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Neglecting the Subjects of the Drag Performance in White Chicks

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In the film *White Chicks*, actors Shawn and Marlon Wayans play two FBI agents who dress in drag and pretend to be two white heiresses on a social weekend in the luxurious Hamptons. The film lives up to the temporary transvestite film genre while simultaneously acquiring its own stance within the genre since it features actual human subjects in the film to model the drag performances after. The majority of discussion on *White Chicks* tackles the racially-charged content within the film, focusing on the white-face performance the African American actors use throughout the film. Such texts do not focus on the drag aspect of the film very much, only to specify the persona the actors are performing: the rich-valley-girl. In the film *White Chicks*, the main protagonists, FBI agents Kevin and Marcus Copeland use their contextually diegetic passing drag performances, as Brittany and Tiffany Wilson respectively, to successfully negate the presence of the two white heiresses, by completely replacing them throughout the majority of the film, within the white upperclass society the original heiresses reside in. Other characters in the film, including agents Gomez and Harper, two of the Copelands' colleagues, and the real Wilson sisters' friends Karen, Lisa and Tori, as well as certain directorial choices in camera gaze and plot line, also add to this neglect of the Wilson sisters, resorting the heiress characters, Brittany and Tiffany, to serve as *mise-en-abyme* images throughout the film.

Why Drag?

The film *White Chicks* follows two African American FBI agents, Kevin and Marcus Copeland, played by Shawn and Marlon Wayans respectively. The two agents have been down on their luck with recent involvement in undercover cases, including the botched attempt to take down an entire drug cartel during the opening scene of the film. The agents are then assigned to

an “easy” case: in the midst of a kidnapping threat, two heiress sisters, Brittany and Tiffany Wilson, must be chaperoned from the airport to the Hamptons for a glorious weekend of upper-class, white-society schmoozing. During the trip to the Hamptons, the agents and the heiresses get into a minor car accident, resulting in minimal scratches to the sisters’ faces, both of whom believe the “damage” to be catastrophic to their social weekend. The sisters refuse to be taken to the Hamptons and the agents call up some “friends” from the Bureau to transform themselves into replicas of the Wilson sisters, without the girls’ consent. The film tracks the two agents in their experience of being black men pretending to be “white chicks” in uppity white society, always avoiding being caught by the chief of the Bureau and two of their competitive colleagues, agents Harper and Gomez, whilst investigating the kidnapping threat and looking for the perpetrators (*White Chicks*).

The subjects of Kevin and Marcus Copeland’s drag performance are the Wilson sisters, Brittany and Tiffany, played by actresses Maitland Ward and Anne Dudek respectively. The characters are stereotypical rich white girls: skinny and blonde, with expensive, highly-feminine makeup, complete with the “Valley Girl” accent and a prissy purse dog. When the sisters first arrive in the custody of the agents, they step off of a private jet, carrying very little of their own luggage. Kevin and Marcus approach the sisters in order to introduce themselves, only to be cut off by one of the girls’ remarking, “we already gave to the United Negro Fund.” The agents correct them and explain their purpose. The sisters then treat them like servants, forcing them to carry their excessive luggage and “clean Baby’s cage.” The group of five pack into the small SUV: Kevin seated in the driver’s seat, Baby the Dog perched in the passenger’s side seat, Brittany and Tiffany poised in the backseat, and Marcus stuffed into the trunk with the luggage. The small accident then occurs, caused by Kevin’s struggle to control the car while saving the

dog from falling to his death from the open front window of the vehicle. When the group returns to the city, the girls throw temper tantrums, known as “bitch fits,” over their “destroyed” faces and refuse to go to the Hamptons (*White Chicks* 12:55-16:37). After only a few short interactions and observances with the heiresses, Kevin and Marcus already have an abundance of useful information regarding the girls’ personalities, mannerisms, dialogues, and of course, racial biases.

Writers for the *African American Review*, George Yancy and Tracey Ann Ryser, explain that Shawn and Marlon Wayans’ “performance of whiteness reveals [whiteness’s] sense of entitlement, its solipsism, and duplicity” (737). But the actors’ performance of white-female gender both iterates the absurdity of traditional femininity within the white, upper class society their characters are thrown into while simultaneously reinstating its importance to exist: to undermine the “real” woman’s existence, thus transforming the image of “real” woman to *mise-en-abyme*, as Peggy Phelan suggests. In her chapter on Jennie Livingston’s film, *Paris is Burning*, Phelan reveals that the particular film she is discussing has a “series of displacements which reveal the *mise-en-abyme* of ‘woman as fetish’” (94). In *White Chicks*, however, this “series of displacements” exists in the actions, mannerisms, and dialogues the Copeland characters utilize to perform as the Wilson sisters, resulting in the lack of necessity for the real Wilson sisters’ presence in the film, establishing their *mise-en-abyme* status.

A “New Kind” of Temporary Transvestite Film

Chris Straayer writes on the popularity of drag performances within the context of film in his chapter “Redressing the ‘Natural,’” developing the “basics” of the genre called temporary

transvestite film. *White Chicks* shares many similarities to other temporary transvestite films such as *Some Like It Hot*, *Mrs. Doubtfire*, and *Tootsie*. Obviously, the four films have the theme of men dressing in drag to reach some sort of gain for the plot but not adhering to full-time drag performance once the gain is made, earning the films the right to be “temporary transvestite.” Also, all four films have these protagonists passing with no issue in the settings they are attempting to blend into, despite giveaways within the drag performance noticed by the audience that increases the humor factor in the films (Straayer 47).

One such scene that formulates a “typical” temporary transvestite film is that of a gender-coded reaction that is incongruent with the gender-appearance. Straayer uses the examples from both *Tootsie* and *Mrs. Doubtfire*, explaining the protagonists’ “male” reaction to having a man try to take something from them, whether it be a cab or his/her purse during an attempted mugging. Both protagonists, still in drag, defend themselves while verbally reacting with their “natural” male voices (46). These scenes fall into place with one in the Wayans’ *White Chicks*: after leaving a clothing store, Kevin/Brittany has his/her purse stolen by a running mugger. In both male and FBI agent fashion, his/her reaction is to run after the perpetrator, not just because he/she was mugged, but also to retrieve the purse that contained all of his/her FBI identification. Kevin/Brittany chases the mugger down the street, skirt flailing in the wind, and finally tackles the perp to the ground, who complains, “Jeez, lady! All that for a bag?” to which Kevin/Brittany replies, “It’s not *just* a bag, it’s *Prada*” (*White Chicks* 41:45-43:05). The character neglects his gender-appearance to adhere to his “natural” tone of voice and running stance, only to finally regain awareness of his necessity to change back to his/her gender-appearance-matching voice and stance so as to not seem *more* out of place than he/she already is due to the impressive public chase and tackle.

Another “basic” element of the temporary transvestite film is that of early indications of the drag performers struggling to get used to their costume. In both *Some Like It Hot* and *Mrs. Doubtfire*, all three protagonists in the films stagger while wearing heels in public (Straayer 46). Marcus/Tiffany attempts to flip his/her hair, failing to do so by catching it on his face, and fusses to undo the hair from his latex-ed “face” (*White Chicks* 19:40-57). In *Mrs. Doubtfire*, while dressed as the namesake nanny, the main character of Daniel catches his/her “breasts” on fire whilst cooking (50). These examples remain true in the Wayans’ production in that Kevin, dressed as Brittany, comes up to the hotel counter to check in and his/her “breasts” bump into a stand of flyers on the counter (21:10-21).

Another set of scenes that are normally included in a temporary transvestite film, according to Straayer, is that of the coveted awkward bathroom and/or dressing room scenes in which the protagonist, dressed in drag, utilizes the bathroom or dressing room that their gender-appearance forces them to use (50-51). Frank P. Tomasulo writes in his article on *Tootsie* that the “[gender intersecting] portrayals do not mock women...they mock femininity, which is always already a...costume” (7). *White Chicks* has both an awkward bathroom scene and a simultaneous pair of equally absurd dressing room scenes, both of which incorporate Tomasulo’s idea. There are differences between each films’ take on these particular scenes, but this particular film’s scenes serve multiple purposes. The awkward bathroom scene involves the three friends, Karen, Lisa and Tori, who, like girls stereotypically tend to do, accompany Marcus/Tiffany to the bathroom. Being lactose-intolerant, he/she rushes into the stall in order to relieve himself/herself after eating quiche. The friends stand outside the stall at the mirrors, primping themselves. Marcus/Tiffany begins to make obnoxiously loud gas noises and moans, while the girls outside the stall try to pretend it is not happening (30:30-31:55). Much like

Tomasulo suggested, this scene is poking fun at traditional, feminine “bathroom etiquette”: the myth that women are not supposed to go to the bathroom to “go to the bathroom.” Unlike other films containing this type of scene which aim to create an embarrassing situation for the protagonist, this scene does not create awkwardness in the protagonist in drag, though it does create awkwardness for the characters surrounding him/her. Marcus/Tiffany’s reaction to her *going* does not come off as embarrassment for himself/herself so much as it comes off as being uncomfortably gassy. The girls standing outside the stall become the embarrassed ones due to the “breaking” of the unspoken rule about traditional feminine “bathroom etiquette.”

The second of the set of scenes is that of the awkward dressing room scene in which the protagonist in drag is supposed to feel uncomfortably out of place. In the back-and-forth cuts of the dressing room scene in *White Chicks*, both protagonists endure two different experiences in the women’s dressing room. Marcus/Tiffany, accompanied by Karen and Tori, is trying on women’s clothes for himself/herself, while Kevin/Brittany is assisting Lisa in finding a new outfit. Marcus/Tiffany struggle to fit into the tight leather pants and red top, forcing Karen to come in the room and physically force Marcus/Tiffany into the pants; Kevin/Brittany watches Lisa changing into a mini skirt, then changing her personality into a crazed, self-conscious girl (36:32-40:27). In this series of shots, Marcus/Tiffany is first-handedly suffering from not being able to fit while Kevin/Brittany is trying to comfort Lisa who is excessively ashamed of her body. This scene also serves a larger purpose: the real women in the scene adhere to traditionally female gender constrictions, such as negative body image alongside forcefully trying to fit into too small clothes. The men in the scene, who are passing as women, do not understand this concept, to the point where Kevin/Brittany even calls out for “professional help,” “Dr. Phil,” “Oprah” (40:20-40:28). This creates awkwardness for the men passing as women

because these constrictions are not *as* abrasive for men as they are for women. These issues among other traditionally “female” issues are introduced in the film but are never really challenged or changed.

The neglect to settle issues once brought up in a film mirror that of what Straayer suggests: “temporary transvestite films reinforce society’s heterosexual hegemony and the absolute alignment of gender, sex, and heterosexual preference” (51). Straayer states that films tend to “correct homosexual mistakes” and the heterosexual hegemony is then reinstated. This is negated by *Some Like It Hot* in that when Jerry/Daphne reveals to Osgood that he/she is officially a man, Osgood is not put off by this (55). This similar instance occurs with Terry Crews’ character Latrell Spencer, Marcus/Tiffany’s “Schwarzenegger” suitor. After a night at the club, Latrell wakes up in bed next to a naked blonde. Thinking it is his Tiffany, he strokes the hair of the person next to him, a young party guy named Russ. The shot shows them sitting up in bed, covering themselves with the sheets, and screaming in homophobic terror (1:24:02-38). But, as the film continues, there is no resolution to this occurrence. In fact, there is an addition to the homosexuality that occurs in the film. During the big reveal scene, which is consequently the same scene in which the “bad guy” is captured, Latrell dives in front of Marcus/Tiffany to save him/her from a bullet. Marcus/Tiffany goes over to Latrell to thank him, in his “natural” male voice, for taking the bullet, then removing the latex face and revealing that he/she is actually a man (1:38-48). Latrell is put off by Marcus’s blackness rather than his maleness. This does not resolve the possibility for homosexuality and therefore complicates the reinstatement of the heterosexual hegemony. A scene that does, however, eliminate one possibility for homosexuality is that of Harper and Gomez’s search of the Copeland/Wilson Hamptons hotel room, where they discover that the “Wilson sisters” are men. Before this

revelation is made, Harper finds a pair of women's panties, that he then picks up and sniffs. Gomez, wielding the latex faces, catches Harper in the act. Harper, once realizing his mistake, throws down the panties in homophobic disgust, thus reinstating the heterosexual hegemony of the film (1:14:11-1:15:15). Though various elements of the temporary transvestite film genre ring true to *White Chicks*, the most important difference between this film and the other films within the genre is that this particular story requires actual subjects of the drag performance to be modeled after.

Heiresses as *Mise-en-abyme*

In spirit of how the film treats the characters of Brittany and Tiffany Wilson, the discussion on the *mise-en-abyme*'d sisters can now commence. After the initial introduction of the Copelands' reason for dressing in drag, the sisters completely disappear until much later in the film, and the brothers' passing drag performance takes precedence. Both of the Copelands attain the "Valley Girl" accent and demeaning, racist dialogue in order to pass in the society. Yancy and Ryser argue that the reason for the explicitly racist comments from the "Wilson sisters" is to focus on and make fun of the idea of white privilege in order to make "whiteness visible" (733). But these comments made by the Copleand/Wilson duo, as well as the overly "Valley Girl" persona come off as just plain bullying to the characters of the real Brittany and Tiffany. Though the heiresses are not the most nice, politically correct people in the world, the performance by the Copelands is viewed as making fun of the girls themselves.

The presentation of the Wilson sisters' resurgence back into the film's plot is almost as fake looking as the Copelands' drag getup. The scene begins with the real Tiffany and Brittany, in the same room the Copelands' left them in. They are sitting in bed, "reading" the paper,

discovering a headlining story about their incredible “rock out” in the Hamptons, then realizing that they were not in the Hamptons. As the girls put together a reason for the mistake, they look directly into the camera, which zooms in on the pair in a “mystery-solved” sort of shot, while the sisters exclaim, “We’ve been cloned!” (*White Chicks* 1:24:39-1:25:08). The way the camera zooms in on the pair while they acknowledge the lens pulls the audience out of the total submersion into the film, “the dream.” This shot blatantly represents the artificial existence of the two characters in the film, thus fully revealing just how *mise-en-abyme* the pair really is. In a scene after Gomez and Harper discover the truth behind the “Wilson sisters” they were assigned to look after, they intercept the real Wilson sisters, who are in pursuit of their “clones.” Gomez and Harper forcefully take the girls into custody to their chief, firmly believing that the perpetrators are men. When the two agents present the girls to the chief, they begin to “prove” their illegitimacy by attempting to strip the two “perps” from their authentic “female disguises.” Agent Harper pulls Tiffany’s hair, mistaking it for a wig, followed by Agent Gomez pulling down Brittany’s top, revealing her bare breasts only to himself and Harper, the chief, and the surrounding audience of fellow FBI agents. Gomez then comments on her bosoms, “Those...those are nice,” while Brittany, clearly pleased with her accomplishing assets, smirks with satisfaction. Because all else has failed in the agents’ plan to foil the perps’ disguises, Harper then exclaims, “You can’t fake these!” and proceeds to kneel down and de-skirt the real Tiffany, revealing her genitals to the aforementioned audience. Unlike her sister, Tiffany is not pleased with Harper’s reveal and punches him in the face (1:28:36-1:29:56).

This scene illustrates the characters of the real Brittany and Tiffany Wilson as *mise-en-abyme*, in that, aside from the obvious censorship issues, the women’s actual nude bodies are never shown to the audience, further perpetuating the lack of necessity for their presence. The

lack of genitals shown in the film is not so much of a problem, considering the film was released as PG-13. However, the refusal to show the women's breasts in the film would be less of an issue if not for the previously revealed presence of pseudo-breasts worn by Kevin and Marcus. When the agents are first being fitted for their costumes, faux yet realistic looking breasts are glossed over by the camera, revealing nipple and areola of the rubber mammary (18:16-18). Understandably, the showing of the rubber breasts are used to provoke audience laughter while also giving realistic background to the incredibly complicated costume. Because the audience is so, for lack of a better word, compelled by the Copelands' performance as the Wilson sisters, it is easy for them to forget about the real sisters. This is most likely a directorial choice in order to establish an audience-character relationship of sorts with the Copelands' drag act and to re-create a new, more likable image of the Wilson sisters that is actually Kevin and Marcus. This new, likable image of the Wilson sisters is evident in the final scene of the film, where the Copelands, free of rubber breasts and blonde wigs, confront the three friends, Karen, Lisa and Tori. Karen says "we liked Brittany and Tiffany, like, *so* much more when you were them" (1:48:26-54). Iwona Kolasi ska uses *Tootsie* to explain that the costume attained by the drag performer allows for the possibility of a relationship that better suits both parties (170). This completely renders the real sisters useless not just in the film itself, but also in the society they reside in, considering their friends do not want them anymore.

Conclusion

This temporary transvestite film lives up to the basic elements of the genre but falls flat on making a strong statement about gender issues and gender performance. The film does, however, tackle the issues of race in a more successful manner than it does gender, and

ultimately the effort to tackle both is impressive. Yancy and Ryser argues that the film *White Chicks* not only tries to push issues of race, but also aims to establish that “white women, not white men, are the object of ridicule and critique” (734). Considering the comedic way in which “female” issues are presented in the film, *White Chicks* falls short of reaching this higher notion of pointing out that white women are “objects of ridicule” because of the way the ridiculed characters, Brittany and Tiffany Wilson, are neglected throughout the film. Imitation may not be the best form of flattery in this case because the drag performance of the men is poking fun at the Wilson sisters. Obviously, the importance of the sister’s existence in the film’s narrative is to give reason to Kevin and Marcus’s passing drag act. But their presence in the film is limited to the beginning of the film, where the purpose for Kevin and Marcus’ drag is introduced, and at the end of the film where Kevin and Marcus are revealed as impostors. Phelan explains that the real woman is rendered useless because only images of women are important, and the real women are not (101). Because the Copelands utilized Brittany and Tiffany’s personalities and appearances to gain ground within the diegetic society, it eliminated the need for the real sisters because their images were already being used, and in the context of this film, the image was all that mattered. The models of the performance remained invisible until they were needed to wrap up the film. *White Chicks*, like many other temporary transvestite films had the opportunity to do something big with the content regarding gender, yet ended up adhering to the norms to a disappointing degree.

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