# The Great Liberation

## (or Standing Up, Laying Down)

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Abstract

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This thesis presents a critical history of stand-up comedy alongside rhetorical analyses of specific stand-up routines and performances to argue for stand-up's efficacy as a therapeutic artform. Through analysis of the history, function, and content of satire, this thesis presents stand-up comedy as an artform utilized for more than just simple laughter. Stand-up comedy, as a form and genre, provides the unique ability to engage with difficult subject matter, traumatic experiences, and offense for the benefit of both listener and audience in a way that subverts, therapizes, and equalizes instances of discrimination, trauma, and denigration.

Keywords: Satire, Stand-up Comedy, Therapy, Abjection, Offense,

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Written with respect and reverence to Paul Mooney, Norm Macdonald, and Gilbert Gottfried

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# Introduction

## *An Introduction to the Introduction*

This is the beginning of my thesis attempt, an attempt at proving that a lifelong love can result in something fruitful. Like many, I've always loved to laugh, but like few, I've taken an interest in comedy that extends to almost all areas of my life. I study comedy and write about it academically. My friendships are built around comedy, and my relationships defined through laughter. More than even love or intellectual connection, laughter exists in my life as an equalizing force. This is likely true for many people, but I can't help but feel that my (or any) life lived without comedy is one lived with no respite, and ridden with sadness, pain, and trauma. Through laughter, we can laugh through the pain. A beautiful thought, really, but one that will become more important and enlightening as this paper continues.

This is an introduction to some ruminations about comedy (in general), satire, and contemporary stand-up comedy (in the specific). The goal of this short introductory chapter is to believe it or not, introduce the subject. This will include a brief outline of the paper's arguments and analytical concerns. These arguments most simply presented are thus: that despite contemporary Western culture's reluctance to laugh, the comedic genre of *Satire* works to offer the reader, viewer, or audience something close to emancipation. This emancipatory effect of satire is one that has historically helped quell the fears of individuals and societies, while also helping those afflicted work through personal traumas in light of larger societal issues. In some ways, this is a straightforward argument, presenting a statement that is neither completely surprising nor illuminating. Of course, comedy works to relieve life's upsets. It can create positivity out of tough situations, and allow for respite when positivity feels impossible. That truth seems to be inherent to laughter itself. It is a positive effect, not a negative one. However, in some way, it feels hard to laugh these days. Jokes containing sensitive subject matter, although not always deliberately offensive, can often upset portions of any given culture, particularly in the West, where sensitive and sensible language and thought has slowly taken over the brash vulgarity of the past. Subsequently, comedy within Western culture often offends, particularly when the content of a given satirical routine is made unclear through the brash and offensive nature of its presentation. To be clear, this thesis will not be some rambling diatribe about the

importance of free speech. The arguments of this paper and the important considerations that it makes will examine the idea of what one should or should not say. However, by delicately, and deliberately analyzing language, and the content surrounding that language, this paper aims to show that, what is most difficult about certain texts, is often exactly that which allows these texts to illuminate and alleviate the darkest aspects of personal and societal trauma.

To explain further, it is often not the implicit, intended message behind satire that is reacted to, but the way of its presentation. Often, the message behind satire's content becomes misinterpreted, or sometimes not interpreted at all, because of the manner of the comic's speech. This can be seen in the work of African American comics (in general) and their history, but can be pointed to specifically in the contemporary work of Dave Chappelle. His recent Netflix comedy specials have received tons of critical acclaim, as well as just as much backlash, due to his usage of loaded terminology, his persona/air of ignorance, and deliberate antagonism through offense. Despite these claims against him, however, the deeper content of his specials illuminates repressed aspects of our culture. Furthermore, his interrogation of our hidden traumas allows for an alleviation of pain difficult in other artforms.

This may seem like gesticulation at this point, but ideas surrounding the duality of satire will become clearer as this paper goes on. Satirical comedy, despite its capacity to offend, also has the capacity to relieve pain, and to help a society, individual, or culture come to terms with its deepest, and darkest traumas. This notion of satire as therapeutic will be an important link throughout this thesis and will be looked at specifically through a deep analysis of the transcripts of comedy specials, and in specific routines or *bits* by comedians. In the following chapters, there will be a limit on the general philosophizing about these texts, focusing rather on the texts themselves, teasing out how therapy is possible through satire, and found in the glamour (or lack thereof) of the comedic stage.

This thesis will take a unique approach to analysis, providing a critical history of the stand-up form throughout the 20th century. This critical history will look at key satirists within the genre of stand-up comedy, explaining and analyzing personal biography, alongside more involved analysis of the form, content, and rhetorical approaches of specific routines within stand-up performances. This combination of critical history and analysis will show how the interplay of personal trauma, narrative specificity, and satirical focus results in a propensity for therapeutic potential. As such, this thesis will not be purely theoretical in its evaluation of

satirical content. Rather, it will work as a public history of the satirical form of stand-up comedy, with particular analytical focus on the rhetoric, content, and narrative performances associated with this form of comedy.

Furthermore, a specific focus on stand-up containing difficult, traumatic, contentious, or offensive material will take precedence. Material that deals with personal trauma is important to the evaluation of satirical therapy simply through the sheer amount of relevant material available. Secondly, without a focus on traumatic and difficult satire, there exists no feasible way to prove that satire can be emancipatory. One must engage with trauma, to tease out the therapy within. This will almost certainly mean, however, that offense itself will be broached within this essay

This thesis, then, exists as an argument for the ways in which engagement with abject material can result in objective and subjective therapy. As Limon writes, "Whenever there is abjectness, there is performance; whenever abjectness is proudly performed, it is comic."[1] Performed abjectness is a key part of stand-up comedy, as this thesis will present the idea that the most liberating satire is satire (in stand-up) that engages with debased ideas, upsetting thoughts, and uncomfortable criticisms of the status quo. The performative aspect of stand–up comedy, combined with stand-up's individualized focus on personal experience, trauma, and opinion proves that stand-up comedy, in its divisive, differentiating, and denigrating qualities, is often an abject phenomenon.

As Limon continues, "It is comic because it should be prone, but it is upright."[2] The idea that admissions on the stand-up stage should be prone evokes the image of a patient laying down in front of a psychiatrist's chair. The idea that stand-up itself is a form of therapy is the main sticking point of this thesis. In this, however, comes an affluence of upsetting and difficult material; this material is often deliberately offensive, contentious, and interrogative. It deals in trauma directly, and doesn't shy away from difficult realities, criticisms, and argumentative interaction with audiences. In this, however, comes a form of relief. It may be a stretch to say that this form of relief only occurs in the specificity of this form of satire. However, the proliferation of stand-up comics working with and through personal upset cannot be ignored as simply chance. Through engaging critical history, and varied rhetorical analyses of routines, this

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[1] John Limon, "Journey to the End of the Night: David Letterman with Kristeva, Céline, Scorsese," in *Stand-up Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), pp. 68-82.
[2] Ibid.

thesis will explain why stand-up comedy often relies on engagement with trauma, and how this focus creates a unique, engaging, liberative artform.

This thesis' critical history is paired with specific rhetorical analysis of satirical routines to emphasize the relationship between the history of stand-up comedy generally, and the outlined realities, traumas, and upsets that inform this genre's performers. By first explaining stand-up comedy, and its performers' positionality, this thesis can then more deeply analyze stand-up itself, through the trends, routines, content, and performances associated with the form. This will then provide an understanding of why stand-up's engagement with difficult subject matter allows for a form of therapy, and how this occurs within specific routines and performances.

The following brief introduction also includes a delineation of terms. In the field of comedy studies, there seems to be varied interpretations as to what its pertinent terms mean. What is comedy? Wit? Satire? What are their defining characteristics? Many theorists of comedy and satire have similar definitions of these broad terms. However, in defining said terms nuances often disrupt a coherent, unified definition. Therefore, it is necessary to delineate exactly what is meant when certain terms arise in the writings referenced throughout this thesis. To provide an element of consistency, this paper will provide relevant definitions of each term, considering the varied historical interpretations and uses of these terms, while also considering these terms' usage contemporaneously.

## *"Fuck em' if they can't take a joke"*

Stand-up comedy itself is a recent phenomenon in its current form, yet shares satirical consistencies that can be linked back historically to the ancient poems of Juvenal and Horace. The act of a comic standing on a smoky stage, surrounded by alcohol, while working through their thoughts, punching in jokes, and making people laugh is a distinctly modern artform. Only in a culture of individualism could one person's thoughts on the mundanity of life matter to anyone but themselves. While there have always existed individual speakers, these individuals have always spoken on the behalf of something, or someone. This is not to say that stand-up comics do not do this. However, the historical precedent for comedy, starting from the ancients, was that it should explicitly work to illuminate the broader qualities of humanity, eschewing individual opinion in favour of educational outcomes. For these original satirists, *specific*

examples of human folly were used to make explicit examples of human ineptitude as a connection to something innate within humanity. As human beings, comedy was presumed to include aspects of humanity itself. Therefore, *human nature*, per se, exists within these satirist's individualized stories.

Donatus writes that, "…comedy is a mirror of daily life. For, just as we easily grasp the outlines of reality by means of the image when a mirror is held up to us, so through the reading of comedy we perceive the image of life and daily habit without difficulty."[3] It seems like a simple idea, but in it, one finds important distinctions about comedy, and the first reflections on the purpose of the form, and, as Aristotle writes, "its mother…laughter."[4] As Donatus alludes, the intended purpose of comedy is unity, and the equalization of human nature for all to join in and laugh . Comedy's essential purpose is to unite and bring together people in "…the imitation of an action which is funny and without magnitude…"[5] The word magnitude is important to note, especially regarding the assertion that comedy should exist without it. This distinction between what is *funny*, and what is important to a society is a persistent preoccupation within these early comedic philosophies. While comedy may exist to provide respite, it should not broach subjects that are beyond its grasp. What is within its grasp, then, is the supposed simplicities of everyday life, and the human nature that exists within it. This human nature, however, must be rooted in a simple life, "without magnitude".[6]

Erasmus writes, almost 1000 years later, "But it is foolish to give one or two examples when the whole of comedy is nothing but a picture of human life."[7] For Erasmus, a broad application of comedy is most important, so much so that to focus on specific examples of foolishness is itself the work of fools. While laughing at the folly of one's individual actions was not the preoccupation of the time, one could argue that disregarding individual actions also illuminates something innate about human nature. Erasmus' comment, however, does not seek to

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[3] Donatus, "On Comedy," in *Classical and Medieval Literary Criticism: Translations and Interpretations*, ed. Alex Preminger, O.B. Hardison, and Kevin Kerrane (New York, NY: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1974), pp. 305-309.
[4] Aristotle, "Aristotle, Tractatus Coislinianus (350 BCE), Translated by Jeffrey Rusten," in *Reader in Comedy: An Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Magda Romanska and Alan Ackerman (London: Bloomsbury Academic, an imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2017), pp. 37-39.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Erasmus, *Collected Works of Erasmus, Volume 24: Literary and Educational Writings*, ed. Craig R. Thompson, vol. 24 (Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 1978).

eschew all individual scenarios, but rather to emphasize a focus on the larger human condition, thereby teaching the masses how to behave, and relieving scrutiny on the powerful.

While some ancient philosophers argued that comedy should bring people together in humour, the renaissance presented an alternative argument. During this time, many theorists argued that comedy's purpose was most important in its ability to correct behaviour considered societally improper or morally incorrect. The corrective nature of comedy presupposes an ability to divide actions morally, and then teach the difference between proper and improper behaviour to individuals observing comedic performance. As Gian Giorgio Trissino states, "It remains, then, to treat the imitation of actions and traits less dignified, and of a worse sort, which may be done by deriding and censuring them, and in that way teach men virtue…"[8]

It's important to note that these early ruminations on Comedy were almost always written in contrast to the form of Tragedy. This distinction between Comedy, and Tragedy is a distinction prevalent in ancient history, and referenced regarding the archetypal forms of these two ancient play types. An excerpt from Evanthius defines the difference between the two forms as such,

"Although there are many differences between tragedy and comedy, these are chief distinguishing features: in comedy the fortunes of men are ordinary, the onslaughts of difficulties minor, the outcomes of actions happy. But in tragedy everything is the opposite: the characters are outstanding, the fears are great, the outcomes disastrous. Then again, in comedy the beginning is stormy, the end calm, but in tragedy the opposite holds true. In tragedy, a life is portrayed, a life which one must flee, in comedy a life which one ought to seek. Finally, all comedy deals with fictional plots, whereas tragedy is often sought in historical reality."[9]

This lengthy excerpt outlines important distinctions between these traditional forms of ancient performance. This dichotomy presents two opposing genres, distinct in relation to the emotional end that they work towards. Comedy seeks to please. Although it may start with worry and upset, comedy's instinctive trajectory moves towards a pleasurable end. The *happy ending*, as such, comes from the comic play-type. Furthermore, when paired with previous ideas about

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[8] Trissino, Gian Giorgio. "Division VI: Comedy." Essay. In *Literary Criticism: Plato to Dryden*, edited by Allen H. Gilbert, 224–32. Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1962.

[9] Evanthius, "Evanthius, ' On Drama' (C. CE 350) in *Classical and Medieval Literary Criticism: Translations and Interpretations*, ed. Alex Preminger, O.B. Hardison, and Kevin Kerrane (New York, NY: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1974), pp. 301-305.

comedy working towards the emulation of life, the comic play-type also tends towards the interpolation of a utopic conclusion, which inspires utopic motivations. "A life which one ought to seek"[10], as Evanthius writes, is one that, despite rooted in fiction, exists to show the audience an element of lightness. Comedy acts not only as an emulation of life as a teachable form, but also as an escape from the upsetting outcomes of the real world. That is why comedy was considered a lesser art-form, firmly rooted in the lower-classes. It existed in a structure which emulated life's natural traumas but provided reassurance in the happiness of its conclusion.

Tragedy works with the opposite. It begins with calmness and pleasantry, and ends in trauma, death, dishonor, and fear. In a way, the tragic formula works towards a similar end as the comedic. Despite existing in formulaic opposition to comedy, Tragedy seeks to educate similarly, emulating or retelling a real historical tale, to then show the extreme disaster which arises from negative actions. It is cautionary but seeks to emulate historical reality. It teaches in its terror, and doesn't necessarily work to please its audience, but to indicate the 'what not to do' of life.

As Northop Frye writes, "Something gets born at the end of comedy."[11] This phrase, while an ambiguous declaration, broadly sums up comedy's conclusory function. Where the form of Tragedy concludes in trauma, ending a cautionary tale in horror, comedy ends in happy resolution, with the characters' supposed future moving forward positively. Upon conclusion, one knows that comic characters are safe, happy, and eager to take on the world. Comedy works in the realm of happily ever-afters, whereas tragedy does not leave room for an after, and especially not one that could be happy.

It is clear, then, why Aristotle distinguishes that comedy must remain "without magnitude."[12] When comedy imitates life, it does so on a lower level that works to appease. It does not take up space in the domain of actual decision-making or prove important in the spaces where it can create significant change, either on an individual, or larger, societal level. While comedy sometimes sought to teach, it didn't seek to teach about broader societal, sociological, or institutional issues. Rather, it taught the ancients how to be good citizens, and how to keep the

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[10] Ibid.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Aristotle, "Aristotle, Tractatus Coislinianus (350 BCE), Translated by Jeffrey Rusten," in *Reader in Comedy: An Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Magda Romanska and Alan Ackerman (London: Bloomsbury Academic, an imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2017), pp. 37-39.

status quo. It appeased, and distracted them, rather than interrogating them. One would not necessarily see comedy to joke about the king's follies, but rather to laugh at the fool who shits in his hand, without something to wipe it off with. The individual fool represented society's moral preoccupations. These functions of individuals, often scatological in nature, were the topic at hand and reinforced the status quo. Larger institutional issues, however, were not common, due to the fear that these satirical preoccupations could result in unwanted, legitimate, and magnitudinous change.

In this way, one begins to see the distinction between these aspects of *comedy* and the definition of *satire*, which will be used throughout this paper. This form of comedy still exists in contemporary culture. It works to educate and appease, and acts as a distraction from individual trauma, pain, and societal worry. It does not engage with these issues through tense contention; nor does it truly alleviate these issues through laughter. The comic form ends in reconciliation allowing for its characters, plot, and audience to leave with the resolution of a happy ending. This type of diversionary comedic entertainment is seen in the modern sitcom, which seemingly interpolates the ancient comedic play-type into its formulas of plot, substance, and intention. These shows always work towards a sense of relief in conformity, to a return to societal norms. Even when broaching sensitive subject matter, these programs do not seek to offend, displace, or disrupt their audiences, or the sponsors of the show itself. Even sitcoms that seem to offend in their content, exist to prove the rule. Reading this, one may be shouting examples of offensive programs. Sitcoms have historically broached difficult topics, but they have done so not to offend in their presentation of those topics, but to make these difficult topics more comfortable. Two examples that deliberately subvert the typical comfort of the sitcom are *South Park* and *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*. These are exceptional in their deviation from the sitcom norm. *South Park*, however, is an animated program, not falling directly within the sitcom genre, but also easily dismissed as just a stupid cartoon. The same goes for a show such as *Family Guy*, which exists as a situational type of animated cartoon, but one that offends in silly vulgarity, easily dismissed as not much more than potty humour. *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*, on the other hand, is a television comedy, but one that deviates from the situational comedy realm in its complete disregard for its audience. In this way, *IASIP* isn't a Sitcom, per se, but simply a comedic program on television. A loose point, maybe, but one that seems relevant in the fact that there aren't many other popular comedy programs that offend as deeply as these. Popularity, it

seems, is a key point to the sitcom, having often been the most lucrative, and most watched, programs historically. These examples, by way of being the only examples of offensive television comedy, show that Sitcoms (as a genre) exist for light viewing, and work to appease, rather than to contend. They are a form of entertainment that stabilizes emotion rather than disturbing it. However, the traumatic relief that extends from this comedic form is a temporary, fleeting one. While this entertainment works to appease and stabilize, it does so only in the momentary nature of the programs themselves. Once these productions end, worry, anxiety, and repressed trauma returns.

Dante Alighieri explains the difference between comedy and tragedy, in terms of each form's poetic prose & potentiality. He also adds a third poetic descriptor, one that is insightful to the modern style of comedic satire. He writes succinctly, "By 'tragic', I mean the higher style, by 'comic' the lower, and by 'elegiac' that of the unhappy."[13]

Dante begins by reasserting the previously argued assumptions regarding the forms of tragedy and comedy. They are distinctly defined by their relation to the audience that they serve. Despite referring to the *style* of each poetic form, Dante uses the terms *lower* and *higher,* evoking the idea of the higher and lower classes. This distinction between the forms themselves as higher or more dignified in tragedy, versus lower in the form of comedy distinguishes these play types based on class. Comedy exists to serve the masses, and therefore, exhibits less distinguished subject matter, for a less distinguished audience. This third form that Alighieri references refers to the poetic form of elegy, which Mirriam Webster defines as, "a song or poem expressing sorrow or lamentation especially for one who is dead."[14] Although Dante is referencing a precise form and genre of his time, with a very particular subject matter, his distinction points out that a third form of play exists outside the rudimentary dichotomy of tragedy and comedy. This third form is rooted in sadness, that when put in contrast to the archetypical forms of comedy and tragedy allows for an entry into the contentious field of contemporary satire.

Satire itself is a distinct genre of poetry and art. However, it parallels the elegiac form in its consideration of traumatic events and serious reflection on anxiety, worry, and grief.

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[13] Dante Alighieri, "De Vulgari Eloquentia (On Eloquence in the Vernacular)," in *De Vulgari Eloquentia (On Eloquence in the Vernacular)*, trans. Steven Botteril (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
[14] Mirriam-Webster, "Elegy," in *Merriam Webster*, accessed November 23, 2021, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/elegy.

The elegiac form works similarly to the function of satire, in that it fractures the distinction that comedy and tragedy, laughter and trauma are exclusive entities.

Of course, it is not all satire that this thesis is focused on, but the more specific form of satire as outlined earlier in this introduction. This is the satire of contention. It is satire that eschews the formulaic returns of the comedic form, for a more difficult examination of that which troubles us. Satire, generally, is the form of comedy that provokes and interrogates the status quo. Satire can do this in a myriad of ways. It doesn't necessarily have to do so by engaging directly in offense. Political satire, while contentious to those that oppose the specific political stance being evoked, does not offend abjectly. The satire that this essay focuses on, therefore, is a satire that provokes through division. It is not safe. It seeks to offend and divide. To take the words from Kenneth Tynan, satire makes "...you squirm as you smile."[15]

An example of the fracturing nature of satire is found in the poems of Juvenal. As Richter writes, "Juvenal and their kind express through the lyric serious moral indignation at vice. They make us serious and elevate us."[16] Juvenal's poems exist in a serious form, but use satire to expose and ridicule the follies, moral flaws, and hypocritical nature of these *elevated* individuals, and the tragic style that they use and force upon their own kind. Proponents of tragedy emphasize this play-type to distinguish their lives and entertainment from the form of the comic, which exists only for the uncouth, uneducated masses.

Juvenal, however, is not pleased with the safety of the comic form either. The opening line of Juvenal's first satire shows the difference between old world comedy, and the satire that is antithetical to this safe comedic form. He writes, "Must I always be a listener only, never hit back … never obtain revenge when X has read me his comedies/Y his elegies?"[17] Juvenal references Elegy here, distancing his writings from previous poetic forms and styles of performance. He thereby proves that even the most similar form, when displayed in serious, exaggerated prose becomes offensive to the satirist. As Beavis explains, "In Juvenal's hands,

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[15] Lenny Bruce and Kenneth Tynan, "How to Talk Dirty and Influence People: An Autobiography," in *How to Talk Dirty and Influence People: An Autobiography* (Boston, MA: Da Capo Press, 2016), p. ix-xiii.
[16] Jean Paul Richter, "On the Ridiculous and the Comic in Drama," in *Horns of Oberon: School of Aesthetics* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1973).
[17] D. Junius Juvenalis, "Satire 1: Why Write Satire," in *The Satires*, trans. Niall Rudd (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 3-8.

satire begins as a revenger's comedy…"[18] While the satirist seeks to take seriously the moral indignities of those in which they react against, they aim to do so in a way that spurns archetypes, ridicules content, and interrogates the comfortable assumptions of the sedated masses, especially targeting those that taught the masses the way of their being.

Richter describes the relationship between the comic form, and satire, as such, "The comic, on the contrary, carries on its poetic game with the smallness of nonsense and makes us cheerful and free."[19] Juvenal, as the first staunchly bitter satirist works against both forms of play in comedy and tragedy, but in a way that unites both forms in satire. Richter states that Juvenal, "through his(their) bitterness, shuts the mouth to laughter."[20] The satirist defies laughter, but ridicules in such a way that provokes it. One may not laugh out loud at the satirist's words, but will take pleasure in the targeted nature of the satirist's ridicule. In this way, satire pulls from the tragic form in its very specific relationship with moral invective.

So, then, what is the point of this morally staunch, and pointedly ridiculous new art-form? Its importance resides in its ability to seriously encounter the moral indignities that tragedy seeks to disperse, but also work to invoke a subtle humour that teases and educates all people. Satire, therefore, often works with an engagement in vulgarity. It pulls people down to its level and exposes the moral flaws of the higher classes. Furthermore, Richter writes, *"*In satire we are morally bound, in laughter we are freed poetically.*"*[21] However, as argued thus far, laughter may not always be prevalent in satire. What is present, however, is a freedom extending from the cutting down of superiority. Satire binds the satirist and her listeners into a position in which laughter, or at least the recognition of ridicule and hypocrisy, can free audiences and practitioners of the art-form from their chains of inferiority.

It is important to note that the satire of Juvenal is not the only form of satire that emerges from ancient poets. It would be remiss not to acknowledge that opposite Juvenal exists the satires of Horace, a writer close to Juvenal periodically, but similar only in the name and age of their poetic prose. The gentle Horatian prodding of the comic form, exists in contrast to the staunch lecture of the tragic form. Comedy is light, tragedy is dark. Satire, however, exists somewhere in

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[18] Matthew Beavis, "Chapter 6: Taking Liberties," in *Comedy: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 77-92.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid.

the middle, often residing in darkness, but allowing for beacons of light to connect and contend with humanity. The difference between Horace and Juvenal, however, exists in the difference between the comic form, and the dark satire crucial to this paper. Horatian satire is typically defined through the tolerance of its purveyor. Horace doesn't hold individuals up to bitter and violent scorn, but rather seeks to gently prod at the follies of human nature. He does so in a gentle manner, with the hope of teaching his audience, rather than invoking rebuke and disgust, as does Juvenal.

As Beavis contrasts, "The satirist, it would initially appear, is the comedian who allows audiences to join him on a mission."[22] This mission, for Juvenal, is the dismantling of a moral authority. "Satire is a scourge of vice, a spur to virtue."[23] Satire, in Juvenal's eyes, seeks to upend the imposed niceties and propriety of his age. Beavis contrasts, "Horace imagines his ideal listener as baring his teeth in a grin."[24] Horace, on the other hand, wants his audience to smile. Laughter, without thought, is applauded within Horace's nicer 'satires', but as Beavis explains, "...the listener must also get bitten from time to time."[25] In the preface to the *Everyman's Library* of Horace's poems, Paul Quarrie writes that Horace's "longish poems… describe and animadvert upon contemporary life – sometimes with a sharp edge though they are not satires in the modern sense."[26] He also writes that some of his poems "deal with the delights of the simple life, a subject also covered in the satires, … and many urge us to rejoice and enjoy ourselves, but generally advocating a simple *douceur de vivre* – wine, love, and sex, flowers and the world of nature."[27] Juvenal exists as the ancient progenitor of a darker satiric form, one that revels in the attack mode of satire. Beavis summates, "the focus is less on recommending improvement or virtue, and more on revelling in the virtuosity of the attack."[28] This comparison of these two originators of satire shows the inherent divide between satiric comedy that is safe in Horace, and dark satire that is divisive in Juvenal. While there is not a ton of contentious satire from the period, Juvenal exists as an example of the therapy that exists alongside a satire of darkness.

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[22] Matthew Beavis, "Chapter 6: Taking Liberties," in *Comedy: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 77-92.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Horace and Paul Quarrie, "Horace: Poems," in *Horace: Poems* (London: Everyman, 2015), pp. 7-15.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Matthew Beavis, "Chapter 6: Taking Liberties," in *Comedy: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 77-92.

Nearly 1500 years later, this anti-establishment, anti-safe-and-sound form of poetry and play re-emerges in Restoration drama. Prior to the 1660's, "French theory dominated the European stage."[29] The comic theory relevant to this period placed an emphasis on the corrective nature of comedy. Moliere states, "The business of comedy is to represent in general all the faults of men, especially those of our time. (…) The duty of comedy being to correct men while amusing them."[30] This theory, while involved in reproach, utilized a gentle derision of vice and moral folly in the hopes of bettering the individuals and audiences viewing such productions. However, a change occurred alongside the English Civil War, which led to "extensive traffic of ideas between France and England."[31] Prior to this period, English stages and playhouses had been closed to the public, with the fears that art could distract from the puritanical ideals of the age. However, in 1649, "they chopped off the head of King Charles I." [32] With Charles I's execution for high treason, these puritanical leaders' suspicions regarding "all forms of pomp"[33] ,and their distrust of "artifice and art"[34] reached a critical juncture. Despite their best efforts to curb sin and vice, the puritanical ideals of the age that aimed to silence the darkest desires, and realities of human nature failed significantly. It seems to be that holding a moral high ground falls flat when the king (in which no early authority can discriminate) is beheaded.

In the preface to the anthology of *Restoration and Eighteenth-Century Comedy,* Scott McMillan describes this period as exuding "raillery and licentiousness."[35] In the Restoration period, poets such as John Wilmot (Lord Rochester), Aphra Behn, and Jonathan Swift took on subjects previously unseen on the English stage. The subjects within their plays, and the poems performed on these stages, took on ideas of sexual freedom, romantic and sexual infidelity, and vulgar humour regarding bodily functions (usually sexual in nature) As Romanska and Ackerman write, "The Restoration saw the Boudoir as a potential place of sexual warfare… This theme points an uncomfortable reality about eighteenth-century comedy: first, sexual violence,

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[29] Magda Romanska and Alan Ackerman, "Reader in Comedy," in *Reader in Comedy An Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Magda Romanska and Alan Ackerman (Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), pp. 93-108.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Ibid.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Scott McMillin and Scott McMillin, "Restoration and Eighteenth-Century Comedy," in *Restoration and Eighteenth-Century Comedy*, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Co, 1997), p. ix-xi.

including threat of rape, was a routine subject of comic mirth, and second, women authors, performers, and audiences, as well as men, produced and consumed this cruel humour."[36]

This idea of *cruel* humour parallels ideas later seen in Lenny Bruce, and his brand of *sick* humour. This dark brand of satire's most significant accomplishment is its existence as a tense, interrogating form, alongside the inclusion of debased subject matter and content. This shows that the satire presented and defined in Juvenal not only takes darkness and degradation into the form of its works, but uses it in the content of the works themselves.

As Romanska and Ackerman continue, "Theorists may have privileged sympathy and rationality, but ordinary people laughed at the disabled, beggars, and rape victims. It was an impolite world that theorized about politeness."[37] Again, R & A indicate that the satire of the restoration age disturbed not only by the way of its presentation, but by the explicit nature of its subject matter. Anger, ridicule, and a distressing onslaught of taboos thrust upon audiences a restored form of dark satire. This satire, however, retains a quality of strength in its ability to attack and offend with a breadth of content, educational wit, and moral conviction. As Samuel Butler comments, "There is nothing that provokes and sharpens wit like malice and anger…"[38] The societal response that emerged in the Restoration period brought forth interrogative anger in the presentation and uncomfortable realization in the content of the performances themselves. Laden with anger and malice, Restoration comedy exists as contemporaneously sharp, and intelligently portrayed. Despite its offensive subject matter, and its violent inclinations, satire, as defined by the Restoration period and Juvenal, both exist as an alleviation of the angers of their ages, interrogating societal fears, and traumas in the process. Without the beheading of King Charles I and the hypocritical ideals of the puritanical age, or Juvenal's raillery against the unjust, unfair, and denigrative society of ancient Rome, this dark form of satire would not exist. While these satires contain upsetting, combative, and violently targeted material, their equivalent

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[36] Magda Romanska and Alan Ackerman, "Reader in Comedy," in *Reader in Comedy An Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Magda Romanska and Alan Ackerman (Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), pp. 93-108.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Samuel Butler, "Samuel Butler, Characters and Passages from Notebooks (c. 1650)," in *Reader in Comedy: An Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Magda Romanska and Alan Ackerman (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), pp. 109-114.

displays of wit, intelligence, restorative, and often therapeutic intent, is something unseen in safer forms of art and humour.

*Towards the Now*

This paper now changes focus from the historical texts of the ancients, and aged importance of the Restoration period, to emphasize that, although historical contextualization is necessary, licentious, vulgar, and offensive satire retains its importance in contemporaneity. Furthermore, difficult satire is a means and an end towards an alleviation of real traumas. It is also an investigation of the dark desires, criticisms, angers, and sorrows of the modern age. Contemporary stand-up comics often exist in a perilous state due to the offensive content of their routines, and the abrasive presentation of their ideas. Richard Pryor used the stage to work out his own personal traumas, and the traumas of his black audience. His representation of black experience presented dark, intense satire that was upsetting and offensive. However, he also used laughter and comedy to alleviate his own dark periods of memory, and the trauma of circumstance.

In the next chapter, this paper will take a deeper historical look at the rise of stand-up comedy in the modern age, with an eye towards its contemporary predecessors. By looking specifically at Lenny Bruce, the following chapter will show how dark satire arises out of dark periods of trauma to bring forth ideas of pain for a restorative purpose. However, Bruce also interrogates the assumptions and hypocrisies of the American public through deliberate offense to expose the negative qualities of the age through audience reaction. For Bruce, Pryor, Restoration poets and the ancient satirists, dark satire works with what is funny and terribly not funny simultaneously. Often, one is urged to laugh at morally absurd content, alongside the shocking, offensive presentation of comedic routines. However, audiences often feel guilt and horror at the reality of these dark situations. This is then made all the worse (or better) by their incitement to laughter. This laughter, however, alleviates by way of its interrogative properties. One may laugh at the absurdity of society's ills, while another laughs at the simple comedy present in a routine. In either case, dark, offensive satire allows its audience (and the public in general) to laugh at the horror of their own existence. Simultaneously, this satiric form also

presents trauma, and hypocrisy to provoke acknowledgement of the deeply ridiculous, darkly disturbing, and downright despicable aspects of society.

## Chapter 1: Lenny Bruce: Trauma, Therapy & Emancipation

*What Came Before*

This chapter will construct a working history of stand-up comedy, one incomplete in its very nature. The specification of the term *stand-up comedy* is a deliberate choice here. This chapter aims to make explicit that the satire analyzed is not simply that of comedy or laughter generally. The routines and bits analyzed are not simply slapstick humour or a ___ walks into a bar jokes. This chapter does not deal with stand-up as a form or genre, but as a form *and* genre, one that exists within certain instances only, and in its purest form, only for specific purposes. Stand-up comedy is important in the very specificity of its occurrence. It does not happen everywhere, or at any time. It must occur under specific circumstances and cannot be translated effectively or purely to any stage or screen. It works on its own terms, in defiance of the grandeur of showbiz. Stand-up comedy at its purest, is nothing more than the comedian & their stage, with the physical audience as the point of reflection. With its rise alongside the emergence of nightclubs of the 30s and 40s during the 50s and 60s, stand-up became a personal performative art-form weaving in the private lives of those who performed it.

Through this specific emergence of stand-up within "...nightclubs…for adults"[39] and the Greenwich village arts scene, however, the private was made public through an entry into the personal. The contemporary speech of stand-up and the analytical rhetoric it evokes introduces the possibility of an emancipatory art-form, one in which negative personal experience and

[39] Wayne Federman, "Nightclubs, Resorts, and Theaters," in *The History of Stand-up: From Mark Twain to Dave Chappelle* (Independent Artists Media, 2021), pp.37-47.

trauma find its light in comedy, thereby transforming repression and personal anguish into liberating laughter.

It is through satire that one finds this liberating effect. The preceding paragraph deliberating describes, yet omits the term 'satire', because the specific style of satirical rhetoric that stand-up comedy embodies necessitates a deeper explanation. To be clear, modern satire finds its most effective home in contemporary stand-up. While satire exists in other forms, its staunchest proprietors are those that work on the stand-up stage, as they represent a personalized rhetoric not representative of society, but rather in opposition to it. Therefore, the following history will be an outline of the stand-up comedy movement, as a representation of contemporary satire. This historical explanation and analysis precedes the emergence of stand-up itself in the Vaudeville era. Then, focusing on Lenny Bruce in the 1950s, this chapter will then trace the progenitor of this satirical form. Upcoming chapters will then analyze the history of black, and female stand-up comedy, comparing the past's emphasis on offense and transgression, to contemporary culture's emphasis on more sensible satirical content. For this chapter, however, it is the precursors of stand-up comedy, and the first tangible, volatile, and offensive representation of this new artform in Lenny Bruce that is most important.

Furthermore, this history of stand-up comedy also acts as a history of offense. The subject matter presented is often contentious yet contains significant therapeutic elements within. Throughout this chapter, a point will be made to analyze the content of satire itself, and to interrogate the feelings that stand-up comedy incites. This analysis will often focus on specific rhetorical strategies that stand-up comics' use to get their points across. As Kliph Nesteroff writes in his introduction to his book *The Comedians,* "The artform evolved and shifted shape over a hundred years, so much so that comedy fans of the current generation find it nearly impossible to relate to comedians who dominated only decades before."[40] It is this significant change in comedy over a short period of time that will be analyzed in this chapter. The emergence of Lenny Bruce, and his creation of a darker, more personal satire exists to show the divide between a generation whose comedy (in satire) rooted itself in personal and societal traumas, rather than the light-hearted joke telling of the previous generation.

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[40] Kliph Nesteroff, "The Comedians: Drunks, Thieves, Scoundrels, and the History of American Comedy," in *The Comedians: Drunks, Thieves, Scoundrels, and the History of American Comedy* (New York, NY: Grove Press, 2016), p. xiii-xvii.

This chapter will mainly focus on the history of stand-up comedy by looking at first-hand accounts of Bruce's influence, and historical commentary surrounding the gap between Bruce's personal comedy, and the less- confrontational comedy of the preceding generation. Rhetorical & literary analysis itself will be emphasized with a specific focus on transcripts of stand-up routines to engage with the specific rhetorical strategies, themes, and subjects of recent history of modern satire. This chapter establishes the rhetorical history of stand-up comedy, the importance residing in the fact that in this contemporary satirical artform, the most striking satire is found in the content of the comic's speech itself. Therefore, it is in that speech specifically that one finds the most illuminating material, making text and performance itself an important analytical figure in its personal touch, rather than in the broader applications of satire representative of whole programs (The Daily Show), or publications (The Onion). However, this chapter will also show that, just as in the philosophy of the ancients, it is often the satirizing of specific circumstances that evokes poignant diagnoses of society's ills.

Stand-up Comedy's roots exist before Lenny Bruce. The stand-up form shares structural similarities to the minstrel shows of the 1840's and Vaudeville programs from the 1900s onwards. The comedic relations of the preceding decades also evoke comparisons to early radio, and television comedies, with their emphasis on the 'master of ceremonies' archetype. Stand-up comedy is relational, in that the comedian interacts with the audience in a mutually beneficial manner. While these relationships between audience and performer also exist within earlier comedic forms, the specific relationship between performer and audience differs drastically in Bruce's confrontational satirical form. Bruce deliberately provoked his audience, showing that the audience itself shall not always be on the performer's side and that performers themselves are not beholden to the audience.

In Vaudeville and the first radio and television comedies, the role of a host became the role of the comedian themselves. While these stage comedians and comedic hosts did not evoke the objectionable satirical content that stand-up comics did, these early MCs were the first representations of the on-stage joke teller. As Nesteroff writes, "In the main the stand-up comic belongs to a sub-literate group. The stand-up comics and their one-liners—they might just as well be reading from a joke book."[41] Despite using the term "stand-up comic"[42], a misuse of the

[41] Ibid.
[42] Ibid.

term in regard to satirical (or lack thereof) intent,[43] Nesteroff's quote shows that early-stage comedians worked with less evocative material. The MC comedian relied on rote jokes to pass time, break up the acts, and transition from one performance to the next. Their role was to act as a buffer between other talent's performances. Nesteroff continues, "And for decades they pretty much were. Prior to the 1950s, the vocation of the stand-up comic was not far removed from being a door-to-door salesman."[44] And what this early stage-comedian was selling was the promise of more-to-come. There's a good show to be had, folks, and there's more entertaining acts to come. The MC made sure to fill the air with some punchlines, to reset the mood, and liven the crowd for upcoming performers. Their role was mainly to introduce acts, fill in airtime, and tell jokes in the process. Nesteroff, speaking of Vaudevillian MC Frank Fay, writes, "He wasn't just introducing, but entertaining as he did so. If the previous act bombed, he warmed the crowd back up, and if the momentum was good, he just kept the show going."[45] While an important aspect of the Vaudeville genre, this comedic host seems to have existed just to do their job and get off the stage. People didn't necessarily go to see the MC themselves, but to see them as an extraneous part of the show. The MC existed as a part of the show itself, and the jokes told were only a small, transitory part of the full performance.

The varietal focus of the period is seen in the historical existence of the American Guild of Variety Artists. This organization had immense influence during the Vaudeville era representing performers in the variety arts. At the time, this included comedian MCs, showing that this comedic precursor existed in tandem with a variety of other acts combined within one representative organization and performance. The union today represents mainly circus-style, and larger exhibition performance arts, but existed periodically to represent shows with varietal performances. The term variety also illuminates the MC comedian's role as one related to pleasurable distraction. Comedy existed as one aspect of the whole and worked as entertainment only, distracting and diverting one from the anxieties of every-day life. The variety of the Vaudeville stage, and its comedian host shows that comedy worked for the purpose of transitory distraction. When one act ended, a buffer was needed to distract and entertain. This will keep the

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[43] This paper contends that the term stand-up comic is a term distinct from that of Comedian MCs, in that these MCs worked for the status quo, rather than against it.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Kliph Nesteroff, "Vaudeville Comedians," in *The Comedians: Drunks, Thieves, Scoundrels, and the History of American Comedy* (New York, NY: Grove Press, 2016), pp. 1-25.

audience lulled in leisure, eschewing confrontation for comfortable reality. Moods were mediated by the MC, and a level of pleasure is present. Early stage-comedy did not exist to target the audience, but rather to appease and distract them.

As Federman writes, "Among the smorgasbord of specialty acts was the *comedy monologist*, an early incarnation of the stand-up comic."[46] The roots of the stand-up comic arise from this idea of the *comedy monologist.* When compared to its precursors, this transitional solo act set the stage for stand-up comedy to become an art-form. The jokes themselves, however, did not seek to upend the status quo, existing rather to reinforce it. Furthermore, the *comedy monologist* also worked for a specific and simple function. Federman continues, "Monologists were in demand in part because they performed at the very front lip of the stage, the area between the main curtain and the footlights. It was called performing 'in one'. These acts allowed time for stagehands to quietly swap out some scenery or set up some special theatrical rigging."[47] The difference between the upcoming boom of stand-up comics and the solo, yet satirically lacking, on-stage comedians is most evident in the simple fact that their existence on stage is less important regarding the act itself, and most important in providing entertainment for the *in-between.*

The previous paragraphs have shown stand-up comedy's roots preceding its emergence in Lenny Bruce's outrageous content, and the subsequent outrage of his audience. An important distinction between Bruce and the MC comedians is seen in their relationship to the audience. During Vaudeville, the comedians were transitory performers, and existed mostly to tell 'jokes' as such, and then get off the stage. A set-up and punchline was both the function and structure of the joke itself. This created an almost cause and effect relationship to comedy and joke telling. Furthermore, the style of humour wasn't rooted in any personal commentary on society, but in the general 'I' of one-liner humour. When these comedians transitioned into TV & Radio, the MC comedian turned from transitory mediator of the stage to appeasing humourist of the screen and airwaves. Often relying on the same style of jokes, these comedians existed for similar purposes. They divided radio and tv programs for the purpose of mediation, interjecting themselves between acts, musical performances, and/or news bulletins. Furthermore, these

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[46] Wayne Federman, "Vaudeville & Burlesque," in *The History of Stand-up: From Mark Twain to Dave Chappelle* (Independent Artists Media, 2021), pp. 15-27.
[47] Ibid.

comedians became even more accessible as they entered the home. Examples of this type of humour are seen in comedians such as: Jack Benny, Milton Berle, Bob Hope, and George Burns. Their type of humour differentiates from the satire of Bruce, in that, while often speaking in the first person, these MC holdovers weren't speaking on behalf of themselves specifically. They were simply speaking in a personal way but relating their jokes to the impersonal, more general qualities of life. Their jokes were meant to be universal, repeatable, and easily transferable. When Milton Berle jokes about his wife, he is joking about all the wives in the audience, or an impersonal archetype of the idea of wives themselves. When Bob Hope jokes about his audience, that same audience is allowed to revel in the laughter of the joke being about them. However, the jokes aren't really about anyone or anything in particular. They seem to exist as personal gestures towards the audience, but never for the purpose of talking specifically *to* the audience. They exist to build a bond between audience and performer, one that remains strengthened throughout the routine.

Kliph Nesteroff writes, "Old comedians joked about their mother-in-law even if they weren't married. An abstract, non-existent mother-in-law suffered the brunt of their ridicule. Seldom was comedic material moored in reality. Seldom did a comic expose his real side. Jack Benny may have played on being cheap and Milton Berle may have talked of joke thievery, but they were fictional characteristics. What they sold to their audience was an illusion."[48] But this lack of specificity isn't just in the performer's relationship with the audience. It is also found in the performer's relationship with their own material. As the above quote states, the material itself relied on universal characteristics, which connected performers with their audience in a manner understood to be not about the individual performer or audience member themselves. Rather, these jokes existed as easily translatable punchlines for all to interpret, repeat, and be amused by.

An example from Bob Hope reads, "I would not have had anything to eat if it wasn't for the stuff the audience threw at me."[49] This is a typical example of pre-stand-up humour. It speaks for the comedian, but doesn't say anything about them specifically. It also doesn't speak for the specific audience listening, watching, or viewing the act, but in the audience *out there.* The audience within the confines of the joke is a general concept, existing only to move the joke

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[48] Kliph Nesteroff, "Stand-Up's Great Change," in *The Comedians: Drunks, Thieves, Scoundrels, and the History of American Comedy* (New York, NY: Grove Press, 2016), pp. 155-201.

[49] Bob Hope, just-one-liners.com, accessed January 5, 2022, https://www.just-one-liners.com/i-would-%c2%a0not-have-had-anything-to-eat-if-it-wasnt-for-the%c2%a0stuff-the-audience-threw-%c2%a0at-me/.

along and make the *actual* audience laugh. Therefore, the audience of the joke is a facade and there remains a distance between the audience and the comedian. Bob Hope may speak in the 'I', but he's never actually at risk of the audience's scorn. Often, these jokes are rooted in some sort of self-deprecation. He sets up his jokes by playing up the loser-ish nature of his persona, and then punches that up with a line about the audience's reaction to his ineffectual comedy. Not only is the audience laughing along with Hope, any truth about the joke itself is non-existent. Bob Hope, despite his gesturing towards the opposite, does not truly believe that he would be a starving, barren man without the audience's angered tomato tossing. While this may seem obvious, a joke is a joke, of course, but the structure of these jokes illuminate an important difference between simple comedy and satire. They exist in the abstract world of joke-telling, rather than the concrete world of satire. Any persona, therefore, becomes a character to play up, completely and utterly distanced from the men behind these characters.

This is not to say that there was nobody pushing boundaries or moments of offense within this precursory comedic form. Moments of offense arise in joking simply due to the varied interpretations of jokes themselves. However, the distinction to be made regarding stage comedians, and the first wave of stand-up comics pertains to intent. Stage comedians may, on occasion, offend, but they do not *intend* to. This is particularly evident in the comedy of Jack Benny, whose radio program dominated the airwaves, but did so for the ease of his audience. Federman writes, "His unhurried, nonchalant delivery made for wonderfully easy listening."[50] Federman is literally referencing the sound and cadence of Benny's voice. This literal ease of listening goes to show that even in the plainest sense, pre-stand-up comedians were not seeking to provoke the audience. They wanted the content, as well as the literal presentation of the show itself, to exist as easily accessible. Nesteroff writes, "Benny was one of the most enduring comedians of the twentieth century, and he managed to do something no other comedian could boast of. His persona as a miserly penny-pincher was established in the 1930s and became ingrained in the American consciousness that it made setups unnecessary. Whenever a store clerk told him the cost of a piece of merchandise, Benny could evoke and then milk a laugh by simply remaining silent. There were punch lines in 1959 that had been set up in 1939, a remarkable feat

[50] Wayne Federman, "Radio Days," in *The History of Stand-up: From Mark Twain to Dave Chappelle* (Independent Artists Media, 2021), pp. 27-35.

that was never again equaled."[51] This shows that pre-satirical stage comedians exploited the audience's expectations of who the performer was, and what that personage represented. Any relationship to reality exists only in the ubiquitous nature of the jokes themselves. In fact, it is the universal nature of these jokes that make these comedians popular. They are infinitely repeatable, and their repetition doesn't require anything more than an adequate memory, and the ability to mimic the comic's speech. They are also universally understood. Everybody knows and understands Jack Benny's character, and in that, they know what to expect from a performance, the performer, and the humour itself.

However, with the transition to TV & Radio, the comedian did not only have to rely on the jokes within their act, but worked to construct a personality and persona that became just as ubiquitous, repeatable, and apparent as the jokes themselves. Nesteroff continues, "(Benny) may be the only great comedian in history who isn't associated with a single witticism. He was the ultimate reactor—and it made him a comedy star."[52] Benny's popularity exists in the collective unconscious of its audience. The popularity of the stage comedian resides in the fact that they are pandering to the audience's expectations of the personality and persona of who they are going to see. In that, the audience retains the expectation of leaving a performance armed with a repertoire of jokes to use socially, romantically, and interpersonally. Furthermore, these routines stuck in people's minds for ease and comfort, in that these jokes could be recalled often to muse at and chuckle over in any instance in which the recollection of a joke, facial expression, or witty comment proves relevant. These comedic performances existed to bring joy, and provided an escape from everyday life, not working to harm and interrogate the audience, but to please and appease them.

This comfortable nature is most evident in two realities of the period. The first is the simple fact that offensive or 'blue' material was prohibited. The term blue material here refers to material deemed vulgar or explicit. As Federman outlines, "After opening night, a comedian might receive a blue envelope containing a list of any offensive material. If that material wasn't immediately removed from the act, the comedian would be removed from the show. Since then, bookers, agents, and journalists have referred to acts that use onstage profanity as working

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[51] Kliph Nesteroff, "Radio," in *The Comedians: Drunks, Thieves, Scoundrels, and the History of American Comedy* (New York, NY: Grove Press, 2016), pp. 26-52.
[52] Ibid.

'blue'."[53] Despite blue humour's simple origins, "Profane, sexually suggestive or vulgar expressions could get a comedian immediately fired."[54] This quote pertains particularly to the Vaudeville period, but it also easily applied to television comedy due to the heightened censorship of early Television standards. While working *blue* could get a comedian fired from a particular club, swearing, or offending on primetime TV could ruin careers.

Furthermore, the pervasiveness of one-liner comedy from the period is maybe most evident in the plagiarism of jokes themselves. As Nesteroff explains, "Thievery was a reality, and it was difficult to prove who originated what."[55] A precedent for this joke theft is found in an early comedy recording entitled *Cohen on the Telephone.* From 1913, this routine proved so popular that other famous comedians of the day deemed it okay to record it verbatim. Federman quips, "Apparently, it was okay back then to release a cover version of a comedy bit."[56] This tongue in cheek comment illuminates a fundamental reality of the period: the jokes themselves weren't personal. In fact, the jokes themselves were as general as possible. As Nesteroff explains, "The comedy was always about some elusive guy: 'Did you hear about the guy who…?"[57] Furthermore, This is no more evident than in the fact that comedians often took from joke books of the period, eschewing personal experience for curated humour. "Stand-up was impersonal because few comedians wrote what they said. With the references generic, a comedy writer could sell the same routine to multiple people."[58] If comedians themselves were comfortable taking jokes from one another, it is not a stretch to say that these short jokes would be passed between audiences as well. Writers, joke books, the theft of routines, and convenient *inspiration* all made up the comedic content of the period. In this way, it is not the individual jokes themselves that matter to the performer or the audience. They are purely entertainment. You could steal, reuse, or buy jokes with little to no consequence. "It created a landscape of homogeneity."[59]

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[53] Wayne Federman, "Vaudeville & Burlesque," in *The History of Stand-up: From Mark Twain to Dave Chappelle* (Independent Artists Media, 2021), pp. 15-27.
[54] Ibid.
[55] Kliph Nesteroff, "Vaudeville Comedians," in *The Comedians: Drunks, Thieves, Scoundrels, and the History of American Comedy* (New York, NY: Grove Press, 2016), pp. 1-25.
[56] Wayne Federman, "Vaudeville & Burlesque," in *The History of Stand-up: From Mark Twain to Dave Chappelle* (Independent Artists Media, 2021), pp. 15-27.
[57] Kliph Nesteroff, "Stand-up's Great Change," in *The Comedians: Drunks, Thieves, Scoundrels, and the History of American Comedy* (New York, NY: Grove Press, 2016), pp. 155-201.
[58] Ibid.
[59] Ibid.

This periodic reality is not true with stand-up Comedy and satire. While writers may exist in the satiric realm, and jokes sometimes stolen, written or stolen aspects of a stand-up comic's routine are usually looked at as detrimental to the quality of said comic's material. It is not their own. It is not personal, and therefore, it is exceptionally different from the satire soon to emerge within American comedy.

It is important to note that this may be a matter of the style itself. In *A Very Short Introduction to Comedy,* Matthew Bevis writes, "Comedy holds out for good times through the art of good timing."[60] One-liner jokes have a definite beginning and end. There is a set-up and a punchline, and once the first joke is finished, the next can begin. This element of timing is especially important in the comedy of these early stage-comedians. They work in short fragments of speech, and use timing to set-up ideas, which is then flipped into humour shortly thereafter. Beavis quoting Cicero states that, "…the most common kind of joke is that in which we expect one thing, and another is said; here our own disappointed expectation makes us laugh."[61] This quote works to explain the element of timing important to these joke-tellers. This idea of an unconsummated expectation is not necessarily the main point of one-liner, early-stage humour, but it does point to the importance of timing in this very metred form of humour. Each word matters, and a turn of phrase, which flips our expectations, often acts as the turn of the joke itself.

An example from Milton Berle is useful here: "I'm 83, and I feel like a 20-year-old, but unfortunately there's never one around."[62] He plays with our expectations in the set-up of the joke. When speaking about age, older individuals often espouse the idea that they feel younger than they are, or that they are young *at heart*. Berle evokes this trope to open his joke. He may be 83, but he feels 20. He may be old physically, but he feels mentally youthful. A nice thought for an old guy to have, huh? However, after he sets up, and manipulates our expectations, Berle flips these expectations on the audience, allowing for the element of surprise to provoke laughter. He feels like a 20-year-old, but there's never one around.[63] The audience's expectation regarding potential reflection on youth and old age, becomes a slightly sinister or perverted line about Berle's continued desires into old age. He doesn't mean that he feels like a 20-year-old

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[60] Matthew Beavis, "Chapter 4: Plotting Mischief," in *Comedy: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 49-62.
[61] Ibid.
[62] Milton Berle, "Quotes by Milton Berle," SComedy.com, accessed January 5, 2022, https://scomedy.com/quotes/8453.
[63] Ibid.

personally, but that he *feels like a* 20-year-old, in that he wants one. For what, the audience is left to wonder. In a way, the expectation in which Berle is playing with isn't even necessarily the expectation surrounding the continued youthfulness of old age. In both, the innocent expectation of the joke set-up, and the corrupt turn of phrase of the punchline, one finds an element of continued youthfulness. In both, he may be old, but he either feels like, or has the desires of, a much younger man. Therefore, the expectation that is flipped is the idea that in old age, individuals must succumb to platitudinal, and innocent reflections on life, diverting from life's desires, and succumbing to the non-essence of old age. By flipping the joke to a perverted turn of phrase, Berle forces his audience to realize that their expectations themselves may be misguided.

In a way, this joke from Berle works in the realm of satire, though not actually being satirical in its form. While there may be a deeper satirical meaning of this joke, it has taken a deep, analytical look at the joke's form and content itself, utilizing almost a full page of space, something that a typical Berle audience would not have the time to afford. What is important to remember, then, is that, while an audience could analyze a simple joke for its implicit satirical meaning, most audience members would put forward the time and energy needed to deconstruct a simple one-liner. This is particularly true when considering that immediately following the uncomfortable nature of this specific joke, another joke is already waiting to be told, ready to bombard the listener with more expectations, more turns of phrase, more sullied inclinations, and clever punchlines.

Beavis writes, "Playing for laughs involves playing for and with time, and it nurtures a certain kind of rhythm."[64] This certain kind of rhythm[65] applies to one-liner jokes specifically through the form of the jokes themselves. The fact that the joke is a *one-liner* solidifies the type of rhythm that one expects as an audience listening and reacting to these comedians. While there is a rhythm in all comedy, the comedy preceding Bruce's satirical style works in a highly structured form. This form is then subsequently subverted once Bruce begins performing on the stage. The important distinction between Bruce's style and the comedians preceding him lies in the simple fact that Bruce himself reacts directly to this highly structured style by creating a longer storytelling form of satire.

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[64] Matthew Beavis, "Chapter 4: Plotting Mischief," in *Comedy: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 49-62.
[65] Ibid.

With Bruce and his contemporaries, they sought to provoke discussion in order to move past simple amusement towards something more substantial. As Federman writes, "Comedy was becoming more experimental and satirical. Topics, once off limits, were now creeping into stand-up and onto late-night television."[66] The one widely spread outlet for this increasingly risky artform was late-night television, with Johnny Carson's *Tonight Show* being the standard of excellence for comics willing to reveal their personal lives on these programs. Besides that one arena, however, comedy preceding and contemporaneous to Bruce remained highly structured, and highly formulaic.

Federman continues, "This was the beginning of what became known as *confessional comedy,* where comedians found laughs in tragic, humiliating, dark and shameful aspects of their personal lives."[67] Bruce's style is directly oppositional to the precedent of comedy that he reacts to, and against. While stage comedians sought to unite in laughter, Bruce's comedy is more evocative, seeking to attack through rhetorical strategies of non-coherence, criticism, and confrontation. The fundamental difference aligns with stand-up comedy's fundamental focus on personal narrative, changing intentions from public comedy to private satire.

Bruce sought to divide the audience, using interrogative tactics unseen since the restoration and the writings of Juvenal. Nesteroff aptly describes this division, he writes, "For decades most stand-up comics relied on material written by others, seldom writing their own words. New comedians started to question that method for the first time in the 1950's. 'If he's a chap who needs writers, he's not a comedian,' said Lenny Bruce. 'He's an actor—whom I respect as a craftsman.' "[68] This notion of the stage comedian as an actor using his jokes as lines is an illuminating distinction that shows the direction in which satire and Bruce chose to proceed. This idea of stand-up comedy as an 'act' is seen contemporaneously through the fact that comics use the word 'act' interchangeably with routine to refer to their personal repertoire. This predominance of the phrase exists because comics still exaggerate their on-stage personalities to heighten their personal characteristics, and in turn, their material. Nevertheless, the popular vaudeville comedians that dominated comedy circuits preceding Bruce weren't presenting

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[66] Wayne Federman, "TV and the New Wave," in *The History of Stand-up: From Mark Twain to Dave Chappelle* (Independent Artists Media, 2021), pp. 49-58.
[67] Ibid.
[68] Kliph Nesteroff, "The Comedians: Drunks, Thieves, Scoundrels, and the History of American Comedy," in *The Comedians: Drunks, Thieves, Scoundrels, and the History of American Comedy* (New York, NY: Grove Press, 2016), p. xiii-xvii.

radical ideas in their acts or routines, but making their audience laugh with familiar humour, and their charismatic personalities. This idea of a persona presenting familiar punchlines is reassured by Nesteroff when he comments, "A comedian standing *alone* onstage? Unheard of. Doesn't this guy know anything about showbiz? To stand still and tell jokes was a foreign move. To perform without a gimmick was considered amateurish."[69] The best comedians preceding Lenny Bruce were comedians with equally engaging personalities, but personalities that presented familiar notions of humour along-side a persona that audiences were comfortable with. Therefore, it was personality that was most important to the act or routine, and not the material itself.

These precursory comedians did not play with the audience's expectations because the audience's expectations when seeing a Milton Berle-esque comedian were based on structured humour punched up with personality. One went to see these comedians, because the audience member knew that they would set up a joke, to then turn the joke cleverly on the audience, themselves, a phrase, an expectation, a pun, etc. What is so radical in Lenny Bruce, is that, even though *billed* as a comedian, he completely denies the audience their expected format. Furthermore, the actual content of Bruce's humour, being politically radical, confrontational, and freeform played with the expectations of stage comedy in general. It's almost as if the greatest trick Lenny Bruce played was being a comedian itself. Elon Gold reflects on the difference between Lenny and the comedy preceding him. He states, "He came from Vaudeville, that was the interesting thing, and his mother grew up in Vaudeville, he grew up in Vaudeville and he just totally bucked that trend, of like ba-dum-bum jokes, and set-up-punch-line, 'take my wife' and to get up there and start talking about yourself, and to get really deep and personal, and talking about the world you're living in, and politicians and racism and class, it's like, that's unbelievable."[70] Bruce's accomplishment in satire was the presentation of the unprecedented. Lenny Bruce presents a genuine version of his own personality, whereas one-liner comedians play a character. One goes to see a stage-comedian to escape reality, have fun, and let loose. One sees Lenny Bruce and is confronted with reality itself. The difference in Bruce's form of satire is in the fact that Lenny turns the personal into laughter.

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[69] Kliph Nesteroff, "Vaudeville Comedians," in *The Comedians: Drunks, Thieves, Scoundrels, and the History of American Comedy* (New York, NY: Grove Press, 2016), pp. 1-25.

[70] *Looking For Lenny* (Gravitas Ventures, 2011), https://tubitv.com/movies/15629/looking-for-lenny, 8:11-8:40.

However, with personal laughter comes discomfort, anger, and aggression. Bruce changed the focus of mainstream comedy into personal satire. This satire did not just delve into the personal life of Lenny Bruce himself, but into the personal lives, hypocrisies, beliefs, and values of the audience themselves. From the foreword to Bruce's autobiography, Kenneth Tynan writes "...he is seldom funny without an ulterior motive. You squirm as you smile. With Bruce a smile is not an end, it is invariably a means. What begins in pure hilarity may end in self-accusation".[71] While Bruce sought to make people laugh, the target of his laughter, and the reason for that laughter is not always as direct, or as clearly interpreted when compared to the era of one-liner comedians. When Bruce begins a routine, he doesn't necessarily have a cause for being there, and his effect exists only as the routine progresses. The ability to offend is a deliberate tactic employed in Bruce's satire. This offensiveness is often pointed to as a negative portrayal of Bruce's *sick* humour. It also represents an unprecedented style unique in the vulgarity of his speech for the time.

Bruce, however, was not the first, or only vulgar comedian working, as a plethora of vulgar comedians existed alongside Bruce. One nightclub comedian, B.S. Pully, is an example of a raunchy comedian known for an emphasis on vulgarity, and deliberately explicit material. Nesteroff explains, "the most famous of the lewd comics was B.S Pully, a creation of Miami beach strip clubs and Catskill roadhouses often billed as The Comic Who *May* Make You Laugh."[72] One of his most memorable bits involved a cigar box where Pully would pretend to offer an audience member a cigar, to then expose his penis to shock the audience into laughter.[73] This bit is completely tasteless, actually bordering on physical and/or sexual assault and harassment. Bruce never stooped this low for his humour, and even though he spoke on taboo topic with the use of vulgar, sexual, and profane elements of speech, his brand of offensive humor existed for more than simple shock value laughs.

The difference between Bruce and other vulgar comedians working alongside or prior to Bruce is made clear by Ronnie Schell. He states, "It's all different than it was when we started because, except for a few comedians, you couldn't use any blue material, you couldn't touch on

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[71] Lenny Bruce and Kenneth Tynan, "How to Talk Dirty and Influence People: An Autobiography," in *How to Talk Dirty and Influence People: An Autobiography* (Boston, MA: Da Capo Press, 2016), p. ix-xiii.
[72] Kliph Nesteroff, "Nightclubs," in *The Comedians: Drunks, Thieves, Scoundrels, and the History of American Comedy* (New York, NY: Grove Press, 2016), pp. 53-94.
[73] Ibid.

anything that was controversial in politics and religion."[74] This quote shows that risqué humour existed prior to Bruce, as something to be stifled or censored. The uniqueness in Bruce's satire, however, was that he created comedy that used offensiveness alongside critiques of modern culture, politics, and religion. This also exposed the hypocrisies of a society used to easy appeasement, instead of critical, satirical, and pointed commentary. The difference between a tasteless comedian as Pully, and a vulgar comic in Bruce is simple: satire. Bruce set the precedent of comedy as free speech. This free speech contains content of personal repression, societal criticism, and the evocation of trauma. The plain difference between Bruce and Pully is that Bruce's humour has a point, reason, and line of argument, sticking with its audience past the jokes themselves. On the other hand, Pully's humour ends as soon as it begins, presenting nothing more than a disgusting image.

As noted previously, the distinction between simple comedy and critical satire is the difference in length, target, reason & direction of the humour. Bruce's work doesn't end at the edge of the stage. It permeates throughout the audience, and meets audience members, only to shake their hands and spit in their faces. It is not safe, relatable humour, or easily dismissible, shock humour, but satirical comedy that seeks to interrogate those who hear it. In this respect, it is important to clarify terminology relating to these types of humorists. Berle, Hope & their kind are comedians, in that classic sense of comedy as humour. Humorous being the operative term, they exist as lighthearted amusement, and not for deep interrogative purposes. They are comedians in the lightness of their being. Bruce, rather, is a stand-up comic. This term, however, euphemizes the reality of this new comedic form. The term comic, being close to comedian, sounds like these two forms are closer than they are. As seen in this chapter's analysis of the contrast between these two forms, stage comedy, and stand-up are distinctly different in their tone, content, and presentation. Bruce is a stand-up comic, but stand-up comics are most purely satirists. They're not just trying to make us laugh, but also trying to make us think.

As Tynan writes, "The point about Bruce is that he wants us to be shocked, *but by the right things;* not by four-letter words, which violate only convention, but by want and deprivation, which violate human dignity."[75] This shows the difference between comics and

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[74] *Looking For Lenny* (Gravitas Ventures, 2011), https://tubitv.com/movies/15629/looking-for-lenny, 3:13-3:24.
[75] Lenny Bruce and Kenneth Tynan, "How to Talk Dirty and Influence People: An Autobiography," in *How to Talk Dirty and Influence People: An Autobiography* (Boston, MA: Da Capo Press, 2016), p. ix-xiii.

comedians. The difference is simple: comedians are a personality, while stand-up comics have a personality, showing that the difference between the two relies heavily on satire itself. Satire is the distinction. Comedians do not want (or need) you to think about more than the words or actions and their humorous effect. Taking physical comedy for example, the physical prowess of that comedic style only exists to punctuate the jokes that the comedian tells. The movements become words themselves, a part of the grammar that resides in the routine. There is a mastery to that form, but it still relies on simple content. The comedian, therefore, does not complicate their own routine, but rather works efficiently, so that the jokes hit with perfect timing and effective punctuation.

Stand-up comedy undercuts this classical style, by making the audience realize that the importance of the routine relies, not on the efficacy of the words within the routine, but in the meaning behind them. That is why, despite many comedians' reliance on physical humour, one goes to 'hear' a stand-up comic, while another goes to *see* a comedian. As Tynan explains, "(Bruce) used words as a jazz musician uses notes, going off into fantastic private cadenzas and digressions, and returning to his theme, just when you thought he had lost track of it forever."[76] This shows that stand-up comedy (satire) becomes an act that works outside of a concrete structure. The specific wording of a joke may not matter as much to Bruce and other stand-ups. Rather, it is the flow of the routine, in its ability to affect the audience through personal content that stand-up comics emphasize. When one *hears* a stand-up comic, they are affected personally, socially, mentally, and critically. In this way, a stand-up comic can often become a comedian, but a comedian cannot become a stand-up comic. There is a divide between the two artforms that exists because of stand-up's proclivity towards criticism & catharsis. While Bruce created a contentious style that utilized vulgarity, and offensiveness, he differentiated himself from past acts to create a new style of comedy through satire. Despite Bruce's brashness, the satire he created forced his audience to think and contend with the act itself, instead of allowing for simple dismissal of the content as *just* comedy.

[76] Ibid.

*From Bruce Himself*

Finally, to understand Bruce's intense, contentious style, it is necessary to analyze a passage from Bruce himself. This will reinforce the shocking divide between light-hearted humour often found in jokes/comedy, and the harsher, satirical form of Bruce.

Before the chapter proceeds, a warning regarding the piece to be analyzed is needed. Bruce uses offensive words throughout the forthcoming routine. This routine is used as a brash example of Bruce's interrogative, divisive humour. Bruce wants the audience to be shocked. However, in his shocking usage of controversial words and material, an important, personal, and political point is made. These points are often illuminating, therapeutic, and even emancipatory. Below is a divisive piece from Bruce, transcribed from an audio recording, with an addendum highlighting an alternative ending. His routine, transcribed as closely as to how it was spoken:

"Are there any niggers here tonight? -- What did he say…? *Are there any niggers here tonight?* Jesus Christ, he had to get that low for laughs?
Have I ever talked about the Schwarzes? Or spoke about the Moulinyans? Or placated some southerner by absence of voice?
When they ranted and raved about nigger, nigger, nigger, are there any niggers?
I know the one nigger that works here, I see him back there. Oh, there's two niggers, customers, and, uh, but between those three niggers sits one kike, (WHISTLES). Thank God for the kike. Uh, two kikes, there's two kikes, and three niggers and one spick, two, three spicks. One mick, one spick, one hick, one fick, funky, spunky, boogie. And there's another kike, three kikes. Three Kikes, one guinea, one greaseball. Three greaseballs, two guineas, two guineas, one hunky funky lace curtain, Irish mick, that mick spick, funky, hunky, boogie. Five more niggers, five more niggers, I pass with six niggers, eight micks, and four spicks."[77]
Another version of this piece ends with this addendum:

"A point: if President Kennedy got on television every day and said, "I would like to introduce all the niggers in my cabinet." And all the niggers called each other niggers and every day you

[77] *Looking For Lenny* (Gravitas Ventures, 2011), https://tubitv.com/movies/15629/looking-for-lenny, 19:46-20:45)

heard 'nigger, nigger, nigger, nigger, nigger', the second month nigger wouldn't mean as much as 'good night' or 'god bless you' or perhaps as much as, "I promise to tell the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me God. Nigger would lose its' impact and you'd never make some poor nigger cry when they come home from school." [78]

This routine is intentionally offensive to an extreme and seems irredeemable in its deliberate use of slurs. However, the following portion of this essay will closely analyze Bruce's rhetorical strategies to investigate how Bruce interrogates the language that American society finds offensive, making laughable that which makes audiences insecure and outraged. Bruce engages with racial slurs throughout this routine. The discriminatory terms presented confront the idea of offensive language itself. He proposes that assumptions of offensiveness are an imposition on humanity. He also uses satire to expose the ridiculousness of words that are challenging to hear and contend with. He begins strong and vexatious. "Are there any niggers here tonight?".[79] A line that is grating not only in its usage of the N-word, but also in the fact he is directing that word deliberately towards potential black audience members. In a way, the N-word is less offensive than the word *here*. Obviously, the slur is the shocking point, but what is even more shocking is the fact that he is asking the audience to represent or self-indicate who exactly is most affected through their specific identification with this contentious slur.

He continues with responses from the audience, both mocking, and affirming the outrage that the audience may rightfully feel. "What did he say…? *Are there any niggers here tonight?* Jesus Christ, he had to get that low for laughs?"[80] Well, that's what he said. By both affirming and mocking the audience's outrage, Bruce is already confronting and dividing his audience between those that abide by the supposed moral (non) usage of certain words, versus those that see language as attributed meaning. Bruce is pre-emptively mocking the outrage of audience members that he foresees are already offended, therefore, interrogating their reason for being there in the first place. If these audience members do not, or refuse to, look past offensive phrases, Bruce makes sure that they know that he knows what he is doing. Bruce creates a mutual awareness regarding the potential offense of his routine. Simultaneously, however, Bruce acknowledges the immediate shock and difficulty that the audience feels with the subject matter.

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[78] Lenny Bruce, "Are there any niggers here tonight?," V.Nova, YouTube Video, 1:21, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IaRqDc41IFQ.
[79] *Looking For Lenny* (Gravitas Ventures, 2011), https://tubitv.com/movies/15629/looking-for-lenny, 19:46-20:45.
[80] Ibid.

By immediately acknowledging the first line as a shocking and *lowly* statement, Bruce is then able to move immediately into the actual message of his routine.

Bruce continues by reminding his audience of the consistency of his material, and the content of his character. He does this by directly confronting the audience with his track record regarding slurs and denigrative speech? "Have I ever talked about the Schwarzes or the Moulinyans? Or placated some southerner by absence of voice, when he ranted and raved about nigger, nigger, nigger?"[81] By evoking other cultural slurs, one from his Jewish cultural background: Schwarzes, and one from his time in Wartime Italy: Moulinyans, Bruce questions the audience's offense, defending his use of the term as something more than typical denigrative speech. By confronting the audience's immediate outrage, Bruce attempts to move past the audience's initial shock and disgust towards the routine. Bruce then moves forward with the message of the routine that he evokes through humour. Bruce interrogates the audience, calling on their memory and acknowledgement of the fact that Bruce remains an ally to African Americans, often chastising those who do use these slurs in real, denigrative ways, rather than the jestful uses that Bruce evokes here. In this way, Bruce proves his division from the slur itself, reminding the audience that anyone shocked or outraged is just as guilty, if not more so, than Bruce in using, defending, and ignoring this sensitive language. He attacks the outrage of the audience as a faux offense. Racial language and the espousal of discriminatory ideals was pervasive at the time. For an audience of the 50s to act offended is hypocritical in Bruce's point of view. He states that he has placated the ranting and raving southerner[82], the archetypical *actual* racist, by removing their voice, and therefore, their power. The phrase ranting[83] reminds the audience of the actual issues regarding these sensitive words. Bruce purports that these words are not offensive in and of themselves, but in the way of their usage. Bruce again builds a case to the audience to hear him out for the message of the routine, rather than tune him out for the offensive content, and way of its presentation.

Next, however, he continues to rely on shocking his audience, by becoming what might be politically incorrectly called an *equal opportunity offender*. He reiterates the first slur, then brings in other slurs rhythmically, working to break down the audience's defences and anxieties,

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[81] Ibid.
[82] Ibid.
[83] Ibid.

moving them towards a sort of unified laughter. He begins, "I know the one nigger that works here, I see him back there. Oh, there's two niggers, customers, and, uh, but between those three niggers sits one kike, (WHISTLES)- thank God for the kike."[84] Again, beginning with the N-word, he sarcastically evokes a common ignorant argument regarding slurs by referencing his familiarity and friendship with the target of the slur. Bruce can use the word, he jests, because he's friends with black people. Bruce then pivots that sarcastic argument by pointing to blacks in the audience. He points out two African Americans in the audience, surely playing with the audience's anxieties, and potential anger. He then breaks the tension with the line, "…between those three niggers sits one kike, (Whistles), thank God for the kike."[85] By including a slur that is personal yet still offensive, Bruce broaches the defences of any audience member left offended by the initial slur to then point out that everyone has got a slur to share. The whistling also acts as an exclamation mark to accentuate the relief felt by having another Jew in the audience. The audience has been silent for the most part of this routine, and up until the whistle that signals Bruce's relief, the audience has rarely laughed, sitting instead in anxious silence. By pointing out a similarly identified audience member, however, and then whistling to indicate relief, the audience finally removes their anxious guards, and laughs at the absurdity of this individual on stage whose mission it is to point out the plethora of identities in the room in potentially the worst possible way. Bruce's routine thus far uses deliberate offense, to shock the audience and garner their attention. He then defends himself personally, in continued potentially problematic ways. However, Bruce presents a strong enough case to string the audience's engagement along. He then evokes just enough comedy regarding the absurdity of the situation to break down the guards of the audience, to then barrage the audience with a desensitized tirade.

Bruce's almost 20-second-long free-form speech builds up and breaks down the diversity of the room by indicating all the potential slurs of individuals present in the audience. The way he speaks these slurs, however, evokes a cadence of musicality reminiscent of the jazz music of his time. He rhymes some of the words used, punching them into his speech like a poet, while also accentuating the rhythm of the words like the taps of a jazz drummer. Lenny's early stand-up routines relied heavily on the influence of jazz music, both in the presentation of his material, and in the material itself. As Tynan writes, "…the rhythms and cadences of his words reflect the

[84] Ibid.
[85] Ibid.

soul of a jazz musician. Syllables and consonants flow with seeming effortlessness when Bruce is on a tear, his love of jazz evident … in the relentless forward motion and swing-beat feel of his solos."[86] When watching Bruce's act, an audience may be familiar with Bruce's style and presentation due to their familiarity with Jazz itself. Bruce uses a freestyle choice of words, rhythmically punctuating awful words to shock the audience. This tactic both illuminates the cleverness of his cadence and the content of his speech.

In this routine, Bruce takes jazz music's style of rhythm and improvisation to a level of uncomfortable commentary on words that American society finds offensive. The slurred sounds of a jazz player's saxophone become the slurs themselves emanating from Bruce's mouth. Tynan continues, "Bruce was creating a self-stylized world of sound and thought of his own, far from the one-liners and stale jokes of an earlier generation… Instead of notes, he had words; instead of melodies, he had themes. But the results were the same. Jazzman's solo, a burst of rhythm and thought – a stream-of-consciousness rush of ideas – that may seem dizzying while it's unfolding but becomes lucid by its final, climactic moments."[87] Not only is Bruce dizzying, but he disorients by confronting his audience with the most uncomfortable of impositions. Bruce's use of the jazz form to question the uncomfortable truths of identity in front of offended, potentially furious individuals creates a profound and provocative display of how language dominates societal standards of propriety. The result of Bruce's terse criticism of and engagement with individual and societal discomforts regarding certain forms of speech, is the exposure of the hypocrisies of offense itself. By interrogating individual offense, Bruce can expose just how much influence American society has on the morals of its population that often go unquestioned by individuals within the society itself.

As Bruce somewhat heavy-handedly points out in the addendum,[88] language itself isn't necessarily right or wrong. It is more important to notice what is given power to in society. For Bruce, the recitation of slurs is a direct challenge to his audience to remove themselves from any moral high ground, and to look at his routine without emotion in order to interrogate and alleviate that which binds us emotionally to words. Bruce's argument isn't that one should go

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[86] Lenny Bruce and Kenneth Tynan, "How to Talk Dirty and Influence People: An Autobiography," in *How to Talk Dirty and Influence People: An Autobiography* (Boston, MA: Da Capo Press, 2016), p. ix-xiii.
[87] Ibid.
[88] Lenny Bruce, "Are there any niggers here tonight?," V.Nova, YouTube Video, 1:21, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IaRqDc41IFQ.

throwing around slurs but an audience, individual or culture should think more closely about which words should retain power over said individuals, cultures, etc., and why. Nesteroff writes that, "Bruce broke down boundaries of language and subject matter."[89] Another famous Bruce routine entitled, *To is a Preposition, Come is a verb* uses language similarly, juxtaposing taboo sexual qualms of the time with a rhythmic word usage to desensitize and satirize that which makes individuals uncomfortable. By using the phrase *to come* as a hinge, Bruce exposes the sexual realities and insecurities of romantic relationships, provoking laughter in the taboo nature of his work.

Mark Lonow reiterates, "Can I say the word fuck? Yeah. Well, I couldn't say the word fuck in 1952 or '54 or '55 before Lenny Bruce because they were banned words. It was a banned word and there were many. But what happened was his pattern, the type of speech he used became very personal on the level that all the comics of the 50s couldn't do, wouldn't do, and they were protective of the fact that they wouldn't do that in public, you know. People would be offended. Holy shit, I can't say that on stage. Well, I guess Lenny either wasn't offended or provoked it."[90] By pointing out that what people find offensive is basically always a choice, Bruce provokes his audience to feel offended, not by the nature of his speech, but by the inequalities and hypocrisies of American culture at large. Bruce asks his audience to evaluate their offense over words to the potential offense felt regarding a society where race riots, war, and suppression of speech exists.

Bruce advocates instead for a frankness of speech that is emancipatory in its deconstruction of that which impedes real societal progress. Bruce's final statement, which presents the absurdly hopeful reality, that John F. Kennedy himself would use these sensitive words in order to desensitize them is an outrageous scenario that presents a radical idea about what society holds as impenetrable and uncouth for public consumption. Bruce's implicit suggestion here is that these words are only as powerful as an individual or society deems them to be. Therefore, if one desensitizes their usage, or simply proclaims them as nothing more than just different language, the words lose their denigrative power. Bruce's example of President

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[89] Kliph Nesteroff, "Stand-Up's Great Change," in *The Comedians: Drunks, Thieves, Scoundrels, and the History of American Comedy* (New York, NY: Grove Press, 2016), pp. 155-201.
[90] *Looking For Lenny* (Gravitas Ventures, 2011), https://tubitv.com/movies/15629/looking-for-lenny, 8:58-9:38.

Kennedy using the word frivolously in his everyday speech[91] is a tongue-in-cheek, jest ridden supposition. However, the powerfulness of that example resides in the fact that certain aspects of societal ills are much more prevalent and acceptable than the simplest of uttered words. Bruce sees the balance of offense as inherently skewed. Why is war a more acceptable talking point than race, identity, and people itself? Why is the usage of uncomfortable terminology stifled, when discussion around bombs, riots, and the efficacy of police brutality a commonplace rhetorical strategy and talking point? To summarize, Bruce is pointing out and questioning the moral high ground (or lack thereof) of a society, political structure, and government that sends people to war, but won't acknowledge the simplest of issues at home.

Finally, it is important to talk about Bruce's involvement in World War II, and the role of satire in response to grand injustice, violence, and the squandered high ground of morality. Bruce endured the horrors of war, and the discriminatory nature of his age firsthand. In 1942, he joined the U.S. Navy, serving until 1945. The specificities and intricacies of Bruce's time abroad are not important here. One does not need to know every single traumatic episode of Bruce's life. Furthermore, the extent of knowledge that one has about Bruce's service is limited to his own reflection within his autobiography as a recitation of a few written gags and jokes. Bruce writes more about his motivations for joining the Navy than he does about any specific events over his three-year period. However, Bruce offers a glimpse of the trauma he faced through a cursory story of naval life. This brief description, however, still shows the horror and trauma that men faced fighting abroad. From Bruce's autobiography, he writes, "Blood and salt water mixed together looks blue. Eight men followed by twelve, then by about forty more, floated gracefully by the bow of the U.S.S. Brooklyn…The bodies continued to float by, their heads bumping into the starboard side."[92] Despite its brevity, this excerpt shows the horrifying and traumatizing nature of existence in the U.S. Military.

In typical Bruce fashion, however, this traumatic experience doesn't just horrify him, but works to turn the mindset of his young self into one of cynicism, doubt, and distrust. Bruce continues, "Seeing those pitiful, fresh-dead bodies, I knew then what a mockery of life the

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[91] Lenny Bruce, "Are there any niggers here tonight?," V.Nova, YouTube Video, 1:21, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IaRqDc41IFQ.

[92] Lenny Bruce et al., *How to Talk Dirty and Influence People: An Autobiography* (Boston, MA: Da Capo Press, 2016).

materialistic concept is."[93] There is a satirical quality to that rectifying statement. It seems simply to be a reflection on the qualities of war and how it changes the viewpoints of those experiencing said war-time realities. However, for Bruce to then make a snide remark regarding materialism pairs the dead with the living, showing that the hypocrisy of an age, society, or even individual, obsessed with *things*, is a total hypocritical farce. In his own sinister way, Bruce seems to be touting the old phrase, "You can't take it with you!", even if you never had it at all.

Finally, it is important to reiterate that the qualitative nature of satire emerges from moral loss and the acquisition of trauma. For Bruce to have survived war, with all its traumas, dangers (physical and otherwise), and horrors to emerge and perform for the same society that condoned these acts of destruction is a jarring juxtaposition. In *Looking for Lenny,* the film opens with a contextualization of the time, presenting a montage of the era's injustices, horrors, and traumatic realities. Juxtaposing the nuclear bomb and race riots with clips of wholesome family programs, joyful newsclips, and early Bruce tv spots shows the incongruous nature of American society.[94] What is offensive to Bruce about society is not necessarily the specific horrors or actions that exist in his world, but the cognitive dissonance that exists in a culture which rails against the bigoted violence of the Nazi regime, to then show the same reckless breadth of death to the Japanese abroad, and the blacks at home. Again, this shows that dark satire often builds off a loss of moral high ground, to interrogate, analyze, and ridicule the hypocrisies of an age that drops a nuclear bomb, segregates based on race, acts violently towards certain demographics, but still pontificates regarding the moral superiority of modest, innocuous subject matter in art and culture.

It is just this presupposed, performative modesty that motivates the satirist to anger. As Paul Krassner states, "He responded to injustice and suffering, and I think of him as an alchemist that… transformed horror into humour."[95] This quote from Bruce's friend is one of loving remembrance. However, to suggest that Bruce worked through a magical, unknown process of transformation is just plain wrong. He did transform horror into humour, but he did so by exposing, interrogating, and ridiculing it head-on, without regard for personal consequence, and other's personal reactions. Mort Sahl comments, "He was irreverent and individualistic and

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[93] Ibid.
[94] *Looking For Lenny* (Gravitas Ventures, 2011), https://tubitv.com/movies/15629/looking-for-lenny.
[95] *Looking For Lenny* (Gravitas Ventures, 2011), https://tubitv.com/movies/15629/looking-for-lenny, 9:53-10:03.

wasn't trying to please anybody."[96] Despite obviously working in show business, Bruce gained fame despite himself. He wanted to make money but did not neglect his intellectual position in favour of simple, safe, money-making comedy.

Furthermore, Sahl's above quote again misses the point. The individualism referred to is only an aspect of the age that Bruce worked. The reason he presented as individualistic is because of the singular nature of his satire. His satire is unique in its commitment to contending with the hypocrisies and damning un-comfortabilities of American society. For nearly ten years following his death, Bruce remained a singular example of a stand-up comic whose focus centred on exposing the status quo of America, with the ability to challenge the influence of his culture's hypocrisy, discrimination and imposed traumatic effects.

[96] *Looking For Lenny* (Gravitas Ventures, 2011), https://tubitv.com/movies/15629/looking-for-lenny, 7:02-7:06.

# Chapter 2: Is Black Satire Dangerous?

## *Living Black and White*

This chapter continues this thesis' focus on satire created and exemplified by individuals from marginalized identities. It expands ideas found in Bruce regarding how trauma, discrimination, and inequality results in a proliferation of satirical content that can prove liberating to performers and audience alike. Lenny Bruce was Jewish and of marginalized identity. His satire reacted against the status quo by interrogating impositions of American culture. This chapter will focus on racial satire through engagement with Black stand-up comedy. It will look at historical precursors to black stand-up as contextualization, then move through 20th century black satire to show how histories, cultures, and identities suffering from trauma, can create freeing satirical content. Subsequent chapters will focus on other marginalized comics, investigating the history of femininity and queerness in 20th century satire. Black people, Women, and members of the LGBTQ community suffered inequality and discrimination throughout the 20th century. This is reflected in the cultural era written about in the last chapter. While Bruce struggled to provoke and create the origins of satirical stand-up comedy, racialized, feminine, and queer individuals often had limited space to humourize, satirize, and therapize through comedy. Nevertheless, racial, feminine, and queer humour has existed throughout comedic and satiric history. This chapter will focus on examples of perseverance in satire through analysis of satirical rhetoric and routine. Furthermore, this chapter shows how perseverance itself is prevalent in racialized individuals, communities, and culture, as exemplified by black stand-up comedy. This chapter focuses mainly on black American satire due to the rich history of black satire and the plethora of material to draw from. This focus on black satire relates to this thesis' general ideas surrounding subversion of the status quo. Extending from Bruce, the personalized perspective within stand-up comedy applies to black satire in its contentious relationship with cultural forms of domination. By specifically taking into consideration black American stand-up, this chapter submits another example of satirical reaction against oppression. Furthermore, black stand-up comedy and satire is a prime example of using the oppressor's tools to subvert and relieve instances and forms of oppression themselves. Despite there being black comics within stand-up comedy, their popularity often

remained secondary to mainstream white comics on television, radio, and stage. However, the marginalized positionality of black comics allowed for a freedom of expression, and boundary-pushing content creation unique to black stand-up. In this way, black comics were able to use this white-dominated form to extend and relieve their own experiences of oppression without the permission of the oppressor themselves.

While an effort to bring in satirical examples from other ethnic demographics will be made, the sheer breadth of racial satire in black comedy will dominate. To deviate from Bruce, however, does not mean that this paper moves forward chronologically. Rather, it is important to acknowledge Bruce's contemporaries in black satire, and their stifled position within American culture. The uncomfortable, critical satire exemplified by Bruce also existed contemporaneously to other demographics of identity and intersectionality. It is important to note that race humour existed alongside earlier one-liner comedians as well.

As Wayne Federman notes, "Black variety performers were relegated to minstrel shows, medicine shows, tent shows, carnivals, roadhouses, and the circus."[97] The important distinction to be made, then, is not to separate racial satire from other forms of satire completely, but to point out that this category of comedy existed alongside the previously traced history of 20th century stand-up and its precursors. The difference, however, lies in the fact that black comedy, while existing alongside the history of satire, was separate from the mainstream. Simply put, black comics and satirists often did not work on the same stages as white comics, or even as Bruce, despite his relevant marginal position. Therefore, a more focused history of black satire is necessary to trace the similarities and differences in the progression of this comedic form.

During Vaudeville and the stage shows of the 1800s and films of the 1900s, black performers were delegated to extremely limited servant roles, only speaking lines in subordination to their white bosses/masters, or playing the roles of minstrels, a fooled-up version of black identity. Often, this blackness represented on stage was not represented by black performers themselves, but by whites playing the role of the fool through minstrel stereotypes. As Federman explains, "Minstrel shows consisted of white actors, comics, dancers, musicians, and singers who smeared their faces with a concentration of burned cork and petroleum jelly into

[97] Wayne Federman, "Vaudeville & Burlesque," in *The History of Stand-up: From Mark Twain to Dave Chappelle* (Independent Artists Media, 2021), pp. 15-27.

an exaggerated, 'blackface' theatrical mask.' "[98] This uncomfortable reality of white performers wearing blackface is a different type of discomfort than the one seen in the creation of this darker satirical form. The difference is that the minstrel type of humour did not satirize institutions of power, but upheld them through racist caricature and performance. Federman continues, "The minstrel show evolved in myriad ways, but the primary comedic aesthetic centred around dehumanizing, demeaning and racist characterizations of African Americans."[99]

While it was mostly whites that played the ridiculous role of blacks throughout this era, blacks were also coerced to play these extremely exaggerated versions of black stereotypes, enacting, and forcibly upholding discriminatory narratives of blackness. In *Darker than Me,* a documentary *Exploring the roots of African American comedy,* Mel Watkins explains that "When blacks really got on stage themselves, they were sort of forced to do the same. They became black minstrels and put on blackface themselves and… well, corked up themselves. Initially, they didn't do any black humour either. What they did was to imitate the whites who had been in minstrelsy before them."[100] This point asserts that the humour portrayed by black performers in this era was often not the humour of their own culture. Rather, it was comedy rooted in the dominant culture of whiteness. These practices of blackface, by white performers and coerced blacks to 'cork up' is an obviously abhorrent practice. That humour will not be analyzed here, as it has no therapeutic or emancipatory benefit, existing only as a historical note of comparison. The condemnation of blackface is clear and a reiteration of this racist artform is not useful. Rather, this chapter presents an analysis of black stand-up that specifically illuminates contemporary masters of the stand-up form who aim to interrogate culture and society itself, making violently uncomfortable those institutions which allow racism and blackface to exist in the first place.

A quote from Bruce's daughter comments on the racism of the period. Kitty Bruce states, "Back in the '50s things were very sanitized and very, let's look pretty for the camera. But a lot of very ugly things were not pretty for the camera. The racism that went on was definitely not camera pretty."[101] This simple comment reaffirms the inequities that define the era of growth for

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[98] Wayne Federman, "The Four Forefathers," in *The History of Stand-up: From Mark Twain to Dave Chappelle* (Independent Artists Media, 2021), pp. 1-14.
[99] Ibid.
[100] *Darker Than Me: Exploring The Roots of African American Comedy* (ITV, 1994), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_8Vb7fJZv8U, 18:25-18:46.
[101] *Looking For Lenny* (Gravitas Ventures, 2011), https://tubitv.com/movies/15629/looking-for-lenny, 18:15-18:31.

stand-up comedy as an artform. Kliph Nesteroff states, "Stand-up comedy was tough for women. It was even harder for those who were Black. During the supper-club era, black comedians played primarily to black audiences, ignored by white show business even if they were major headliners…"[102] Although prosecuted for his dangerous speech, Bruce could still perform in comedy clubs, whereas black comics could not even get on stage. This disallowed and silenced black speech completely for mainstream audiences, typifying blackness as a dangerous, uncouth proposition itself. The idea of black comics performing for white audiences was the most dangerous element. It didn't matter what black satirists had to say, the position of power on the stage was dangerous enough to be stifled.

As Lowe writes, "Ethnic humor, so frequently used to maintain hegemony by the group in power, can, through inversion on the part of the oppressed, become a weapon of liberation. At times it can be used aggressively to serve the purposes of revolution, but it can also serve as a mode of communication and conciliation."[103] The position of the black stand-up comic is often fundamentally a position of subversion. The simple act of standing on stage flips assumed power dynamics from white dominated to black subverted oppression.

*Redd Foxx*

Emerging from the blacks- only Chitlin' circuit came Redd Foxx. Foxx was the first hugely popular black comic able to bridge the gap between white negligence and discomfort over black performers, to an infatuated love of them. From the opening of Foxx' *On Location (1978)* comes a succinct narrative summation. "The success of Sanford & Son made Redd Foxx a star overnight; a voice and a face the nation now knew, but for more than 30 years before that Redd played back country juke joints keeping company with the likes of Bessie Smith, Big Bill Brunzy, Ma Rainey, and the Will Mastin Trio starring Sammy Davis Jr. Payment was often a few beers, and a place to change clothes. Next, came the stages of black theaters, on the south side of Chicago, the east end of Los Angeles and up in Harlem, New York at the Apollo, the

[102] Kliph Nesteroff, "Stand-Up's Great Change," in *The Comedians: Drunks, Thieves, Scoundrels, and the History of American Comedy* (New York, NY: Grove Press, 2016), pp. 155-201.
[103] John Lowe, "Theories of Ethnic Humour: How to Enter, Laughing," *American Quarterly* 38, no. 3 (1986): pp. 439-460, https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.2307/2712676.

Royal, the Regal. The Chitlin' Circuit was the only place black performers worked."[104] His humble, lower-class beginnings signify how a performer can get stuck in the segregated world of club comedy. However, with a familiar style, and brilliance in writing and promotion, Foxx became the first black comic to become a star regardless of his audience and identity, able to work, offend, and confront all demographics alike.

The familiarity of Foxx's style may have helped his career through the creation of a routine filled with a comfortable style of humour. Foxx also relied on the one-liner form of joke-telling. While Foxx did not only use one-liners, his storytelling style often ended with clever turns of phrase, puns, or most subversively vulgar statements that shocked his audiences. While vulgarity pushed Foxx towards the emerging offensive satirical form, these turns of phrase and puns often endeared Foxx with his audience, cultivating respect between audience and performer.

An example from Foxx's *Video in a Plain Brown Wrapper* provides a clear example of his use of puns, phrasing, and vulgarity. Foxx jokes, *"*See, I'll tell ya, I'm getting divorced, but it was my fault. Really, I tell the truth, publicly, it was my fault. My old lady caught me in a motel in Henderson, Nevada with a midget broad from Circus Circus. She doesn't understand English so well, and I tried to explain to her that I was cutting down."[105] This joke is admittedly crass, especially in its use of a slur for individuals with dwarfism. However, this joke shows the way that Foxx played with words, to spin an audience into both laughing at the pun-chy phrasing of his routine, while also slipping in vulgarity, thus making uncomfortable those in the audience typically unwilling to hear such words. Foxx, a repeat adulterer sets up his audience with an admission, feigning sincerity, guilt, and flaunting the need to explain his actions. However, directly after stating, 'it was my fault'[106] multiple times, Foxx bluntly states the reality of the situation, disarming the audience, and denying their ability to catch their bearings. The terms *midget* and *broad* remain offensive terms. However, if Foxx used the more politically correct terms of *little person* or *dwarf* and *woman,* the jokes pun(ch) line remains purposefully crude. The wife in reference is Korean, and Foxx states that "she doesn't understand English so well"

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[104] *On Location: Redd Foxx* (HBO, 1978), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gK-j3erDRHQ, 0:02-0:52.
[105] *Redd Foxx - Video In A Plain Brown Wrapper* (Vestron Video, 1983), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CA_aqkzvjrM, 47:18-47:35.
[106] Ibid.

[107], and that his attempt to "cut down"[108] is lost through a language barrier. This punchline again references Foxx's personal issues with infidelity, whilst making light of the situation by incorporating a (fictional) reality with a play on words. Foxx is attempting to cut down his cheating ways but conflates the actual action of infidelity with the physical size of the person he is cheating with. Although still an offensive, combative joke, Foxx is more importantly contending with his own personal issues, allowing for personalized comedy to provoke a catharsis of the situation at hand. The satire, here, is inwardly directed, whilst the offensiveness is directed outward. Foxx is satirizing his own black, male persona. Although rooted somewhat in autobiographical experience, Foxx's position as a bridge between stage comedian and stand-up comic allows him to punch upwards at his own oppressive nature, to expose the idiocy of a typically masculine position in a marriage. At first glance, this joke seems to denigrate marginalized communities. However, the actual bulk of critical satire remains inwardly directed. Foxx is the fool at hand, unable to work through, and stop his own misdeeds as a husband and a man. By using offensive language, and a raunchy pun, Foxx misdirects his audience, yet the bulk of the criticism remains self-facing.

As Schulman writes, however, "There is little doubt that the world of black stand-up comedy is a masculine, confrontational one in which humour most often assumes the attack mode."[109] Foxx's humour is one of brashness, and overt offense. Foxx purposely plays with the audience's reservations, to break down their defenses. This is common in Black satire, and is pushed to its absolute limit in Pryor, Murphy, Rock & Chappelle. What is important here is the content of the joke, as well the style of the joke itself. Foxx is using a well-known form of joke-telling, but slipping in critical self-reflection, and an element of satire to expose his own faults. He thereby reveals to the audience details of his own black experience, previously unknown. While Foxx's humour evokes a masculine, aggressive style, a deeper look at his content shows a self-awareness and self-criticism that allows individual admission as a way of satirizing male infidelity.

Furthermore, Foxx made significant contributions to racial humour and satire through his provocative and influential releases on Vinyl/ LP. As Nesteroff explains, "Redd Foxx was one of

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[107] Ibid.
[108] Ibid.
[109] Norma Schulman, "The House That Black Built: Television Stand-up Comedy as Minor Discourse," *Journal of Popular Film & Television;* 22, no. 3 (1994): pp. 108-115, https://doi.org/10.1080/01956051.1994.9943675.

the most influential comedians of the twentieth century. He was responsible for what became one of the biggest trends in the early 1960s—comedy records."[110] These *blue* records gave a platform for that which (black) comedians could not say on television, reaching a broader audience through the secretive, and private nature of listening, rather than watching. As stated previously, Black comedians couldn't play in white clubs, but white audiences could purchase black & blue comedy records to get an alternative, radical, satirical perspective. However, while these records articulated elements of the black experience, they very much still relied on the familiar set-up, punch-line style of humour. Although these one-liners were often told within a larger comedic story. From *Mo Funny: Black Comedy in America*: Dick Gregory explains, "People was honest about Redd Foxx. They knew there was filthy, there was profanity, and, and, and everybody had em'. But you waited til' all the Christians left. The good folks. And you say (*shields mouth and whispers)*, 'I got Redd Foxx. And everybody smiled."[111] Despite being a *dirty* comic, Redd Foxx connected white and black audiences by bringing comedy into a new medium; one that, although shrouded in secrecy, brought black culture, rhetoric, and satire into white homes.

Foxx helped move forward the genre of black satire, breaking ground in his ability to connect black experience through comedy with white audiences. Although not a cause-effect relationship, Foxx likely helped break black stand-up comics into white clubs by negotiating a familiarity with the black experience. Despite Foxx's raunchy and offensive nature, he managed to engender himself positively with white audiences. While Foxx may have exploited the familiarity of one-liner humour, his subversive and vulgar content proved an inspiration for comics wanting to emulate him. Foxx was a mentor for a younger generation of black comics who, despite looking up to Foxx, did not seek to connect white and black audiences, but rather to extend black satirical vulgarity to its potential limit.

*Richard Pryor*

Richard Pryor comments on the influence that Foxx had on his career, and the importance of a subversive, offensive comic to the growing genre of black satire. Pryor, as stand-up comic,

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[110] Kliph Nesteroff, "Stand-Up's Great Change," in *The Comedians: Drunks, Thieves, Scoundrels, and the History of American Comedy* (New York, NY: Grove Press, 2016), pp. 155-201.
[111] *Mo' Funny: Black Comedy in America* (HBO, 1993), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fjybp7XjpUA, 47:53-48:12.

spent the early parts of his career focusing on a safer, more conventional form of comedy. His style is more reminiscent of Bill Cosby's early material and does not seek to deliberately question or attack audiences. His comedy remained relatively safe, and relatively non-racial in nature. Pryor himself lamented this period of his comedy. He states, "I told neat little inoffensive chickenshit stories. I thought that because it was safe, it would also be commercial. I was wrong. I couldn't have been wronger. What I was doing was phony. I was turning into plastic."[112]

However, upon watching Foxx's act, and realizing that his middlebrow style wasn't setting him apart significantly from his peers, Pryor began working profanity and racial content into his act. He explains, "And I kept watching Redd. He was the epitome. He was doing it all—being himself on stage, pulling no punches, a totally no-bullshit act. Wherever he worked, he was always Redd Foxx. If it wasn't for him, I'd still be working clean. He has got to be the greatest fucking corrupter of youth since Socrates. I tell you, before I worked Redd's club, I didn't know shit. But he taught me how to say shit and piss and fuck and motherfuck and all of them God-forbid words."[113] This "no-bullshit"[114] idea that Pryor evokes is an influential result of Foxx's style/ content that helped grow black satire and stand-up comedy. While Pryor's contemporaries Flip Wilson, Bill Cosby, and Dick Gregory all had their own styles, Pryor was the most provocative. He took the idea of brash, offensive, and blunt rhetoric as far as possible. In this way, he used vulgarity itself to loosen up his audiences, so that, at least if the audience can't get past the vulgarity, they might be able to hear the actual message. As Watkins explains, "[Pryor] introduce[d] and popularize[d] that unique, previously concealed or rejected part of African-American humour that thrived in the lowest, most unassimilated portion of the black community."[115] Pryor was not only unique in his usage of brash language, but existed as a progenitor of a previously unseen, especially by white audiences, brand of black comedy.

His initially safe persona dissipated into an unrelenting black comic ".... radically unconcerned with deferring to any social conventions, particularly those that accepted black

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[112] Kliph Nesteroff, "Percolation in the Mid-1960s," in *The Comedians: Drunks, Thieves, Scoundrels, and the History of American Comedy* (New York, NY: Grove Press, 2016), pp. 202-231.
[113] Ibid.
[114] Ibid.
[115] Mel Watkins, *On the Real Side: A History of African American Comedy* (Chicago, IL: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999).

comedians as clowns but rejected them as satirists."[116] Pryor specifically rejected the history of blacks as fools, eschewing traditions of minstrelsy and black clowning for *real* satire that presented experience in opposition to domination rather than alongside it. As Nesteroff explains, "He channeled a variety of bleak, true-to-life characters, revealing subconscious fears and obsessions, entering realms not previously explored by a stand-up comedian."[117] This uniqueness of Pryor's satire set the stage for preceding black comedians to work within personal experience rather than generalized humour, or comedy defined by white laughter.

As Steve Allen states, "One reason that there is a shortage of Negro stand-up comedians or humorists is that comedy of this sort usually involves a certain amount of critical observation and our society is probably not civilized enough yet to permit or encourage the Negro comedian to make satirical commentary about… our bungled international relations, the Un-American activities committee or other things of that sort. Just Imagine a Negro comic getting up on a stage and saying some of the things that Lenny Bruce is getting away with."[118] This quote, from the early 60s, predicts the shape of things to come. Despite the absence of a provocative black comedian alongside Bruce, Pryor's emergence in the following years allowed for the black experience to be spoken bluntly, with a level of brashness, and divisiveness unprecedented for the time. As Thea Vidale states, "Pryor was brilliant because he showed white people how we see them. We already know how you see us, but we see you, and this is what you do."[119] This comment shows the different levels of seeing that often divides black and white audiences from the performer that is Pryor himself. This element of division is a testament to Pryor's satirical efficacy. Not only was he able to make available and mainstream to audiences the black experience, but he was also able to make light of difference, to poke fun, and sometimes down-right mock this divide between cultures, allowing for racial trauma to be worked out through humour. Nilsen & Nilsen comment on "how skilled Richard Pryor was in pulling his white audiences into his black humour. He was the comedian, but he made whites provide the comedy as he impersonated a goofy white man lolling along with his head in the clouds so that he is

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[116] Randall Kennedy, "The Protean N-Word," in *Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word*, 1st ed. (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 2003), pp. 3-44.
[117] Kliph Nesteroff, "The First Comedy Clubs and the 1970s," in *The Comedians: Drunks, Thieves, Scoundrels, and the History of American Comedy* (New York, NY: Grove Press, 2016), pp. 274-305.
[118] Ibid.
[119] *Darker Than Me: Exploring The Roots of African American Comedy, YouTube* (reelblack, 2019), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_8Vb7fJZv8U, 32:36-32:45.

completely oblivious to the snake that bites him. In contrast, he impersonates a black man strolling to the rhythm of nature itself. When the black man sees the snake, he nonchalantly says, 'snake' and does a sideways dance step."[120] This routine not only made fun of the oppressor, but broke ground in painting black people in a positive light. This allowed both black and white audiences to see typical societal hierarchies in an exposed and reoriented presentation.

Despite Pryor's emergence as a subversive, critical, and divisive voice, his comedy remained most popular in comedy clubs, records, and comedy specials. While these mediums still allowed Pryor to subvert the hierarchies of the time and allowed for his inciting comedy to reach broader audiences, the comedians that existed on mainstream television did not seek to divide audiences as blatantly as Pryor. Instead, they sought to bring audiences together in the recognition of a shared humanity, morality, and sense of humour.

*Bill Cosby*

The foremost comedian of this inclusive comedy was Bill Cosby. Cosby's emerged as stand-up comic alongside Dick Gregory and Richard Pryor, but accumulated fame quicker and larger than the previous two. Despite starting his career speaking about race in his act, Cosby soon pivoted to a longer storytelling style that he constructed within his hometown of Philadelphia. Having started at a venue called the Cellar, Cosby polished his act due to the venue's lack of time constraints. Before branching out to shows in Chicago and the Village in New York, Cosby's act was already polished and ready for the mainstream. His raceless comedy was perfect for popular television, and his routines suitable for any venue, not just the dingy nightclubs and coffeehouses that harboured the emerging satirists of contention.

Cosby, rather, existed as a stand-up comic who relied on the comfortable comedy of the previous age within a routine that felt different in its storytelling style and content. Cosby was speaking frankly of the human experience, but he was not doing so to subvert any status quo, or criticize audience members, oppressive institutions, or society at large. Mel Watkins explains that "At that point, this was about 1968, Cosby was *the* American comedian. Cosby was a sort of

[120] Alleen Pace Nilsen and Don L.F. Nilsen, "Just How Ethnic Is Ethnic Humour?," *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 38, no. 1 (2006): pp. 131-139, https://go.gale.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA154070107&sid=googleScholar&v=2.1&it=r&linkaccess=abs&issn=00083496&p=LitRC&sw=w&userGroupName=anon%7E48a058ea.

raceless comedian, and even that was revolutionary in a sense because Cosby didn't really do traditional black, or African American humour. The revolutionary thing about Cosby was for a black comedian to step onstage and really, in a very subtle way say that race means nothing was, in fact, revolutionary."[121] Cosby existed as the cleanest example of a black comic, in that he didn't revel in divisive race-based humour, but sought to bring together white & black audiences through humour about shared human experience. Despite the recent allegations and charges against him, Cosby is an example of the type of safe humour that blacks could perform. This humour allowed for black performers to gain notice on television and in the mainstream (white) media. However, Cosby, by focusing on a "raceless" humour [122] disallowed black audiences a relational, and satirical experience. To put it simply, Cosby played it safe. His early albums, *I Started Out as a Child, & Why is There Air?* suggest an ambiguous attitude toward race in the titles themselves, presenting a safe, family friendly humour in their content. His later work on the *Cosby Show*, and as the host of *Kids Say the Darndest Things* only compounds the fact that Cosby wanted to exist as a raceless, American, but not necessarily black, father figure. He didn't seek to present the black experience itself, per se, but to present the human experience through humour more generally. As Nilsen & Nilsen write, "… 'ethnic humour that becomes popular with mainstream audiences has been 'Americanized.' It is as if mainstream audiences do not really want ethnic values to be the main ingredient. Instead, they want ethnicity to serve as a spice to lend new flavour to old jokes or even as frosting that will hide the fact that the humour is coming largely from the perspective of mainstream listeners or readers."[123] Cosby is the prime example of this idea of blackness used only as an accent for the broader existence of human comedy. His blackness is there, but it is not a talking point. Only shared, therefore, as an acknowledgement between audience and performer, quickly pivoted from to point out general observations and easily laughable jokes.

The focus on ease of laughter within Cosby's repertoire is most evident in his staunch opposition to the use of the N-word with stand-up routines. Kennedy explains, "[Cosby] fears

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[121] *Darker Than Me: Exploring The Roots of African American Comedy, YouTube* (reelblack, 2019), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_8Vb7fJZv8U, 30:29- 30:54.
[122] Ibid.
[123] Alleen Pace Nilsen and Don L.F. Nilsen, "Just How Ethnic Is Ethnic Humour?," *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 38, no. 1 (2006): pp. 131-139, https://go.gale.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA154070107&sid=googleScholar&v=2.1&it=r&linkaccess=abs&issn=00083496&p=LitRC&sw=w&userGroupName=anon%7E48a058ea.

that white onlookers will have negative impressions of African Americans reinforced when blacks laughingly bandy about the N-word."[124] Cosby's contentious relationship with the N-word represents his commitment to moving past the word towards an America ignorant (for the greater good) of racialized, denigrative language. As Kennedy continues, "He fears that many whites largely ignorant of black America will be all too literal minded and will fail to understand the joke."[125] In a way, whatever satire Cosby is able to evoke is free from the constraints of blackness, in that they exist outside of a racialized specific world, satirizing humanity itself. However, by not encountering race, Cosby adheres to the status quo. His satire, therefore, becomes closer to the Horatian style of satire, safe and teasing, rather than directly combative of the institutions that hold black Americans back.

Despite Cosby's squeaky-clean persona, it is interesting to note that he ended up becoming the worst example of a black comedian (or human) than any of his deliberately offensive counterparts. It is almost as if, those working in offense, can leave the bulk of their traumas, secrets, or negativities on-stage. Other than Richard Pryor, equally offensive and divisive comics such as Chris Rock, Dave Chappelle, and Eddie Murphy seem to have escaped prolonged negative publicity, facing backlash mostly in the content of their satire, rather than the subjects of their lives. Comedians that use offensive material and divisive presentations in their acts, often therapize themselves, working through their personal issues, and trauma itself. Cosby's heinous acts, coming from the cleanest of comedians, is a disgustingly ironic truth. It is almost as if Cosby used clean humour to hide his personal evils, creating a persona in which no one could believe the atrocities he committed. Whereas comics who perform offensive material, for the most part, do so to expose the evils that may exist within themselves, society, and the world. By doing so, these comedians have less to hide, having exposed their internal struggles, rather than obscuring or hiding them.

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[124] Randall Kennedy, "Pitfalls in Fight *Nigger*: Perils of Deception, Censoriousness, and Excessive Anger," in *Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word*, 1st ed. (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 2003), pp. 89-135.
[125] Ibid.

*Flip Wilson*

Flip Wilson is another more conventional comedian from the 60 and 70s. Wilson presented an on-stage persona as a comedian first, and an African American second. Hosting his own variety show, Flip's most popular routine was that of playing a woman named Geraldine, dressing in full feminine garb, whilst exaggerating typical feminine stereotypes of shrillness, overbearing acts, and the 'karen'-ic nature of whining and complaining. These skits presented to a mainstream audience would reify typical stereotypes of femininity, utilizing a misogynist humour to make audiences laugh, whilst also ignoring the black individualism of its purveyor. Mel Watkins again explains the difference between popular variety show comedian Flip Wilson who relied on a shtick-y, persona or character-based humour, and the satirical stand-up of Richard Pryor. He writes, "An interesting comparison is Flip Wilson. (He) had all of the gestures. He had everything except the satire, so in a way, Richard Pryor was the epitome of black, or African-American humour, because he had the gestures, he had the language, the body language, he had the facial expression, he had the tone of voice, he could move from character to character and he also had the satire".[126] Comedy, joke-telling, and generalized humour all have their purpose in the world of entertainment as leisure. However, it is satire that is truly evocative, provocative, and able to expose the injustices that exist at both the skin's surface, and deep down in the bowels of society. As Nilsen & Nilsen explain, "…what the majority of North Americans recognize and enjoy as ethnic humour is actually pretty far removed from its ethnic roots. In most cases, the humourists succeed with the mainstream, the closer they have brought their humour to mainstream customs and values."[127] Bill Cosby, and Flip Wilson are examples of this distanced style of black humour, which relies less on the black experience, and more on black identity as a supplement to human nature generally. The most provocative black satirists, however, are those that incorporate their blackness greatly into their work itself, using the realities of blackness, and the divide between black and white identity to interrogate and analyze the inequities of our world.

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[126] *Darker Than Me: Exploring The Roots of African American Comedy, YouTube* (reelblack, 2019), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_8Vb7fJZv8U, 37:05-37:29.

[127] Alleen Pace Nilsen and Don L.F. Nilsen, "Just How Ethnic Is Ethnic Humour?," *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 38, no. 1 (2006): pp. 131-139, https://go.gale.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA154070107&sid=googleScholar&v=2.1&it=r&linkaccess=abs&issn=00083496&p=LitRC&sw=w&userGroupName=anon%7E48a058ea.

*Dick Gregory*

A less combative, but an equally interrogative black social and political satirist is Dick Gregory. Mel Watkins explains, "Dick Gregory was really the person who changed all of it. Beginning in the 60s, Gregory escalated the humour to a cerebral stage where, or intellectual stage where, it was difficult for people to react to it, except by thinking about it."[128] Coming to popularity alongside the rise of the civil rights movement, Gregory's comedy relied on clever political satire, while utilizing the typical turn of phrase comedy of the early 60s. His spin on this one-liner, safe humour, however, was the inclusion of explicit and deliberate incorporation of race. A short example of Gregory's racially charged material comes from his 1961 comedy record *In Living Black and White*. Even the title of the record shows Gregory's focus on pushing comedic boundaries for the purpose of race. Gregory was not just utilizing his black experiences to become popular within the black community. He also was not towing the line. He did not integrate his comedy into the general media landscape. Rather, as the title suggests, Gregory exposes the lines between, and through black and white experience.

The routine itself is simple. When speaking about his southern upbringing, Gregory relays the story of his first experience at a newly integrated swimming pool. He jokes about his reluctance to go swimming by saying to his parents, "I told my people, dammit! you wanna be with them people, you go! Get out there with all that water, even though they don't like me anyway, and I can't swim."[129] The first few lines of this joke seem to present light-hearted joking about the reality of this situation, using a sarcastic, insecure, and reluctant tone to describe the fears and worries of a child's first encounter with a fearsome (especially to a child) and potentially dangerous (especially to a *black* child) situation. As the routine continues, however, the humour turns to inward insecurity, as it is revealed that the child is both afraid of any potential harm that could be done by the forcedly integrated whites. Gregory, however, still maintains an innocent persona, continuing the revelation of his simple, childhood insecurity regarding an inability to swim. This inability to swim plays gently off stereotypes surrounding

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[128] *Darker Than Me: Exploring The Roots of African American Comedy, YouTube* (reelblack, 2019), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_8Vb7fJZv8U, 27:09-27:22.
[129] *In Living Black and White*, *YouTube: Dick Gregory - Comedians of the 60s* (Monkey D. Sound, 2018), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CzhiAOjf7s4&t=237s, 1:24-1:59.

black individuals' general inability to swim, while also riffing on the insecurity of childhood itself. Gregory presents a specific evocation of trauma for his black audiences, but also affirms typical childhood insecurities, embarrassment, and fear.

These first few lines, therefore, seem antithetical to the assertion that Gregory's comedy avoids the human touch of things. However, this gentle prodding at the shared insecurity of humanity turns into a more direct, incited, and exposed satire regarding white attitudes towards black people. While still using punchlines, Gregory speaks about specific actions (hypothetically) done by whites to the blacks attending these first integrated pools. He says, "They were real nice to us, they knew they had to integrate. They hired a new lifeguard for us. He was blind."[130] The simple, unexpected line "he was blind"[131] shows that, while all humans can share experiences, the reality of this specific situation is more sinister. Blacks were not afraid of their newly integrated white neighbours simply because of the embarrassment of cultural difference. Rather, they were actually afraid of violence being imposed on them by their white oppressors, that in the humorous context of Gregory's story, but in the very serious context of the real world, could result in injury or death. Gregory continues, "It was a glorious day. We all walk out to that integrated swimming pool, diving board 50 feet in the air. We got up on that diving board, they blew the whistle, we jumped, and they drained the pool."[132] Again, his delivery of this one-liner style manipulates expectations of light-hearted humour surrounding racially awkward situations. However, the serious, and surreal reality presented in the joke turns an uncomfortable circumstance into a potentially violent and deadly affair.

As Schulman explains, "Assuming racial inequity to be a given in contemporary American society, it (Black Stand-up) pokes fun at the comic justice that passes for the real thing. Its humour is double-edged mixing rebellion against racial oppression with the playful self-deprecation of black people and black culture."[133] As seen in the "I can't swim"[134] line and hinted at throughout this routine is a playful commentary on black experience, punctuated with punchlines centred around blacks playing a sort of literary slapstick role. In this, one can see the theme of self- deprecation that surrounds black individuals that inhibit these stories. They are

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[130] Ibid.
[131] Ibid.
[132] Ibid.
[133] Norma Schulman, "The House That Black Built: Television Stand-up Comedy as Minor Discourse," *Journal of Popular Film & Television;* 22, no. 3 (1994): pp. 108-115, https://doi.org/10.1080/01956051.1994.9943675.
[134] Ibid.

playing the fool. They can't swim, they can't be saved by those around them, and they fall far, having safety pulled out from underneath them. The difference in Gregory, however, is that while he is playing with a familiar trope of flipping expectations through short phrasal punchlines, the actual subject matter presented is desperate, brutal reality. While premises such as a blind lifeguard, and the draining of a swimming pool in mere seconds are imagined circumstances, the real animosity and hatred that defines the actions of the hypothetical whites in these routines is real.

In the same clip, Gregory later speaks about sit-ins, his era's refusal to serve blacks in southern (and elsewhere) restaurants. He uses a clever turn of phrase to show just how idiotic the racism and racist segregation of the period. He jokes, "I sat down. A blonde waitress walked over to me. I say, 'I'd like two cheese-burgers'. She says, 'we don't serve colored people down here'. I say, 'I don't eat coloured people no-where.' "[135] Again, one sees Gregory using an almost farcical, ridiculous punchline to expose the inherent racism involved in encounters between black and white individuals. These encounters are those where whites feel threatened in losing power or privilege to their historically oppressed counterparts. The phrase, "we don't serve coloured people down here"[136] is flipped to accentuate the word *serve*, conflating the reality that restaurants would not host and feed black patrons, to a sarcastic, tongue-in-cheek misunderstanding of the other meaning of the term, that what a restaurant *serves* is food itself. Again, this places a bit of foolery on the speaker in their conflation of the two meanings of the word *serve.* However, this emphasized foolishness points to the idiotic ways in which blacks were discriminated against. Gregory is both playing the fool, and making the fool, evoking a misinterpretation of a phrase to attack rote expectations of even the most subservient of whites.

As Bell-Jordan writes, "In cultural performance, critiques of hegemony are often achieved through the visual or verbal reshaping of our social reality. In this context, humour is generally seen as a way psychologically to cope with marginalization and to provide a space for artists and audiences to create meanings that affirm cultural identity and lived experience."[137] This quote summarizes the reality and purpose of these jokes. Gregory uses shared black

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[135] *In Living Black and White*, *YouTube: Dick Gregory - Comedians of the 60s* (Monkey D. Sound, 2018), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CzhiAOjf7s4&t=237s, 3:48-3:55.
[136] Ibid.
[137] Katrina E. Bell-Jordan, "Speaking Fluent 'Joke' Pushing the Racial Envelope through Comedic Performance on Chappelle's Show," *Performance Research: A Journal of the Performing Arts* 12, no. 3 (2007): pp. 74-90, https://doi.org/10.1080/13528160701771329.

experience to identify the logical hypocrisies of a hegemonic society that strengthens those in power by disallowing those without power from existing in the same spaces. Gregory's political satire exists as black oriented. It is not rooted in general human experience like the comedy of Foxx(somewhat), Cosby, and Wilson. Rather, he seeks to use familiar tropes of the punchline to ingratiate himself with his audiences, to then pivot and expose the injustices of humanity itself.

As Schulman writes, "Such jokes succeed by dint of the sheer ingenuity expended in coming up with new and more extreme variations on an old theme. But however fanciful their form, their point is simple and clear: "the whiteness of the prevailing cultural images in America is alienating—and these images are everywhere…"[138] In the context of these early satirists, and in any comedy that relies on phrasal humour and punchlines, the form itself isn't necessarily fanciful. Rather, it is the work done to continually expose injustice by exploiting these comfortable forms that prove ingenious. This joking which utilizes the oppressor's tools to then expose the oppressor's abuse is the crux of the most important, black satire of the 20th century.

*Darker than Me*

The following passage from the 1994 documentary Darker than Me explores the idea of African American humour as directly combative to white imposed domination. The encounter between host Lenny Henry and comics Robin Montagu and Thea Vidale reads:

> "*Interviewer (Lenny Henry)*: Is there such a thing as African American Humour? What is it?
>
> *Thea Vidale:* I think there's African American humour, because we been laughing at white folks for a long time. *Laughs* And we had to do it in a way that they wouldn't know. And I think that goes back to when we were slaves in this country.
>
> *Robin Montagu*: They used to talk about stuff, right in front of us, like we weren't there, and then they be like, 'them niggers knew everything that was gonna happen, how did they know? And they're standing, I'm the damn, I'm the house nigga, I'm in there. I'm

[138] Norma Schulman, "The House That Black Built: Television Stand-up Comedy as Minor Discourse," *Journal of Popular Film & Television;* 22, no. 3 (1994): pp. 108-115, https://doi.org/10.1080/01956051.1994.9943675.

listening to them plan the war, and then when I know, - 'How in the hell did they…?' I was standing there you moth(erfucker)…, but anyway…"[139]

This brief interaction explains the intent of black comedy with the familiar raunchiness often used in said humour. This quote explains how exposed secrecy allowed for satire to arise from the simple observation of white life. Blacks assumed to be stupid, and made to be insubordinate, were able to create a culture of satire through the simple act of listening.

An example of this observational satire is the white voice that most black stand-up comics evoke throughout their routines. The specifics of any one routine are not necessarily important here. However, in many African American stand-up routines, black comics present and perform a polished mockery of whiteness. These impressions usually extend from a retelling of an encounter with a white person or are presented through an observation of difference between the races. This vocal caricature includes a heightening of vocal pitch, a high-falutin, pretentious cadence, and an emphasis on pompous words and phrases. This voice is often presented as a response to the comic itself, being used to show white people's tendency to talk down to black people. While exposing the hypocrisy of whiteness, black comics use this satirical trope to empower their own kind through laughter, mock those themselves that force black individuals, culture, and history to be continually subordinated.

As Schulman explains, "Not infrequently, stand-up comedy becomes a mock display of power in which the occasional white member of the studio audience is made pointedly aware that he or she is outnumbered. But if no white person happens to be present, it does not matter. Much of the comedy still takes the rhetorical form of an imaginary interracial conversation in which white people, teasingly addressed in absentia are made at least provisionally vulnerable. As Hughley once put it, 'you [white people] can take it for two hours. We've been taking it for 200 years.' "[140] This white voice mentioned above is an example of just one way that black comics make deliberate this difference in power dynamics. By making fun of whites themselves and their privileged existence, black satirists expose and equalize the power dynamics of the rooms in which they perform, presenting, even for a moment, a more equal world.

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[139] *Darker Than Me: Exploring The Roots of African American Comedy, YouTube* (reelblack, 2019), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_8Vb7fJZv8U, 5:10-5:47.

[140] Norma Schulman, "The House That Black Built: Television Stand-up Comedy as Minor Discourse," *Journal of Popular Film & Television;* 22, no. 3 (1994): pp. 108-115, https://doi.org/10.1080/01956051.1994.9943675.

In the same way that Gregory flips punchlines to expose the hypocrisies of white dominance, the stage itself, and the black comedian occupying it function similarly. By adopting the persona of a safe comedian, the satirist can lure their audience into the performance, making members of the audience feel comfortable even if they are undeservedly so. Thereafter, however, the (black) comic turns on these audience members, accusing, denigrating, and exposing them for what they truly are, through what they represent.

*Paul Mooney*

Paul Mooney is an example of a comic who uses this staunch, accusatory tone. Mooney may not have the name recognition of the previous comics mentioned. However, he is a prolific writer that has written for every comic mentioned thus far. He has provided material for Pryor's stand-up, Foxx's *Sanford & Son* sitcom, Cosby, Gregory, and even Flip Wilson. More contemporarily, he has also written for Chris Rock, *In Living Colour* (the first black sketch comedy program), and *Chappelle's Show*. Mooney has been able to use his comedic prowess to write jokes, skits and scenarios that fit the comics at hand. However, in his own personal comedy, Mooney is unabashedly black in his energy, satire, knowledge of culture, and rhetorical prowess. He does not try to lighten (or whiten) his routine, or his own character. This unabashed blackness is most evident in Mooney's deliberate disregard for those concerned with the use of the N-word within stand-up routines. If black comics use the oppressor's tools to satirize institutions of power, Mooney takes this one step deeper, by using the specific denigrative words used against blacks against those that defined and constructed the words themselves.

In this way, Mooney presents an unashamedly black persona, embodying an aggressive and jarring persona that not only seeks to criticize power dynamics, but purposefully inflicts discomfort onto those with power and privilege. Oftentimes, Mooney himself will stop his own routine to point out, expose, and abuse the privilege of a white audience member. Upon seeing a white audience member offended, Mooney launches into the following radical analysis of whiteness, that crosses the line from playful ribbing and educational disorder of power to a berating and scathing exposure of white arrogance and affectation.

Mooney explains,

> "Because White people are very sensitive, you have to remember that. Oh! they kill me with their sensitivity. *Sooo* sensitive. They'll get out of here, like little white bunny rabbits. They'll hop out of this motherfucker. This lady even. Look at her! She's leaving now! I hope when you get home, niggers are burglarizing your house. Good night, Ma'am! They can't take it! I'm telling you! I know white folks, they can't take- she got the fuck outta here, didn't she? They can't take it! Because all of their lives, they've been told they're the shit. White people are always told, 'you're the best, you're everything, you're wonderful, you come from heaven, you're everything. You've never done nothing to nobody. You wear the white hat. You're the good fucking guy. And the minute they hear a nigger talk about, it freaks em'. Because I study white audiences. You can laugh at anybody, because white folks'll talk about nigger, you'll laugh *exaggerated laughter* And the minute it's about you *ahh* (like an affected, guard up exclamation)- You get that fucking bag. No sense of humour about yourself. Fuck you! You can be talked about too! This is America, fuck you! Fuck. You. You can be talked about too, motherfucker! And this white man is looking around thinking I got some sort of power over niggers…"[141]

While this routine is met with shock, and awesome laughter from the remaining audience members, the aggressive and hostile nature takes Mooney's reaction to white pretense from the "mock display of power" [142] that Schulman presents towards a real and tangible threat regarding the reaction and direction of his white audience. In short, by directly attacking his audience, Mooney is not presenting a *mock* display of anything. He is serious and absolutely certain of his position and his power as a comic on stage. This power upheaval again shows stand-up comedy's ability to subvert and work against the status quo, placing real power in the hands of those previously relinquished of it.

Furthermore, many of Mooney's routines contain clever phrases that point out realities of the black and white experience through succinctness and rhyming. These are not puns or

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[141] *Race*, accessed January 7, 2022, https://music.apple.com/us/album/race-live/370992174.
[142] Norma Schulman, "The House That Black Built: Television Stand-up Comedy as Minor Discourse," *Journal of Popular Film & Television;* 22

punchlines, but repetitions of presented facts that Mooney uses to punctuate his satire. When speaking about white people's ability to live unscathed by racial, marginalized, or demographic circumstances, Mooney espouses that they have got the "complexion for the protection."[143] This line is often met with audible laughter, in response to the humorous succinctness of the phrase, but is also often met with audible agreement from the audience. When speaking of black celebrities, or other black individuals who misinterpret their racial hierarchy, Mooney evokes the phrase, "under the illusion of inclusion."[144] This phrase again uses rhyming to humour the audience, whilst explaining the blunt reality of certain situations. To Mooney, despite black growth in economic, societal, and cultural spheres, the difference between whites and blacks, when analyzed through power dynamics, is that they simply cannot, and will not ever be equal.

This is what makes Mooney's material so jarring, but also so evocative. He is unashamedly black. He is unashamedly unequal, in that he realizes where the power resides, attempting not necessarily to undo power dynamics at the societal level, but to make scared and awkward those who do not know how to contain their pomposity in the presence of a reversal of power. He does have the microphone after all, and while exposing racial attitudes, pompousness, and inequities may not change the underlying racism of society, it surely will make the individual think twice about their own attitudes and prejudices.

In his special, *Analyzing White America,* Mooney has an extended dialogue on the N-word, and the common criticism from whites (and blacks) that he should stop saying it on stage. He comments, "There's some black and some white folks tripping on me now. You trip. They trip. They trip on me. *Using a *white* voice* 'Make that Nigger stop saying nigger. I'm getting a nigger headache. I can't think. Nigger, stop it. Nigger, stop.' But white folks, you shouldn't have made up Nigger, I didn't make it up. It's too bad. I say Nigger 100 times every morning, it makes my teeth white. Nigga, nigga, nigga, nigga, etc. I ain't' scared of that word."[145]
His liberal use of the N-word seems to take on Bruce's previous idea of desensitizing the word, to then turn that idea violently against white people themselves, the ones that, as Mooney explains, actually created the word. Where comics such as Cosby and Flip Wilson shy away from the word completely, Mooney chooses to engage with it. However, what is most

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[143] *Paul Mooney's Analyzing White America* (Shout! Factory, 2002), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8DvK0ydDcSU, 47:57.
[144] Ibid.
[145] Ibid.

provocative in Mooney isn't only that he chooses to use the N-word deliberately, but that he chooses to use that word combatively in response to white apprehension about the word that represents white privilege itself. The generational experience and psychological damage inflicted on black individuals has provoked an opposite reaction in Mooney as compared to his gentler counterparts. Instead of shying away from racial discomfort, Mooney eggs it on. Where comics such as Pryor, Murphy, Rock & Chappelle used the word liberally in their acts, the level to which they used it to specifically make white audience members uncomfortable is arguably less clear. For Mooney, to take the power back, one must tell the truth, and that truth is often what is hardest to say. To combat comfortable silence, is to provoke the speech of a satirist unabashed, unashamed, and unable to remain silent regarding words imposed and created elsewhere.

Mooney sums up the bulk of the racial issue that comics face by stating, "America says race. America is race. America is founded on racism. I didn't found America. I had nothing to do with America. It is what it is. I didn't create it."[146] This quote synthesizes the preoccupations of this chapter into a succinct response to the black satirical form. Whether it be Pryor's incorporation of blackness simple, or Cosby's reluctance, Gregory's political satire, or Foxx's one-liners, the idea of a specifically black, racial comedy, is an idea that stems from the imposition of race itself. It is America that has created the racial problem through slavery. Black comics are not necessarily anything other than simply comics making the most and best out of the situations placed on them.

*Portrayals of Race*

So why joke about these serious, traumatic issues? Well, as seen in this encounter from *Darker than Me,* Black humour resides in the middle of power and therapy. As Lenny Henry and Comedian Jay Anthony Brown converse, they illuminate the simple idea that laughter functions therapeutically. They discuss,

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[146] *Paul Mooney: Homey Don't Play That | The Uncut Interview (2010)*, *YouTube* (reelblack, 2021), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PNOiH0mJrN8, 13:06-13:19.

"Jay Anthony Brown: Like I said, whenever there's like something happens bad to black people, we've been able to bring-

Interview (Lenny Henry): Why is that?

Brown: Because that's all we got is laughter. That's all we got. The man has managed to take everything else away from us but our ability to laugh."[147]

As complicated as much of this analysis can be, and as unfunny as it is to analyze jokes, routines, and punchlines in this tense, academic way, quotes such as the above make clear how an emphasis on black satire is necessary to a broader understanding of the societal treatment of blacks throughout history. This simple exchange between Henry and Brown sums up this chapter's preoccupations. Laughter is the greatest equalizer. Whether one is making their own community laugh, or forcefully comparing and satirizing the oppressor's actions, black comedy makes the best out of the most negative of situations. Taken from their homeland, living under the violent shadow of slavery, racism, discrimination, and societal injustice, black comics have subverted division through laughter. Whether this laughter exists amongst blacks only, or is directed at, and inclusive of white audiences is maybe a secondary consideration. Rather, the most important aspect of black comedy is the simple, yet radical notion that, through laughter, emancipation, equality, and freedom are possible.

When it comes to the black experience, and the white perception of black culture, Kennedy summarizes the crux of black concerns over negative portrayals of black experience. He writes, "Some think that the racial perceptions of most whites are beyond changing; others believe that whatever marginal benefits a politics of respectability may yield are not worth the psychic cost of giving up or diluting cultural rituals that blacks enjoy."[148] This emancipatory nature of laughter is most possible in satire, as it actually engages the audience and performer with tense and terse realities, rather than deviating away from them towards safety through laughter within the status quo. The *politics of respectability*[149], in which Kennedy references, is eschewed in much of black satire, providing an outlet and artform for black comics to present

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[147] *Darker Than Me: Exploring The Roots of African American Comedy, YouTube* (reelblack, 2019), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_8Vb7fJZv8U, 7:05-7:20.
[148] Randall Kennedy, "Pitfalls in Fight *Nigger*: Perils of Deception, Censoriousness, and Excessive Anger," in *Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word*, 1st ed. (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 2003), pp. 89-135.
[149] Ibid.

and upheave discriminatory experiences through contention with discrimination and domination itself.

Indigenous Examples

The previous chapter on racial humour focused solely on black satire. This focus used a plethora of examples of black stand-up comics, as inspired by the scope of influence that this satire has had on American society. Racial satire seen through black stand-up comedy is a form of comedy that utilizes the darkest aspects of humanity to enlighten, educate, interrogate, and evoke therapeutic changes both in the individuals hearing the stand-up performance, and the speaker of the performance itself. However, through the previous chapter's search for the best examples of African American satire, a satirist named Charlie Hill presented a line of racial, societal, and political satire that worked towards a gentler, more educational, yet still equally combative level of provocation. While somewhat obscure, Hill, an indigenous American comic exists as an equally provocative and illuminating example of racial humour. However, his focus on education, and therapy unsettles as it illuminates, presenting a satire that does not necessarily seek to offend, but rather, to affect his audience.

Interestingly, it was Richard Pryor who paved the way for Hill. Getting his first big TV appearance on the *Richard Pryor Show* in 1977, Hill utilized familiar one-liner jokes with an oral, educational style, that sought to both teach white audiences about indigenous Americans, whilst confronting that same audience with the complicity of their (in)actions. Throughout his act, Hill muses on his satire itself, prefacing and clarifying the style and content of his routine. Hill orientates his routine towards subversion of the status quo by poking fun and criticizing the privileged individuals in the audience that feel discomfort in the presence of his satire.

He jokes, "Listen, I just want to say white folks, what we are doing up here tonight, we're not white bashing. This is just a little spiritual spanking you should have got 400 years ago."[150] Hill oscillates between playful musings on American Indigenous identity and the exposure of the

[150] *Charlie Hill • Remembering a Native American Comedy Legend*, *YouTube* (laugh out loud flix, 2019), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RaWTGnA9xrY&list=PLX5fvjtM4m92D5-h6Botez1cOnTw4zDsK&index=8.

privileges and prejudices of white America. He specifically targets those who lack an understanding of Indigenous culture, history, and the social issues that affect the indigenous community.

Hill sometimes directs his satire broadly at societal institutions, educating his audience, while exposing little known realities of the Indigenous experience. Other times, however, Hill poignantly pokes fun at the ignorance of those in power by relaying elements of his own lived experience through hypothetical interactions with his audience. These interactions are hypothetical only because it is unclear whether the content of Hill's jokes extend from real situations, or if they are simply constructed fictions. These interactions that Hill evokes are not out of any realm of possibility, however. While Hill may embellish, construct, or fictionalize stories, these stories still represent truths that are clearer in their fiction than any specific circumstance may be in reality. The truth in his jokes, therefore, may not come from the truth of the story itself, but in the residual truth that exists in the fact that these stories and interactions are not only familiar, but disappointingly believable. He jokes, "I had a heckler the last time I did a show. I'm on stage and he goes, *doing an exaggerated southern voice* 'I don't want to hear that crap, Injun'! I'm an American! Why don't you go back where you came from?'...long pause … So, I camped in his backyard."[151] By using a familiar punchline form, while portraying ignorance within a well-told, comfortable storytelling style, Hill subverts racist assumptions and the trauma imposed on indigenous peoples. The content of his jokes, however, and the intent of his satire is very much the opposite. Hill subverts most unexpectedly, by making his audience comfortable, then provoking and exposing the ignorance that surrounds indigenous culture, specifically through the contention with the most upsetting, traumatic elements of indigenous life.

Another joke from hill uses a clever turn of phrase to expose the extent to which settlers pillaged indigenous communities. After talking generally about the hypocrisy of the Thanksgiving holiday, Hill jokes, "There's one holiday we do celebrate, with white people, it's uh... Halloween. Every year, we dress up like white people, see. Then we go door to door, and we get anything we want, you know. *Knocks on mic* Trick or Treaty?"[152] This joke uses a phrasal turn that exposes the traumatic realities of colonization. By contrasting Halloween with

[151] Ibid.
[152] Ibid.

Thanksgiving, Hill compares the hypocrisy of one holiday that celebrates settler domination over indigenous peoples, to another geared capitalistically towards children and candy. Hill's comparison presents the implication that both these holidays are about getting all that one wants, thereby exposing the privileges and power that whiteness entails. The joke's hinge is the word *treaty*. Hill takes a risk in this joke by using a term that, despite being meaningful to Indigenous peoples, might still be unfamiliar to those uninformed about colonization in the audience. The joke's implication regarding the fact that settlers stole indigenous land is exemplified here by the simple utterance, through a turn of phrase, of the word treaty. This exploitive agreement[153] between indigenous peoples and colonizers allowed for colonizers to get everything they wanted, just as a child does in the presence of an unattended bucket of candy on Halloween.

Hill and Pryor's professional friendship shows how racial satire shares an emancipatory and therapeutic effect. As Hill explains, "Richard Pryor, I met in 1976, and I remember seeing him on stage and I thought, 'oh wow, Richard Pryor!'… He called me up. And he took me to the movies. He says, 'you talk to these white people like they're dogs. We got to get together, motherfucker, and I could tell he was a family man, he brought up his mother. It's like, wow, and every time I saw him, he had time for me. And he put me on his show, and it's how I got my start."[154] Displeasure with white oppressive power allowed for Pryor and Hill to connect and bond over shared trauma. Satire not only allows individuals to work out trauma individually but allows for equally disenfranchised individuals to connect and bond with each other through a shared culture of perseverance. Another joke from Hill compares these two cultures through the hypothetical ancestry of an audience member. He muses, "You know, I met a guy before the show, he's really proud of his heritage. He says, 'Charlie, you know my great-great-grandfather was African-American and Native- American…' I'm thinking that poor bastard, they not only stole his land, they made him work on it for free."[155] For Hill and Pryor to share a bond is not that surprising. These two individuals lived, and witnessed immense discrimination from their oppressors, and performed satire in purposeful insubordination to subvert hierarchies of race. For Pryor and Hill to bond over these shared intentions, to grow through comedy, and to persevere through satire is surprising only in just how apt the connection truly is.

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[153] I use the word *agreement* loosely.
[154] Ibid.
[155] Ibid.

Perseverance, therefore, is not only a theme of racial satire, but a function of satire itself. To be able to stand on the stage, endure the gaze of the audience, and then flip expectations, assumed notions, and imposed narratives is a daring feat. To do so, while also making an audience laugh at their own hypocrisies, expectations, and/or assumptions is not only a counterintuitive turn towards liberation from discrimination, but a subversive and powerful reality of the satirical form.

A quote from Hill explains, "When you get around Indian people, there's always laughter, even in times of stress, sorrow, sadness, there's always that undercurrent of humour. It's something spiritual. There's always something funny about it. Because joviality, lightness, laughter, they say laughter is the language of God."[156] As Hill points out, there's an element of spirituality and transcendence in comedy that allows for the individual to move past trauma and work through personal issues. This allows satirists the ability to expose, condemn, and explain larger, more permeative traumas. For Hill, an individual living in the violent shadow of colonialism, to espouse the benefits of laughter shows just how important satire is to the mental, physical, and spiritual emancipation of those that engage with it.

*Moms Mabley*

This short addition acknowledges and appraises another ground-breaking American comedian: Moms Mabley. It will also work as an explanation, and apology for her omission from the previous chapter, and the upcoming ones. Mabley's humour is wholly unique, and her intersectional position as being both Black and a woman has somewhat excluded her from a total application to either individual chapter. Her dual marginalization means that she doesn't necessarily embody fully the proclivities of black or female satire, but rather embodies the comedy of a social satirist existing as provocative in multitudinous ways in relation to her white and male audiences. She was a subversive comic yet sought to bring gentle joy to her audience through laughter. This is not to say that Moms did not tackle difficult or upsetting subjects, but she did so almost sacrificially, at the expense of her own image.

[156] Ibid.

Her persona, from the 1930s onwards was to dress up as an elder black woman, feigning ignorance in some ways and weakness in others to present a harmless appearance to her audience. This appearance, despite being harmless at face value, allowed for Mabley to subvert traditional means of content in satire to present racially charged, and gendered criticisms of the status quo. As Nesteroff writes, "Mabley's targets were interesting. She joked at the expense of bigots and 'damned old men'. With a benevolent voice she criticized the South and the empty promises of white liberals in Washington. From the 1930s through the 1950s Mabley was comedy's primary voice of the Civil Rights movement."[157] Mabley's harmless persona was deliberately adopted to evoke the dense social satire she relied on. By presenting as harmless, Mabley was able to present harmful and striking satirical preoccupations in her act. Mabley's persona was a way of lulling her audience to sleep, presenting transcendent preoccupations with gender and race simply due to the presupposed and assumed weakness of the performer in front of them. Once audiences realized Mabley's intent, however, her satire would already be densely exposed, evoking biting, social criticism within this innocuous persona.

Mel Watkins speaks of Mabley, "You got people like Moms Mabley who was, as early as the 1930s, doing humour that had some bite to it. I mean, Moms would tell, I guess one of her famous jokes was, uh, the one about being stopped by a policeman in Georgia. She runs a red light, and the cop comes over and says, 'Miss, why did you run that red light?' and she says, 'well, I saw the white folks go when the light was green, I thought it was our turn to go when the light was red.' "[158] This comment, and the joke within, again shows the extent to which Mabley utilized a comforting and less threatening persona in order to provoke her audiences into realizations about race. The joke is a simple story with a feigned misinterpretation of traffic laws that sheds light on segregation and the divide between white and black individuals in society. Her assumed ignorance is shown through an apparent misunderstanding of something as simple as traffic lights. What it exposes, however, is the reluctance in black individuals to overstep boundaries. She doesn't think that she is allowed to go when the light is green because she sees whites going. Whites and black doing things simultaneously, in the same space and time would have been frowned upon, if not persecuted. Her excuse for missing the red light is really an

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[157] Kliph Nesteroff, "Stand-Up's Great Change," in *The Comedians: Drunks, Thieves, Scoundrels, and the History of American Comedy* (New York, NY: Grove Press, 2016), pp. 155-201.
[158] *Darker Than Me: Exploring The Roots of African American Comedy, YouTube* (reelblack, 2019), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_8Vb7fJZv8U, 25:34 -26:05.

admission of fear, which exposes the extent to which whites impose their will of violence, and trepidation through the subtle, feigned ignorance of its speaker. Mabley's persona, as a weakened, non-threatening individual, allows for poignant satirical observations to be spoken to her audience.

This tactic of appearing non-threatening to evoke dense and critical social satire is a tactic that will be seen further in the work of the female comics explored in the next chapter. However, Mabley's identity as a black woman gives unique perspective to the clever ways in which marginalized individuals conceal their satirical edge through accessible and deliberately innocuous personas, seeming innocent to those in power, but provoking dissent once the veil is lifted.

# Chapter 3: Can Women Be Funny?

*The Mother of Laughter*

The question of feminine funniness is one that dominates discourse around female comics. Can they be funny? Can they be funny *and* pretty? What if sexuality is involved? The answer seems simple. Of course, women can be funny. However, doubts surrounding the quality of female comedy is not a new phenomenon. The question remains familiar. In the first episode of popular comedy-drama program *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel,* the titular character, encounters stand-up comedy as a place for therapy through providing laughter based on her personal experiences. Set in the 1950s, the story of Miriam 'Midge' Maisel is a story of perseverance despite male domination and the status quo. At the end of the first episode of the series, Miriam has a conversation with a fictionalized Lenny Bruce regarding stand-up comedy. Maisel has recently performed an improvised routine, and having received positive acclaim, is contemplating entering the industry. She asks Bruce if he loves the job, in which he replies in part, "It's a terrible, terrible job. It should not exist — like cancer, and God."[159] But for Maisel, the job is an outlet for her pain, heartbreak, and personal traumas. It does exist, and exists in good measure, in order to find an equivalency to her pain through laughter. Having suffered a break-up from her husband in a time where divorcees were looked down upon, stand-up comedy, for Maisel, is an outlet to renegotiate her personal trauma and challenge mainstream society's assumptions about women.

Despite being a fictionalization, the late 50s, and early 60s setting of the show is rooted in historical reality. This period saw the growth of stand-up comedy within America through the rise of nightclubs, coffeehouses, radio, and television. In fact, the main character, Mrs. Maisel herself, is loosely based on Joan Rivers. Rivers, whose satire will analyzed later in this chapter,"...was covering new terrain as an entertainer: giving voice to women's experiences, bravely pushing the boundaries of taste, and drawing grudging respect from her fellow stand-up

[159] "Pilot," *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (New York, NY: Amazon Prime Video, March 16, 2017).

comics for pummeling her way into their largely male preserve."[160] Existing as a progenitor of the female stand-up form, Rivers exists as a shining inspiration for the character of Miriam Maisel in her subversion of the status quo, and embodiment of growth through performed abjection.

As Rivers herself reports, "...people were shocked," "I was breaking new comedy ground with talk about women's intimate experiences and feelings…"[161] Expanding from *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel,* and her inspiration in Joan Rivers*,* his chapter will analyze comedic history to combat the typically ignorant view of female comedy as simply not funny. With specific focus on female comics and their satirical routines, this chapter will delineate just how female comedy subverts in its content, and how the female comic herself is a subversive figure in relation to the male dominated world (of comedy).

*The Masculine-Feminine, or, two sides of the same…*

The historic function and content of one-liner comedy is this thesis' first delineation of the difference between simple club humour, and the more contentious satire that followed. In both the mainstream, white tradition of comedy, and the alternative black tradition, one-liner humour existed as a safe set-up – punchline form that existed to amuse audiences. Offense was rarely a main function, appearing only in the infrequent raunchiness of a joke or two. In this chapter, the question of female comedy throughout the larger history of satire will be broached. It is important to note, however, that although there existed contemporaneous comedians to their male counterparts, these female comedians often relied on different styles of humour than the Milton Berle's or Redd Foxx's of the past. This difference lies in its emphasis on the varietal nature of humour, moving away from the masculine, nightclub, joke telling style, to one rooted in song, dance, comedy, and performance. Female humour existed alongside the early joke tellers of the 20th century, but worked with the other influential side of vaudeville, that of variety itself.

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[160] Leslie Bennetts, "Joan Rivers's Remarkable Rise to (and Devastating Fall from) Comedy's Highest Ranks," Vanity Fair (Vanity Fair, November 3, 2016), https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2016/11/joan-rivers-last-girl-before-freeway-excerpt.
[161] Ibid.

In this way, mid 20th century female comedy existed as a form more connected to the varietal aspects of comedy. Although, there did exist more complicated, and varied performative styles as the 20th century progressed. Female contemporaries of Berle and his kind, such as Sophie Tucker, and Totie Fields focused on comedy as amusement, the satirical edge more hidden, and deliberate offense often eschewed for gentler satirical prodding. These comics often performed under the variety designation, instead of as strictly a comic, or comedian only. This can be attributed to the fact that, despite there being a prevalence of feminine humour, female-comic relationships to the stage and/or screen was closer to the role of supplementary talent as guests or special acts.

*Not Funny Enough*

Despite its jestful nature, the title's question is a common preoccupation of satirical and comedic theoretical content. It is ridiculous that this question exists at all. However, even the respected writer Christopher Hitchens argued against comedy by women in his essay *Why Women Aren't Funny.* Hitchens' arrogantly writes, "Slower to get it, more pleased when they do, and swift to locate the unfunny—for this we need the Stanford University School of Medicine? And remember, this is women when confronted with humor. Is it any wonder that they are backward in generating it?".[162] This article is mentioned to reiterate the very real assertion that women lack some sort of humorous lobe, a funny bone, so to speak. This is a common statement from men. Women just cannot take a joke, and as Hitchens extends, obviously have issues making them. Hertz responds, "As irritating as Hitchens is, he is on to something. Hitchens is illuminating the social constructs that create the stereotype."[163] While Hitchens seems to be parroting common assumptions regarding the feminine relationship to humour, Hertz clarifies that, despite Hitchens' apparent ignorance, his paper unknowingly points out the reasons for the stereotype itself.

As Stanley explains, "(Stand-up) comedy was always harder for women, because it is aggressive…Comedians have to dominate their audiences and "kill," by common metaphor.

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[162] Christopher Hitchens, "Why Women Aren't Funny," Vanity Fair, January 1, 2007, https://www.vanityfair.com/culture/2007/01/hitchens200701.
[163] Emily Hertz, "Alternative Comedy: Women in Stand-Up" (dissertation, 2010).

Male listeners might make allowances for sparkling repartee—which is, after all, instinctive and responsive and manslaughter at the very worst. But a premeditated joke or routine can be murderous in the first degree".[164] Stanley talks about the more recent satirical form of stand-up here, but adequately explains the situation of female comedians throughout much of the 20th century. The form, style, and content of female comedy that existed alongside the male dominated one-liner form, is a comedy that risks offending the domination of men through patriarchy simply in its relationship to the balance of power. Whether seen in earlier vaudeville inspired acts, or the more recent satirical stand-up form, female humour becomes dangerous simply in relation to the status quo. A woman evoking the power of a singular performer on stage did not reinforce societal norms. For female comedians to exist in these spaces, they were forced to rely on more palatable content, seen through the forms of variety and the varied comedic songs, dances, and performances of 20th century female humour. Female comedy, therefore, exists relationally to the racial humour explored in the previous chapter. Feminine satire threatens the world of male-dominated comedy. Women, just as black comedians had before, subverted this status quo through the utilization of familiar forms and tropes of comedy. By doing so, female satirists created a niche of comedy within these male dominated worlds, slowly and stealthily subverting from within.

*Sophie Tucker*

A comedian, singer, and entertainer such as Sophie Tucker utilized her stature as a variety star, to present subversive content to a broader audience. From 1929, long before the established satirical stand-up period came Tucker's provocative tune, *I'm the Last of The Red-Hot Mamas.* This song, despite existing within a larger film, subverted and most likely offended audiences in its brash, albeit innuendo laden discussion and flaunting of female sexuality. The sultry refrain, "Cause I'm the last of the red-hot mamas/ They've all cooled down but me!"[165] evokes not only an unabashed female sexuality, but almost an antagonistic refrain. Tucker exists

[164] Alessandra Stanley, "Who Says Women Aren't Funny?," Vanity Fair, March 3, 2008, https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2008/04/funnygirls200804.
[165] *Sophie Tucker - I'm The Last Of The Red-Hot Mamas 1929 w/ Lyrics 'From Honky-Tonk"*, *YouTube* (warholsoup100), accessed January 9, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dEe2PSoa4gM.

not only as a scorching hot example of feminine individuality but promises to be an enduring example of feminine eroticism itself.

As the song continues, Tucker's flaunted sexuality not only extends to her ability to outperform and outpace other females, but also works to overpower the men that she encounters. The lyrics read,

"I'm the last of the red-hot mamas/They've all cooled down but me!
I don't pet and only neck 'em/ No sir, I'm a mama who loves to wreck 'em!
I can make 'em sizzle/ Make 'em fry and frizzle,
If you wanna know the truth/ I can warm the cold ones
And give the old ones /Back their flaming youth!"[166]

This verse raunchily flaunts feminine sexuality to expose and reverse male-dominated sexual power, changing these dynamics to a female oriented and prescribed experience. As Hertz writes, "In its purest form, 'stand-up' is a set of relations that are created between a comic and an audience."[167] Despite Tucker existing as a stage comedian, rather than a pure stand-up comic, her unashamed evocation of femininity is a direct link to the sort of power relations that Hertz is discussing. Lines such as, 'I'm a mama who loves to wreck 'em!'[168] point to the reversed power dynamics of Tucker's work. Tucker renounces the common stereotype of a woman or patronized *girl* ruined by male persistence. Rather, Tucker shows that a woman can have just as much, if not more power, than a man. The last couplet of the stanza shows just how much power a woman has in relation to their male counterparts. As Tucker sings, 'I can warm the cold ones/ and gives the old ones / back their flaming youth"[169] the reader can see that not only can a woman influence the emotions, thoughts, and feelings of their male counterparts, but they also have the absolute power to improve masculinity (the cold ones), and to restore masculinity (the old ones). The power that Tucker evokes is a provocative evocation of sexual acceptance. While the song, and Tucker's performance of it relies on tongue-in-cheek humour, the implicit content of the lyrics shows just how powerful femininity is in relation to less powerful male counterparts.

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[166] Ibid.
[167] Emily Hertz, "Alternative Comedy: Women in Stand-Up" (dissertation, 2010).
[168] *Sophie Tucker - I'm The Last Of The Red-Hot Mamas 1929 w/ Lyrics 'From Honky-Tonk"*, *YouTube* (warholsoup100), accessed January 9, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dEe2PSoa4gM.
[169] Ibid.

As Hertz continues, "If women's use of humour already violates gender roles and threatens the normative order, a woman on-stage making the traditionally male audience laugh would be dangerous to the masculine structure of stand-up."[170] As will be seen moving forward, the most poignant and subversive female comedy is that which tackles stereotypes head-on, joking about the typical female experience, but doing so to subvert those same constructs that make the phrase *typical female experience* exist in the first place.

*Totie Fields*

Totie Fields is another subversive female comedian situated between stage comedy and stand-up. Gaining mainstream popularity during the 60s, Fields' comedy presented an unabashed femininity and unrelenting aversion to toxic masculinity. Fields' comedy, however, existed as a remnant of the variety style of entertainment, with her biggest spotlights being on programs such as *The Ed Sullivan Show*. However, Fields' performances presented her own feminine identity with a satirical edge, joking about her weight, and therefore the absurd beauty standards of a male dominated world. Her incohesive affront to beauty standards, and her rise to fame while already in her mid to late 30s, provided Fields a unique situation within the satirical landscape. While already marginalized as a woman, Fields also had to oppose gender discrimination based on appearance and age. Her satire, therefore, often focuses on this exact topic, presenting somewhat self-deprecating material to subvert gendered assumptions and move towards acceptance and self-love for those outside of the mainstream.

She jokes, "Thank you. Thank you. Am I adorable? Did you ever see anything more precious than this? *Lifts yellow dress she's wearing* I look like a stuffed canary in this dress, don't I? Oh, I just think it's precious! and do you want to know something? Look at this. I lost so much weight. Can you believe that? That's an 18-inch waistline. Through the center."[171]

While these jokes are self-deprecatory in nature, they also work on a level of acceptance also seen in Tucker. However, Tucker's song about being a *Red-Hot Mama*, while unabashed

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[170] Emily Hertz, "Alternative Comedy: Women in Stand-Up" (dissertation, 2010).

[171] *Totie Fields "Shopping" on The Ed Sullivan Show*, *YouTube* (The Ed Sullivan Show), accessed January 9, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dGUD713dBEg&list=PLX5fvjtM4m92D5-h6Botez1cOnTw4zDsK&index=12, 0:00-3:28.

sexually, does not confront the fact that much of the laughter comes from the audience's realization that Tucker's feelings about herself do not match with her actual image, in that she is not a skinny, typically beautiful woman. The supposed distance allows for Tucker to subvert certain attitudes, and present herself powerfully, but also allows for a remainder of the audience to continually laugh at the cognitively distanced presentation of a fat girl thought beautiful. Where Fields differs from Tucker is through her direct, and immediate engagement with her body image, to show the audience that she knows who and what she is and is beautiful anyways. She looks like a stuffed canary[172] she jokes, but a stuffed canary is still precious, still cute, and still attractive in their own way.

The rest of the routine continues in a storytelling style that is punctuated by turns of phrase and one-liners. The story she presents relates a stereotypically feminine pastime in shopping. However, the content of the story is not a frivolous recollection of prices and items, as ignorant males might expect. Rather, she subversively recalls this story by owning her individual body and beauty differences in a way that antagonizes individuals within the ideal feminine forms, and the standards that create those forms themselves. She jokes,

"Well, there were two salesgirls standing there that you had to see to believe. You know the ones with the screwed-up noses? *Scrunches nose* They both look like they're smelling something, and I look like what they're smelling. You know that kind of face?"[173] Fields presents these salesgirls as an example of the type of attractive gatekeepers that one often finds in higher fashion establishments. These individuals often look down upon those that do not conform to typical standards of beauty. Fields, knowing this, sets up the rest of her story by joking about these salesgirls themselves, grossly imitating their snobbish nature as seen in their *screwed-up noses.*[174] However, she also presents herself as unabashedly different and therefore equally deserving of interaction as these snobbishly beautiful salesgirls.

She continues, "I say, 'I'd like to see something in an Italian knit. She says, 'you're kidding, you're bigger than Italy, where am I going to get an Italian knit to go around you?"[175] This joke is also self-deprecatory but uses a familiar comedic form to ease its audience. Fields combines her humorous storytelling with punctuated phrases that relay a story of societal

[172] Ibid.
[173] Ibid.
[174] Ibid.
[175] Ibid.

ignorance. By combining the comedic tactics of storytelling, punchlines, and turns of phrase, Fields can amuse her audience, while also pointing out the dysfunctional nature of a society unable to see and respect difference in a functional manner. What Fields is exposing is the fact that, through snobbishness, societal ideals of beauty, and masculine influenced environments, even the simplest of activities (shopping) can be made hierarchical through the impositions of masculinity.

As she continues, Fields also points out how this imposition of difference negatively affects the fundamental tenets of society as these impositions diminish power for both the powerful, and the oppressed. She jokes, "There is not a sale being made through this whole transaction. In fact, one lady was trying on a bathing suit, she had two legs in one hole."[176] By telling this unfortunate, denigrative, yet comedic shopping experience, Fields shows that the exclusion of certain body types and female forms does more harm than good to the powerful as well. Whereas one would assume that the powerful benefit from these exclusionary tactics, masculine impositions result in the lack of a sale. Feminine beauty standards, despite being prevalent, hinder those who presumably are meant to benefit. The shopkeepers, the clothing makers, and even the salesgirls, in their inability to accept difference, lose money and status throughout this interaction. Not only are they not able to accommodate Fields' wants and needs, but they also lose the potential of monetary gain from other typically feminine customers within the store. Fields' short bit on shopping flaunts a need for acceptance, while also subverting the ideal standards of a society that would rather lose money multiple ways, than simply accept differences in beauty and size.

Totie Fields' comedy, while subversive at its best, is still rooted in a form of comedy less abrasive to its audience and the people viewing it. While this paper has thus far argued that it is often offense, and vulgarity that is used to expose societal hypocrisies, Fields exists as an example of a satirist that is able to subvert through contention with the impositions of American society. In this way, while Fields does not deal in deliberate offense and vulgarity often seen through swearing, slurs, and taboo subjects, she does still evoke offense and vulgarity through her presentation of herself. The offense here is her simple rejection of her culture's implied standards, and the vulgarity present is Fields herself, who abstains from the stereotypes of

[176] Ibid.

feminine beauty. Fields, therefore, still manages to bridge the gap between the simple comforts of laughter, and a more illuminating, self-deprecating style of satire. By making herself the target, Fields exposed common assumptions of femininity, and the subsequent societal impositions of proper size, body type, and fashion sense.

In both Fields and Tucker, however, female comedy existed mainly as a comedy made specifically for women, with the satirical edge pointedly sharp, but not necessarily reaching the target of the satire itself (The patriarchy, American society, (white) men). The content itself dealt with female-centric issues related to body image, marriage, beauty, and stereotypically feminine activities. As Hertz explains, "Funny women, whether culturally discouraged and ignored, limited to in-group interactions, or just plainly misunderstood, have existed as long as women have, with or without the (laughing) approval or recognition of the opposite sex."[177] Fields and Tucker are powerful comedians, clever humorists, and poignant satirists, but they have also presented themselves in ways that lessen their power through self-deprecation, gaining favor with their audiences through the lack of real fear regarding an upheaval in privilege. Furthermore, this comedy was also likely lost on the individuals (men) it tried to subvert. Their satire, while making inroads for a more critical form of female satire, existed more so for emphasized, individual female empowerment, rather than the larger dismantling of discriminatory power dynamics relating to masculine impositions of misogyny and control.

*Phyliss Diller*

This is not to say that Fields' and Tucker's work was not influential to the comics that worked with or succeeded them. Comedians like Phyliss Diller and Joan Rivers who existed alongside Fields were equally subversive. However, these satirists also presented an element of angst and disgust that worked to expose the hypocrisies of male dominated culture. Phyliss Diller is an example of deliberately grotesque feminine comedy She used one-liners, but did so in a pointedly ragged, costume-like outfit, utilizing the quirks of her old-age, and a unique image to disgust in her presentation.

[177] Emily Hertz, "Alternative Comedy: Women in Stand-Up" (dissertation, 2010).

She jokes, "I got a figure that just won't start. My body is in such bad shape, I wear prescription underwear."[178] Again, Diller uses self-deprecation to draw in her audience, presenting the appearance of weakness in beauty. This allows for those in positions of power to dismiss her from the star, and until it is too late. As Hertz explains through Gilbert, "Though Marginal humour is not strictly a female model, Gilbert says, "…women who perform their marginality may offer a potentially subversive critique of the hegemonic culture while simultaneously eliciting laughter and earning a living."[179] Diller subversively critiques hegemony later in her routine, flipping self-deprecatory personal commentary to an abrasive critique of marriage that rejects the assumed and accepted ignorance evoked by men(in general) and husbands(in the more specific) alike. Speaking of her husband, she jokes: "All he cares about is football. I thought that our weekends after we were married would be a loaf of bread, a jug of wine and thou. You know how it turned out? A box of pretzels, a can of beer, and the Green Bay Packers. You wouldn't believe the way this man boozes. He can kill a six pack during an instant replay."[180] Her critique is simple, blunt, and directly antagonistic to any masculine audience who sees no issue with ignoring the wants, needs, and concerns of their feminine counterparts. Diller's brilliance lies in her ability to play possum. By presenting herself as grotesquely feminine, Diller performs weakness. However, it is the strength of her words, and the cleverness of her content that allows for a staunch critique of societal inequities to emerge.

*The Beauty of Rivers*

Joan Rivers broke through alongside Diller and Fields, presenting yet another perspective from which female satire can expose the faults of masculinity and a patriarchal society. Despite being much younger, Rivers pushed the envelope regarding what a reasonable, clever, and satirical female comic could and should evoke. Rivers was a comedienne, a word deliberately used to portray the fact that Rivers did not encounter masculine discrimination, and feminine satire with the safety net of difference that would weaken the direct impact that abrasive satire

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[178] *Phyllis Diller on The Ed Sullivan Show*, *YouTube* (The Ed Sullivan Show), accessed January 9, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mH66_tFP8VA&list=PLX5fvjtM4m92D5-h6Botez1cOnTw4zDsK&index=13.
[179] Emily Hertz, "Alternative Comedy: Women in Stand-Up" (dissertation, 2010).
[180] *Phyllis Diller on The Ed Sullivan Show*, *YouTube* (The Ed Sullivan Show), accessed January 9, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mH66_tFP8VA&list=PLX5fvjtM4m92D5-h6Botez1cOnTw4zDsK&index=13.

creates. To put it simply, unlike Tucker, Fields' and Diller, Rivers presented as typically feminine in appearance. She was thin, pretty, and neatly dressed. This point itself conveys a level of sexism that seems to reinforce the status quo but is mentioned only to note that Rivers' existence as a satirist that also conforms to beauty standards is unique in this comedic period. To be funny and a woman, it seems, one must also perform the grotesque, thereby diminishing the threat of hierarchical change.

In comedy, being beautiful often creates a satirical disadvantage. In fact, in Hitchens' ignorance, he does point out just how society views gender traits. He states, "for a woman to say a man is funny is the equivalent of a man saying that a woman is pretty."[181] To Hitchens being funny is inherently masculine. Feminine humor and satire can only emerge when women tamper with their supposed inherent nature in beauty. This stereotypical gender divide pits beauty against humour itself. Rivers', however, does not adhere to this. In fact, it is through her typically feminine presentation that she manages to expose the hypocrisies of male-female interactions, discrimination, and domination most aptly. As Hertz explains, "Funny women cannot *be* women. How can a woman maintain her femininity while being aggressive, expressing angst, speaking publicly, and making people laugh?"[182] The importance of Rivers, therefore, resides in her complete dismissal of the common distinction between what is funny and what is feminine. To Rivers, a woman can be both, seemingly obvious, but unfortunately missing in much of feminine comedy and satire due to the impositions of masculine influenced societal beauty standards.

Joan Rivers, worked alongside Fields and Diller, yet harboured an element of abrasiveness and confrontation not yet seen in 20th-century female comedy. From a performance on the Ed Sullivan Program in 1967, Rivers presents a routine that, despite lacking her later signature vulgarity, interrogated uncomfortable subjects and aspects of a denigrative (towards women) male society. As Nesteroff states, "Rivers came of age during a time when there were few female comics… Gender was a stand-up obstacle."[183] In this struggle, however, Rivers

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[181] Christopher Hitchens, "Why Women Aren't Funny," Vanity Fair, January 1, 2007, https://www.vanityfair.com/culture/2007/01/hitchens200701.
[182] Emily Hertz, "Alternative Comedy: Women in Stand-Up" (dissertation, 2010).
[183] Kliph Nesteroff, "Stand-Up's Great Change," in *The Comedians: Drunks, Thieves, Scoundrels, and the History of American Comedy* (New York, NY: Grove Press, 2016), pp. 155-201.

found her voice in her simple, confrontational style. Her style pulls no punches surrounding the gender divide. In fact, she confronted them directly. She comments,

> "I feel sorry for any single girl today. The styles, and the whole society is not for single girls, you know that? Single men, yes. A man, he's single, he's so lucky. A boy on a date, all he has to be is clean and able to pick up the cheque. He's a winner, you know that… And when you finally go on the date, the girl has to be well dressed, the face has to look nice, the hair has to be in shape. The girl has to be the one that's bright, pretty, intelligent, a good sport! *mocking* 'Howard Johnson's again! Hooray, hooray! It just kills me. A girl, you're 30 years old, you're not married, you're an old maid. A man, he's 90 years old, he's not married, he's a catch."[184]

This quote is a distinct change when compared to Fields, Tucker, and Diller. Physicality aside, Rivers also doesn't rely on familiar forms of comedy to make her masculine audience comfortable. Instead of one-liners, and storytelling, Rivers speaks frankly with her audience, satirizing aspects of male-female relationships, and directly interrogating the hypocrisies of a society which expects so much from women, and so little from men.

As her career continued, Rivers became known for brashness, vulgarity, and an engagement with taboo. In a 2004 set from *Live at the Apollo*, Rivers comments frankly, "because women should look good! Work on yourselves! Because not one of us was made love to because we did the linoleum. The floor's immaculate, lie down you hot bitch! It never happens! Look good! And education, I spit on education. Not one man will put his hand up your dress looking for a library card." [185] The comedy sounds less progressive here, in that Rivers seems to be advocating for the exact same standards in which the previous routine attempted to expose and subvert. However, Rivers uses an intentional evocation of ignorance and spite to frankly explain the standards of a shallow society. Just as before, Rivers explains in a blunt, frank manner the sexual and societal standards imposed on heterosexual, feminine relationships. They must be beautiful, and nothing else. She rejects her earlier routine's ideas that a female

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[184] *Joan Rivers on The Ed Sullivan Show*, *YouTube* (The Ed Sullivan Show), accessed January 9, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EpPCFoXXhF0&list=PLX5fvjtM4m92D5-h6Botez1cOnTw4zDsK&index=14&t=4s.

[185] *Joan Rivers | Live at the Apollo | Season 1 | Dead Parrot*, *YouTube* (Dead Parrot, 2018), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wnP43YYu3ZA&list=PLX5fvjtM4m92D5-h6Botez1cOnTw4zDsK&index=15&t=2s.

must be, "bright, intelligent, and a good sport"[186] to further criticize the fact that in a world of misogyny, education, talent, and a good personality is subordinate to the simple ability to look good. Rivers' playful ignorance exaggerates patriarchal standards to expose just how ridiculous these assumptions and impositions of gender are. Rivers' comedy, therefore, becomes especially dangerous to a male-dominated society in her combination of knowledge, talent, beauty, and power. In fact, not only does she function as a satirist and a woman, but she functions as a genuine threat to male superiority. As Stanley quotes from Rivers herself, "Men find funny women threatening. They ask me, 'Are you going to be funny in bed?' "[187] This simple quote from Rivers again shows just how subversive female comedy can be.

*Roseanne Barr*

Roseanne Barr exists as an example of the continued seditious nature of satire that emerges as the 20th century progresses. Despite a recent fall from fame due to an unfortunate social media controversy, Barr's early comedic work on the stand-up stage took on the frustrations of a stereotypically feminine archetype to expose hypocrisy and misogyny. Prior to her eponymous Sitcom *Roseanne*, Barr's satirical stand-up presented the frustrations of marriage, relationships, and housewifery in a way that pivoted the balance of domestic power, completely exposing the hypocrisies of societal marriage and gendered pressure. She jokes, "Well, it's a thrill to be out of the house. I never get out of the house, I never go no place, I never have no fun, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever 'cause I'm a housewife. You a housewife, too? I hate that word. I hate the word homemaker, too. I wanna be called 'domestic goddess'. So, do I seem bitchy to you at all?"[188] This opening line to her *Domestic Goddess* routine completely flips typical gender roles by giving the housewife or homemaker the voice of complaint and agitation. While other female comics worked through feminine issues, and investigated hypocrisies perpetuated around women, Barr attacks the problem at its' root, not simply explaining these hypocrisies, but

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[186] *Joan Rivers on The Ed Sullivan Show*, *YouTube* (The Ed Sullivan Show), accessed January 9, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EpPCFoXXhF0&list=PLX5fvjtM4m92D5-h6Botez1cOnTw4zDsK&index=14&t=4s.
[187] Alessandra Stanley, "Who Says Women Aren't Funny?," Vanity Fair, March 3, 2008, https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2008/04/funnygirls200804.
[188] *"Domestic Goddess" Roseanne Barr at Dangerfield's (1986)*, *YouTube* (Rodney Dangerfield, 2018), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SzE1A-S3vJU&list=PLX5fvjtM4m92D5-h6Botez1cOnTw4zDsK&index=16.

inviting and antagonizing masculinity itself. Like Diller and Rivers, Barr is attacking the problem of masculine expectation through an interrogation of marriage. She isn't using herself, necessarily, or other females as the butt of the joke, however. Rather, she is focusing instead on the specific, male root of the problem.

She continues, "And they know, right, what to do, that's why I think they do it on purpose, you know? Like when they all the time try to talk to you, God, I hate that. Comes in, 'Roseanne, don't you think we should talk about our sexual problems? *Mocking exaggerated throughout* Like, I'm gonna turn off wheel of fortune for that."[189] Barr directly engages with marriage issues from a feminine perspective, while also subverting the gender dynamics of typical male humour that focuses on male frustrations regarding their wives and marriage.

As Ravits explains, "By portraying women as uppity, excessively verbose, and demanding, men implied that there was little reason to take women's complaints seriously."[190] Male comics like Rodney Dangerfield, Henny Youngman, and even the previously mentioned Milton Berle and Redd Foxx, all used this familiar archetype of comedy to gain popularity and fame. By going up on stage, and making fun of their relationship issues, male comics often find laughter through the simple mocking and satirizing of femininity. Barr presents that familiar satirical trope, but subverts that history by reversing the roles of frustration from the typically dominant husband to the subordinate wife.

Barr takes aspects of Diller's preoccupations to a greater level of poignancy with her subversive focus on the absurd, and immoral aspects of toxic masculinity. In her blunt and unkind manner, Barr points out familiar issues of marriage in a deliberately frank and derisive tone. While Diller seems to work within the typical structures of her era's comedy, making sure to subvert through a comfortable engagement with difference, Barr renounces comfort itself. While Diller is satirizing her husband's negative traits, she does so with a less drastic, and affectionate style. Barr, on the other hand, espouses real disdain for her husband throughout. It really does seem that, although obviously working in jest, Barr's relationship frustrations contend with a level of frustration which doesn't just tease masculinity but attacks it.

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[189] Ibid.

[190] Martha A. Ravits, "The Jewish Mother: Comedy and Controversy in American Popular Culture," *MELUS* 25, no. 1 (2000): pp. 3-31, https://doi.org/10.2307/468149.

*Barr, The Unruly Woman, and Ellen DeGeneres*

Many of the comics within this chapter adhere, whether on purpose or by chance, to Karlyn's idea of *the Unruly Woman.* This simultaneous description, and theoretical insight applies to Roseanne Barr, Phyliss Diller, Totie Fields, and Sophie Tucker in their inflammatory relationship to the patriarchal status quo, and its various impositions regarding age, beauty, and femininity itself. As Karlyn writes, "...Women might begin to reweave the web of visual power …by taking the unruly woman as a model – women as rule-breaker, joke-maker, and public bodily spectacle…"[191] By relying on and evoking feminine difference rather than adhering to the status quo, female comics are able to subvert patriarchal domination by simply existing on stage, and as themselves. Karlyn continues, "In acts of spectatorial unruliness…we might examine models of *returning* the male gaze, exposing and making a spectacle of the gazer, claiming the pleasure and power of making spectacles of ourselves, and beginning to negate our own invisibility in the public sphere."[192] Taking the power back, in reference to female satire, is a phenomenon centred around confidence, in-cohesion, and the brave brilliance of simply being who one is. Vulnerability, therefore, becomes a crucial element of female stand-up, as the presentation of a different self subverts and interrogates dominative aspects of society through the sheer performance of that which does not fit into the patriarchally imposed mould.

Finally, this section's last example of a subversive female comic exists in the least typically *feminine* comedian mentioned thus far. Ellen DeGeneres early work, before her Eponymous Sitcom and talk show, exists in the genre of female comedy only by the thinnest of standards. DeGeneres is a comedian and a woman, of course, but the content of her comedy often denies any engagement with typical feminine subject matter. From her HBO special *One Night Stand (1992)*, DeGeneres jokes about random societal quirks or trends, in an observational manner. She jokes, "The big thing now is like some stress reduction gimmick… they have these goggles that you can put on to eliminate stress. You put them on, they're electronic, they're hooked up to something. They flash weird beams and colours of light in your eyes. They're 350

[191] Kathleen Rowe Karlyn, *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005).
[192] Ibid.

dollars. You know, I could just poke you in the eyes. I charge you 75 if that's gonna help you out."[193] This joke ignores completely previous feminine comic preoccupations of relationships, sex, gender power dynamics, or even the struggles of being a woman in society. Instead, DeGeneres jokes simply about that which she sees as weird or different. She subverts feminine humour itself, in that she completely avoids typically feminine comic subjects of marriage, sex, relationships, etc. for a generally eccentric style of storytelling, social satire, and exaggerated engagement with character. By ignoring assumed feminine comedic content altogether, DeGeneres negates the idea that female comics should talk about their own issues, or their issues with men, instead of simply their observations of the world around them. For a female comic to speak frankly about the things they notice, and what they find funny, is a simple yet poignant way of equalizing the satirical landscape. After all, why can men talk about whatever they want in comedy, but women *must* talk about their relationships?

Barr and DeGeneres are indicative of an emerging female satire that is confident. They are unabashedly themselves, and work through their satirical ideas with little regard for the actual power dynamics that they may (or may not) be commenting on. Barr and Degeneres embody the commonalities of America itself. In their varied quirks, and engagement with varied subjects, Barr and DeGeneres present authentic personalities, allowing for audiences to see themselves represented on the satirist's stage. Barr's evocation of domesticity allowed for an exposure of marriage hypocrisies that affirmed the very real frustrations of female audiences. DeGeneres, on the other hand, subverted through an ignorance of typical feminine comedic archetypes allowing for audiences outside of typical feminine spectrums of existence to find solace in a female-minded satirist that didn't feel that, just because they were female, they had to engage with the typical talking points of femininity itself. As Stanley writes "By and large, however, stand-up comedy is tougher and meaner, and the women who do it play by men's rules."[194] This is true for much of female comedy. However, the emergence of Roseanne and Ellen shows that women are just as tough as their male counterparts, and can also create careers out of unique personas that are authentic to reality.

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[193] *Ellen Degeneres - One Night Stand (1992)* (HBO, 1992), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EWOdNSh3W3U&list=PLX5fvjtM4m92D5-h6Botez1cOnTw4zDsK&index=17.

[194] Alessandra Stanley, "Who Says Women Aren't Funny?," Vanity Fair, March 3, 2008, https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2008/04/funnygirls200804.

As Marx and Sienkiewicz write, "Power matters in the world of comedy, and power, in comedy as anywhere else in life, is deeply intertwined with gender norms and expectations."[195] This chapter has thus far established the historical power dynamics of female stand-up comedy through a critical history of the type, and rhetorical analysis of specific routines/bits by female comedians. Insofar, this chapter has looked at female satire for its general lack of adherence to the status quo. This history of female comedy, and its subversive tradition in relation to male domination, reaches its breaking point in the modern feminine satirical occupation with the most heinous of crimes: rape, and in the most contentious of comedy: rape jokes. Moving from simple presentations of femininity to the more focused concerns of contemporary female satire will show specifically how female comics are able to subvert even the most violent impositions of the patriarchy, by interrogating rape culture, chastising those who defend or perform rape, and presenting personal experiences of this heinous act.

*The Rape Joke in Modern Female Comedy*

Alessandra Stanley writes about female comedy that, "There has been an epochal change even from 20 years ago, when female stand-up comics mostly complained about the female condition—cellulite and cellophane—and Joan Rivers and Roseanne Barr perfectly represented the two poles of acceptable female humor: feline self-derision or macho-feminist ferocity."[196] In the past few years, however, an emphasis on female-centric traumatic concepts such as sexual assault and rape have become prevalent in the female satirical form. A response to these very real issues has been presented by comics such as Hannah Gadsby and Cameron Esposito who are leading a new genre of contentious, yet therapeutic engagement with the violent realities of the female experience. The rape joke in comedy represents exactly that which satire through stand-up seeks to react against and contend with. The abjection felt by females within society culminates in rape culture. An analysis of rape jokes for their negative effects, when told by the dominant gender, and their subversion when told by women will provide a clear example of how female stand-up comics subvert the status quo by invoking and illuminating personal experience

[195] Nick Marx and Matt Sienkiewicz, eds., "Gender & Sexuality," in *The Comedy Studies Reader*, 1st ed. (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2018), pp. 208-210.
[196] Alessandra Stanley, "Who Says Women Aren't Funny?," Vanity Fair, March 3, 2008, https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2008/04/funnygirls200804.

and trauma. Specifically considering the #metoo movement, rape jokes have become a particularly cringeworthy comedic tactic wholly uncomfortable in an age where the extent of male domination through violence and intimidation is coming to light. As Molly Ringwald comments, "I feel like rape used in a comedic way is something that's going to become like a minstrel show…"[197] Andrews clarifies Ringwald's words "...meaning that it will become so obviously taboo, no one will attempt to use it as a punchline again."[198] Ringwald's perspective comes from her history as a star of many 80s teen comedy films. These films often contained jokes centred around assault, and upheld the status quo of rape culture. The difference between film comedy and stand-up comedy is like the difference between the sitcom and stand-up comedy, in that film comedy, particularly the movies Ringwald starred in, work to uphold the status quo through humour that is familiar instead of subversive. For Ringwald to make this sort of comment, however, shows the extent to which the rape joke has been make an uncomfortable relic of the past, rather than a recurring comedy of the present.

*History and Context*

Speaking on the history of rape jokes, Esposito comments in a 2018 PBS *NewsHour* Interview: "That's always been a concept that was shorthand for a certain type of joke. So, it always meant a joke that is told by somebody who is not a survivor. That's generally like dismissive of the concept of rape, usually brought up as a sort of a taboo, punchy word that would just get a laugh based on the comic being brave enough to speak it."[199] Rape jokes are used generally to undermine the act itself. These jokes do not subvert the abusive and violent nature of rape, but rather exploit that violence for shock value humour which offers nothing satirically. They are evoked only for the supposed *bravery* of speaking such a taboo subject. Using the word bravery here seems like a jestful way of exposing what is really an exploitation of the pain, trauma, and violent history of survivor experiences. To be clear, rape jokes are most

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[197] Travis M. Andrews, "Comedians Have Long Used Rape as a Punchline. The Me Too Era Is Changing That.," washingtonpost.com (Washington Post, November 9, 2018), https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/comedians-have-long-used-rape-as-a-punchline-the-me-too-era-is-changing-that/2018/11/08/54ffc888-dd5b-11e8-b3f0-62607289efee_story.html.

[198] Ibid.

[199] *Comedian Cameron Esposito Tackles Sexual Assault in New Special "Rape Jokes"*, *YouTube* (PBS NewsHour, 2018), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9qMQTWzhh_E&list=PLX5fvjtM4m92D5-h6Botez1cOnTw4zDsK&index=18&t=5s.

often told by men, and their prevalence doesn't reside only in lesser-known comics without critical acclaim. In fact, well-known male comedians have often contended with the idea of rape. George Carlin, for instance, rape joke, claiming, "I can prove to you that rape is funny. Picture Porky Pig raping Elmer Fudd."[200] This joke, while part of a larger socially satirical routine regarding freedom of speech censorship, shows the prevalence of rape content in the most prescient comedians. "Rape jokes, it turns out, can actually bring into being the mindset they aim to satirize."[201] As Andrews points out, "Rape has often been used as a punchline that makes an audience laugh uncomfortably."[202] This Carlin joke, despite its fixture within a larger satirical routine, uses the concept of rape as a defense against backlash. By evoking a taboo subject, the drastic nature of the mentioned subject stifles debate, allowing for the satirist's rhetoric to exist unchallenged.

This idea seems counterintuitive. How could such a taboo subject, when evoked, create a lack of response? One would think that bringing up difficult and painful subjects would create immediate backlash and stifle the comic's attempts at exploiting these topics for cheap laughs. However, in the context of such visceral trauma, these jokes often shock the audience into submission, allowing the comic to escape criticism. By exploiting shock, these comics provoke an assault itself on the listeners of this satirical content. This can be particularly harmful to those who have experienced such traumas. This is not necessarily to say that any (male) comedian should not joke about rape at all. Rather, the above explanation points out the simple reality of hack-y comedians' reliance on horrendous subject matter for cheap laughs. Carlin's rape joke is only cheaply played momentarily, as his absurdly presented idea, moves into a more thoughtful engagement with themes of freedom and censorship. Daniel Tosh, however, controversially evoked rape without satirical foresight, responding to a heckler's interruption with the utterance that said female heckler should be gang raped.[203] A horrendous response, with no satirical intent,

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[200] *George Carlin: You Can't Joke about Rape, It's Not Funny? Fuck You, I Think It's Hilarious!*, *YouTube* (Zarkow, 2016), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NuTqBd_ycHA&list=PLX5fvjtM4m92D5-h6Botez1cOnTw4zDsK&index=2.

[201] Virginia Goldner, "Rape Jokes: Laugh Till You Cry," *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* 18, no. 4 (November 21, 2017): pp. 294-298, https://doi.org/10.1080/15240657.2017.1383058.

[202] Travis M. Andrews, "Comedians Have Long Used Rape as a Punchline. The Me Too Era Is Changing That.," washingtonpost.com (Washington Post, November 9, 2018), https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/comedians-have-long-used-rape-as-a-punchline-the-me-too-era-is-changing-that/2018/11/08/54ffc888-dd5b-11e8-b3f0-62607289efee_story.html.

[203] James Hibberd, "Daniel Tosh Apologizes for Rape Jokes at Comedy Club," cnn.com (Entertainment Weekly, July 11, 2021), https://www.cnn.com/2012/07/11/showbiz/daniel-tosh-jokes-apology-ew/index.html.

evoked only to stun the audience member in question, and shock the general audience into uncomfortable laughter.

In the context of the recent #metoo movement, and the growing awareness world-wide of sexual assault and rape in the public, this cheap, shocking form of rape humour has taken heavy criticism, falling out of favour, and being replaced with a more honest, therapeutic, and female-driven contention with rape from a survivor's perspective. As Esposito explains, "I don't think any topics are off limits, but I think if… the way to deal with taboo subjects or subjects that can be painful is to lead with personal experience, if you have it. If you don't have personal experience, you need to be aware of that. You need to be aware that you are perhaps speaking to an audience that has more experience with something than you do and acknowledge that."[204] This movement away from rape jokes for shocking purposes, towards a more therapeutic, and less exploitive style of comedy has come to light alongside the #metoo movement itself.

As Andrews summarizes, "their humor tries to expose rape for the crime it is, rather than relegate it to a cheap laugh."[205] This again reiterates the idea of contemporary rape jokes as closer to a form of therapy, not existing solely as an edgy hypothetical, but as a real, lived experience that satirists contend with. This proves rape jokes' worth generally as a way of contention with real trauma, but also works as a prime example of satire's immediate engagement with trauma and therapy through humour.

In Cameron Esposito's special, aptly titled *Rape Jokes,* she comments on just how insufficient social and political rhetoric is when talking about the topic of assault. She jokes, "I just think we need to talk about things in a slightly larger scope. Mmm yes, nods, agreed. Yes, yes, yes, I agree, yes. I mean, especially, it's not like we've nailed the way we talk about assault in the past, right? I feel like I have heard, as if it was a legitimate argument: "I can't stop! I can't stop once I've started. If I stop, once I've started, my balls will turn a colour! "Like, that's the level of sophistication with which we talk about assault."[206] Esposito's mocking inflection of the

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[204] *Comedian Cameron Esposito Tackles Sexual Assault in New Special "Rape Jokes"*, *YouTube* (PBS NewsHour, 2018), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9qMQTWzhh_E&list=PLX5fvjtM4m92D5-h6Botez1cOnTw4zDsK&index=18&t=5s.

[205] Travis M. Andrews, "Comedians Have Long Used Rape as a Punchline. The Me Too Era Is Changing That.," washingtonpost.com (Washington Post, November 9, 2018), https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/comedians-have-long-used-rape-as-a-punchline-the-me-too-era-is-changing-that/2018/11/08/54ffc888-dd5b-11e8-b3f0-62607289efee_story.html.

[206] *Rape Jokes*, *Rape Jokes* (cameronesposito.com, 2018), https://www.cameronesposito.com/rape-jokes/, 23:15-23:48.

assumed male voice emphasizes the simple *'a' colour* as a punctuation point on the joke, using her voice to expose just how preposterous arguments for pressured sexual relations sound when taken out of the specific, coerced context of an actual bedroom with the presence of an imposing, or intimidating individual within. The joke exposes the absurdity of typical male excuses for pressured sexual relations, showing just how limited in scope our discussions surrounding assault really are. Furthermore, this joke not only exposes the limitations of the rhetoric surrounding assault. It also switches the narrative of assault from the typical male, edgy evocation of rape or assault to a female, lived commentary on the experience and rhetoric surrounding assault.

Kilmartin states, "I think there's more room culturally to talk about having been through the other side of that experience as opposed to having a rape joke where rape is sort of the punchline," she said. "Now, sadly, it's a premise." "[207] This final line is an interesting reflection on contemporary satirical content. It seems to imply that this transition from rape jokes to rape or assault satire exposes the most unfortunate aspect of this type of humour: that it exists at all. Andrews (Moorti) explains how, when commentary around assault itself became more prevalent in society, rape jokes acted as way to undermine survivors in order to diminish the unfortunate, and unsettling realities around assault itself.[208] Andrews writes, "as the public discussed sexual assault more frankly, jokes "became a way of defusing the kind of cultural crisis that was being produced by saying that certain behaviors were assault, and not just 'boys will be boys,'" Moorti explains, "If you make a joke about it, one can trivialize it."[209] This point may be true in the certain contexts, as jokes about rape are not new. Humour about assault, specifically in stand-up can be seen in one-liner humour, and the plots of many early romantic comedies. In fact, the trope of a woman swayed by a man's insistence and persistence might be the defining archetype of romantic comedies. In 2007's *Superbad*, the plot literally revolves around three high school students attempting to get their female co-students drunk enough to have sex with them.

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[207] Travis M. Andrews, "Comedians Have Long Used Rape as a Punchline. The Me Too Era Is Changing That.," washingtonpost.com (Washington Post, November 9, 2018), https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/comedians-have-long-used-rape-as-a-punchline-the-me-too-era-is-changing-that/2018/11/08/54ffc888-dd5b-11e8-b3f0-62607289efee_story.html.
[208] Ibid.
[209] Ibid.

A particularly shocking, older example comes from Bill Cosby's 1969 album *It's true! It's true!* in which he discusses the mysterious elixir called Spanish Fly, and his desires to use it on women. This substance supposedly turns women into sexually, active beings, allowing men to take advantage of them. A portion of the routine goes, "From then on, any time you see a girl. 'Wish I had some Spanish fly.' Go to a party, see five girls standing alone. 'Boy, if I had a whole jug of Spanish fly, I'd light that corner up over there."[210] This joke is particularly shocking in the wake of the revelations about Cosby himself. In a way, this joke does not really seem like a joke, but an early admission of his sexual deviance and violent nature. The Spanish fly bit from Cosby is especially jarring considering that the rest of Cosby's repertoire is squeaky clean. It is important to remember that, up until the last few years of accusations, persecution, and his criminal trials, Cosby's reputation was one of a fatherly figure joking lightly about family dynamics, gentle social commentary, and evoking non-aggressive situational humour. However, the fact that this one outlier in Cosby's catalogue contends with the exact form of assault that he committed is illuminating, especially since Cosby himself often avoided difficult topics, opting for a more cohesive form of humour. This bit, however, whilst overlooked for its jarring subject matter at the time is an older example of just how prevalent rape humour is in its permeation throughout comedy more generally.

Louis C.K. is another comic that often speaks on his own perversity, weaving his awkward sexuality and perversions throughout his routines. The recent revelations about C.K. having masturbated in front of his female colleagues also shines an uncomfortable light on his satirical repertoire.[211] This is all to say that rape jokes, assault humour, and admissions about perverse or violent sexuality do not function only as a simple response to the threat of female equality. It is not just a contemporary reaction to the proliferation of survivor stories. Rather, it is a pervasive, and unfortunate aspect of satire itself, especially in the context of male comics, who use certain aspects of their self-reflective satire to admit things that they would otherwise hide. In this way, these comics exploit their audiences to relieve their own guilt, taking advantage of the audience's presence to work through personal perversions. This is a veiled form of therapy, but

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[210] *Bill Cosby - Spanish Fly*, *YouTube* (andrewf1), accessed January 10, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LAorIG6MZnc&list=PLX5fvjtM4m92D5-h6Botez1cOnTw4zDsK&index=4&t=52s.

[211] Caroline Framke, "The Sexual Harassment Allegations against Louis C.K., Explained," vox.com (Vox, November 10, 2017), https://www.vox.com/culture/2017/11/9/16629400/louis-ck-allegations-masturbation.

therapy that is done without the audience's consent, creating an almost assaultive relationship in function.

*Stone and Silverman*

In Kelly Stone's Ted talk on the confluence of rape jokes with the #metoo movement, she explains, "So, there are bad rape jokes, we hear them all the time, but I want to say there are also good rape jokes which is sort of a weird thing to say, I know, but that's our job as comedians is to put a mirror up to society and stimulate discourse and talk about difficult things and maybe make you laugh if we're good at it."[212] While stone doesn't necessarily delineate what constitutes a *bad* rape joke thus far, she does contextualize how rape jokes can still exist, while not relating or representing the history of assault and rape for cheap laughs. The idea of putting "a mirror up to society"[213] is Stone's way of evoking the importance of satire when speaking the concept of rape. To explain the difference between the two types of rape jokes, Stone retells two rape jokes from her comic colleagues, one that satirizes rape, and the other that utilizes it for a cheap laugh.

The first joke, as recited from comedian Eric Moore, goes as such, "Are you guys ready to hear my rape joke? …Well, I'm gonna tell it anyway, whether you like it or not. That's my rape joke."[214] This joke is comments on the fact that rape is a non-consensual act, and that a rape joke itself is almost an extension of the act itself, imposing an uncomfortable topic on an audience for the hope of shocked laughter. She goes on to explain, "But you see what he did there? He put a light on a problem, which is consent."[215] This simple explanation again evokes the concept of satire without explicitly saying it. A good rape joke is a joke which isn't necessarily the act itself, but rather, a joke surrounding the context that makes rape a reality.

Her second example, reciting a *bad* rape joke from unnamed comedian goes as such, "I accidentally called my wife the wrong name while I was making love to her the other night. I'm

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[212] *Rape Jokes in Stand-Up Comedy through the Lens of #MeToo | Kelly Stone | TEDxTexasStateUniversity*, *YouTube* (Tedx Talks, 2019), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YQuYg6v3STg&list=PLX5fvjtM4m92D5-h6Botez1cOnTw4zDsK&index=5.
[213] Ibid.
[214] Ibid.
[215] Ibid.

glad she was sleeping."[216] This joke is pure shock. It doesn't satirize the act of rape, or the institutions that make rape such a prevalent act. Rather, it functions only in upset. She chastens, "Cringe-worthy, absolutely, and me, as a comedian, who's about to go on stage and follow that is very triggered, because #metoo, I too was married. #metoo, I woke up while my spouse was perpetrating me. It's not funny. It starts with jokes. Jokes lead to violent acts. We know this from comedians like Bill Cosby & Louis C.K. They told jokes, and they also engaged in violent acts like rape and assault."[217] Her Ted Talk finishes with a moral petition for people to expose rape culture. She urges her audience to remember their individual obligations to speak up when something is wrong. Her points throughout this talk are inherently politically correct, but her line or argument, and the real-life examples she uses exist as correlated, but not clearly linked through cause and effect. While one can agree that there is a difference between satire about rape, and the exploitative style of humour that evokes rape only to shock, the actual prevalence of any individual who makes jokes about rape, and the prevalence of rapists themselves is unclear. This is not to undermine Stone's explanations of how harmful rape jokes can be. Stone's point is to say that, accepting rape jokes, in their offensive, satirically lacking form, does perpetrate a sort of violence. However, this point also assumes that the average individual can ascertain, to a comic's level of understanding, just what is going on in a given joke, what the target is, and where the point of reflection/accusation lies.

While both Cosby (briefly) and C.K. (as a shtick) talked about their sexual perversions in their act, these are two specific examples, that may not apply as a rule to all comedians. Cosby's humour, with the removal of the Spanish Fly routine, wasn't preoccupied with rape jokes. In fact, despite the shocking admissive nature of Cosby's Spanish Fly routine, the bit isn't a rape joke that seeks to offend and shock only. It works, rather, as a form of commentary and storytelling, completely outdated, uncomfortable, and gross, but not existing necessarily just to stun an audience into lack of criticism. His comedic repertoire also wasn't laden with rape and assault humour. Much the opposite, in fact, as Cosby was often derided by his contemporaries as too clean, and therefore removed from a relationship to the subversive history of black satire.

CK, whilst utilizing sexual humour, did so to come across as pathetic in his perversions. His comedy, whilst often evoking his own sexual desires and odd fetishes, only really did so to

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[216] Ibid.
[217] Ibid.

denigrate himself. In his comedy, he plays the fool and the comic deviant. This is not an attempt by CK to try and make his perversion acceptable, but to expose them for comedic effect. That second joke which Stone derides, while obviously very offensive, misogynistic, and difficult to hear, can also be interpreted as a darker satire on the ignorance of men, and their affinity to not upset their wives, even when acting in the darkest of misogynist, violent ways. To be clear, this is not to say that this joke should be excused or that it is somehow a good example of social satire. Rather, it is simply to point out that the satirical edge of comedy is often subjective, even in its ability to expose prejudice, social, and gendered violence. It is easy to agree with Stone's ideas about the importance of comedy that perpetuates good, satirical forces. It is also easy to wonder what her opinions would be on a darker type of rape joke, which exists and is told by a woman, instead of the potential perpetrators of violence in men.

From Silverman's special, *Jesus is Magic,* She jokes, "I need more rape jokes. I do. Rape jokes are a hidden gem in comedy. Let me explain: Rape, obviously, the most heinous crime imaginable. Rape jokes are great. No, because they make a comic seem so edgy and so dangerous, and the truth is, it's like the safest area to talk about in comedy. Because whose gonna' complain about a rape joke? I mean, I would say, rape victims, but they're traditionally not complainers. I know. That's a tasteless joke about the fact that rape victims often don't report rape. I mean, the worst thing that can happen really is that someone comes up to you after a show, and is like, 'look, I'm a victim of rape, and I just wanna say that that joke was insensitive and inappropriate and totally my fault and I am so…sorry…"[218]

This joke is hard to contextualize when taking Stone's binary ideas about good and bad rape jokes into consideration. This joke exists somewhere in the middle. It mediates between a joke that satirizes the act of rape and rape culture itself with a joke that uses the taboo subject of rape for a shocking effect. The joke starts with Silverman commenting on rape jokes themselves, arguing for their "hidden gem"[219] status. She comments that, "they make a comic seem so edgy and so dangerous."[220] This set-up for the joke echoes what has been pointed out so far by Esposito and Stone, that rape jokes exist to shock, often without satirical intent. She deflects

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[218] *Sarah Silverman - Rape Jokes* (HBO, 2005), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fYUDJrhllqQ&list=PLX5fvjtM4m92D5-h6Botez1cOnTw4zDsK&index=7&t=16s.
[219] Ibid.
[220] Ibid.

some of the audience's reactionary moans by offering the curious idea that they are "the safest area to talk about in comedy."[221] She draws the audience's attention even more with this statement. The rhetorical set-up for this joke confuses and intrigues the audience in its frank defense of rape comedy. As she builds to her first shocking punchline, she questions the audience, asking "whose gonna complain about a rape joke?"[222] Silverman feigns ignorance throughout, purposefully acting naïve to the very real concerns that individuals may have with rape and assault humour. She then turns the whole charade on her audience by stating that the only people who might complain about a rape joke are rape victims themselves, yet they won't complain because "they traditionally aren't complainers."[223] This punchline is shocking and edgy, evoking audible groans from her audience as they laugh in discomfort and potential offense. She then turns on the audience once more, explaining the joke itself to them, admitting to the tasteless nature of the punchline. Silverman's use of a shocking punchline, feigned ignorance, and an assured rhetorical conviction satirizes rape comedy itself, as well as audience expectations regarding such a taboo subject. The punchline shockingly plays with the upsetting fact that survivors of rape often don't report the crime. However, the routine really satirizes audience taboos. She confuses the audience with her blatant conviction about rape jokes, feigns ignorance at her audience's complaints, to then utilize the exact tactic most often frowned upon when discussing rape comedy. The final few lines of her routine continue to satirize typical realities about rape victims, evoking their traumas, and the supposed timidity of victims. This routine could be criticized for exploiting shocking punchlines that Stone and Esposito criticize. However, Silverman's mastery of satirical rhetoric, and her ability to sway the audience's feelings throughout this routine shows the larger reality of rape satire. This reality is that, if done well, with satirical intent, and with an eye towards understanding audience reaction, rape jokes can both offend and therapize, upset, and educate, dependent on the strength of the satire, and the strength of the performer's understanding.

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[221] Ibid.
[222] Ibid.
[223] Ibid.

*The Gadsby Paradox*

Finally, this chapter must acknowledge the most provocative comic and comedy special that directly interrogates acts of gender violence, while navigating trauma through satire. Hannah Gadsby's 2018 *Nanette* initiates a typical stand-up special that powerfully turns on its audience, evoking, provoking, and exposing the heartbreaking, traumatic, and destructive realities of assault, and the problems that arise when comedy that touches on trauma. Her special begins with a quirky style of personal and humorous reflection. Gadsby speaks on dark, traumatic topics, but does so in a way that seems harmless and zany. Talking generally about her upbringing and heritage, she jokes, "I'm from Tasmania. Now, of course, Tasmania is that little island floating off the arse end of mainland Australia there, just a lovely place. Famous for a lot of things. Potatoes. And our frighteningly small gene pool... But I love Tasmania. I loved growing up there. I felt right at home, I did. But I had to leave as soon as I found out I was a little bit lesbian."[224] Tinges of trauma are felt in the early part of this special, however, she moves through this first part of her routine with an atypical rhythm. This joke doesn't move linearly, but jumps around, presenting odd cultural quirks that Gadsby identifies with to then turn the traumatic part of the routine on the audience. Speaking generally of her home country, she evokes a simple agricultural fact(potatoes), and then a humorous, almost stereotypical denigrative fact (small gene pool). Then, however, she hints at the truth about Tasmania, referencing the country's difficult history with traumatic homophobia.

The bulk of the special revolves around Gadsby's own identity, and her recollection of traumatic events related to that identity. The early part of her routine plays on a lot of these traumatic experiences for laughter. She doesn't attack the audience with these jokes, rather allowing for these traumatic stories to ease into calming laughter. An integral story, as Gadsby recalls it, "The pub had closed, it was the last bus home, and I was waiting at the bus stop. And I was talking to a girl, and… you know, you could say flirting. I don't know. And… out of nowhere, he just comes up and starts shoving me, going, "Fuck off, you fucking faggot!" And he

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[224] *Nanette, Netflix* (Netflix, 2018), https://www.netflix.com/watch/80233611?trackId=13752289&tctx=0%2C0%2C4cc3ab65d80a7112d36a0e1eebbd477a1dcb8252%3Ab37afeee61ec1f5c4e2c0dea692727eed2f77513%2C4cc3ab65d80a7112d36a0e1eebbd477a1dcb8252%3Ab37afeee61ec1f5c4e2c0dea692727eed2f77513%2Cunknown%2C%2C%2CtitlesResults.

goes, “Keep away from my girlfriend, you fucking freak!” And she’s just stepped in, going, “Whoa, stop it! It’s a girl!” And he’s gone, “Oh, sorry.” He said, “Oh, I’m so sorry. I don’t hit women,” he said. What a guy! “I don’t hit women.”[225] She focuses on the caricatured nature of the other individuals in this story by emphasizing their ignorance, sarcastically mocking the insufficiency of their actions and reactions. This allows for a deeply personal event to seem relatively harmless to the audience who sees Gadsby playing the situation for laughs, somewhat laughing herself. Beneath the exaggerated nature and mockery of this story, however, lies a real, personal traumatic element, one inflicted upon her by a stranger, simply due to the marginalized nature of her existence. The laughter in this joke stems mostly from Gadsby’s ability to mock the ignorance and confused mental state of the abuser. He first calls Hannah a homophobic slur, not understanding that a gay man, if that’s what he believes Gadsby is, would not be flirting with his girlfriend at all. He then, upon realizing that Gadsby is a woman, steps away, exclaiming in pure ignorance that he doesn’t *hit* women. The way she portrays this other character allows for Gadsby to work through a traumatic moment in her life, in a public setting, to then arrive at the other side of the joke relieved therapeutically.

However, as Gadsby explains, this theme of tense, traumatic humour acts counterintuitively to therapy proper. She states, “A joke is simply two things, it needs two things to work. A setup and a punch line. And it is essentially a question with a surprise answer. Right? But in this context, what a joke is a question that I have artificially inseminated. Tension. I do that, that’s my job. I make you all feel tense, and then I make you laugh, and you’re like, ‘Thanks for that. I was feeling a bit tense.’ I made you tense. This is an abusive relationship. Do you know why I’m such a funny fucker? Do you? It’s because, you know, I’ve been learning the art of tension diffusion since I was a child. Back then it wasn’t a job, wasn’t even a hobby, it was a survival tactic. I didn’t have to invent the tension. I was the tension. And… I’m tired of tension. Tension is making me sick. It is time… I stopped… comedy. I have to quit comedy… but I mean… I can’t quit you.”[226] This quote aptly explains the role of audience and performer, while also showing that comedy and satire often work irreconcilably with personal trauma. While this might not be the case for all humour, Gadsby’s personally argues that joking itself acts as a form of affirming or making okay the type or actions and reactions that inform

[225] Ibid.
[226] Ibid.

traumatic experiences. Her ability to make tense, and then relieve that tension, stems directly from her ability to exploit her own personal trauma for comedic effect. In Gadsby's case, however, this exploitation isn't framed as therapeutic, but rather exists as an extension of her own personal, and irreconcilable shame.

She continues, "I couldn't tell that story as it actually happened. Because I couldn't tell the part of the story where that man realized his mistake. And he came back. And he said, "Oh, no, I get it. You're a lady faggot. I'm allowed to beat the shit out of you," and he did! He beat the shit out of me, and nobody stopped him. And I didn't… report that to the police, and I did not take myself to hospital, and I should have. And you know why I didn't? It's because I thought that was all I was worth. And that is what happens when you soak one child in shame and give permission to another to hate. And that was not homophobia, pure and simple, people. That was gendered. If I'd been feminine, that would not have happened. I am incorrectly female. I am incorrect, and that is a punishable offense. And this tension, it's yours. I am not helping you anymore."[227] This revelation that occurs later in the special is distanced temporally from the original story and joke. It occurs after Gadsby has explained and chastised comedy's ability to dismiss trauma by making light of it. The realization that Gadsby presents to the audience is that, despite her existence within the LGBT community, this assault was perpetrated against her, not due to her sexual orientation, but due to her simple presentation outside of gender lines. This shows the extent to which female comedy is delineated along the very real lines of assault and must engage with traumatic experience. To Gadsby, however, her ability to access satire for therapeutic means is hindered by laughter itself.

This analysis and summary of Gadsby's special doesn't fully acknowledge or evoke the powerfulness of its message here. It is an abbreviated version presented to point out the importance of the special in regard to contemporary female comedy, and the type of gendered satire and violence that has been explored throughout this chapter. Gadsby plays with audience expectations throughout this special, beginning with simple quirky humour, then working through personal experience and trauma to provide light laughter. As the special continues, however, the content becomes darker, and the humour begins to fade. To Gadsby, some things

[227] Ibid.

ought not to be laughed at, and in the presence of laughter, some things continue to be perpetrated.

This final example of comedy about assault is not comedy at all. While she makes fun of herself, and jokes about personal traumas, her final point resides as a sort of antithesis to what has been explored so far. However, one could argue that, for Gadsby, it is not all satire that most stop dealing with traumatic topics, but Gadsby's own comedy, and the larger genre of comedy that plays on assault and rape for laughs. In this way, Gadsby's strong, staunch commentary isn't a call to a hindrance of satire itself, but, like Esposito and Stone, a call to the termination of humour that plays gendered violence for laughs. Therapy, and the therapeutic nature of comedy and satire has not been made diminutive. Rather, a strong consideration of just what is okay to joke about, and just what an audience truly understands about certain types of comedy has been reflected upon. Satire's ability to help personal trauma is strong, but some things may not be appropriate for the stage, especially when satire often allows for audiences to dismiss realities surrounding traumatic content. Gadsby's special admits that, although her humour may engage with trauma, it doesn't work through it in a healthy manner, allowing instead for the audience's dismissal of the very real effects and implications of comedy based around self-derision.

This chapter's contention with the rape joke provides a gendered perspective on the ways that stand-up comedy can subvert traumatic experiences for the performance of abjection as a form of therapy. As Goldner writes, "Rape jokes oscillate somewhere between free speech and hate speech and between the domains of playing and reality, but in whatever register, we now know that their 'no harm done' premise turns out to be false."[228] The ways that rape jokes are interpreted has changed from the comfortable presentation of stereotypical oppressive ideals of the abuser to the uncomfortable, yet liberating, experiences of the survivor. The rape joke, as seen in female stand-up comedy, and from the survivor perspective, exemplifies stand-up comedy's ability to reckon with traumatic experiences for the benefit of those performing and experiencing satire on stage.

[228] Virginia Goldner, "Rape Jokes: Laugh Till You Cry," *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* 18, no. 4 (November 21, 2017): pp. 294-298, https://doi.org/10.1080/15240657.2017.1383058.

# Chapter 4: We're All Mad Here

## *The Sick*

The satirical rhetoric of stand-up comedy is inherently linked to an engagement with significant traumatic experience. Starting with Lenny Bruce, comedians who engaged with deeper, darker, and more personal themes were attributed the traits of mental instability. As Nesteroff explains, "Time Magazine complained…that Bruce "merely shouts angrily and tastelessly at the world. *Time*, taking its cue from the established appellations 'beatnik' and 'sputnik,' dubbed coffeehouse comedians "sickniks." The magazine said they were purveyors of 'sick comedy'…"[229] The term sick has a twofold meaning. The first idea refers to that which is unappealing; sick becomes a word to signify the gross, uncouth, and offensive aspects of satirical comedy. However, sickness, extending from the first definition also comes to define the comedians themselves, with the implication that only those who are seriously psychologically ill would joke of such things. In this way, sickness, therefore, comes to define stand-up itself but does so to a moral standard. Sick is not a medical term, but an outside qualification from offended people. The individual comedian is sick because they joke about sick things, but in their presentation of comedic sickness, an evocation of individual identity precludes an instability of the mind.

As Hargrave writes, "'Mental health' is embedded in the craft of stand-up since the form places high demands on the individual practitioner's ability to negotiate this self aesthetically and publicly."[230] This self that Hargrave refers to is the unique self of the individual comic. This individualized nature of stand-up comedy has been delineated previously in this paper's discussion of Lenny Bruce. As Mort Sahl asserts, "He was irreverent and individualistic and wasn't trying to please anybody."[231] Without speaking too much about Bruce again, this quote

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[229] Kliph Nesteroff, "Stand-Up's Great Change," in *The Comedians: Drunks, Thieves, Scoundrels, and the History of American Comedy* (New York, NY: Grove Press, 2016), pp. 155-201.
[230] Matt Hargrave, "Stage Persona, Stand-up Comedy and Mental Health: 'Putting Yourself Out There,'" *Persona Studies* 5, no. 2 (2019): pp. 67-82, https://doi.org/10.21153/psj2019vol5no2art917.
[231] *Looking For Lenny* (Gravitas Ventures, 2011), https://tubitv.com/movies/15629/looking-for-lenny, 7:02-7:08.

plainly shows how the origination of stand-up itself inherently values the individual mindset, and in doing so, presents a form of comedy unparalleled in its ability to disrupt, and provoke discomfort. This uncomfortable provocation entices reactions of offense and disgust, but it also precludes the possibility for significant discussion to take place. Stand-up comedy, therefore, is not just a space for unprecedented freedom of speech, but also maintains an environment whereby authentic therapeutic discussions can occur through satire.

The discomfort that starts in Bruce is really a discomfort with the established order that stifles individual expression for safe, regulated, and conformed art. By presenting individualized accounts of vulgarity, stand-up satirists are working against the status quo. This itself could be deemed as sick because it is outside of the norms of society. This chapter, therefore, will aim to engage directly with stand-up comedy's varied links to trauma in order to present a clear image of stand-up comedy's therapeutic effects. The idea of the comedian as *sick* is an almost psychoanalytic qualification. By labelling stand-up comics as inherently mentally ill, the dominant culture itself seeks to repress and discriminate against provocative satire. By using offense and outrage against the comic, contemporary culture deals directly in trauma, attempting to take away the speech of its critics, while gaslighting their thoughts, ideas, feelings, and beliefs. The fear of plain therapeutic speech is really a fear that "the comedy might not stop if we get to the 'Real' behind it."[232] The comic is urged not to speak the truths of their society and culture because, when done honestly and efficiently, the laughter doesn't stop at the punchline but continues into the absurdity of life itself.

Therefore, this *sickness* attributed to stand-up comedy is really a sickness that attempts to repress societal traumas, and sublimate therapy's exposure of truth. Another famous Bruce routine affirms and reiterates the phrase that, "The Truth is, what is."[233] This diffuse, highly poetical phrasing engages and interrogates society's fixation on an *ideal* of sorts. Oftentimes, various cultures and societies present values that do not adhere to the truth of life within said places. Bruce urges his listener to realize this simple fact. Despite being told that life may be a certain way, or that one's inclinations are morally wrong and factually incorrect, the truth still

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[232] Zupančič Alenka and Alenka Zupančič, "Figures of Comedy: The Other and the Other," in *The Odd One in: On Comedy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), pp. 88-108.
[233] *Warning Lenny Bruce Is Out Again* (U.S.A.), accessed March 29, 2022, https://open.spotify.com/album/6yGKD1fYWfkBXgMofzjd7Z?si=4MUG5XNmRLeso5vsZ7iPuQ.

resides as a simple, salient being. The truth is what exists. No society, culture, law, order, or rule can change that.

To conclude with our re-evaluation of Bruce, and move forward to speak of stand-up satire more broadly comes a quote from Kenneth Tynan. He writes about Bruce, "The message he bears is simple and basic: whatever releases people and brings them together is good, and whatever confines and separates them is bad."[234] Despite stand-up comedy's proclivity towards offense and outrage, it is important to remember that, at its best, regardless of content, stand-up comedy aims for therapeutic release. The divisive aspect of this form of satire is not lost in this quote. Rather, the optimal stand-up comic seeks to divide those unwilling to come together for this basic purpose, focusing on the remaining population that can understand the absurdity, discrepancies, and inequities of life.

Therefore, one can see that the aspirations and preoccupations of stand-up comedy are not necessarily chosen by the individual performers but are compelled. A recurring theme presented by stand-up comics is the idea of compulsion; a comic does not choose to be what they are but is driven to do so by inherent desire. As Bell Jordan writes, "In Chappelle's own words, humour flows from him as easily as conversing with someone. 'Telling jokes is like a language I know really well . . . when I'm up [on stage], I speak fluent joke.' "[235] This compulsion that afflicts stand-up comics is a compulsion linked to their inherent mental state. They cannot help but see the absurdities of the world, and therefore also cannot help but joke about them. They are sick in their ability to stop the voices; it just so happens that their intrusive thoughts tell jokes. As Paul Mooney reminds us, "Timing's everything and funny's funny, no matter how racial it is, sexual, if it's funny, it's funny."[236] This quote illuminates the active engagement with offense that stand-up comics perform. What Mooney and Chappelle are explaining here is that, despite offense, outrage, or the potential destruction of careers, the stand-up comic cannot help but joke about the things they view as funny, odd, absurd, and/or upsetting. In fact, satirical stand-up routines often present themselves similarly to the classic example as therapist and patient on couch. The stand-up expresses their lives, traumas and fears in a stream-of-consciousness style,

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[234] Lenny Bruce and Kenneth Tynan, "How to Talk Dirty and Influence People: An Autobiography," in *How to Talk Dirty and Influence People: An Autobiography* (Boston, MA: Da Capo Press, 2016), p. ix-xiii.
[235] Katrina E. Bell-Jordan, "Speaking Fluent 'Joke' Pushing the Racial Envelope through Comedic Performance on Chappelle's Show," *Performance Research: A Journal of the Performing Arts* 12, no. 3 (2007): pp. 74-90, https://doi.org/10.1080/13528160701771329
[236] *Looking For Lenny* (Gravitas Ventures, 2011), https://tubitv.com/movies/15629/looking-for-lenny, 21:38-21:45.

disallowing censorship, and reform to stifle independent thought. As MacRury points out, "the stand-up comedian is able – even compelled – to communicate, to figure, to embody risky, concrete-fantasy material (shock, profanity, unease). Performers work to provoke and prod, to share, to display and (together with an appreciative audience) to overcome the traumata, inconsistencies and glitches that make up experience of the everyday world."[237] This quote most aptly explains the compulsion of the stand-up comic. Comic material, in its most shocking and divisive aspects, is material that is uncomfortable in its very nature. However, by way of an appreciative audience, this discomfort can be disseminated and alleviated comprehensively.

As Lowe evaluates Freud, one begins to see the psychological nature of stand-up comedy itself. He writes, "…jokes succeed in liberating an otherwise suppressed, or "censored" thought via the disguise of humor, thereby releasing energy, and creating joy."[238] This 'joy' which Lowe evaluates exists in both performer and audience. The audience, if not completely turned away by the content of the satirist's speech, is able to revel in the alleviation of presented and joked absurdity, trauma, and societal flaws. The comic, by way of uttering these realities, can therapize themselves, working out their own personal issues on stage, dividing and divvying their individual traumas onto a willing audience ready to encounter and disseminate sickness itself. The sickness that they encounter is not a sickness of the individual performer. It is not the attributed outrage of a society provoked. Rather, the sickness exposed and disseminated onstage is the sickness of society itself. It is not the individual who targets absurdity that is ill; No, it is the society which attempts to stifle criticism itself that presents symptoms of instability.

To move towards a truly encapsulated engagement with the therapeutic aspects of Stand-up Comedy, a digression to the audience-performer relationship is necessary. Without the audience, the performer is kept sick. As mentioned before, however, by way of mutual engagement, the audience and performer rely on each other to work as equivalent benefactors of therapeutic content. The following sub-chapter will analyze the performer-audience relationship, reaffirming the importance of both variables within stand-up. However, the following chapter will also present and explain the inherent power dynamics evident within stand-up comedy and

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[237] Iain MacRury, "Humour as 'Social Dreaming': Stand-up Comedy as Therapeutic Performance," *Psychoanalysis, Culture &Amp; Society* 17, no. 2 (2012): pp. 185-203, https://doi.org/10.1057/pcs.2012.20.
[238] John Lowe, "Theories of Ethnic Humour: How to Enter, Laughing," *American Quarterly* 38, no. 3 (1986): pp. 439-460, https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.2307/2712676.

provoke thought regarding whether relationships predicated on traumatic relief can be equivalent emotionally, or if they are necessarily exploitive in their very nature.

*Comic-Audience Confidentiality*

Stand-up comedy, despite its singular nature, is dependent on relationships. The comic satirist may work on stage alone, speaking solely from a personal perspective, but their rhetorical comedy cannot exist in a vacuum. This isn't a novel or play that makes audiences chuckle; stand-up's effect is more than the echoing laughter of the Sitcom audience. It is a delicate balance between performer and audience. As Hertz writes, "In its purest form, 'stand-up' is a set of relations that are created between a comic and an audience."[239] This balance must be navigated and negotiated. Yet often this relationship is exploitive; Stand-up comedy only negotiates this balance to manipulate the audience for its own purposes. Hertz continues, "When occupying the stage, the comic begins in a position of power…"[240] This position of power is simply defined and understood. The comic has the microphone. They occupy the stage. They are the reason for being.

However, the audience also has power and control to assert. As Limon points out, "Stand-up is uniquely audience-dependent for its value because joking is, essentially, (1) a social phenomenon (no audience, no joke…)."[241] One may argue, therefore, that through the mutually exploitative qualities of the performer-audience relationship, stand-up comedy is not an equivalently therapeutic relationship, but a relationship founded on the toxic navigation of power. The audience and performer may mutually benefit from one another, but they do so at a cost. As one alleviates their pain through laughter, the other reasserts their power through aversion and diversion. As Hertz writes, "Laughter functions in several ways. First, it signifies that the audience understands the material presented and can identify with the material. Secondly, when the audience laughs, they are conceding power to the comic. In this sense, laughter functions as a kind of approval, justifying the joke and the presence of the comic on

[239] Emily Hertz, "Alternative Comedy: Women in Stand-Up" (dissertation, 2010).
[240] Ibid.
[241] Limon, John, "Inrage: A Lenny Bruce Joke and the Topography of Stand-Up," in *Stand-up Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), pp. 12-27.

stage. Lastly, laughter is a weapon."[242] This quote effectively outlines the process by which power fluctuates throughout a stand-up comedy set. This fluctuation of power does not allow for an equivalent power dynamic throughout the stand-up's performance. Rather, the comic exploits the retention of power through laughter, allowing the audience only brief moments of respite. The audience may understand the material, but their brief moments of understanding are soon undermined by the comic's weaponized joke-telling. Laughter is not so much a reaction to the comic's word, but a shield. While the audience retains the power of affirming the comic's presence, the comic retains the power of presence itself. They are the ones on the stage. They are the ones with the privilege of the microphone. They are the people with the power to divide, or the power to unite an audience.

A more positive viewpoint of the audience-performer relationship comes from MacRury. He writes that "stand-up is open to and requires an analysis alert to the close, the sensate, and the communal. At its best, it evokes reciprocity and dialogue."[243] This reflection on the audience-performance relationship presents a mutually beneficial image of an often-contentious dichotomy. It is curious, therefore, to understand where these varied images of stand-up comedy and its audience comes from. For Abrahams, this dialogue between comic and audience is a relationship built on trust, seen through the comic's ability to evoke competence and intent. As Abrahams writes, "Competence just means the would-be humorist's ability to construct and enact the humor act. Intent has to do with what the humorist means, and what she is attempting to convey."[244]

The idea of trust in stand-up comedy is an idea that illuminates the ways in which certain stand-up audiences go to stand-up performance for the pure enjoyment of the comic's material. In this style of comedy "The comedian is often not just trying to get the audience to laugh but to laugh along with the comedian, or to laugh together at the comedian."[245] This above quote seems to harken back to the introduction, and its presentation of the dichotomous relationship between ancient satirists Horace and Juvenal. As argued previously, Horatian and Juvenalian satire present different ideas about satire's purpose. They are at odds with each other, as one seeks to

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[242] Emily Hertz, "Alternative Comedy: Women in Stand-Up" (dissertation, 2010).
[243] Iain MacRury, "Humour as 'Social Dreaming': Stand-up Comedy as Therapeutic Performance," *Psychoanalysis, Culture &Amp; Society* 17, no. 2 (2012): pp. 185-203, https://doi.org/10.1057/pcs.2012.20.
[244] Daniel Abrahams, "Winning Over the Audience: Trust and Humor in Stand-up Comedy," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 78, no. 4 (2020): pp. 491-500, https://doi.org/10.1111/jaac.12760.
[245] Ibid.

divide and offend (Juvenal), while the other seeks to unite and appease (Horace). The varied interpretations of the audience-performer relationship proceed similarly. Certain theorists contend that satire through stand-up is an exploitive, combative artform, which seeks to alienate its audience. Others point out that laughter is itself a uniting force, and that the best stand-up comics are those that bring people together through laughter, offering power through the decision to laugh for the audience itself. As Brett Mills points out, "Humour commonly functions by inviting an audience to be amused by a comic butt, it can both include and exclude; the audience comes together to affirm its shared humour, while the butt is excluded as worthy of nothing but laughter."[246] The ability to include and exclude is exactly that in which satire holds in its grasp. But who decides what is worthy of laughter? And who decides who the butt of the joke must be? And how is this decided?

Abrahams writes, "People who are being invited to laugh affiliatively are either being invited into a group or affirmed as a member of the group doing the laughing. People who are being targeted with dis-affiliative laughter, who are being laughed at, are being excluded from the group that includes the laughers."[247] However, as Limon argues, "Stand-up…begins with aggression toward an audience…"[248] This aggression can be seen in dis-affiliative laughter, or the style of satire where the comic seeks to divide its audience. This doesn't always occur according to the idea of a comic butt. It can also simply occur with an evocation of offensive, provocative subject matter, and an arrogant, aggressive tone and presentation.

Limon writes, "The comedian works from above his audience…; he looks down on them as upon children and lectures them. But they make his jokes into jokes, or refuse to…"[249] This divisive style is evident in the most substantive, influential representatives of the form. Lenny Bruce did so through his unprecedented presentation of subversive vulgarity. Pryor and Mooney divide their audiences along the lines of race, subverting the oppressor, and interrogating privilege. Hannah Gadsby divides, and attacks based on a discomfort with comedy itself,

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[246] Brett Mills, "Nation & Globalization: Comedy and the Nation in The Trip," in *The Comedy Studies Reader*, ed. Nick Marx and Matt Sienkiewicz (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2018), pp. 267-276.
[247] Daniel Abrahams, "Winning Over the Audience: Trust and Humor in Stand-up Comedy," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 78, no. 4 (2020): pp. 491-500, https://doi.org/10.1111/jaac.12760.
[248] Limon, John, "Inrage: A Lenny Bruce Joke and the Topography of Stand-Up," in *Stand-up Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), pp. 12-27.
[249] Ibid.

wondering if one can truly laugh through all this pain. In this way, the power dynamic is uneven. The satirist holds the balance of power.

However, as Limon writes, "The particularities of the relationship of joke-teller and audience do not make the joke seem more or less funny; they make the joke more or less funny."[250] Though the stand-up satirist provokes an uneasy relationship with their audience and seems to exploit said audience for their own gain, the audience's power resides in the simple fact that they hold the final decision in their hands. This decision is simple: to laugh or not to laugh, to applaud or to stay silent. As Abrahams notes, "Since laughter is a social signal, it can be used to exercise power in a group by either including or excluding individuals or groups."[251] While Abrahams is writing here about the previous ideas of affiliative/dis-affiliative laughter, and the butt of the joke, the real exclusionary power of laughter is its total exclusion of the performer themselves when it is unable to be provoked. This risk is most evident in Juvenalian satire, whereby, in seeking to alienate their audience, the Juvenalian satirist also runs the risk of alienating themselves.

So how does one avoid alienation and exploitation in the satiric space? As Abrahams notes, it is trust, which, "imbues stand-up comedy with a social dynamic where the personage of the comedian is important."[252] Or as Hargrave quotes Robin Ince, "An audience need to know what they believe they are dealing with – the universe they occupy must be defined."[253] These two above quotes evoke an analysis of stage comedy that precludes and emphasizes the redemptive power of satire. This "social dynamic" is seen in Horatian satire, and it is Horatian satire which provides a cohesive satirical form. In Horatian satire, one can only educate through comedy by way of positive gesturing. An audience must be familiar with what they encounter, because, without that familiarity, stand-up reorients itself into tense, terse engagement with fear, trauma, and disruptive therapy.

The question therefore becomes which style of satire can evoke the most significant therapeutic change. This thesis has not diverted from its emphasis on Juvenalian content. Despite the very tense nature of its subject matter and presentation, this satiric form's direct engagement

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[250] Ibid.
[251] Daniel Abrahams, "Winning Over the Audience: Trust and Humor in Stand-up Comedy," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 78, no. 4 (2020): pp. 491-500, https://doi.org/10.1111/jaac.12760.
[252] Ibid.
[253] Matt Hargrave, "Stage Persona, Stand-up Comedy and Mental Health: 'Putting Yourself Out There,'" *Persona Studies* 5, no. 2 (2019): pp. 67-82, https://doi.org/10.21153/psj2019vol5no2art917.

with darkness provides the most illuminating aspects of satirical freedom. As MacRury writes, "As the audience, we share in and recognise the comic's abjection (Limon, 2000) but are energised in the presence of some (greater) good, some bigger thought."[254] This "greater good (and) bigger thought"[255] is not necessarily defined as a uniting force. While there is an upside to dark satire, this satiric style does not presume that everybody will emerge unscathed. While Horatian satire seeks to make all amused, it also does not contend with anything more significant that minute social qualms. It does not chastise authority, or interrogate racism, sexism, homophobia, etc. In fact, by avoiding frank discussion with these topics, lighter satire reaffirms them. By not standing in direct opposition to societal inequities, one stands with them. It is this reason why Juvenalian satire, even in its exploitation of its audience, provides the ability for emancipatory, therapeutic potential.

As MacRury summarizes, "On stage, the background noise of everyday pain and existential dread is turned and tuned by the humourist for his audience and by them and thus evokes both loss and its overcoming: laughter, smiling…"[256] This "everyday pain"[257] and "existential dread"[258], which MacRury speaks of is the sickness referenced earlier in the chapter. By engaging directly with all that is wrong, whether it be individually, interpersonally, or societally, the stand-up comic is made sick by an audience that does not (want to) understand how direct engagement with these issues is more beneficial than a glossary humour predicated on avoidance of disruptive upset.

This sub-chapter has outlined the fraught relationship between audience and performer, navigating and negotiating power dynamics, interrogating the exploitative qualities, and investigating the realities of this relationship. This chapter has thus far presented a relatively balanced view of this relationship, pointing out the supposed inequities of either position, whilst relegating extreme examples to the margins. Only in the last few paragraphs has a position been taken. To investigate further, this chapter continues with a few direct questions: But what happens when a comic doesn't want the audience on their side? Or an audience turns on said performer? The following will investigate instances of upheaval in the comedy club, and how,

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[254] Iain MacRury, "Humour as 'Social Dreaming': Stand-up Comedy as Therapeutic Performance," *Psychoanalysis, Culture &Amp; Society* 17, no. 2 (2012): pp. 185-203, https://doi.org/10.1057/pcs.2012.20.
[255] Ibid.
[256] Ibid.
[257] Ibid.
[258] Ibid.

even in those moments that lack equivalency, stand-up still exists as a provocateur for therapeutic release.

The first example of deliberate division by a stand-up comic is seen in a routine from S*tewart Lee's Comedy Vehicle.* This program comes from the comic namesake Stewart Lee, a performer notorious for his proclivity to attack his audiences. These attacks, however, are often divisive not by vulgarity of content, but by Lee's focus on the audience's relationship and responsibility to the humour at hand. Lee often chastises his audience for not being able to follow the thread of comedy, blaming them for their supposed inability to understand, appreciate, and regard his genius through laughter. As the YouTube Channel *Comedy without Errors* notes, "Often, it's not the joke that gets the laugh, which Lee will purposefully set up to fail, but instead the long patronizing explanation of how the audience are misunderstanding his genius."[259]

Lee's routine begins with a tense phrase, meant to evoke uncomfortable laughter, which is then made even more uncomfortable by the joke's inability to provoke laughter across the room. He jokes, "You know, for a lot of men of his generation, I think in many ways the war never really ended."[260] This phrase is a jarring reflection alluding to the previously presented vulgar reflection about his Grandfather urinating on a nest of flies. The jarring connection between bodily function, and the effects of war are assumed by Lee to evoke awkward laughter. However, without widespread laughter, Lee sees the opportunity to chastise and intentionally provoke his audience. He continues, speaking directly to an audience member, "Still just you, isn't it? It's still just you. Do you know what? I've been running this live for about six months and there is normally applause there…"[261] This meta-commentary on the routine itself begins to get laughter from the audience. However, because this laughter is misplaced according to Lee's standards, he attempts to shut it down, continuing to chastise his audience for their inability to follow the thread of comedy. He continues, "No, no, no. No. No. We play the hand we are dealt in this game, right? Play the room as it lays, right? What the fucking...? Unbelievable. It's a good routine, this."[262]

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[259] *Stewart Lee: The Audience Is the Problem*, *YouTube* (Comedy Without Errors, 2020), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0w-K0NWtysA&t=407s.
[260] "Childhood," *Stewart Lee's Comedy Vehicle* (BBC Two, April 7, 2016).
[261] Ibid.
[262] Ibid.

This commentary provokes even more laughter from the audience. Those familiar with Lee's comedic style laugh in anticipation of Lee's performed breakdown. Those unfamiliar laugh or not laugh, but stay engaged due to the direction of surrounding audience members. In this way, Lee is working deliberately with the dichotomy of affiliative and dis-affiliative laughter. In the process, however, he also seeks to make laughter as hard as possible, but by doing so, provokes laughter throughout the process. Lee comments in an interview, "I don't like any kind of performance where everyone's really enjoying it. I much prefer things where there's a struggle going on. I like something when there's something at stake."[263] This reflective quote shows Lee's manipulation of the satiric form. He states, outside of the satiric persona, that he enjoys the difficulty of performance, yet manipulates his audience in person to believe the opposite. Those knowledgeable of Lee's style laugh because of this dichotomy. While Stewart Lee may not be a liar, he bends the truths of his art to suit the whims of the situation.

The routine continues with a direct reference to sickness, "You think we're mad, comedians, don't you? Sort of crazy desperate figures. Sort of low self-esteem, you know, wanting the approval of strangers all the time, perhaps because of some childhood trauma."[264] This summary from Lee of the preconceived notions of what Stand-up represents extends back to this chapter's earlier discussion of sick comedy. Lee evoking this historical precedent works to diffuse the audience by acknowledging their expectations, placing almost an element of guilt on their interpretations of Lee himself.

After discussing the difficulty of performing stand-up comedy, specifically regarding what occurs when practiced, solid routines go awry, Lee pauses to breathe deeply before accusing the audience of the most heinous outcome. He declares, "I mean, audiences like you, you know, you as good as murdered Robin Williams."[265] This is met with shock, surprise, and laughter, again bridging the gap between those in on the joke, and those viewing the performance as genuine upset. However, Lee does not relent. He continues, "You did. You as good as got the fucking noose and kick(ed) the..."[266] This direct accusation is not only shocking, but adds a deeply traumatic element to the routine. Whether Lee is joking or not, this routine has now gone

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[263] *Comedian Stewart Lee in Conversation at Oxford Brookes University*, *YouTube* (Oxford Brookes University, 2013), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8-2rVyizLt8&list=PLX5fvjtM4m92D5-h6Botez1cOnTw4zDsK&index=4.
[264] "Childhood," *Stewart Lee's Comedy Vehicle* (BBC Two, April 7, 2016).
[265] Ibid.
[266] Ibid.

into territory of the real. "The truth is, what is"[267], said Lenny Bruce. Well, the truth here is that Lee, while manipulating and exploiting his audience, is also speaking the truth. These people are dead. Whether it be shtick, persona, or performed routine, there is no getting around what Lee is contending with: His dearest friends, and the most important comics in the industry, continually die.

Lee continues to mock his audience, summarizing their opinions of comedians again as simply 'sick' individuals, who are potentially "on drugs or drunk."[268] He then attacks them directly by comparing the lethality of a moving car to the lethality of a comedy audience. He accuses, "Chipping away at people's self-esteem, that is a lethal weapon, right? And you should not be in a comedy audience if you can't follow the development of an idea through, because there are consequences of your indifference, of your stupidity, and that is the fucking holocaust of dead comics that we have got."[269] The truth that Lee evokes here is the simple fact of the dead. What he's twisting and turning in this evoked toxic relationship is who is really to blame. In a way, Lee is the comic gas-lighter, an abusive narcissist ready to place the blame on anyone but on himself. He targets and blames the audience for their indifference, when it is up to the comic every night to make the audience laugh. As Hargave writes, "Lee often seeks to 'lose the room' in his longer sets; there is a built-in dynamic of failure in his work where he is consciously trying to make it appear as if the act has lost its way."[270] This set from Lee goes even further than this. He is not only trying to lose the room here, he is trying to lose himself; in turn, this damages the relationship not just with the audience (the room), but with satire itself. Throughout this routine, the typical cues for laughter are missing. There are no punchlines, or stories that lead to comedic conclusions. Laughter only occurs from pure shock, or pure appreciation of Lee's ability to manipulate.

Furthermore, by evoking the simple phrase: 'holocaust' in reference to the heightened percentage of dead comics, Lee dredges up the most significant tragedy of the last century, without bringing it up specifically. Lee does not go into detail, utilizing the phrase only for its course, dictionary definition. However, by specifically choosing to use that word, the audience is

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[267] *Warning Lenny Bruce Is Out Again* (U.S.A.), accessed March 29, 2022, https://open.spotify.com/album/6yGKD1fYWfkBXgMofzjd7Z?si=4MUG5XNmRLeso5vsZ7iPuQ.
[268] "Childhood," *Stewart Lee's Comedy Vehicle* (BBC Two, April 7, 2016).
[269] Ibid.
[270] Matt Hargrave, "Stage Persona, Stand-up Comedy and Mental Health: 'Putting Yourself Out There,'" *Persona Studies* 5, no. 2 (2019): pp. 67-82, https://doi.org/10.21153/psj2019vol5no2art917.

again manipulated towards a certain interpretation, unable to shed connotative images. One begins to sympathize with Lee, and if not in on the joke, may really and truly feel like the comic on stage is having a breakdown. As Hargrave notes, "(Lee) presents the trope of the wounded clown recovering from … trauma."[271]

Lee's routine continues with a memory: He discusses playing a bill with 4 comedians, two of which have died since. He then accused-ly declares that their deaths occurred, "…because of you."[272] Lee's performance of feigned reminiscence gives credence to the routine's factuality and authenticity. He weaves aspects of his own life, most likely true, but potentially not, to target those individuals in the audience that may not understand what he is doing. In a way, Lee's routines work exactly for those who can follow the thread of an idea, because Lee's audience have been following the inside meta-thread of his style of dismembering satire. As Hargrave points out, Lee works with "… the fluidity between life lived and life as material."[273] Lee ensures that the average audience member does not know the difference between what is personal to him, and what is material. In fact, this difference is probably incredibly diffuse to even Lee himself. Of course, he would've known some of these people, and their deaths would have struck him as tragic and disheartening. But who is really to blame?

Lee continues with more reflective upset. He acts bewildered at the audience's reaction and laughter to certain elements of his routine. He pauses repeatedly, as if to halt his emotions; he stutters his words, as if trying not to cry. His voice trembles, "I think about all the comics we've lost…dead by their own hand, and I... I think about them every night before... before I come on stage, but I do come on stage, and I... I walk out onto these stages every night... through a forest of ghosts... of all the dead... comics, and I look through them... and I see you."[274] Lee plays up the emotions here, manipulating his audience. Lee is a strong actor, emphasizing the tragedy of the situation, exaggerating his own personal upset. The "forest of ghosts"[275] line is met with laughter from his audience. The poetical, almost Shakespearian image of being haunted by the dead contrasted with the absurdity of Lee on stage confronts the audience with their own hand in the matter, leaving only shock, guilt, or laughter as necessitated reactions. The paused

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[271] Ibid.
[272] "Childhood," *Stewart Lee's Comedy Vehicle* (BBC Two, April 7, 2016
[273] Matt Hargrave, "Stage Persona, Stand-up Comedy and Mental Health: 'Putting Yourself Out There,'" *Persona Studies* 5, no. 2 (2019): pp. 67-82, https://doi.org/10.21153/psj2019vol5no2art917.
[274] "Childhood," *Stewart Lee's Comedy Vehicle* (BBC Two, April 7, 2016
[275] Ibid.

phrases of Lee's routine allow for him to play up the emotional effects of his content, but also to catch his audience off guard through the style and presentation of the routine. This is most evident in the final line quoted above. As Lee speaks about all his dead comic friends, he paused emphatically to reflect on the scene, before again directly accusing and implicating the audience in the deaths of these individuals. "I look through them… and I see you"[276] is not only an individual admission, working to stress Lee's individual instability, but an accusation towards the audience themselves, suggesting that they are the cause of such destruction.

Lee continues, "And the worst... ones are the people that I knew. Because they're not like ghosts in a film, they're... They're just in the clothes they wore...and they come up to me on this side…and they say to me, 'Oh, don't let them get you down, you know? 'Ones on this side, they come in, close, and they whisper to me, 'Join us, join us, join us.' "[277] This is met with riotous laughter. The absurdity of Lee's fictional instability paired with the very real deaths of Lee's (and the audience's) comic idols is exaggerated to the point of delusion and hallucination. In these revelatory passages, Lee potentially reveals his own insecurities, struggles, and potential sickness. However, the audience is left to wonder how much of the routine is an act, and how much is truly Lee providing insight into the tragedy of the comic mind. Throughout all of this, however, remains Lee himself, contending with difficult, contentious, and traumatic subject matter, but doing so not to alleviate pain (from the audience and/or himself), but to identify its origin.

Throughout Lee's routine, the audience cannot help but feel attacked. However, the audience is also able to dismiss Lee's attacks, somewhat, based on Lee's "deluded sense of self-importance."[278] As Comedy Without Errors reminds us, "Stewart Lee declares he's the smartest person in the room, but takes it to such a maniacal extreme that the audience is left to laugh…"[279] This analysis of Lee comic ability is seen clearly in the finality of this routine. After provoking and manipulating the audience into raucous laughter over the exaggerated effect of Lee's discussion of the proliferation of dead comics, Lee lifts the veil, continuing to accuse the

[276] Ibid.
[277] Ibid.
[278] Matt Hargrave, "Stage Persona, Stand-up Comedy and Mental Health: 'Putting Yourself Out There,'" *Persona Studies* 5, no. 2 (2019): pp. 67-82, https://doi.org/10.21153/psj2019vol5no2art917.
[279] *Stewart Lee: The Audience Is the Problem*, *YouTube* (Comedy Without Errors, 2020), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0w-K0NWtysA&t=407s.

audience of their implication in the matter, but speaking so bluntly as to acknowledge and reveal that the previous purported sadness was only an act to evoke these reactions.

Lee continues by questioning and accusing. He scolds, "Is this what is takes, is it? It that what it takes to get you…to understand that you hold in your visibly indifferent hands…a person's living, beating heart? You should have been concentrating like that from the moment you came in... Because there are consequences of your indifference, and that is the dead! The piling up of the dead, now, and their blood is on you, on your faces, pouring down your..."[280] Where Lee may have only significantly implied that the "holocaust of dead comedians"[281] is the audience's fault up to this point, he eschews the façade here, and directly accuses and scolds his audience for their implication in these symbolic murders. While most comics are "dead by their own hand"[282], as Lee points out, these suicides, and overdoses occur for a reason. To spring these accusations on the audience is to manipulate the previously contended performer-audience relationship itself. While trust and reciprocation seem to be the purported optimal relationship, Lee eschews this here, stating, "I want you to laugh in spite of me, not because of me."[283] While there is spite throughout Lee's routine, it is still unclear as to what the audience is laughing at exactly and why they are doing so. However, as can be seen in the final portion of this routine, Lee works to not only bring forward laughter from an illogical, emotionally vested place, but also to extend this societal trauma, to personal insecurity and upset.

His routine concludes with the finale to his originally attempted joke. He harkens back and concludes the joke about his grandfather urinating on a pile of flies. He states, "And the worst thing about that memory is my grandad, when he was urinating on those flies, he was in his late 70s, he'd had a heart attack, a stroke, heart valve replacement surgery, and yet the jet of his urine then... was more powerful and accurate than mine is now…"[284] This joke follows a similar vein of self-aware, emotional rhetoric. He exaggerates the effects that this story has on his psyche, providing the audience with a glimpse into Lee's comic strategy. However, without a keen eye towards satirical rhetoric, an audience may remain wounded and worried for Lee's

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[280] "Childhood," *Stewart Lee's Comedy Vehicle* (BBC Two, April 7, 2016
[281] Ibid.
[282] Ibid.
[283] *Comedian Stewart Lee in Conversation at Oxford Brookes University*, *YouTube* (Oxford Brookes University, 2013), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8-2rVyizLt8&list=PLX5fvjtM4m92D5-h6Botez1cOnTw4zDsK&index=4.
[284] "Childhood," *Stewart Lee's Comedy Vehicle* (BBC Two, April 7, 2016

mental state. As Hargrave writes, this "…echoes John Limon's central thesis that stand-up's true subject is always abjection: abjection as an abasement and a prostration before the audience; but also, abjection as a way to describe "something miring your life, some skin that cannot be sloughed off, some role … that has become your only character."[285] Lee's pivotal tactic is his exploitation of the audience's inability to distinguish between what is real in Lee's routine, and what is simply a form of play and persona. When Lee scolds his audience for not being able to follow his routine, it is almost as if he is scolding their inability to distinguish between what is real and what is constructed. Lee's excessively antisocial persona reveals the fundamental issue with the audience-performer relationship: the fundamental exploitation that satire predicates for its own effect.

Another example of deliberate division extending from a performer to their audience can be seen as outlined by John Limon on Richard Pryor's proclivity to designate and divide audience members according to their race. Pryor's *Live in Concert* begins with audience members filing into their seats. Pryor immediately begins by jest-fully stating, "Jesus Christ. Look at the white people rushing back."[286] This statement is spoken with mocking surprise. What are they rushing for? seems to be the question. And why are white people the ones rushing? Recalling this moment from Pryor's special, Limon states plainly, "The subject of race has been broached."[287] As seen in the previous chapter about racial comedy, African American satire either struggles in avoidance of the topic of race, or is compelled to focus on the topic. For African American comics, the topic of race is unavoidable. One either makes a statement by avoiding the topic or must encounter the subject head-on. Pryor work here in the veins of the later. However, his opening words do not feel compelled or coerced. It is not the awkward avoidance of a 'raceless' Bill Cosby, or the political engagement of a Dick Gregory. Pryor revels here in the audience divide. He doesn't seek to educate on equality and doesn't avoid the topic of race altogether.

Rather, he confronts, interrogates, mocks, and ridicules a portion of his audience (the whites), thereby introducing the topic of race, without emphasizing blackness as coerced subject

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[285] Matt Hargrave, "Stage Persona, Stand-up Comedy and Mental Health: 'Putting Yourself Out There,'" *Persona Studies* 5, no. 2 (2019): pp. 67-82, https://doi.org/10.21153/psj2019vol5no2art917.
[286] *Richard Pryor: Live in Concert* (Special Event Entertainment, 1979).
[287] John Limon and John Limon, "Scatology: Richard Pryor in Concert," in *Stand-up Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), pp. 83-103.

matter. Pryor jokes, "…the fun part for me (is) when the white people coming back from the intermission…find that niggers stole their seats."[288] Pryor then moves into an exaggerated impersonation of that scenario[289], with the black inhabitants of the seats evoking cool composure, while the whites react accusingly as "a cartoon of sweaty uncool belligerence."[290] The morals of this situation, that is, who is in the right or wrong here is not important. Pryor plays up the criminal stereotype of black experience to then evoke an exaggerated caricature of white posturing and pretension. As Limon explains, "Pryor has effectively divided the audience in half, -- (which) seems comically suicidal."[291] Pryor's mastery of his satiric content, and his uncomfortable, yet hilarious, stereotyped juxtaposition of these two demographics works to force "(his) audience … to live as a division but laugh as a unity."[292]

The topic of race is broached in order to divide and conquer. The blacks that identify with Pryor's work, and the whites that fully cannot, must coexist, but also acknowledge their difference. For Pryor, however, the intent of this joke isn't even to poke fun at both races. As Limon notes, "The lesson is that whites – including whites at a Pryor concert – cannot pretend to be black."[293] They cannot hide in the shadows, watching voyeuristically the satire of an afflicted race. They are immediately made aware that their privilege isn't hidden. In a few short phrases, Pryor has levelled the playing field. While the world may not be equal outside of the satiric arena, it sure as hell will be within the space of Pryor's work. The audience-performer relationship is imbued here with another analytical element: race. However, Pryor's intent in confronting (at least a portion of) his audience directly works similarly to the rest of this chapter's evidence. By acknowledging, exploiting, and conversing with the audience, Pryor can offer something close to equality, thereby illuminating the potential liberative effects of stand-up comedy itself.

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[288] *Richard Pryor: Live in Concert* (Special Event Entertainment, 1979).
[289] Ibid.
[290] Limon, John, "Scatology: Richard Pryor in Concert," in *Stand-up Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), pp. 83-103.
[291] Ibid.
[292] Ibid.
[293] Ibid.

*Trauma & Therapy*

This chapter has thus far outlined the typical attributions of sickness to stand-up comics, while also interrogating the comic-audience relationship for elements of bound trauma and therapy. This chapter continues with a specific example of the potential for satirical liberation and alleviation of the traumatic effects of the personal, social, and/ or societal world. It then finishes with another analysis of a long-form satiric routine that neatly ties together much of this thesis' preoccupation with the traumatic world of comedy, and its release through dark, often offensive satiric contention.

The ability for humour to help negative mental states is an oft stated aspect of comedy. You either laugh or you cry, as the old saying goes. This thesis has thus far pointed out a plethora of examples of satire's ability to help comics and their audiences encounter and alleviate trauma. In a more specific context, comedy helps the direct mental state of those afflicted by illness. As Pedetti writes, "Despite the silence that surrounds the problem of depression, humor can potentially be the most efficient way to break the stigma of mental illness."[294] By encountering mental illness head on and being able to make light of these traumas, Stand-up comedy works to normalize them. As MacRury comments, "Stand-up, at its best, enlivens the textured 'surfaces' of the everyday."[295] This thesis contends that these "textured surfaces"[296] in which MacRury references, are the aspects of everyday life often hidden from view, but made normal through laughter. While stand-up comedy often evokes laughter in a contentious way, this result of laughter by any means allows for satiric content to balance the personally affected individual, with the effects that said content has on an audience.

By interrogating traumatic events, affected mental states, and personal illnesses, satire allows for these negative aspects of personal life to be normalized on a broader scale. Satire works to make public, the negative effects of private life. As MacRury points out, "…the genre lies in an oscillating convergence of play and pain…"[297] The fluctuating effects of satire have been encountered throughout this thesis. These effects are first seen historically in Bruce, the

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[294] Karina Pedetti, "The Funny Thing About Depression: Using Humor to Cope," *Dialogues@RU* 12 (2017): pp. 239-249.
[295] Iain MacRury, "Humour as 'Social Dreaming': Stand-up Comedy as Therapeutic Performance," *Psychoanalysis, Culture &Amp; Society* 17, no. 2 (2012): pp. 185-203, https://doi.org/10.1057/pcs.2012.20.
[296] Ibid.
[297] Ibid

first creator within a new artform dedicated to exposing social trauma and hypocrisy through personal reflection and interrogation. It is carried throughout much of racial comedy, as evoked by Gregory, Mooney, Pryor and the like to expose racial traumas and injustice. Female comedy takes up this mantle to bridge the divide of power between men and women, exposing the inequities of gender itself. It is then seen again in the attribution of sickness to comics, and their relationship with their audiences. This final sub-chapter will once more show this link, with an example of stand-up comedy's hands-on ability to navigate trauma, finishing with a final provocative routine that broaches all aspects of this thesis' preoccupations

As Pedetti writes, "Laughing at depression, by oneself and with others, can promote the realization that a mental illness is something one has, it is not who one is."[298] While this quote talks specifically about depression, the word trauma just as readily works in its place. That being said, the quote above is not used to conflate trauma with specific mental illnesses, but to clarify how laughter works to navigate the difference between identifying with one's mental state versus realizing the realities of mental processes. Trauma, like mental illness, is something one has. It does not define an individual but is simply something to navigate alongside other mental effects and personality traits.

*McCreary's Wager*

An example of this emancipatory distance between an individual's identity and their illness is seen in Michael McCreary. McCreary is a Canadian comic who suffers from Asperger's syndrome. Despite this disorder's potential negative effects on McCreary's life and social capabilities, he has chosen to turn his difficulties into stand-up comedy. He jokes, "Finally, I settled on this stand-up thing, which was a difficult call for me because all my life I've had this fear that people are staring at me and laughing."[299] This joke specifically relates to the interesting choice made by McCreary in conjunction with his disorder. The things that stand-up comedy evokes in laughter and audience engagement are exactly this which a person suffering from Asperger's may feel uncomfortable with. McCreary sees this as positive way to

[298] Karina Pedetti, "The Funny Thing About Depression: Using Humor to Cope," *Dialogues@RU* 12 (2017): pp. 239-249.
[299] *Stand-up Comic Mines Asperger Syndrome for Laughs*, *YouTube* (CBC News: The National, 2016), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=POAbEUkIAMg&list=PLX5fvjtM4m92D5-h6Botez1cOnTw4zDsK&index=2.

understand his own illness, and bring his experiences into public performance for broader understanding. As he states, "I think it's a therapeutic experience. When I go out there on stage, it's less so like a comedy show and more like group therapy…"[300] While some of his material deals directly with his personal experiences with the disorder, other jokes simply go to show the fundamental connection between people with and without Asperger's syndrome. As he states, "People with Asperger's, Autism, on the spectrum, you know, we also have a sense of humour."[301] McCreary's admission (to his audience) and navigation of Asperger's syndrome is a fundamental part of his act. However, it is not the only thing engaged with throughout the course of his routines. McCreary may acknowledge his own disorder and broach it specifically in his stand-up. However, he does not allow for his disorder to dominate the material, weaving aspects of personal reflection into other parts of his routine distanced from the disorder itself.

McCreary *has* Asperger's syndrome, but it does not define everything he does. As MacRury asserts, "…Stand-ups can triumphantly turn the tables on psychic pain…"[302] By utilizing aspects of personal experience within a larger, satiric routine, McCreary is able to effectively show how laughter, even when navigated alongside trauma, helps to alleviate the stigmatization of his specific illness through laughter. Or as the nice CBC narrator puts it, "(McCreary) realized when he's on-stage making fun of himself, he could get the last laugh." [303]

The idea of a last laugh for stand-up comics is an idea that shines a light on the dialogue driven nature of satire. As evidenced in this chapter's previous discussion of the audience - performer relationship, stand-up comedy is predicated on revolving feedback between comic and audience. While stand-up comedy cannot completely solve societal inequities affecting specific issues of a satirist's life, it can, at the very least, create a dialogue between perspectives deemed normal, and others deemed abnormal. The idea of a last laugh, therefore, pivots to the most recent laugh. As in any conversation, the potential for response is never completely final. McCreary's satire may not truly involve the final word on a subject. What it does allow for, however, is for the conversation to finally take place. When McCreary makes his audience laugh,

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[300] Ibid.
[301] Ibid.
[302] Iain MacRury, "Humour as 'Social Dreaming': Stand-up Comedy as Therapeutic Performance," *Psychoanalysis, Culture &Amp; Society* 17, no. 2 (2012): pp. 185-203, https://doi.org/10.1057/pcs.2012.20.
[303] *Stand-up Comic Mines Asperger Syndrome for Laughs*, *YouTube* (CBC News: The National, 2016), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=POAbEUkIAMg&list=PLX5fvjtM4m92D5-h6Botez1cOnTw4zDsK&index=2.

with or without content about his disorder, a conversation starts, and any laughter heard is the most recent response in a new dialogue between the stand-up's individual perspective and the audience's broader assumptions, expectations, and potential discriminations.

*In a Neat, Little Bow*

This final section of the thesis will pull together the multitude of ways that satire works to expose, confront, and normalize taboo, trauma, and illness. This thesis' focus on satire over simple humour/comedy becomes most clear when looking into darker, contentious routines that present difficult experiences that disrupt the status quo over familiar experiences that uphold instances of oppression. This thesis has thus far taken the time to engage with varied longer-form routines that engage with trauma, abjection, societal subversion, and personal reflection. Therefore, a final engagement with sickness and trauma as embodied on stage through satire itself will be presented. This final routine, as performed by Doug Stanhope is a highly contentious routine that analyzes this thesis' ruminations on offensive subject matter, alongside trauma, personal reflection, and the abjection felt by the satirist. It also looks at the upheaval that stand-up comedy can provoke through subversion of imposed, forced, or coerced ideas and thoughts. Stanhope's routine is one that expresses taboo subjects about the body, death, God, and denigrative speech. Stanhope's presents his ideas in a vulgar fashion that espouses values of free speech, while also rebuking impositions of sensitive language and subject matter. In doing so, however, Stanhope criticizes societal impositions of the status quo, working through personal trauma and the feelings of abjection that arise when traumatic experiences intersect with things out of human control. This conclusory sub-chapter will look at profanity and offense to evaluate specific concerns of what is permissible in stand-up comedy. This focus will show that, even in stand-up comedy that deliberately seeks to offend its audience, subversion, therapy, and personal reflection exist to curb perceived cultural impositions of trauma, denigration, and subordination

Stanhope begins his routine with jarring vulgarity. He states, almost as a demand, ""I need a fucking black cock… I need a picture of a black Cock…. I need a picture of me with a Fat black cock just slapped across my open mouth…"[304] Stanhope relies on uncomfortable, provocative sexuality to shock his audience as a beginning statement. Stanhope creates an

[304] *Before Turning the Gun on Himself* (Warner, 2011).

expectation in his audience that his routine will be shocking, vulgar, and potentially contemptible. The routine, however, is thus far ineffective in provoking genuine contemplation. After evoking this vulgar sexual image, Stanhope presents an equally shocking, blunt image of trauma. He continues, "I have a picture I keep in my Wallet of my father's corpse. My father died in 2001. He was just a fat nice guy. He died at 73. He had colon cancer. It had just fucking tore him apart. He was a fat nice guy. He was always nice, and he made Blueberry pancakes, and he didn't have opinions…"[305] This statement again shocks the audience, but does so with the reality of familial death, presenting two images in quick succession that disorient the audience through their incongruous nature, provoking offense in the uneasy image of taboo subjects.

McWhorter's work on profanity illuminates the offensive nature of Stanhope's routine by clarifying societal conflicts of the taboo. As McWhorter writes, "Profanity channels our essence without always making sense."[306] The *essence* that is channeled here is the human nature of the body as evidenced through deliberate sexuality, and the decay of the body through a blunt image of death. The lack of sense here is the lack of clarity regarding how a black penis and a dead father are related in the first place. By provoking taboo, without explanation, Stanhope forces his audience to contend with deliberate offense. The offense caused by provoking taboo is an offense rooted in the uncomfortable feelings that negation of the status quo evokes in the audience. The Taboo, after all, is a representation of that which society deems uncouth to speak of, or encounter. By deliberately provoking taboo subjects, Stanhope eschews the bounds of accepted cultural speech for a blunt form of performed abject material.

Stanhope continues, "He was down to like 78 pounds, And I have a picture of me kissing him on the forehead, moments after he died. I'm all full of fucking tears. And I keep that picture in my wallet to show people who show me baby pictures."[307] He again provokes his audience here, evoking the uncomfortable imagery of a body ravaged by cancer, creating unease in his continued subversion of the status quo through the presentation of images incongruous to what is acceptable to be spoken in public. Furthermore, the image of a baby full of life seems incompatible to the death of a father. However, Stanhope explains the connection mockingly,

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[305] Ibid.

[306] John H. McWhorter, "Introduction," in *Nine Nasty Words English in the Gutter: Then, Now, and Forever* (New York, NY: Avery, 2021), pp. 1-9.

[307] *Before Turning the Gun on Himself* (Warner, 2011).

feigning false interest in a hypothetical parent's baby to then chastise these same people for their choice to have a child in the first place.

Stanhope scolds, "Oh, you had a baby. Well, this is how that ends…That's what you made... Did you consider that before you had that hubris to fucking just create people without their consent? Because that's gonna be your corpse one day, and that'll be your crying child not understanding why someone who's done nothing but be really nice to people has to be fucking raped to death with shit cancer by nature like that, and then it will be your baby's corpse with a gray death mask…"[308] Stanhope broaches two profane topics here in his discussion of the vulgar body, and death. The body as profane is represented in the image of the penis, but also represented through the image of death. The taboo subject of decay, and each individual audience member's individual demise has been broached. However, Stanhope also evokes the profane topic of God, albeit adjacently by evoking the image of death without the affirming companion of religion. As McWhorter writes, "…profanity first involved the holy, and only later the holes."[309] These two profane topics are broached by Stanhope in quick succession, shocking the audience into submission through the presentation of taboo connection. Stanhope also undermines pleasant assumptions about youth, eschewing the image of the pleasant life of a child for the more cynical image of eventual death. Stanhope's words about death are agnostic at best, eschewing any potential spirituality for cold, callous, and uncomfortable reality.

He continues bluntly, "And that's why I want the big black cock as a companion piece."[310] To this point, Stanhope has stayed away from opinion, not necessarily making a fully satiric point about society, but simply connecting satirical dots to provoke his audience into discomfort. By connecting the penis, death, and infancy, Stanhope sets a precedent for his audience to (re)evaluate previously unthought of connections. In a way, the function of the routine thus far has been to make the audience comfortable, or at least expectant, of offense. As Stanhope continues, however, the offense increases from relatively uneasy subject matter to utterances not supposed to be spoken at all. His intentions remain diffuse, but connections regarding the impositions of society, and satire's role in combatting these impositions become

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[308] Ibid.
[309] John H. McWhorter, "What is it about *Fuck?*," in *Nine Nasty Words English in the Gutter: Then, Now, and Forever* (New York, NY: Avery, 2021), pp. 46-73.
[310] *Before Turning the Gun on Himself* (Warner, 2011).

clearer as his routine moves from taboo vulgarity that is easily dismissed to profane speech unable to be forgot.

He states, "Because I use the word "faggot" Very liberally and I never attach sexuality to it. It's just a fun word of weakness, and it's happy. I love homosexuality. I promote it. You fuck and you don't leave Fucking garbage on the earth."[311] Stanhope has now broached the third form of the profane: the racial slur. As Mcwhorter writes, "…bodily matters are considered crucially less taboo than they once were, with slurs having become our true profanity."[312] McWhorter considers the slur to be an emerging third form of profanity that is dominant in current Western society. The slur has changed what is considered profane from disrespectful blasphemy and debased sexuality to a taboo rooted in discriminatory practices. One can talk about God, with little to no uproar these days, and one can evoke sexuality with only an element of shock in the frankness of the evoked subject matter, but presenting a slur without contextualizing the slur as not one's *true* speech is profane and completely unacceptable.

As Mcwhorter writes, "*Faggot* is no longer just a slur – it has become… profane. One is not to utter it, period, no questions asked."[313] Stanhope, however, goes one step further by not only presenting the F-slur uninhibited, but by evoking the most offensive of slurs in the N-word. He states, "…And I use the word *nigger* when nigger's the appropriate word, …or if I'm just quoting Mel Gibson…"[314] While blatantly provoking his audience to confront their apprehensions, Stanhope still uses a bit of caution when broaching the N-word. He doesn't shy away from using the word outright, but he does contextualize its usage by saying he will only use it when it's *"the appropriate word"*[315] or when quoting someone else. Stanhope does not clarify when he believes the word is appropriate, launching, instead, into a tirade about the power that we give to words. This tirade is like Bruce's rant about the power of the word. It is less eloquent, however, and relies on blunt rhetoric, rather than the more internally rational argument of Bruce.

Stanhope states, "It's a sound you can make with your mouth…fucking get over it. If you're offended by any word in any language, it's probably because your parents were unfit to

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[311] *Ibid.*
[312] John H. McWhorter, "Profanity and Shit," in *Nine Nasty Words English in the Gutter: Then, Now, and Forever* (New York, NY: Avery, 2021), pp. 75-104.
[313] John H. McWhorter, "The Other F-Word," in *Nine Nasty Words English in the Gutter: Then, Now, and Forever* (New York, NY: Avery, 2021), pp. 209-232.
[314] *Before Turning the Gun on Himself* (Warner, 2011).
[315] Ibid.

raise a child."[316] He directly attacks the audience here, breaching the agreed equivalencies of the audience-performer relationship for a scolding from of mockery and denouncement of apprehension. In a way, Stanhope becomes the scolding parent here, but instead of warning against the use of slurs, he advocates for the dismantling of power that gives slurs their denigrative potential in the first place. As Limon writes, "The comedian works from above his audience; … He looks down on them as upon children and lectures them."[317] Stanhope's rebuttal to the offensiveness of the language deliberately relates to his views on how censorship and the fear of certain words can create weakness in those told to not say these particular words. By evoking the parental image in content, and then taking on that image in function, Stanhope imposes his own abjection on his audience. This imposed debasement necessitates a decision in the audience; one must either accept or deny Stanhope's ideas, and no matter what the result, must also accept the consequences of his speech.

Stanhope continues, "It's not a weakness that you have naturally. When you come out of that pink, ugly hole onto this planet, You're nothing but a gooey, shrieking, wrinkled ball of weakness. That's all you are. You're just weak. You're nothing but weak, and your parents look at that, and they think: 'not weak enough.' "[318] Stanhope moves back to a more observational tone here. He is not scolding the audience directly. Their decision has now already been made. He is back in the typical satirist mode, still relying on vulgarity, but simply chastising the imposition of ideals rather than scolding the audience members themselves for their indifference. As Garrett explains, "Doug Stanhope stresses that 'offensiveness' is a mindset that weakens human beings and that we are conditioned to react negatively to certain words or phrases which he finds deplorable."[319] In the fact of death, decay, and traumatic experience, imposed weakness is not an option. We are weak enough already; anything more is overkill.

Stanhope concludes his routine by again going on the attack. He now attacks those who may be offended, and their adherence to self-imposed censorship. He uses a mocking voice to present typical arguments against using these words, evoking, yet undermining genuine concerns regarding the use of slurs by those outside of identification with the demographics discriminated

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[316] Ibid.
[317] Limon, John, "Inrage: A Lenny Bruce Joke and the Topography of Stand-Up," in *Stand-up Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), pp. 12-27.
[318] *Before Turning the Gun on Himself* (Warner, 2011).
[319] James H. Garrett, "Just Because You're Offended Doesn't Mean You're In The Right: A Perspective on Language, Comedy, and Ethics," *The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College* 5, no. 1 (2013).

against. Stanhope's response to these concerns, however, calls back to his initial request for *that* vulgar picture. Any attempts to tell him not to use the F-slur or the N-word will be negated by his possession of the picture.

He states, "Hang on, look right here. Look, do you know what black cock tastes like? Then why don't you study your roots a little bit more like I Did? And in the meantime, back off. Who is the faggot nigger now, Huh?"[320] Stanhope's theoretical possession of a picture of him performing something close to oral sex on a black penis does not excuse him from criticism or accusation. However, as Garrett explains, "Stanhope's point is drawn along the lines of the seemingly uncontrollable emotional response that certain words or linguistic sentiments bring up in listeners. He advocates almost an amnesia that would wipe out the cultural biases that certain words are imbued with."[321] This final rebuttal from Stanhope isn't to excuse his language, but to exploit people's apprehensions and expose the forced perspectives of sensible, and censorable, society. The connection between Stanhope's actions and the words that he uses isn't presented to excuse the language itself, but to show that, just as his reasoning for obtaining the picture is fraught and unhinged, so is the reason for imposing weakness on those previously unmarred by societal ideals of the profane. For Stanhope, the idea of something being taboo is an imposition of society itself, and therefore something, that in the face of life and death's atrocities must be eschewed at all costs.

But how varied are interpretations of the status quo really? And how far can be push these critical bounds? The extent to which stand-up comedy reacts to the supposed impositions of mainstream society varies dependant on the individual performing on stage, or watching from the audience. The abjectness of life (and death) itself is rallied against in this routine, and the idea of imposition itself, that any individual, group, or structure would have *any* expectations of others becomes the key point of contention. This routine is almost nihilistic in nature. The status quo that Stanhope is working against is the idea of expectation at all. As Hanscomb explains, "conveying unusual or extreme events, making outrageous and unexpected claims, and perhaps

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[320] *Before Turning the Gun on Himself* (Warner, 2011).

[321] James H. Garrett, "Just Because You're Offended Doesn't Mean You're In The Right: A Perspective on Language, Comedy, and Ethics," *The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College* 5, no. 1 (2013).

implicitly or explicitly challenging the audience to behave or think about the world differently. This is fundamental to Stanhope's act…"[322]

But does the routine work to provoke an upheaval of privilege? Probably not. Has it crossed the line into offense for offense's sake? Probably, but any moral or ethical concerns about satire are out of the bounds of this thesis. As Garrett explains, "…for the person who might not be familiar with Stanhope's work, he is a widely-recognized inflammatory comedian who is precise and purposive in the ways that he deconstructs social standards about language."[323] If anything works in this routine, it is Stanhope's engagement with his own vulnerability. This vulnerability is found in the feeling of immense pain that emerges in the loss of a loved one. It is defined by the trauma felt and then stifled by a society unwilling to hear and help solve trauma. For Stanhope, the taboo, the profane and profound point of offense is trauma itself. And the status quo he attempts to subvert is the expected stifling of that trauma in (Western) society. Worries about only words (as Stanhope believes that they are), have been questioned. To Stanhope, however, there are bigger issues to confront than mere words.

In this way, we have come full circle. Where Limon's ideas of performing abjection had presented a way into stand-up comedy, it now presents a way out. As Limon states, ""Whenever there is abjectness, there is performance; whenever abjectness is proudly performed, it is comic."[324] Whether you agree with Stanhope or not, his performance of trauma, subverted censorship, and discourse about taboo subjects performs abjection proudly. Hanscomb states, "The experiences he talks about and the views he expresses are unusual, edgy, often drawn from life's darker recesses."[325] The abjection that Stanhope evokes is the abjection of these *darker recesses*[326]. The performance becomes comic in Stanhope's complete lack of regard for his audience. By proudly performing his own debased, vulgar thoughts, Stanhope has confronted abjection directly, thereby projecting feelings of abjection onto the audience that encounters him. It is through satire in stand-up comedy, however, that one can see this proud abjection performed

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[322] Stuart Hanscomb, "Truth and Autobiography in Stand-up Comedy and the Genius of Doug Stanhope," in *Enlighten: Publications* (Kent: Enlighten – Research publications by members of the University of Glasgow, 2019), http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/234557/.
[323] Ibid.
[324] Limon, John, "Journey to the End of the Night: David Letterman with Kristeva, Céline, Scorsese," in *Stand-up Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), pp. 68-82.
[325] Stuart Hanscomb, "Truth and Autobiography in Stand-up Comedy and the Genius of Doug Stanhope," in *Enlighten: Publications* (Kent: Enlighten – Research publications by members of the University of Glasgow, 2019), http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/234557/.
[326] Ibid

most consistently in the truthful nature found in this (and all our) satirist(s)' performances. As Hanscomb states, "truthfulness is a fundamental feature of the unusual excellence of Stanhope's comedy."[327] Whether it is the audience's reaction to, or the specific content of, satiric routines, stand-up comedy performs abjection proudly. This allows the stand-up comic to work through feelings of abjection in an artform unique in its ability to therapize individual perspectives, traumas, and experiences for relief from negative *feeling* altogether. While this relief from negativity may not be permanent, stand-up comedy does provide respite, and provokes feelings of freedom inherent to satire that does not lay down.

[327] Ibid.

# Conclusion

This chapter was going to be a rumination on the state of stand-up comedy today, considering whether the artform can continue to exist in an increasingly sensitive world. However, I don't think that is necessary. While there will always be backlash against the satirist, as long as abjection and trauma exist, stand-up will be there to help those willing to work through the pain. As Todd McGowan explains, "Comedy is emancipatory when it shows that everyone is necessarily lacking and that no one is whole."[328] This thesis has encountered a plethora of satirical efforts, from the origin of the form in Bruce, to the experience of discrimination, subordination, and denigration in black and/or female stand-up to the imposition and placement of sickness unto satirists themselves. In each of these examples, however, the comics in question have all presented an image of humanity that is at once liberated, but incomplete. In this incompletion, however, there is room (literally) for change. The danger of satire is irrevocable change. But change is scary, and that is why a portion of satire offends us. To push back against powers of domination is to necessarily offend audiences that align with the status quo. Whether this alignment is deliberate or simply ignorant of the potential for change does not matter. Stand-up comedy often blurs boundaries. It disorients and confuses ideas of offense and change by presenting complex ideas within simple, and shocking content.

Garrett explains, "The mechanism of offense is a fragile emotional and cognitive switch that some comedians have mastered in order to advance their craft." Offense is something that often arises in stand-up comedy. It is a prevalent theme both in the deliberate fascination by comics to provoke audiences, and in the form itself, rooted in the presentation of that which society finds difficult to contend with. Garret continues, "Comedians are people who are well-versed in the nature of offense and who understand that there are some facets of the human experience that are vessels for negative feelings, facets that add up and contribute to a person's feeling of vulnerability." Vulnerability and abjection are similar emotions. They both alienate those afflicted by feeling. In stand-up comedy, however, abjection and vulnerability are performed, allowing those experiencing these emotions to present them uninhibited, honest, and

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[328] *A Theory of Comedy*, *YouTube* (Todd McGowan), accessed March 30, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k65yjyMYQBY&list=PLX5fvjtM4m92D5-h6Botez1cOnTw4zDsK&index=5.

outside the bounds of judgement. In this presentation, however, comes offense in discomfort caused by these frankly presented emotions.

Zupancic clarifies, "…blasphemy and possible offense, precisely crossing the line, are almost constitutive elements of comedy…Not simply because comedy favors transgression, but because it essentially works and plays with what is on the other side."[329] What is on the other side is the status quo, that which we inherently accept because we are indoctrinated to do so. Stand-up comedy, however, works against indoctrinations, looking for potential difference through the interrogation of comfortable sameness. In performed vulnerability and abjection, sameness is replaced by the different and the distinct. This difference and distinction offend sensibilities of convention. In *Looking for Lenny*, Hugh Hefner states that, "Free Speech requires eternal vigilance."[330] This vigilance, however, isn't a vigilance that allows everyone to say whatever harmful ramblings that they please. It is a vigilance, rather, that allows those willing and able to present personal feeling the ability to do so without suppression. To be frank is to be open to change because frankness is not an ideal of sensible society.

A profound contemporary example of this search for freedom (of expression) is found in Volodymyr Zelensky, a comedian turned world leader fighting against subordination in a vicious war of attrition. As Gopnik explains, "…Watching Zelensky now…one thinks, this is what a comedian looks like in power. In American terms, it would not be hard to imagine the late George Carlin or Richard Pryor…in the same kind of role, familiarly self-satirizing, suddenly sober and serious."[331] He continues, "Comedy and democratic courage are the same thing seen at different moments, and what they have in common is the will to defy authority in the cause of humanity…to assert the desire of people, ridiculous and animal and imperfect as we are, to live as we choose."[332] To be frank, satire and stand-up comedy has a responsibility to people, to ideas, and to things usually held in, back, and behind.

It is that fact that provides the potential for irrevocable change.

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[329] *Alenka Zupančič: Evening Lecture - "Stand Up for Comedy" 2019-06-16*, *YouTube* (European Graduate School Video Lectures, 2019), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5DKsuU5T0qs&list=PLX5fvjtM4m92D5-h6Botez1cOnTw4zDsK&index=7, 9:29-9:54.

[330] *Looking For Lenny* (Gravitas Ventures, 2011), https://tubitv.com/movies/15629/looking-for-lenny, 54:16-54:20.

[331] Adam Gopnik, "Volodymyr Zelensky's Comedic Courage," newyorker.com (The New Yorker, March 13, 2022), https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/volodymyr-zelenskys-comedic-courage?utm_source=onsite-share&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=onsite-share&utm_brand=the-new-yorker.

[332] Ibid.

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