial landscape of the United States despite a black president, a black attorney general, or black police officers. As David Theo Goldberg noted at the dawn of Obama’s presidency, “The end of racism is confused with no more than being against race, the end of race substituting to varying degrees for the commitment to—the struggles for—ending racism. The refusal of racism reduces to racial refusal; and racial refusal is thought to exhaust antiracism” (2009, 1), aptly describing the ways in which Williams mines this discursive confusion with calls to be happy. The call to do the impossible, channeling Sun Ra, is still provocative. It is time for something more than provocations, however. It is time to realize a differently constructed social world in which power is distributed freely, coordinated collaboratively, and instrumentalized in ways that encourage trust, sincerity, and compassion among collaborators across, between, and through difference. Clap along to *that*.

Notes

- 1 I borrow the term “aggrieved communities” and its meaning from George Lipsitz. See also, for example, Rich 2014. There is a link to the Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights and its reports in Rich’s article.

See also Wolfers, Leonhardt, and Quealy 2015. “This article describes the fact that “[more] than one out of every six black men who today should be between 25 and 54 years old have disappeared from daily life . . . largely because of early deaths or because they are behind bars”; see also Wolfers 2015.

- 2 I acknowledge that Orta is no choirboy. However, his involvement in the Garner case is limited to the legal act of recording police officers acting in the public sphere on a private

citizen who, at the very least, should be treated as innocent until proven guilty. That I should have to write that said citizen should not be *dead* after the encounter is symptomatic of much current political and public discourse regarding difference. See also note 16 below.

- 3 Numerous texts make this point, including Floyd 1995; Small 1998; Ward 1998. For more on the ability of black musicking to play a vital role in social justice organizing, see Reed 2005; Monson 2007; Sullivan 2011.
- 4 Note that only forty-eight iterations of “Happy” during the entire twenty-four-hour video feature more than a solo dancer. Of those forty-eight versions, two are of women with dogs, and one woman is seen dancing with a puppet. The other couples are largely male-female or male-male duos. There are two versions of young girls dancing together and two of adult females dancing with young children. There is a single version of a woman performing in a wheelchair.
- 5 The site is currently reduced to a multicolored “splash” page with links to various social media sites. The manifesto, in other words, is no longer online.
- 6 See <http://iamother.com/>. I have retained the use of uppercase letters from the website.
- 7 The shirt also sports “Think other” in a smaller font and the logo for the company i am OTHER.
- 8 The twenty-four-hour video was available for viewing at www.24hoursofhappy.com/.
- 9 The song was initially released in November 2013 for the *Despicable Me 2* sound track. Williams reminds us of this cinematic link in the fifth iteration of “Happy” in his twenty-four-hour video version, which, instead of a live-action dancer, focuses on a vintage 1980s-era monitor on the counter of a gas station displaying scenes from the film, which acts as a self-conscious visual commentary on the lyrics. Two other iterations reference *Despicable Me 2*, both using dancing yellow “minion” characters. At 5:32 AM, a trio of minions dances uphill along a frontage road in a park. At 4:40 PM, a single minion dances through a suburban Southern California neighborhood.
- 10 Often attributed to Mahatma Gandhi, as Brian Morton (2010) points out in a *New York Times* editorial, it is a misquotation. As Morton notes, the actual quote—“If we could change ourselves, the tendencies in the world would also change. As a man changes his own nature, so does the attitude of the world change towards him. . . . We need not wait to see what others do”—promotes, rather, the idea that “for Gandhi, the struggle to bring about a better world involved not only stringent self-denial and rigorous adherence to the philosophy of nonviolence; it also involved a steady awareness that one person, alone, can’t change anything, an awareness that unjust authority can be overturned only by great numbers of people working together with discipline and persistence.”
- 11 There is not space here to fully engage with the debates surrounding either the political efficacy or the weighing of philosophical value between various versions of community and individualism. For more detail on this particular set of debates, see Fox-Genovese 1990; Keat 2013. There is also a substantial amount of literature devoted to these tensions in psychology and education; see, for example, Bhawuk 1992.
- 12 For a view from philosophy and political theory, the special issue of the *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race* 1, no. 1 (March 2014) focusing on the “post-racial,” with contributions from the coeditors (Robert Gooding-Williams and Charles W. Mills), as

well as Paul C. Taylor, Lawrie Balfour, Tommie Shelby, Kathryn T. Gines, and Cristina Beltrán, provides a number of productive entry points for grappling with the term.

- 13 Paul C. Taylor (2014, 14) also raises the significant issue of the whitewashing of history in “ideological postracialism” through its efforts to hold to the prohibition of race-talk as an antiracist posture, thus making it difficult to raise questions regarding past injustices.
- 14 At the time I was finishing this essay, multiple police officers were facing felony charges for the deaths of Walter Scott and Freddie Gray (see note 16 below). This fact does not erase all the other deaths that have occurred with little to no consequence for the police officer involved and is indicative of a systemic disregard for black lives. That this is a national issue indicates its pervasive and insidious character, though it has been characterized as the actions of a few bad apples. The orchard is rotting from the roots.
- 15 All quotations in this and the following paragraph are from K. Hunt 2014, except where noted otherwise.
- 16 Regarding the attorneys general, I am thinking not only of Eric Holder but also of his successor, Loretta Lynch. She faced an unprecedented delay in her confirmation by the US Congress due, in large part, to current political positions by dominant players rather than the merits of her case.

Sadly, in April 2015, fifty-year-old Walter L. Scott joined the ranks of widely publicized black Americans shot to death by white police officers. The unarmed Scott was shot as he ran away from a traffic stop. At the time of writing, the police officer involved, Michael Slager, had been charged with first-degree murder. The footage responsible for indicting the police officer was on the internet and used by mainstream media news outlets alike. Consequently, Scott’s death quickly became a national spectacle, rendering it a public matter. April 2015 also saw the death of twenty-five-year-old Freddie Gray while in police custody in Baltimore, Maryland. Six Baltimore police officers have been charged with various crimes in relation to Gray’s death. We should not forget that the names of black and brown people are drawn from the list of known, i.e., reported, killings; I want to acknowledge the unreported here, as well. Indeed, there has been legalized killing of non-white people since the US colonial period. A running count of all individuals—i.e., not only blacks—killed by police in the United States can be found at *The Counted* website: www.theguardian.com/us-news/ng-interactive/2015/jun/01/the-counted-police-killings-us-database#, accessed June 6, 2015.

Even more tragically, the deaths of nine black congregants at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, at the hands of white supremacist Dylann Roof occurred just before the deadline for the submission of this essay. While Roof was not a police officer, his actions speak even more clearly to the connection of white supremacist ideology in contemporary US culture to its mortal consequences for black American lives.

- 17 And then, perhaps, we can begin to rationally discuss reparations, decolonization processes, and other historical dismantlings.
- 18 All the quotations in this paragraph are from K. Hunt 2014. For example, Obama continued to face political opposition in often undisguised racist reactions to his presidency. I am thinking here not only of Donald Trump’s standing request to see Obama’s “actual”

birth certificate or Tea Partiers' related emphasis on the purported foreignness of his upbringing and heritage but also the Republican Party's obstructionist policy toward any Executive Office initiative at least partially rooted in race-based opposition to Obama's presidency. See, for example, Bouie 2012; Ramos and Fabian 2014; Slate 2014; Grunwald 2012. For a concise blog post regarding the racist imagery used against President Obama and his wife, Michelle, see Sauer 2011.

A May 21, 2015, *New York Times* story by Julie Hirschfeld Davis describes that "it took only a few minutes for Mr. Obama's account to attract racist, hate-filled posts and replies. Posts addressed him with racial slurs, called him a monkey, and one had an image of the president's neck in a noose." The left has also criticized President Obama but on issues of policy, including his inaction or unfavorable action on any number of given issues, including fracking, the closing of Guantanamo Bay prison facilities, government surveillance programs, and the use of drones.

- 19 However, the Associated Press reported that Williams and Thicke each earned \$5 million from the sales of "Blurred Lines." In any case, it was a substantial amount of money.
- 20 At the Columbia University music department's fiftieth anniversary of its graduate student-run journal, *Current Musicology*, invited guest Harvard University Quincy Jones Professor of African American Music, Ingrid Monson, told the audience about her experience as an expert witness in the "Blurred Lines" case, noting that the arguments regarding *notational* distinctions, which are the historical basis of copyright law, no longer carried much rhetorical weight, and it was the argument for the correlations between audible phenomena such as the timbral affinities between the two *recordings* of music that won the day.
- 21 There are a number of enchanting, funny, and endearing dancers scattered throughout the twenty-four hours. However, the gas station attendant—even if simply a character—is the sole dancer to consistently rub creatively against the grain of "Happy" as I am portraying it here. The young woman at 11:24 PM may come closest in an opposite way by giving in to and embodying the song's naive charms.
- 22 Yet she, too, has to take a short breather at one point in her dance, simply lying coquettishly, belly down, on the floor with her feet up behind her.
- 23 According to Jason Newman's *Rolling Stone* article, "*Girl* [the recording featuring "Happy"] has reached Number One in more than 75 countries since its release and is Spotify's Number One album worldwide. 'Happy' has topped *Billboard's* Hot 100 chart, *Billboard's* Digital Songs and *Billboard's* Radio Songs and is Number One on the iTunes chart in more than 90 countries" (J. Newman 2014). Elsewhere, "Happy" was listed by *Billboard* as the Top Single of 2014; www.billboard.com/charts/year-end/2014/hot-100-songs, accessed April 19, 2015. Williams was awarded a 2015 Grammy award for "Best Pop Solo Performance" and "Best Music Video" for "Happy," as well as a "Best Urban Contemporary Album" Grammy for *Girl*.
- 24 Recent articles in the *New York Times* (A. Williams 2017) and *Japan Times* (Hoffman 2016; Editorial Board 2016) point to a small cottage industry in "we are now living in an age of anxiety" essays and articles.