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The Filth and the Filthier: Plumbing the Depths of Controversial Stand-up Comedy

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Sean Springer

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Abstract of the Dissertation

The Filth and the Filthier: Plumbing the Depths of Controversial Stand-up Comedy

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This dissertation is a genealogy of the filthy stand-up comedian in the United States. Using case studies of five so-called filthy stand-up comedians, each chapter looks at how the filthy label has functioned as a floating signifier that is applied to certain comedians in ways that conceal what is actually transgressive about their performances. The first chapter compares Lenny Bruce's legacy to Richard Pryor's, arguing that they have misleadingly become equated as two comedians who apparently transcended their filthy words. In actual fact, white critics saw Bruce as a filthy Other because he aligned himself with Jewish and African-American cultures. In contrast, white critics excused Pryor's filthiness on the grounds that it was "authentically" "urban" or black. The subsequent erasure of their differing receptions led to their shared status as stand-up comedy's supreme practitioners, against whom all future filthy comedians would be judged. One such future comedian is chapter two's subject, Andrew "Dice" Clay, who critics claimed failed as a comedian because he never transcended his filth. What critics have ignored is that Clay operated within the subgenre of put-on comedy. Given that Clay's character intentionally revealed in his boorishness, critics concluded that Clay had failed as an artist and that his fans were too wretched to care. Clay and his fans were filthy, they implied, because they were "white trash," i.e. white and working-class. While Clay's filthiness complemented his gender role, the same cannot be said for the third chapter's subjects, Amy Schumer and Sommore, both of whom manage to appear feminine as they use four-letter words, racial epithets, sexual imagery, and scatological references in their acts. Schumer earns the audience's approval to tell filthy jokes because they recognize her character as an ironic version of the Girl Gone Wild archetype of popular culture. Unlike Schumer, who with a wink and a nod to the mostly white audience convinces them that she is not as hypersexual as she pretends to be, Sommore performs before mostly black audiences, who understand that black women's sexuality is often erased by, or demeaned within, popular culture. Throughout her performances, Sommore stresses her individuality so as to discourage anyone from seeing her filthy behavior as confirmation of black stereotypes.

Dedication Page

In memory of Patrick Springer (1975-2003)

Frontispiece



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Introduction

When, in 1963, Michel Foucault wrote his *Hommage à Georges Bataille* (later translated as “A Preface to Transgression”), he did not have the comedian Carrot Top in mind. In this text, Foucault is concerned with our inability to acknowledge “the limits of our reason.”¹ But while he makes no mention of comedic transgression, focusing instead on how Bataille’s representations of sexual transgression helped readers experience the limits of their own existence, Foucault’s views nevertheless can be applied to laughter and Bataille’s writings on it. Beyond that, his views apply to debates about the ethical rules that govern American stand-up comedians. Transgression, writes Foucault, “is both so pure and so complicated, it must be detached from its questionable association to ethics if we want to understand it and to begin thinking from it and in the space it denotes” (74). This dissertation detaches purportedly filthy stand-up comedians from their associations with ethics in order to understand why the term “filth,” a certain type of transgressiveness, continues to be bandied about as a way to categorize what a stand-up comedian does on stage. Instead of looking at whether comedians should or should not tell filthy jokes on stage, I look instead at why certain audience members opt to categorize a comedian’s joke as “filthy” in the first place. What does “filth” do as a label? I explore this question by looking at the cases of five comedians, each of whom has worn the label at various points over the course of their career: Lenny Bruce (1925-1966), Richard Pryor (1940-2005), Andrew “Dice” Clay (b. 1958), Sommore (b. 1966), and Amy Schumer (b. 1981). More than fifty years since Lenny Bruce was arrested for his alleged filth, the term’s enduring currency is puzzling, not least because no one seems to know exactly what it means.

The concept of the filthy stand-up comedian is rooted in a long history of people wagging their fingers at comedic transgressions. Aristotle pooh-poohed those “common buffoons who will do anything to raise a laugh, and care more about this than about speaking decently and not offending those who are the butt of their jokes.”² Quintilian didn’t appreciate Cicero’s fondness for “joking in the Forum.”³ And while Thomas Aquinas saw good things in the use of “[humorous] words and deeds wherein nothing further is sought than the soul’s delight,” he drew the line at finding pleasure “in indecent or injurious deeds or words.”⁴ Protofeminist writer Christine de Pizan thumbed her nose at *Roman de la rose*, a satirical poem from the later Middle Ages, because it seemed “a mere handbook for lechers.”⁵ As for Voltaire, his satire of Joan of

¹ Michel Foucault, “A Preface to Transgression,” in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (London: Tavistock, 1972), 76.

² Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Robert Crisp (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000), 78.

³ Salvatore Attardo, *Linguistic Theories of Humor*, Vol. 1 of *Humor Research* (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1994), 30.

⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (Raleigh, NC: Hayes Barton Press, 2006), 3417.

Arc didn't go over well with Schiller, who retaliated with a poem of his own. "Mocking the noble image of humanity," it began,

Derision dragged you through deep mire,
Wit's eternally at war with beauty,
Neither to the angelic nor to the godly does it aspire
Seeking to rob the heart of its wealth,
It combats dreams and offends belief itself."⁶

Schiller not only criticized a particular instance of humor, but went so far as to dismiss anyone who tells a joke or two (and made himself look like a bit of a spoil sport).

Debates over where to draw the line are still a good conversation starter, both in scholarship and in mainstream journalism.⁷ In June 2011, after a Facebook user's critique of Tracy Morgan's stand-up show had gone viral, a headline at *Time.com* read, "Tracy Morgan's Anti-Gay Rant Upsets Tina Fey, Chris Rock, Much of Wider World."⁸ Another at *Today.com*: "Should Tracy Morgan Really Have to Apologize? After Anti-gay Tirade, Comic Made Jokes About Mentally and Physically Challenged."⁹ *Salon.com* criticized comedian Louis C.K. for his defense of Morgan, claiming that he placed "the blame for homophobic comments on the people offended by them."¹⁰ Using Twitter, C.K. had written, "Tracey [sic] Morgan said something wrong, evil, cruel, ignorant, and hilarious. He was on a comedy stage, not at a pulpit." Like most discussions about stand-up comedy, this one stalled partly because the sides disagreed over what stand-up comedy is. If it is public speaking, then Morgan was endorsing homophobia; if theatre, then Morgan was merely performing a character study. From the former point of view, the stand-up comedian is a moral agent who affects the world in some way. The latter point of view refuses to call the stand-up a moral agent, citing a double standard that privileges actors; if an

⁵ Larry D. Benson, "The Romaunt of the Rose," in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson (Oxford: Oxford UP), 686.

⁶ Quoted in Nora M. Heimann, *Joan of Arc in French Art and Culture (1700-1855): From Satire to Sanctity* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005), 52.

⁷ Berys Nigel Gaut, "Just Joking: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Humor," *Philosophy and Literature* 22, no. 1 (April 1998): 51-68; Memo Bergmann, "How Many Feminists Does It Take To Make A Joke? Sexist Humor and What's Wrong With It," *Hypatia* 1, no. 1 (March 1986): 63-82; John Morreall, *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell), 2009.

⁸ Glen Levy, "Tracy Morgan's Anti-Gay Rant Upsets Tina Fey, Chris Rock, Much of Wider World," *Time.com*, June 11, 2011, <http://newsfeed.time.com/2011/06/13/tracy-morgans-anti-gay-rant-upsets-tina-fey-chris-rock-much-of-wider-world/>

⁹ "Should Tracy Morgan Really Have to Apologize? After Anti-gay Tirade, Comic Made Jokes About Mentally and Physically Challenged," *Today*, June 29, 2011, http://www.today.com/id/43578594/ns/today-today_entertainment/t/should-tracy-morgan-really-have-apologize/

¹⁰ Drew Grant, "Why Louis C.K. is wrong to defend Tracy Morgan," *Salon*, June 17, 2011, http://www.salon.com/2011/06/17/louis_c_k_defending_tracy_morgan/

actor can get away with playing a homophobic character in a movie, should not a stand-up comedian be permitted to play a homophobic character in his act? The differing attitudes are understandable given that a stand-up comedian's performance is designed to obscure the difference between "performed and authentic persona."¹¹ Coming on-stage as "themselves," stand-ups blur the line between performer and character; and it is this blurring, as Judith Lee Yaross observes, that brings the audience to laugh. In other words, the idea of the stand-up comedian having an authentic persona conflicts with the stand-up's tendency to keep his or her off-stage persona in doubt. Stand-ups and moralists speak in different registers, which is arguably why comedians such as Louis C.K. get so defensive whenever anyone subjects their performances to an ethical analysis. While these ethical analyses certainly have their place, they tend to obscure one of stand-up's functions, which is to mock the very pretense of having an authentic persona.

The audience's inability to know the comedian is, arguably, one of the sources of their laughter. As Bataille puts it in a lecture delivered in 1953, "That which is laughable may simply be *the unknowable*. . . . Within us and in the world, something is revealed that was not given in knowledge, and whose site is definable only as unattainable by knowledge. It is, I believe, at this that we laugh. And, it must at once be said, in theorizing laughter, that this is what ultimately illuminates us; this is what fills us with joy."¹² Although Bataille does not take a psychoanalytic approach, his theory does agree in some ways with Freud's work on jokes. The "joy" of laughter, as Freud's description of "the comic" explains, stems from the conservation of psychic energy customarily expended toward the struggle to know the essence of some *one* or some *thing*.¹³ If stand-up comedians (filthy or otherwise) are funny because they are unknowable, then to guess at their intentions is to miss the entire point of a stand-up comedy show. Instead of saying, "Here's what so-and-so is gunning for with his comedy," I look to describe how the culturally recognized idea of a filthy stand-up comedian emerges out of both the comedian's performances and statements about the performances. Statements pertaining to the comedian comprise a "discursive formation," which is discoverable only "if one can show how any particular object of discourse finds in it its place and law of emergence; if one can show that it may give birth simultaneously or successively to mutually exclusive objects."¹⁴ The particular object in this case is an idea that comes up in the lead of a review published in the *New York Post* in 1960. The critic wrote, "It's an understatement to say that Lenny Bruce, currently at the Blue Angel[,] is a controversial comic. The slim, dapper monologist evokes adjectives that some reviewers haven't had cause to use in a long time. Rambling, offensive, crude—these are some that come to mind

¹¹ Judith Lee Yaross, "Mark Twain as a Stand-up Comedian," *Mark Twain Annual* 4, no. 1 (September 2006), 7.

¹² Georges Bataille, "Un-Knowing: Laughter and Tears," trans. Annette Michelson, *October* 36 (Spring 1986): 90-1.

¹³ Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1990), 273.

¹⁴ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 1969, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (London: Tavistock, 1972), 49.

at the moment. Others may occur later.”¹⁵ The critic manages to find other adjectives—“shocking, downright embarrassing”—and even some nouns—“the vile, the ugly, the perverted” and “a cesspool of talent”—all of which point to the idea of the filthy stand-up comedian. The idea is worth exploring, I contend, partly because it has served and continues to serve as justification for discrimination. Although it might seem that filthy comedians deserve the label on account of their filthy language, their alleged filthiness derives in truth from something else altogether. The comedian’s filthiness comes as much from the critics as from them.

The current body of scholarship on stand-up comedy does not consider the extent to which discursive systems have given rise to the problematic notion of a filthy stand-up comedian, a figure who is implicitly inferior to a clean comedian. Scholars have explored stand-up’s genre conventions,¹⁶ its debt to minstrelsy and vaudeville,¹⁷ the rise of irreverent or so-called “sick” comedians in the 1950s,¹⁸ its institutionalization in the 1970s and ’80s,¹⁹ and how

¹⁵ Martin Burden, "Going Out Tonight?," *New York Post*, March 16, 1990, 71.

¹⁶ Philip Auslander, “‘Comedy About the Failure of Comedy’: Stand-up Comedy and Postmodernism,” *Critical Theory and Performance*, eds. Janelle G. Reinelt and Joseph R. Roach (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 196-207; Ian Brodie, “Stand-up Comedy as a Genre of Intimacy,” *Ethnologies* 30, no. 2 (2008): 153-180; Matthew Daube, “Laughter in Revolt: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity in the Construction of Stand-up Comedy,” Ph.D. diss., Stanford University, 2010; Andrea Greenbaum, “Stand-up Comedy as Rhetorical Argument: An Investigation of Comic Culture,” *Humor - International Journal of Humor Research* 12, no. 1 (1999): 33–46; Stephanie Koziski, “The Stand-up Comedian as Anthropologist: Intentional Culture Critic,” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 18, no. 2 (Fall 1984): 57-76; John Limon, *Stand-up Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000); David Marc, *Comic Visions: Television Comedy and American Culture*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1997); Tracy Wuster, “Comedy Jokes: Steve Martin and the Limits of Stand-Up Comedy,” *Studies in American Humor* 14 (2006), 23-45.

¹⁷ Stephanie Koziski Olson, “Standup Comedy,” *Humor in America*, ed. Lawrence Mintz (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1988), 109-136; Eddie Tafoya, *The Legacy of the Wisecrack: Stand-up Comedy as the Great American Literary Form* (Boca Raton, FL: BrownWalker Press, 2009).

¹⁸ Tony Hendra, *Going Too Far* (New York: Doubleday, 1987), 1-174.; Stephen E. Kercher, *Revel with a Cause: Liberal Satire in Postwar America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006); Gerald Nachman, *Seriously Funny: The Rebel Comedians of the 1950s and 1960s* (New York: Pantheon, 2003).

¹⁹ Phil Berger, *The Last Laugh: The World of Stand-up Comics* (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2000); Betsy Borns, *Comic Lives: Inside the World of American Stand-up Comedy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987); William Knoedelseder, *I'm Dying Up Here: Heartbreak and High Times in Stand-up Comedy's Golden Era* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2009); Richard Zoglin, *Comedy at the Edge: How Stand-up in the 1970s Changed America* (New York: Bloomsbury USA, 2008).

Jewish Americans,²⁰ African Americans,²¹ women,²² and LGBT performers have used stand-up as a form of resistance.²³

²⁰ Arthur Asa Berger, *Jewish Jesters: A Study in American Popular Comedy* (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2001); Lawrence J. Epstein, *The Haunted Smile: The Story of Jewish Comedians in America* (New York: Public Affairs, 2002); Anthony Lewis, "The Jew in Stand-Up Comedy," in *From Hester Street to Hollywood: The Jewish-American Stage and Screen*, ed. Sarah Blanche Cohen (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1983), 58-70.

²¹ Bambi Haggins, *Laughing Mad: The Black Comic Persona in Post-Soul America* (New Brunswick, NJ, 2007): Rutgers University Press; Daryl Littleton, *Black Comedians on Black Comedy* (New York: Applause Theatre & Cinema Books, 2006); Eddie M. Tafoya, *Icons of African American Comedy: A Joke of a Different Color* (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood, 2011); Mel Watkins, *On the Real Side: Laughing, Lying, and Signifying—The Underground Tradition of African-American Humor That Transformed American Culture, from Slavery to Richard Pryor* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994).

²² Philip Auslander, "'Brought to You by Fem-Rage': Stand-up Comedy and the Politics of Gender," in *Acting Out Feminist Performances*, eds. Lynda Hart and Peggy Phelan (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 315-336; Zita Dresner, "Whoopi Goldberg and Lily Tomlin: Black and White Women's Humor," in *Women's Comic Visions*, ed. June Sochen (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991), 179-92; Allison Fraiberg, "Between the Laughter: Bridging Feminist Studies through Women's Stand-up Comedy," in *Look Who's Laughing: Gender and Comedy*, ed. Gail Finney (Langhorne, PA: Gordon and Breach, 1994), 315-334; Joanne R. Gilbert, *Performing Marginality: Humor, Gender, and Cultural Critique* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2004); Andrea Greenbaum, "Women's Comic Voices: The Art and Craft of Female Humor," *American Studies* 38, no. 1 (Spring 1997): 117-138; Susan Horowitz, *Queens of Comedy: Lucille Ball, Phyllis Diller, Carol Burnett, Joan Rivers, and the New Generation of Funny Women* (New York: Routledge, 1997); Suzanne Lavin, *Women and Comedy in Solo Performance: Phyllis Diller, Lily Tomlin, and Roseanne* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Lara Elizabeth Starceвич, "Women Stand-up Comics, Performance Communities, and Social Change," Ph.D. diss., University of Colorado, 2001.

²³ Colleen Coughlin, "Lezbe Friends, U-hauls and Baubo: A Study of Lesbian Stand-up Comedy," Ph.D. diss., Bowling Green State University, 2004; Maria Esposito, "The Laugh that Dare Not Speak Its Name," *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 2, nos. 2-3 (1998): 157-163; Rachel C. Lee, "'Where's My Parade?': Margaret Cho and the Asian American Body in Space," *TDR* 48, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 108-132; Susan Pelle, "The 'Grotesque' Pussy: 'Transformational Shame' in Margaret Cho's Stand-up Performances," *Text & Performance Quarterly* 30, no. 1 (January 2010): 21-37; Linda Pershing, "There's a Joker in the Menstrual Hut: A Performance Analysis of Comedian Kate Clinton," in *Women's Comic Visions*, ed. June Sochen, Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1991, 193-236; Helene Shugart, "Performing Ambiguity: The Passing of Ellen DeGeneres," *Text & Performance Quarterly* 23, no. 1 (January 2003): 30-54; Frances Williams, "Suits and Sequins: Lesbian Comedians in Britain and the US in the 1990s," in *Because I Tell a Joke or Two: Comedy, Politics, and Social Difference*, ed. by Stephen Wagg, 144-162, London: Routledge, 1998.

Most of these works fall under “culturalism,” which Stuart Hall defines as one of the two main paradigms of cultural studies, the other being structuralism. Culturalism “defines ‘culture’ as both the meanings and values which arise amongst distinctive social groups and classes, on the basis of their given historical conditions and relationships, through which they ‘handle’ and respond to the conditions of existence; and as the lived traditions and practices through which those ‘understandings’ are expressed and in which they are embodied.”²⁴ Opposed to culturalism, which focuses on how individuals and social groups struggle with their environments, is structuralism, which puts “stress on ‘determinate conditions’,”²⁵ especially those conditions (e.g. ideological, linguistic, psychoanalytic, economic) that influence human behaviour. A culturalist approach assumes that stand-ups are moral agents whose conscious reflection on their experiences leads to transgressive comedic performances, whereas a structuralist approach assumes that a comedian’s performance abides by underlying schematics of power. Hall also notes the influence of the Foucauldian paradigm, which “has had an exceedingly positive effect: above all because in suspending the nearly insoluble problems of determination Foucault has made possible a welcome return to the concrete analysis of particular ideological and discursive formations, and the sites of their elaboration.”²⁶ Genealogical analysis, Foucault writes, fends off any “attempt to capture the exact essence of things, their purest possibilities, and their carefully protected identities.” Instead, it “finds that there is ‘something altogether different’ behind things: not a timeless and essential secret, but the secret that they have no essence or that their essence was fabricated in a piecemeal fashion from alien forms.”²⁷ Foucault offers a suitable method for analyzing stand-up comedians, to whom scholars tend to assign one of two subjectivities: the filthy and the heroic comic.²⁸ If ever there was an artist committed to genealogy, it is the stand-up comedian, who, by going onstage as “himself” or “herself” implies that his or her essential self is a mere performance—that “they have no essence.” A genealogical analysis of the filthy stand-up comedian will, I hope, open up scholarship that analyzes stand-up comedians in the same way they present themselves: as constructions.

Although the concept of the immoral comedian goes back to Plato, the concept of the stand-up comedian was formed as recently as the 1950s in America. *Billboard* magazine began using the term as early as its April 8, 1950 issue when it noted that television sponsor Gulf Oil “has a prejudice against employing stand-up comedians as emcees.”²⁹ The term entered the

²⁴ Stuart Hall, “Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms,” in *Media, Culture & Society: A Critical Reader*, ed. Richard Collins et al. (London: Sage Publications, 1986), 38.

²⁵ Hall, “Two Paradigms,” 42.

²⁶ Hall, “Two Paradigms,” 47.

²⁷ Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” in *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, ed. and trans. James D. Faubion (New York: New, 1998), 371.

²⁸ In fact, debates about stand-up comedians often center on whether a comedian is filthy or heroic. Initially deemed filthy, the three founding figures, Bruce, Pryor, and George Carlin, are now roundly hailed as heroic champions of free speech.

²⁹ “Gulf Rejects CBS Pitch for Account,” *Billboard*, April 8, 1950.

popular lexicon in the late-1950s when national publications such as *Time* began associating it with Mort Sahl, Dick Gregory, Lenny Bruce, and other so-called “sick comics.” Around the same time, discourses about specifically filthy stand-up comedians began circulating regularly within mass culture—with Bruce being held up as the prime example.

I am not interested in describing stand-up comedy’s essence, but rather in explaining why certain stand-up comedians such as Bruce become known as filthy. As such, this dissertation differs in scope from *Stand-up Comedy in Theory, or Abjection in America*, in which John Limon explores the essence of stand-up. The book’s six chapters, each of which looks at one or two sets of performances, cover a wide range of styles and eras. The first three are all from the early-1960s: the hipster moralizing of Lenny Bruce; the sketch comedy of Mel Brooks and Carl Reiner; and the improv comedy of Mike Nichols and Elaine May. The last three are David Letterman’s talk-show wisecracking from the 1980s and ’90s; Richard Pryor’s character studies from the 1970s; and finally, from the 1990s, Ellen DeGeneres’ stories about her befuddled ways and Paula Poundstone’s crowd work (i.e. generating laughs by conversing with a live audience). According to Limon, what the comedians, and in fact all American stand-up comedians, have in common is their portrayal of abjection. By abjection, he means, first, “what everybody means by it: abasement, groveling prostration. Second, I mean by it what Julia Kristeva means: a psychic worrying of those aspects of oneself that one cannot be rid of, that seem, but are not quite, alienable—for example, blood, urine, feces, nails, and the corpse.”³⁰ Limon sees the comedians revealing through their performances a “psychic worrying” toward things that seem both part of and alien to themselves. My interest is not so much in what the comedians worry about; instead, I wonder why certain comedians elicit a worrying in those critics who respond by labeling the comedian “filthy.” My focus is on the cultural anxieties these performances produce and why they manifest themselves in the symptom of a filthy label.

The term filth is hard to define, partly because it is metaphorical. When a critic calls a comedian filthy, the critic does not mean that the comedian is literally covered in mud. He means that the comedian has told a joke in poor taste. This conception of filth as a function of taste comes from Pierre Bourdieu, who sees in “every struggle over art [. . .] the imposition of an art of living, that is, the transmutation of an arbitrary way of living into the legitimate way of life which casts every other way of living into arbitrariness.”³¹ Although critics will attribute filth to either the comedian’s material (“his jokes were filthy”) or the comedian himself (“he is a filthy comic”), what they find objectionable is neither the comedian nor the material. Filth is an event in which “an arbitrary way of living” collides with the critic’s “legitimate way of life.” The critic is not offended by the comedian’s taste itself, but rather by the comedian’s decision to bring his taste into the critic’s social sphere. The critic has become symbolically associated with the comedian’s Otherness that the critic denies in himself; this denial allows the critic to believe he belongs to a superior class that has transcended the comedian’s Otherness. By calling the comedian filthy, the critic draws attention away from what actually bothers him: his symbolic descent into an inferior class.

The dissertation’s main thesis is that the filthy label is a floating signifier that conceals what is actually transgressive about the performances of certain comedians. A corollary of this

³⁰ Limon, *Stand-up Comedy in Theory*, 4.

³¹ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1984), 57.

thesis is that the term erases significant differences between comedians and advances the myth that filthy comedians become known as filthy because their performances teem with four-letter words, racial epithets, sexual imagery, and scatological references. While their performances do share these traits, it is never the mere utterance of offensive words that provokes hostile reactions. What provokes the hostility is the comedians' implication that a certain social group—predominately white, middle-class Americans—are not as wholesome and innocent as hegemonic discourses would have us believe. This understanding of filth's currency is in keeping with the definition William A. Cohen provides in the introduction to the edited collection *Filth: Dirt, Disgust, and Modern Life*. “In a general sense,” he writes,

filth is a term of condemnation, which instantly repudiates a threatening thing, person, or idea by ascribing alterity to it. Ordinarily, that which is filthy is so fundamentally alien that it must be rejected; labeling something filthy is a viscerally powerful means of excluding it. Objects are filthy—polluting, infectious, fearful—the nearer they approach the ultimate repositories of decay and death, feces and corpses. People are denounced as filthy when they are felt to be unassimilably other, whether because perceived attributes of their identities repulse the onlooker or because physical aspects of their bodies (appearance, odor, decrepitude) do.³²

A speaker uses the term, Cohen adds, because it helps to “establish distinctions—‘That is not me.’”³³ The alleged alterity of a filthy Other establishes a reassuring distinction between the speaker's purportedly clean self and that which the speaker finds so offensive.

Comedic filthiness relates to what Freud calls tendentious jokes—jokes that serve an aim apart from the primary aim of creating amusement. Freud sees tendentious jokes having either a “hostile” or an “obscene” aim: hostile jokes allow one to attack one's enemies whereas obscene jokes allow one to sexualize the body. Unlike innocent jokes, tendentious jokes “run the risk of meeting with people who do not want to listen to them.”³⁴ Although Freud does not specify who these “people” are, he suggests that the more refined one is, the more likely one will object to a tendentious joke. Among “the common people,” writes Freud, a smutty joke is “universally popular,” but “when we rise to a society of a more refined education,” the smutty joke must be told in a form that allows the listener to believe he is laughing merely at the joke's form—not at the smuttiness.³⁵ The tendentious joke's dual sources of pleasure make this belief possible. While innocent jokes produce pleasure based on the joke-teller's technique, tendentious jokes produce pleasure based on technique as well as the fulfillment of a repressed desire. The listener wants to believe he is laughing only at the joke's form, but as Freud argues, it is actually impossible to pinpoint the source of our pleasure—is it from the technique, from the desire, or both?

³² William A. Cohen, “Introduction,” in *Filth: Dirt, Disgust, and Modern Life*, ed. William A. Cohen and Ryan Johnson, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005, xi.

³³ Cohen, “Introduction,” xii.

³⁴ Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989), 90.

³⁵ Freud, *Jokes*, 100.

For the purposes of this dissertation, a filthy stand-up comedian is one whose jokes do not sufficiently allow certain listeners to believe that the joke's pleasure derives from its form. This definition excludes such comedians as George Carlin and Louis C.K., both of whom are cerebral comedians who justify their jokes' hostile pleasure by couching them within insightful commentary. For example, when C.K. says that he hates hearing someone say "the n-word," he gives audience members the opportunity to hear the words "nigger," "cunt," and "faggot":

Literally, whenever a white lady on CNN with nice hair says "the n-word," that's just white people getting away with saying nigger. That's all that is. They found a way to say nigger. It's bullshit, 'cause when you say "the n-word," you put the word "nigger" in the listener's head. That's what saying a word is. You say "the n-word," and I go, "You're making me say it in my head. Why don't you fucking say it instead and take responsibility for the shitty words you want to say? Just say it. Don't hide behind the first letter like a faggot. Just say 'nigger,' you stupid cunt."³⁶

In *George Carlin: Again!*, Carlin uses the same technique when he ridicules people's fear to say "the dirty words." After observing that "we have more ways to describe the dirty words than we have actual dirty words," he rhymes off a lengthy list of meta-dirty words: "bad, dirty, filthy, foul, vile, vulgar, coarse, in poor taste, unseemly, street talk, gutter talk, locker room language, barracks talk, bawdy, naughty, saucy, raunchy, rude, crude, lewd, lascivious, indecent, profane, obscene, blue, off-color, risqué, suggestive, cursing, cussing, swearing."³⁷ When it comes to actual dirty words, he says, "All I could think of was shit, piss, fuck, cunt, cocksucker, motherfucker, and tits!" For both Carlin and C.K., the person who objects to the word's utterance—not the person who likes hearing the word—has a problem. Throughout their careers, Carlin and C.K. have used this sort of bait-and-switch routine—where the censor, not themselves, is the real transgressor—to evade the filthy label.

Don Rickles, who jokes about "needing the blacks so we can have cotton in the drugstore,"³⁸ has largely escaped the filthy label as well. Even though his repertoire of racist and ethnic jokes is clearly tendentious, he has the reputation of "an equal-opportunity offender [. . .] deploying stereotype to demonstrate that we are all different and all equal."³⁹ Rickles' Jewishness, which he foregrounds throughout his act ("Don't call me sir [. . .] King Jew will do fine," he says to an audience member),⁴⁰ may also play a part in his innocent reputation. As Robert C. Allen observes in his study of American burlesque, so long as an alleged transgression appears to be a function of the Other, it will not offend "WASP, bourgeois culture."⁴¹ In other

³⁶ Louis C.K., *Chewed Up*, directed by Louis C.K. and Shannon Hartman (Los Angeles, CA: Showtime, 2008).

³⁷ George Carlin, *George Carlin: Again!*, directed by Marty Callner (New York, NY: HBO, 1978).

³⁸ Qtd. in Zoë Heller, "Don't Call Me Sir," *The New Yorker*, August 2, 2004, 33.

³⁹ Heller, "Sir," 33.

⁴⁰ Heller, "Sir," 33.

words, if the comedian's filthy jokes seem to derive from the comedian's supposed filthy Otherness, then the audience will not take their jokes as a stain on WASP, bourgeois culture. For this reason, arguably, comedians such as Redd Foxx, Joan Rivers, Moms Mabley, and Whoopi Goldberg do not provoke the hysteria that, as we shall see, accompanied Lenny Bruce's and Andrew "Dice" Clay's rises to stardom. In different ways, these two comedians threatened the alleged purity of WASP, bourgeois culture.

The concept of filth does not have a singular meaning, however. In certain cases, in fact, it establishes one's distinction as a successful stand-up comedian. This dissertation's first chapter examines Bruce's and Pryor's legacies as "The Two Greatest Stand-up Comedians of All Time" and concludes that their reputations derive in part from their perceived abilities to have transcended their filthiness. Based on a reading of their press coverage, it seems that what critics initially found filthy was the way they foregrounded their social positions as a Jewish man and an African-American man from the working classes. Moreover, despite this labeling, their fans have since heralded Bruce and Pryor as artists who were not really filthy—they were actually enlightened beings who taught audiences valuable lessons about how social inequality works. My problem with this kind of uncritical appraisal and reappraisal is that it frames their struggles as individual achievements, not as reminders of the legacy of racist and classist domination. Ironically, as I argue in chapter one, the two comics, who used their performances to critique inequality, are now celebrated as proof of an America where anyone can make it.

By hailing Bruce and Pryor in this way, critics entangled their legacies to the point where they began to dub Pryor "a black Lenny Bruce." What this equation conceals is the different circumstances under which each performer attained filthy status. White critics saw Bruce as a filthy Other because he aligned himself with Jewish and African-American cultures. Performing at a time when Jews were becoming seen as white within the cultural imaginary, Bruce presented himself to white audiences as a reflection of their own grotesqueness. He came on stage as a white man, but would then trouble whiteness by calling attention to his status as a Jew in an anti-Semitic culture. Holding himself up as proof that the notion of whiteness as equal to pureness was a myth, Bruce asked the audience to see him as a white, dirty Jew. By littering his routines with Yiddish, profanity, and jazz argot, skits mocking Christianity, and moral points of view, he appeared, on one hand, white, intelligent, and middle-class and, on the other hand, Jewish, profane, African-American, and lower-class. He represented what Peter Stallybrass and Allon White call "the grotesque as a boundary phenomenon of hybridization or inmixing, in which self and other become enmeshed in an inclusive, heterogeneous, dangerously unstable zone."⁴² White audiences also saw Pryor as grotesque; however, not in the same way. Pryor was what Stallybrass and White call "the grotesque as the 'Other' of the defining group or self."⁴³ Able to see Pryor as someone alien to themselves, they excused his filthiness on the grounds that it was authentically "urban" or black. Disapproval came mostly from black critics who felt that Pryor perpetuated black stereotypes, whereas white critics lauded Pryor for allowing them to see

⁴¹ Robert C. Allen, *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 272.

⁴² Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), 193.

⁴³ Stallybrass and White, *Politics and Poetics*, 193.

themselves as citizens of a post-racial world where they had the same experiences black audiences did.

The redefinition of the term “filthy” by mainstream critics has helped to frame stand-up comedy as an art form whose esteemed practitioners—notably, Bruce and Pryor—are to be distinguished from the *truly* filthy ones such as the subject of chapter two, Andrew “Dice” Clay. When “The Dice Man” began selling out arenas in 1989, more than a few critics warned not to make comparisons to Bruce and Pryor. All three employed filthy signifiers (e.g. profanity, sexual and scatological imagery), but apparently, while Bruce and Pryor had managed to transcend their filth and to educate audiences, Clay reveled in his own and encouraged audiences to indulge their basest urges. Such notions of stand-up comedy as an art form that requires the performer to transcend his filth concealed the source of critics’ grievances with Clay. Their accusations that Clay perpetuated misogyny, racism, and homophobia were a cover, I argue, for what they really reviled: Clay’s perceived threat to stand-up comedy’s ascendant cultural status. Most reviews focused largely on the social position of Clay’s audiences, noting that they were largely white and working class. Clay was the filthy Other because he represented what more than one critic termed “white trash.” Like Bruce, Clay troubled whiteness, but unlike Bruce, Clay could not be redeemed as an intellectual, a prophet, and a martyr for free speech.

I read Clay against accusations that he was “no Lenny Bruce,” because they mistakenly imply that stand-up comedy is a genre one can master by going on stage and transcending one’s filth—i.e. by appearing to disavow those traits associated with the Other. In reality, while Bruce and Pryor were intellectual satirists, Clay worked within a subgenre known as put-on comedy. Clay put the audience on by forcing them to wonder just who this idiot was. Was the performer as much of a bozo as his stage character? Was he aware that his stage character was a horrible person? I show that when critics based their reviews on live performances, they appreciated Clay for his put-on comedy. Press coverage turned negative once Clay became known primarily by his mediated performances via cable television. Drawing on Peggy Phelan’s theory of live performance’s ontological qualities, I argue that Clay’s put-on comedy did not adequately transfer to film, television, and compact disc. As a result, without the appropriate frame through which to understand Clay’s comedy, critics began to interpret Clay according to the same standards by which they had come to judge Bruce and Pryor—as comedians who worked within a genre that required them to transcend their filth. Given that Clay’s character reveled in his boorishness, critics concluded that Clay had failed as an artist and that his fans were too wretched to care.

Although Bruce, Pryor, and Clay were all explicitly called filthy, their masculinity was never in question. In fact, by exploring their filthiness unflinchingly, they seemed to prove their mettle. But when it comes to women stand-up comedians, critics have historically been loathe to call them filthy, perhaps because the very labeling would challenge the coding of femininity as timid, clean, and coy. Things have changed over the past decade, however, with dozens of women comedians now being marketed nationally as filthy stand-up comedians. Although a *New York Times* reporter would claim in 2011 that women comics were now “Breaking the Taste-Ceiling Taboo,”⁴⁴ I spend the third chapter debunking the notion that a woman becomes known as a filthy stand-up for the same reason a man does. This myth is problematic because it conceals gendered power relations, specifically those that discourage women from performing stand-up

⁴⁴ Jason Zinoman, “Female Comedians, Breaking the Taste-Taboo Ceiling,” *The New York Times*, November 15, 2011.

comedy in the first place. While men and women can be and are often funny for the same reasons, in this chapter I show that the new wave of filthy female stand-ups is incurring a filthy reputation because they are negotiating power relations in gender-specific ways. Focusing on performances by two separate women comics, Amy Schumer and Sommore, I look at how they persuade audiences to laugh at their filthy jokes.

In similar and different ways, both comedians demystify the belief that filth is the natural domain of male comics and that if a woman is being filthily funny, she is simply mimicking a man. Schumer earns the audience's approval to tell filthy jokes because they recognize her character as an ironic version of an archetype of contemporary popular culture. This archetype, symbolized by the women in *Girl Gone Wild* videos, leaked sex tapes, and splashy, tabloid-driven stories, is the target of Schumer's comedy. She plays a wanton socialite, but she also inserts into her act a running commentary that mocks her character's perceived filthiness. At the same time, Schumer is a self-professed feminist who discourages audiences from condemning her character as damaged. She saves her ire for patriarchy, which demands women to be filthy and then condemns them for it. Schumer's running commentary legitimizes her desire to be filthy while simultaneously indicting the virgin/whore dichotomy.

In contrast to Schumer, Sommore does not play an ironic version of a pop culture archetype. While both comedians describe their sex lives, they cater their performances toward differing sets of audience expectations. Although Sommore can be filthy in ways similar to Schumer, she is nevertheless cognizant of the fact that the filthy, sexual stand-up comedian can be interpreted as a negative controlling image of Black womanhood. Unlike Schumer, who with a wink and a nod to the mostly white audience convinces them that she is not as hypersexual as she pretends to be, Sommore performs before mostly black audiences who understand that black women's sexuality is often erased by, or reviled within, popular culture. As such, she does not mock her character to the same extent that Schumer does. Throughout her performances, Sommore stresses her individuality so as to discourage anyone from seeing her filthy behavior as confirmation of black stereotypes.

In what follows, I hope to show that all five comedians—Bruce, Pryor, Clay, Schumer, and Sommore—negotiate the filthy label in ways specific to their social positions. While they have all been called filthy stand-up comedians, this dissertation argues that their performances should not be viewed as parts of a coherent subgenre. On the contrary, when a speaker utters the phrase “filthy stand-up comedy,” they say less about the performances than they do about their own attitudes toward the performance. If there is any actual filth to speak of, it is only what the speaker imagines the performance to have revealed about themselves.

Chapter One

The Clean Legacies of Lenny Bruce and Richard Pryor

“Ladies and Gentlemen, a White Richard Pryor and a Black Lenny Bruce!!”

Why Lenny Bruce and Richard Pryor Are Not Each Other’s Racial Inversions

Sometimes I look at life in the fun mirror at a carnival. I see myself as a profound, incisive wit, concerned with man’s inhumanity to man. Then I stroll to the next mirror and I see a pompous, subjective ass whose humor is hardly spiritual.

—Lenny Bruce⁴⁵

People say I use too much profanity. There is no such thing as profanity in what I do. I talk to people in their own words. When I say mother so-and-so, people react because they know exactly what I mean. This is our language. A lie of profanity. A lie is the worst thing in the world. Art is the ability to tell the truth, especially about oneself. Of course that takes a lot of courage.

—Richard Pryor⁴⁶

When their careers were in their formative periods, Lenny Bruce and Richard Pryor received the same word of advice from *Variety*. In 1958, a critic for the entertainment trade publication noted that Bruce “apparently has a sharp and inventive mind, and it could be turned to lampooning other, less controversial subjects with greater returns for himself and to larger benefit to his audiences. His material, as it stands, is not for public performance. He greatly

⁴⁵ Lenny Bruce, *The Essential Lenny Bruce*, ed. J. M. Cohen (New York: Ballantine, 1967), 84.

⁴⁶ Frederick D. Murphy, “Richard Pryor: Teetering on Jest, Living by His Wit,” *Encore American & Worldwide News*, November 25, 1975, 28.

needs discipline and some knowledge of rectitude.”⁴⁷ The problem was not with Bruce’s personality or style but with his material—references to race, religion, sex, sexuality, social injustice, and snot—which did not suit “public performance.” Underlying this criticism was the assumption that, in 1958, an American stand-up comedian’s career rested on whether he (or in rare cases she) could meet the approval of a homogenous group known as “the public.”

While this concept of the public is not found in *Variety*’s review of a Pryor performance from 1971, the critic nevertheless faulted Pryor for failing to reach out to a different public, one that lay beyond the nightclub: “Pryor, a class technician and with expert delivery, must be categorized as the rawest, four-lettered comment comic extant. Obviously he is not shocking to those who turn out for him. Putting it succinctly, Pryor makes gutter gab [sound] like an evangelistic sermon by comparison. He jibes blacks as well as the whites. If he would expunge present vocabulary he could be one of the great stand-up comedians of this decade.”⁴⁸ Not “shocking to those who turn out for him,” Pryor apparently would have been shocking to another crowd. The critic did not describe this crowd in detail. A few years later, however, in a *New York Times* article on the banality of television, cultural critic John Leonard hinted at who this more sensitive crowd was. After calling Pryor “a very funny man,” Leonard noted that “He also used to be a very scary man, a *black Lenny Bruce*, before television made him clean up his act. His career is doing nicely now in the movies, although not on television. He was, if not lost on television, at least misplaced: his flow was cut up into ‘bits’; his language—the dirty words and the multiple sexual references—was taken away from him, and so the street itself was gone.”⁴⁹ Bruce and Pryor were allegedly “scary”—Pryor more so because he was “a black Lenny Bruce”—to a group of people Leonard associated with 1970s television’s target audience: white, conservative, affluent.⁵⁰

Based on a cursory reading of these criticisms, it might seem that Pryor succeeded where Bruce failed because Pryor had apparently followed *Variety*’s advice and cleaned up his act for a wider (i.e. television) audience. The quotes give a misleading picture, however. First, Pryor did not wind up having a distinguished movie career. As Hilton Als puts it, “He certainly didn’t work hard to make us believe that he was anyone other than himself as he walked through shameful duds like *Adios Amigos*. On the other hand, his fans paid all the love and all the money in the world to see him be himself: they fed his vanity, and his vanity kept him from being a great actor.”⁵¹ Second, before the obscenity busts scared off club owners and sent his career into the toilet, Bruce was a huge success—*Variety* listed his earnings for 1960 at \$108,000, a

⁴⁷ Review of “A Wonderfully Sick Evening,” *Variety*, November 17, 1958, 3.

⁴⁸ Review of Bo Diddley and Richard Pryor, *Variety*, January 4, 1971, 10.

⁴⁹ John Leonard, “Vidcult—When Video Becomes Our Culture,” *New York Times*, August 15, 1976. Italics mine.

⁵⁰ See David Marc, “Television Comedy,” *What’s So Funny? Humor in American Culture*, ed. Nancy A. Walker (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 1998), 249-273.

⁵¹ Hilton Als, “A Pryor Love: The Life and Times of America’s Comic Prophet of Race,” *The New Yorker*, September 13, 1999, 76.

handsome income for a stand-up comedian.⁵² Third, while Pryor did reluctantly tone down his language for his television appearances, the stand-up material for which Pryor has received unanimous approval from fans and critics is littered with language that in any era would have been censored on network television. Fourth, Pryor's and Bruce's careers reached their zenith in their work as “filthy” stand-up comedians, the vast majority of which occurred in the nightclubs, cafés, and concert halls where they performed, on the comedy albums they recorded and in the performance films and documentaries in which they appear. Given that neither Bruce nor Pryor took *Variety*'s advice, it seems *Variety* was wrong to declare that Bruce and Pryor needed to “expunge” certain four-letter words from their acts. In fact, a *Variety* critic corrected his colleague's take on Pryor when, in 1975, he noted that “As Richard Pryor rumbled around small clubs for years, critics kept telling him he'd be much more successful if he'd knock off the dirty talk. Well, he's now up to 1824 sold-out seats a night . . . and he hasn't changed yet.”⁵³

In this chapter, I argue that although filth was essential to Bruce's and Pryor's success, their legacies as the Two Greatest Stand-up Comedians of All Time are scrubbed free of filth. By filth, I mean any aspect of their routines that conjured up images of racialized, lower-class Others. While filthy is one of the more common terms critics used to describe their material, it is not the only one; critics have also doled out profane, obscene, vulgar, and foul, to name a few. I use filth because it retains the disdainfulness connoted by critics who condemned Bruce's and Pryor's routines.⁵⁴ It also includes the class connotations I am trying to make visible throughout this dissertation. While critics have identified the racial and ethnic inequalities that both performers addressed through their use of filth, the routines' class politics often go unmentioned. Consequently, even though the two comedians used filthy jokes to critique class inequality, their career successes have come to symbolize the success of the American Dream. Laura Kipnis makes a comparable argument to my own in her assessment of the adult magazine *Hustler*. According to Kipnis, a hidden agenda to carry out “bourgeois reformism” may have led some anti-porn feminists to mistake *Hustler*'s “class resentment” for misogyny and to become themselves “legitimately a target of that resentment.”⁵⁵ (This is not to deny the misogyny, but to recognize that class resentment and misogyny might co-exist.) Filth channels class resentment because filth symbolizes what proponents of American Dream refuse to acknowledge—that this ideology gives rise to class inequality (one purportedly clean group, one filthy). When Bruce and Pryor flaunted their alleged filth, they expressed their class resentment. And yet, when critics ignore this resentment, they mischaracterize the comedians as symbols of American progress. Pryor was keenly aware of this mischaracterization. As he told the *New York Times*, “There

⁵² “Lenny Bruce, 40, Takes Final Trip,” *Variety*, August 10, 1966, 53.

⁵³ Review of Richard Pryor, Etta James, and Johnny Shine, *Variety*, October 16, 1975, 13.

⁵⁴ The word derives from *fylð* in Old English, meaning “uncleanness” and “impurity.” When the adjective filthy first appeared in the late-14th century, it meant “physically unclean”; in the 1530s, it came to mean “morally dirty, obscene.” See *Online Etymology Dictionary*, <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=filthy>.

⁵⁵ Laura Kipnis, “Male (Desire) and Female (Disgust): Reading *Hustler*,” in *Cultural Studies*, eds. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Aulor Nelson, Paula A. Treichler (Psychology Press: New York, 1992), 389.

comes a time in your life . . . when the host on the talk show turns to you and says ‘Isn’t America great, Richard?’ and you’re supposed to say ‘It sure is,’ and then he says, ‘See, guys, *he* did it—what’s the matter with the rest of you?’ I’ve gone along with that in the past, but no more.”⁵⁶ Praised for their critiques of social injustice, Bruce and Pryor have ironically become symbols of everything right about America, the land where oppressed individuals can speak up and expose their oppression and therefore wipe it away. By wiping it away, they therefore appear to have transcended that which marked them as filthy: their social positions as a Jewish man and an African-American man from the working class.

Their biographies fit this narrative well, each emphasizing the strength and character required to transcend their humble origins. Born Leonard Alfred Schneider in 1925, Bruce was raised on Long Island by his mother Sally Marr, who worked as a waitress and a maid before becoming a stand-up comedian herself.⁵⁷ After serving in the navy during World War II, Bruce followed his mother into comedy, which eventually led to a one-and-a-half year stint as the house MC at Strip City, a Los Angeles strip club. Here, according to Albert Goldman’s 700-page biography, *Ladies and Gentlemen: Lenny Bruce!!*, Bruce developed the *habitus* for dirty stand-up comedy. By “dirty,” Goldman means that he used vulgar words and talked without shame about vulgar things: “See that waitress over there in the butch haircut,” he would say, “—she’s a diesel dyke! That bartender? A muff diver! You know what the owner of this club said to a stripper this afternoon when she wouldn’t dance at rehearsal: ‘Turn in your cunt—you’re through!’”⁵⁸ By 1958, he had parlayed his dirtiness into a successful night club act, which did not include straight jokes.⁵⁹ Bruce was now acting out satirical conversations and riffing on current events. Published a year after his death, *The Essential Lenny Bruce* groups transcriptions of his routines into subjects like “Blacks,” “Jews,” “Politics,” “Pills and Shit,” “Balling, Chicks, Fags, Dikes, and Divorce,” “The Law,” and “What Is Obscene?”⁶⁰ In one of his most famous routines, Bruce acted out a conversation at “the headquarters of Religions Incorporated” where America’s religious leaders celebrate their wealth, grumble about integration, and ask the Pope over the phone for “a deal on one o those Dago spawts cahs.”⁶¹ In another, Bruce asked the crowd, “Are there any niggers here tonight?” and went on to spot “two kikes, and three niggers, and one spic,” then “a mick,” then “one hick, thick, funky spunky boogey.” Bruce saw that “the word’s suppression,” as Judith Butler would later argue at length in *Excitable Speech*, “gives it the power, the violence, the viciousness.” Bruce argued that by repeatedly saying the word,

⁵⁶ Joyce Maynard, “Richard Pryor, King of the Scene-stealers,” *New York Times*, January 9, 1977.

⁵⁷ “Sally Marr, 91, the Mother of Lenny Bruce,” Obituary, *New York Times*, December 20, 1997.

⁵⁸ Albert Goldman, *Ladies and Gentlemen: Lenny Bruce!!* (New York: Ballantine, 1974), 178.

⁵⁹ Straight jokes have a formal setup-punchline structure. Since they do not emphasize the speaker’s distinct point of view, they can be told by virtually anyone.

⁶⁰ Bruce, *The Essential Lenny Bruce*.

⁶¹ Bruce, *The Essential Lenny Bruce*, 49.

eventually “you’d never make any four-year-old nigger cry when he came home from school.”⁶² Bruce’s act became more fixated on pseudo-speech act theory after his arrest in 1961 for saying cocksucker during a show in San Francisco. Although a jury acquitted Bruce, he endured three more obscenity trials, and by 1965, club owners would not book him out of fear of being shut down. During this later stage of his career, when Bruce did perform, he dwelt pedantically on his obscenity arrests and, by all accounts, stopped being funny. He died on August 6, 1966, of a morphine overdose, but lives on in the cultural imaginary as an exemplary stand-up comedian. Overcoming the paradoxical state of being both filthy and exemplary, Bruce has been canonized as a prophet, a martyr for free speech, and a comedian who resignified words and concepts conventionally deemed filthy.

Pryor’s life had a similar trajectory. Born in Peoria, Illinois in 1940, he grew up in a family of “ghetto entrepreneurs.”⁶³ His mother and father worked in the brothels owned by his paternal grandmother whom Pryor credited as his primary caregiver. When he became a professional comedian in the early-1960s, he sought to be as “slick and colorless as [Bill] Cosby,”⁶⁴ but by 1970, he had remade his act, which now offered what a *Variety* critic at the time called a “smut barrage in uninhibited, sometimes clever, fashion.”⁶⁵ He had also gained a reputation as a comic who brought the politics of the Black Panther party to stand-up comedy, as heard in his classic routine about the police:

Cops put a hurtin’ on your ass, man, you know. They really degrade you. White folks don’t believe that shit, don’t believe cops degrade. [*In a nasal white-guy voice*] “Ah, come on, those beatings, those people were resisting arrest. I’m tired of this harassment of police officers.” ’Cause the police live in your neighborhood, see, and you be knowin’ ’em as Officer Timpson. [*In a dumb, friendly white-guy voice*] “Hello, Officer Timpson, going bowling tonight? Yes, uh, nice Pinto you have, ha, ha, ha.” Niggas don’t know ’em like that. See, white folks get a ticket, they pull over, “Hey, Officer, yes, glad to be of help, here you go.” Niggas got to be talkin’ ’bout “I AM REACH-ING INTO MY POCK-ET FOR MY LICENSE—’cause I don’t wanna be no motherfuckin’ accident!”⁶⁶

After winning Grammy awards for comedy albums in the mid-1970s, he reached the pinnacle of his stand-up career with the release of the concert films *Live in Concert* (1979) and *Live on the Sunset Strip* (1982). Although his film career was marred by a string of critical flops, critics lavished his concert films with praise—even the notoriously harsh Pauline Kael called Pryor “the

⁶² Bruce, *The Essential Lenny Bruce*, 11-12.

⁶³ Jim Haskins, *Richard Pryor: A Man and His Madness* (Toronto: Musson, 1984), 3.

⁶⁴ Richard Pryor and Todd Gold. *Pryor Convictions, and Other Life Sentences* (New York: Pantheon, 1995), 93.

⁶⁵ Review of Amanda Ambrose, Gene Ammons, and Richard Pryor, *Variety*, May 5, 1970.

⁶⁶ Qtd. in Bob Avakian, *Reflections, Sketches & Provocations: Essays and Commentary, 1981-1987* (Chicago: RCP Publications, 1990), 3-4.

only great poet satirist among our comics.”⁶⁷ In contrast to his comedy albums, the concert films were more autobiographical, with Pryor making light of his well-publicized private life. For example, as he tells it, when the police came to his house to arrest him for shooting his car with a magnum, “I went in the house. ’Cause cops have magnums, too. And they don’t shoot cars—they shoot nig-gars.”⁶⁸ Reflecting on his brush with death when he set himself on fire, he said that God had not been punishing him because “If God had wanted to punish my ass, he’d have burnt my dick!”⁶⁹ His career slowed in the mid-1980s when he was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, and he remained out of the spotlight up until his death from a heart attack in 2005. Like Bruce, he lives on in the cultural imaginary as a paradoxically exemplary stand-up comedian.

When it comes to how Bruce and Pryor entered the cultural imaginary, critics never single out their filthiness. Later critics focus mainly on their “honesty” and “truth-telling,” which apparently excused their reliance on filth. Writing in the *Village Voice*, Nat Hentoff sketched an artistic hierarchy, which placed Bruce and Pryor above other notoriously filthy comics. He noted that while “Eddie Murphy, Andrew Dice Clay, Richard Pryor, Sam Kinison, and many other performers can work, most of the time, without fearing that an undercover cop, sitting in the dark, will be taking notes on their acts . . . only Richard Pryor, in his early work, used to take the covers off the way we live [the way Bruce did]—with bitingly hilarious disdain for sentimentality.”⁷⁰ Audiences obviously enjoyed Bruce’s and Pryor’s satire, but the widespread snubbing/disavowal of the pleasure some experienced when hearing them invoke culturally taboo topics like sexuality and racism is troubling. These invocations are partly what catapulted Bruce and Pryor to fame and enabled American stand-up comedy to gain recognition as a genre in its own right. Moreover, this snubbing denies us of an opportunity to understand how our culture has come to understand filthiness as a signifier for lower-class, racially stigmatized Others.

Most of the writing on the history of American humor and, in particular, stand-up comedy, acknowledges Bruce’s and Pryor’s roles as founding figures but glosses over their filthiness. Bruce is “the founding father of modern stand-up comedy,” writes Richard Zoglin in his history of 1970s American stand-up comedy, while Pryor is the “comedian of the post-Lenny Bruce era most often hailed as its greatest genius.”⁷¹ Seconding this opinion, Léon Rappoport writes, “When considering the remarkable influence of Jews and blacks on American humor, many scholars and critics agree that the outstanding figures during the early 1960s and 1970s, respectively, were Lenny Bruce and Richard Pryor. . . . [and] no less an authority than comedian

⁶⁷ Pauline Kael, review of *Richard Pryor: Live on the Sunset Strip*, Columbia/Rastar, *The New Yorker*, April 5, 1982, 184.

⁶⁸ *Richard Pryor: Live in Concert*, directed by Jeff Margolis (Burbank, CA: Elkins Entertainment, 1979).

⁶⁹ *Live on the Sunset Strip*, directed by Joe Layton (Culver City, CA: Columbia, 1982).

⁷⁰ Nat Hentoff, “The Onliest Lenny Bruce,” *The Village Voice*, February 5, 1991, 22.

⁷¹ Richard Zoglin, *Comedy at the Edge: How Stand-up in the 1970s Changed America* (New York: Bloomsbury USA, 2008), 8, 42.

Jerry Seinfeld has a similar opinion. He was quoted in *Time* magazine (11/4/02) as flatly declaring, ‘Today’s style [of comedy] started with Lenny Bruce,’ and he referred to Richard Pryor as ‘perhaps the greatest artist of all standups.’⁷² When praising Bruce and Pryor, critics tend not to praise their use of what was known as obscenity/filth/dirt/foulness/[insert synonym here]. Rappoport does mention the importance of obscenity to their performances, but he diminishes its role by describing it as “shocking,” as a “style,” and as separate from the “substance” of their acts: comedic explorations of “sex, ethnicity, religion [and] patriotism.”⁷³ The quote from Seinfeld, a famously clean comedian who has publicly criticized comedians who use four-letter words, further suggests that Bruce and Pryor’s cultural memory has been scrubbed clean of filth. Regarding stand-up in general, only two scholars have explored its obsession with obscenity. Susan Seizer, in “On the Uses of Obscenity in Live Stand-up Comedy,” defends obscenity as an artistically vital component of certain performances. She notes, for example, that obscenities enhance the stand-up performance’s intimacy by adding to the comic’s “‘off the record’ attitude.”⁷⁴ Kate E. Brown focuses on “the poetics” of Pryor’s cursing, arguing that it “produces a space in which insult can translate into recognition and in which devalued bodies can be granted fantastic immunity to circumstance.”⁷⁵

I focus on the importance of filth in order to argue that Bruce and Pryor were not racial inversions of one another—that by calling Pryor a “black Lenny Bruce,” critics drew attention away from significant differences between Bruce and Pryor’s relationships with audiences. My over-arching theoretical framework is based on a key point in Peter Stallybrass and Allon White’s *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, in which the authors argue that bourgeois culture has long included representations of two types of grotesques: “the grotesque as the ‘Other’ of the defining group or self, and the grotesque as a boundary phenomenon of hybridization or inmixing, in which self and other become enmeshed in an inclusive, heterogeneous, dangerously unstable zone.”⁷⁶ Using this concept, I map Bruce, as the “Jewish White Negro,” the well-spoken yet lower-class comic, onto “the grotesque as a boundary phenomenon,” whereas Pryor, as the black man whose lower-class, black stage presence conformed to white expectations, is mapped onto “the grotesque as the ‘Other’ of the defining group or self.” These two types of grotesques are related, Stallybrass and White explain, because a fundamental mechanism of identity formation *produces* the second, hybrid grotesque at the level of the political unconscious *by the very struggle to exclude the first grotesque*. That is to say, when the bourgeoisie consolidated itself as a respectable and conventional

⁷² Léon Rappoport, *Punchlines: The Case for Racial, Ethnic, and Gender Humor* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2005), 71.

⁷³ Rappoport, *Punchlines*, 72.

⁷⁴ Susan Seizer, “On the Uses of Obscenity in Live Stand-up Comedy,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 84, no. 1 (2011): 214.

⁷⁵ Kate E. Brown, “Richard Pryor and the Poetics of Cursing,” in *Richard Pryor: The Life and Legacy of a Crazy Black Man*, ed. Audrey Thomas McCluskey (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008), 73.

⁷⁶ Stallybrass and White, *Politics and Poetics*, 193. Italics in original.

body by withdrawing itself from the popular, it constructed the popular as grotesque otherness: but by this act of withdrawal and consolidation it produced *another grotesque*, an identity-in-difference which was nothing other than its fantasy relation, its negative symbiosis, with that which it has rejected in its social practices.⁷⁷

The two grotesques refer to two discursive strategies the bourgeoisie use to elevate themselves socially. They first describe themselves as different from the inferior, grotesque Other (the first kind of grotesque), but once they define themselves as different from the grotesque Other, they begin to imagine themselves as a grotesque hybrid of themselves and the Other (the second kind). From his early detractors' perspective, Bruce embodied this second, hybrid grotesque—someone who personified Norman Mailer's "White Negro" by blending intellectual, middle-class whiteness with lower-class Jewish and African-American markings. For white audiences, he was a mirror in which they saw their own grotesqueness as a boundary phenomenon. Pryor did not embody this second, hybrid grotesque; instead, he reassured white audience members that he was the grotesque Other through whom they could safely encounter their own Otherness.

At the same time, mainstream discourses surrounding Bruce's and Pryor's comedy draw attention away from the comedians' functions as embodiments of grotesqueness. Recalling Michael Rogin's essay on how *The Jazz Singer* frames Jackie Rabinowitz/Jack Robin/Al Jolson as a white American, I argue that Bruce's fans framed the comedian in the same way—as a white American, not as a comedian who got laughs by presenting himself as the hybrid, grotesque Other.⁷⁸ David E. Kaufman has made a similar argument, noting that American popular culture had until the 1990s memorialized Bruce by downplaying the Jewish aspects of his performances.⁷⁹ Kaufman quotes a review of *Lenny* (1974), the biopic directed by Bob Fosse and starring Dustin Hoffman, which dismissed the film as "a trendy, liberal, *middle-class*, gentele translation of a life and art that was perverse, radical, *lower-class* and unassimilatedly Jewish."⁸⁰ Kaufman claims that, over the past ten years or so, popular culture has done a better job recognizing Bruce's on-stage efforts to represent himself as a Jewish comedian. Yet to this day, in my view, critics rarely ever mention his stage character's class position, which is what made Bruce seem filthy in the first place. As William Paul notes in *Laughing Screaming: Modern Hollywood Horror & Comedy*, it was Bruce's manner, "abrasive, aggressive, and decidedly lower-class," that was "most disturbing."⁸¹ In this chapter, I elaborate on Paul's observation by pointing out that Bruce's presentation of himself as both a white person and a lower-class Jew came at a time when middle-class Jews were gaining status as whites. Since class is commonly

⁷⁷ Stallybrass and White, *Politics and Poetics*, 193.

⁷⁸ Michael Rogin, "White Noise: The Jewish Jazz Singer Finds His Voice," *Critical Inquiry* 18, no. 3 (Spring, 1992): 417-453.

⁷⁹ David E. Kaufman, "Dirty Jew," in *Jewhoing the Sixties: American Celebrity and Jewish Identity* (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2012), 99-154.

⁸⁰ Andrew Kopkind, "Lenny Bruce: Resurrection of a Junkie Prophet," *Ramparts* 13 (March 1975); quoted in Kaufman, *Jewhoing*, 144. Italics mine.

⁸¹ William Paul, *Laughing Screaming: Modern Hollywood Horror & Comedy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 43.

assigned to an “ethnic” figure and whiteness is portrayed as classless, Bruce became grotesque as a boundary phenomenon, which troubled essentialist notions of whiteness as pure and as an unmarked category.⁸²

Pryor offers an informative contrast to Bruce’s appropriation because, akin to the way *The Jazz Singer* “appropriated an imaginary blackness to Americanize the immigrant son,”⁸³ mainstream discourses about Pryor called attention to his blackness so as to make America seem like a post-racial utopia. Discourses surrounding Pryor identify him as the representative of black culture in its entirety, overlooking the fact that Pryor’s black stage characters are from the working class. For example, in an essay on Pryor, Siva Vaidhyanathan ignores the racist reception he endured throughout his career, and instead commends “the wholesale desegregation of the past fifty years [for having] created a nearly open competitive market for cultural expression.”⁸⁴ According to Vaidhyanathan, the market is all well and good because “White America desired an avenue into black oral tradition, and Pryor offered it on a large scale at their local theaters. In this way, Pryor masterfully exploited the triumph of black cultural expression.”⁸⁵ Making an equally problematic point about Bruce, historian Frank Kofsky claimed in 1971 that society had progressed to the point where Bruce was no longer filthy. “When enough people subscribe to a heresy,” he wrote, “it ceases to *be* heresy. In this way—as with the cold war, the U.S. in Vietnam, integration versus Black nationalism, marijuana, sexual relations without marriage, the status of women in society, the laws on abortion, and countless other topics—it has finally become possible to think the unthinkable about Lenny Bruce: that he was right after all, that the conventional wisdom is—bullshit.”⁸⁶ Although Kofsky, along with many others, described Bruce as having become “clean,” I argue that both Bruce and Pryor are only clean because the lower-class social position they embodied on stage goes unmentioned within mainstream discourses, which despite progress in some areas still remain committed to the myth of a classless society. It was their lower-class social position, symbolized in part by their use of profanity, that critics originally found filthy. Arguably, since their class continues to threaten the myth of a classless, post-racial society, few critics even acknowledge it.

The disregard of their class positions is ironic given that these class positions are partly what make them grotesquely funny in the first place. Linda Williams makes a comparable point

⁸² Gwendolyn Audrey Foster uses the term “whiteface” to describe the space “where representation . . . demands class-passing, class othering, giving up ethnic identity to become white, and insists that the human race, especially in America, is white.” See *Performing Whiteness: Postmodern Re/constructions in the Cinema* (Albany: State University of New York, 2003), 51.

⁸³ Rogin, “White Noise,” 421.

⁸⁴ Siva Vaidhyanathan, “Now’s the Time: The Richard Pryor Phenomenon and the Triumph of Black Culture,” *New Directions in American Humor*, ed. David E. E. Sloane (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1998), 41.

⁸⁵ Vaidhyanathan, “Now’s the Time,” 48.

⁸⁶ Frank Kofsky, *Lenny Bruce: The Comedian as Social Critic and Secular Moralizer* (New York: Monad, 1974), 62.

about *The Jazz Singer*, arguing that the film's emotional power (its "melodrama") is expressed through its musical numbers. Williams critiques Rogin's claim that *The Jazz Singer* whitewashes African-American and Jewish histories of suffering, arguing instead that the film's "mongrelized" music works "to tap into the poignancy of the suffering of those persons—Jews and Blacks—victimized by racial prejudice and inequity and to appropriate that suffering as the very energy and meaning of the nation."⁸⁷ Similar to *The Jazz Singer*'s appropriation of Jewish and Black suffering to salute the nation, recent writings on Bruce and Pryor salute the nation while also drawing attention away from what made them funny, namely, the way they tapped into the purported filthiness of working-class Jews and Blacks. Like Jakie Rabinowitz, whose somber final number, "My Mammy," reflects "an abject longing for a racially marked good home," Bruce and Pryor constantly use their racialized, lower-class social status to remind audiences of their exclusion from a "racially marked good home."

This is not to undermine the important political statements their comedy conveyed. In fact, similar to *The Jazz Singer*, a complex text that, as Charles Musser has argued, appealed to a diverse array of audiences for a diverse array of reasons, Bruce and Pryor should not be read merely as two comedians whose enduring legacies can be chalked up to nothing except racist nationalism.⁸⁸ My aim is instead to problematize the notion, one advanced by comedian Greg Proops, that "[a]s was the case with Bruce in the Fifties, Pryor forced us to confront the elemental issues we like to pretend we have solved, issues such as race, class and religion."⁸⁹ While we do like to pretend we have solved these issues, Bruce and Pryor's legacies tend not to confront us with them. Bruce and Pryor's comparable trajectories of recuperation within American popular culture shows us how each has functioned as a symbol of comedic exploitations of the racialized working class and not solely as comedic triumphs that successfully encourage audiences to reject hegemonic views of oppressed people. The denial of class reframes and celebrates two anti-establishment performers as token examples of capitalism's apparent ability to abolish racial and ethnic inequality. It also conceals the fact that class mobility, as bell hooks notes, does not "mediate and break down racist barriers. That despite their success, the individuals who had made it still encountered racial discrimination."⁹⁰

The rest of this chapter is divided into four subsections. In the first, "Ladies and Gentlemen, the Inauthentic White Negro!!," I argue that Bruce mongrelized himself by appropriating symbols of Otherness—Jewishness, blackness, profanity, sexual perversion—that his critics deemed filthy. But while Bruce inverted racial hierarchies by criticizing whiteness for seeming too middle-class, he did not declare solidarity with the underclass. Instead, he and his fans used this acknowledgment to recast themselves as enlightened beings who transcended their own whiteness. The second section, "Ladies and Gentlemen, the Authentic Black Comic!!,"

⁸⁷ Linda Williams, *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O.J. Simpson* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 156.

⁸⁸ Charles Musser, "Why Did Negroes Love Al Jolson and *The Jazz Singer*?: Melodrama, Blackface and Cosmopolitan Theatrical Culture," *Film History: An International Journal* 23, no. 2 (2011), 196-222.

⁸⁹ Greg Proops, "Sniggers with Attitude," *The Scotsman*, June 10, 1999.

⁹⁰ bell hooks, *Killing Rage: Ending Racism* (New York: H. Holt and Co., 1995), 23.

contrasts Bruce's divisive audience relations with Pryor's seemingly more harmonious relations with white audiences. Although white critics mostly ignored Pryor's filth, I argue that this did not speak to the white critics' enlightened attitudes toward race. Instead, it confirmed white notions of blackness as hip, cool, and "down" with filth. Becoming popular at a time when the minstrel stereotype had become a symbol of America's racist past, Pryor's anti-minstrel on-stage characters symbolized a new era, what Vaidhyathan calls "the triumph of black culture."⁹¹ I argue that Pryor's status as the only bankable black movie star of the late-70s and early-80s did not symbolize "the triumph of black culture." Pryor's token triumphs concealed mainstream culture's failure to include blacks.

I base the third and fourth sections on Richard Schechner's distinction between ritual and theater, noting that Bruce and Pryor did not play the same role within the white cultural imaginary. As white critics implied, Bruce's stage performances were ritualistic whereas Pryor's were theatrical. In the third section, "Ladies and Gentlemen, He's Actually Authentic!!," I note that Bruce's fans, and even Bruce himself, framed Bruce not as a performer but as a ritual overseer who spoke "the truth." Praised for his critiques of racial injustice and hypocrisy, Bruce has been memorialized as a prophet but not for what he really was: a performer who shocked by masquerading as a militant member of the working class. Since his death in 1966 at age 40, two feature films, three documentary films, a handful of plays and one-man shows, and several magazine profiles have glorified Bruce as a martyr for free speech.⁹² I argue that Bruce's hagiography perpetuated class hierarchy by conferring status onto both Bruce and his fans—white, male, well-educated liberals (known in the 1960s as "eggheads")—instead of championing his comedy's class-based critique. By demanding that we recognize him as a dignified performer who spoke the truth, Bruce and his followers reinserted Bruce into the same cultural hierarchy he mocked throughout his career.

In contrast, as I argue in the fourth section, "Ladies and Gentlemen, He's Actually Just an Actor!!," by viewing Pryor as a theatrical actor and not as a public spokesperson, white critics erected a divide between themselves and Pryor. Had white critics described Pryor the way they described Bruce—as a representative of themselves—they might have exposed the problematic trend whereby whites form their identities through popular representations of African Americans. This divide allowed white audiences to repress their identification with Pryor as the grotesque Other. In this sense, Pryor's film career did not differ much from his stand-up career. Although fans tend to bemoan Pryor's film career, I see both his film roles and his stand-up comedy performances having similar functions. By stressing the entertainment value of Pryor's theatricality and by praising him for allowing blacks and whites to laugh together, critics have diverted attention away from Pryor's anti-racist critiques. Like the films, the stand-up became

⁹¹ Vaidhyathan, "Now's the Time," 40-48.

⁹² Feature films *Lenny* (Bob Fosse, 1974) and *Dirtymouth* (Herbert S. Altman, 1970); the play *Lenny: A Play Based on the Life and Words of Lenny Bruce* (Julian Barry, 1971); the one-man shows starring Sandy Baron, Steve Cuiffo, and Ronnie Marmo; the documentaries *Lenny Bruce Without Tears* (Fred Baker, 1972), *Lenny Bruce: Swear to Tell the Truth* (Robert B. Weide, 1998), and *Looking for Lenny* (Elan Gale, 2011); the songs "Lenny Bruce" by Bob Dylan, "Eulogy to Lenny Bruce" by Nico, and "Father Bruce" by Grace Slick; the glowing profiles in *Rolling Stone* (October 26, 1972), *Playboy* (August, 1991), and *Time* (August 10, 2006).

important because it allowed white audiences to imagine themselves laughing with African Americans in a post-racial utopia.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, the Inauthentic White Negro!!”

How Bruce Constructed His Stage Persona as a Grotesque Boundary Phenomenon

Dirt, as Mary Douglas defines it in *Purity and Danger*, “is matter out of place.”⁹³ “Dirty Lenny,”⁹⁴ to use the moniker his biographer gave him, was “out of place” among stand-up comedians, who in the 1950s were viewed by industry insiders as jokesters with bland personas.⁹⁵ To some extent, bland meant white, male and middle-class, as comedian Steve Allen implied in his 1956 book *The Funny Men*. The most exemplary was Bob Hope (1903-2003), hailed by Allen as “the best stand-up comedian of them all.” Allen noted that [i]f there is one word of praise that his work most readily calls forth, it is *class*,⁹⁶ explaining that “The average [read: white] middle-class American . . . would probably picture himself as something very like Bob Hope.”⁹⁷ Hope was a straight joke-teller who said things like “Here I am at the Naval Air Station in Coronado, California, for Chesterfield’s and the men of the navy! And it was really a thrill to see that sign that said, ‘Welcome Bob Hope.’ It was tattooed on an ensign’s knee.”⁹⁸ Hope legitimized what Paul Fussell calls twentieth-century America’s “sizable middle class desperate not to offend through language and thus addicted to such conspicuous class giveaways as euphemism, genteelism, and mock profanity (‘Golly!’).”⁹⁹ Instead of talking about, for

⁹³ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (New York: Praeger, 1966), 44.

⁹⁴ Goldman, *Ladies and Gentlemen*, 171.

⁹⁵ See Phil Silvers, “Advice to Standup TV Comic: Embroil Self in Situation,” *Variety*, February 23, 1954, 12; Steve Allen, *The Funny Men* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1956), 198; Leon Morse, “Gleason Gazes Into TV’s Future, and He Ain’t Being Funny,” *Billboard*, November 5, 1955, 1-3.

⁹⁶ Allen, *The Funny Men*, 199. Italics in original.

⁹⁷ Allen, *The Funny Men*, 203.

⁹⁸ *Legends of Radio: The Bob Hope Show*, performed by Bob Hope (2003; New York: Radio Spirits), CD.

example, Jane Russell’s breasts or his desire to have sex with her, he would say, “Jane Russell’s got a slight cold. Doctors came in from as far away as Alaska for the examination. [*Audience laughs.*] I was right there with my stethoscope, I was hoping for a quarantine.”¹⁰⁰ Through his stand-up, Hope displayed “earnestness and psychic insecurity,” “status panic,” and a strong “desire to belong,” all signs of a middle-class American.¹⁰¹



Bob Hope’s unctuous demeanor made him both a model pitchman and a model stand-up comedian for his time. In contrast, by literally and figuratively giving the middle finger to the middle class, Lenny Bruce broke with tradition.

On stage, Bruce displayed none of these traits. If he had a desire to belong, he compromised it by saying things like “For years I’ve been buying *Playboy*, *Nugget*, *Rogue*, *Dude*, *Gent*, all those other stroke books. I buy those books for one reason: to look at the chicks, man. I don’t need a Nelson Algren short story for rationalization.”¹⁰² He poked fun at the middle-class, implying that their preference for euphemisms, fear of words like “stroke,” and need to juxtapose nudity with a short story meant that they did not belong in his community. By acting comfortable with gutter language, he also marked himself as working class. Even though, as Geoffrey Hughes notes, it is “a popular oversimplification” to assume that “swearing is a low-

⁹⁹ Paul Fussell, *Class: A Guide Through the American Status System* (New York: Summit Books, 1983), 151.

¹⁰⁰ *Legends of Radio: The Bob Hope Show*.

¹⁰¹ Fussell, *Class*, 39.

¹⁰² Bruce, *Essential Lenny Bruce*, 219.

class habit,” this was and is still a popular assumption.¹⁰³ Bruce’s class position might not have been so problematic for his audiences, however, had Bruce not also marked himself as a working-class Jew. As a *Variety* critic noted, “[Bruce’s] attitude, as reflected in his beatnik banter, religious references and excessive Yiddishisms, is one of disregard for audience sensitivities.”¹⁰⁴ Bruce would say *schtupping* instead of fucking; *emmis* instead of the truth; *spritzing* instead of improvising; *schlep* instead of carry. By drawing attention to his Jewishness, Bruce implicitly mocked Jews who passed as white by acting middle-class. As Frank Kofsky and David E. Kaufman observe in their studies of Bruce’s legacy,¹⁰⁵ he stood out as the first Jewish entertainer to make a mockery of assimilation. In one routine, he acted out a mock conversation about why he changed his name:

Louis. That’s my name in Jewish. Louis Schneider.
“Why havn’t ya got Louis Schneider up on the marquee?”
“Well, ’cause it’s not show business. It doesn’t fit.”
“No, no, I don’t wanna hear that. You Jewish?”
“Yeah.”
“You ashamed of it?”
“Yeah.”

He “embarrassed older Jews,” writes Gerald Nachman in his study of rebellious comics from the 1950s and ’60s, “because he dared use Yiddishisms usually only heard on stages at the Catskills and Miami Beach—or anywhere two or more Jews gathered.”¹⁰⁶ Kaufman agrees, noting that among Jews “Bruce was more often feared as an upstart, evoking anxiety rather than adulation.”¹⁰⁷ He was unique among Jews, writes John Limon, because instead of fleeing the city for the suburbs, Bruce went the other way—growing up in the suburbs, spending his adulthood in the city.¹⁰⁸

Although none of Kofsky, Kaufman, or Nachman discuss social class, Bruce’s class position clearly troubled the whitening of post-war Jews, who, as Karen Brodtkin Sacks notes in *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says About Race in America*, became viewed as white as many gained class mobility in the 1940s and ’50s. “Before the war, most Jews, like most other Americans, were working class,” Brodtkin writes. “Already upwardly mobile before the war relative to other immigrants, Jews floated high on this rising economic tide, and most of

¹⁰³ Geoffrey Hughes, *An Encyclopedia of Swearing: The Social History of Oaths, Profanity, Foul Language, and Ethnic Slurs in the English-speaking World* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2006), 80.

¹⁰⁴ Review of Lenny Bruce, Carol Sloane, Bill Rubenstein Trio, *Variety*, April 4, 1962, 77.

¹⁰⁵ Kofsky, *Social Critic*, 87; Kaufman, *Jewhooing*, 120.

¹⁰⁶ Gerald Nachman, *Seriously Funny: The Rebel Comedians of the 1950s and 1960s* (New York: Pantheon, 2003), 397.

¹⁰⁷ Kaufman, *Jewhooing*, 99.

¹⁰⁸ Limon, *Abjection*, 22.

them entered the middle class.”¹⁰⁹ Bruce characterized Jewishness as lower-class and, hence, not-quite-white, when, for example, he observed why Jewish attorneys defend alleged pornographers. The reason is because

To a Jew f-u-c-k and s-h-i-t have the same value on the dirty-word graph. A Jew has no concept that f-u-c-k is worth 90 points, and s-h-i-t 10. And the reason for that is that—well, see, rabbis and priests both s-h-i-t, but only one f-u-c-ks.

You see, in the Jewish culture, there’s no merit badge for not doing that. And Jewish attorneys better get hip to that.

And since the leaders of my tribe, rabbis, are *schtuppers*, perhaps that’s why words come freer to me.¹¹⁰

In this routine, Bruce lowers himself and all Jews by calling them a “tribe” of “*schtuppers*” who have not been civilized to the point where they see the difference between the relative filthiness of f-u-c-k and s-h-i-t. Bruce was drawing on anti-Semitic folklore that, as Alan Dundes has shown, had long claimed that “the Jew is ‘dirty.’”¹¹¹ From the Middle Ages to the twentieth century, from Russia to Nazi Germany to the United States, Jews had been debased and dehumanized by the dominant culture as physically dirty. These myths were so widespread that “[i]n a standard 1940s test designed to measure anti-Semitism in the United States, we find a reference to Jews being ‘dirty and smelly.’”¹¹² Bruce did not explicitly refer to the anti-Semitic myth that Jews are physically dirty, but he did allude to it by coding Jewishness as anti-Christian. (According to Dundes, this myth also has its roots in anti-Semitic myths about money and pigs; however, Bruce never referred to either.) The purported dirtiness of Jews, Joshua Trachtenberg notes in *The Devil and Jews*, was tied to Christian propaganda that portrayed Jews as anatomically distinct Christ killers.¹¹³ Their horns and tails gave away their devilishness.

Bruce did not make himself seem dirty/lower-class only by emphasizing his Jewishness, however. He further coded his stage character as lower-class by using “the Black musician’s vernacular,”¹¹⁴ claiming at times to have “felt colored,”¹¹⁵ and mocking a bigoted white man’s awkward attempt to appear racially open-minded. The skit “How to Relax Your Colored Friends at Parties” has Bruce as a condescending bigot who tries to “relax” the party’s token black guest, played by guitarist Eric Miller. During moments of awkward silence, Bruce’s bigot says, “You

¹⁰⁹ Karen Brodtkin Sacks, *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says About Race in America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 42.

¹¹⁰ Bruce, *Essential Lenny Bruce*, 33.

¹¹¹ Alan Dundes, “Why Is the Jew Dirty? A Psychoanalytic Study of Anti-Semitic Folklore,” *From Game to War and Other Psychoanalytic Essays on Folklore* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1997), 92-119.

¹¹² Dundes, “Why Is the Jew Dirty?,” 93.

¹¹³ Joshua Trachtenberg, *The Devil and Jews* (New York: Harper, 1966); cited in Dundes, “Why Is the Jew Dirty?,” 94.

¹¹⁴ Kofsky, *Social Critic*, 92.

¹¹⁵ Bruce, *Essential Lenny Bruce*, 23.

know, that Joe Louis was a hell of a fighter” and “Well, here’s to Henry Armstrong.” He uses the term “you people” when he says,

WHITE: Awright . . . Now, I wanya to comover the house, but I gotta tell ya somtin cause I know you people get touchy once in a while.

NEGRO: Oh, umhm?

WHITE: Yeah, ahhh, I gotta sister, ya see?

NEGRO: Yeah?

WHITE: Well now, cummere. [*whispers*] You wouldn’t wanna Jew doin it to your sister, wouldja?¹¹⁶

At this point in the skit, according to Ioan Davies, “Jew equals Black, but with the self-critical awareness that this may not be quite true (that Black and Jew may sit uneasily together in any minority relationship: ‘You wouldn’t want no Jew doing it to your sister’).”¹¹⁷ Bruce did not always display this self-critical awareness, however. In his “Jewish and Goyish” routine, he equates himself with working-class blacks by, as he puts it, “neologiz[ing] Jewish and *goyish*.” He continues:

Dig: I’m Jewish. Count Basie’s Jewish. Ray Charles is Jewish. Eddie Cantor’s *goyish*. B’Nai Brith is *goyish*; Hadaasah, Jewish. Marine corps—heavy goyim, dangerous. Koolaid is *goyish*. All Drake’s Cakes are *goyish*. Pumpnickel is Jewish, and, as you know, white bread is very *goyish*. Instant potatoes—*goyish*. Black cherry soda’s very Jewish. Macaroons are very Jewish—very Jewish cake. Fruit salad is Jewish. Lime jello is *goyish*. Lime soda is very *goyish*. Trailer parks are so *goyish* that Jews won’t go near them. . . .¹¹⁸

Since trailer parks are home to not merely working-class people but *white* working-class people, Bruce claims they are *goyish*. By calling Count Basie and Ray Charles Jewish, Bruce claims a kinship with their working-class blackness, which further signals to the audience his desire not to belong to white, middle-class society. He also disentangles racial and ethnic identities from actual bodies by framing them as attitudes—B’Nai Brith is *goyish* while Bruce and Count Basie are Jewish. For these sorts of routines, Bruce’s detractors called him filthy.

Although Bruce’s fans did enjoy his use of filth, they appeared to enjoy it in part because it symbolized their entry into an emerging social class of hipsters—people who join the creative class by masquerading as an outsider. As Dick Hebdige notes in his summary of the hipster and beat subculture, the model outsider was “the Negro” who was constructed within the white imaginary as “blowing free, untouched by the dreary conventions which tyrannized more fortunate members of society (i.e. the writers) and, although trapped in a cruel environment of mean streets and tenements, by a curious inversion he also emerged the ultimate victor. He escaped emasculation and the bounded existential possibilities which middle-class life offered. Immaculate in poverty, he lived out the blocked options of a generation of white radical intellectuals.”¹¹⁹ The late-1950s hipster manifesto was “The White Negro,” Norman Mailer’s

¹¹⁶ Bruce, *Essential Lenny Bruce*, 18.

¹¹⁷ Ioan Davies, “Lenny Bruce: Hyperrealism and the Death of Jewish Tragic Humor,” *Social Text* 22 (Spring 1989): 106.

¹¹⁸ Bruce, *Essential Lenny Bruce*, 31.

¹¹⁹ Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Methuen, 1979), 47.

infamous 1957 essay which romanticized a white person's stereotypical notion of the primitive, African-American male. According to Mailer, by adopting "a black man's code of ethics," one then would know "one's desires, one's rages, one's anguish."¹²⁰ The black man had the key to discovering these desires, it seemed, because, "Hated from outside and therefore hating himself, the Negro was forced into the position of exploring all those moral wildernesses of civilized life which the Square automatically condemns as delinquent or evil or immature or morbid or self-destructive or corrupt."¹²¹ In the white hipster's eyes, the "Negro" had learned to survive by "digging" his filthiness. According to Mailer, if the white hipster admitted his own filthiness and learned to "dig" it, too, then he would become as masculine and sexually potent as the "Negro."

When English comedian/dramatist/doctor Jonathan Miller wrote an essay on Bruce, he titled it "The Sick White Negro," which misleadingly implied there was a difference between Bruce and Mailer's "White Negro" on the basis of Bruce being "sick." In actual fact, it was Bruce's sickness that made him the "White Negro" in the flesh. Critics called Bruce "sick"—*Time* magazine called Bruce the "sickest" of the new wave of comedians—because he laughed at "religious leaders," spoke openly about "his own checkered life," and performed satirical "political routines."¹²² Mailer's "White Negro" was also "sick" given that he flouted "the stable middle-class values so prerequisite to sublimation [that] have been virtually destroyed in our time, at least as nourishing values free of confusion or doubt."¹²³ Bruce personified Mailer's "White Negro" by declaring his love for jazz, by using used what Mailer identified as the key hipster words: "man, go, put down, make, beat, cool, swing, with it, crazy, dig, flip, creep, hip, square,"¹²⁴ and perhaps most importantly by displaying the purported "courage" to embrace the Other in himself. This courage, reflected in the term "I dig," is what provides the white hipster's "superiority over the Square." Without it, "you are less likely to be cool (to be in control of a situation because you have swung where the Square has not, or because you have allowed to come to consciousness a pain, a guilt, a shame or a desire which the other has not had the courage to face)."¹²⁵

Bruce's gleeful invocation of filth divided the audience into squares (Bruce's critics), who did not have the courage to embrace the Other in themselves, and rounders (Bruce's fans), who did. A *Variety* critic noticed this tendency, writing that Bruce "strays into areas that will bug the sensitive but completely gas the rounders in the audience."¹²⁶ Miller remembers that when Bruce played in England, "Ten days after his arrival everyone knew his name and even those

¹²⁰ Norman Mailer, "The White Negro," *Dissent* (Summer, 1957): http://www.dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/the-white-negro-fall-1957

¹²¹ Mailer, "The White Negro."

¹²² "The Sickniks," *Time*, July 13, 1959, 42.

¹²³ Mailer, "The White Negro."

¹²⁴ Mailer, "The White Negro."

¹²⁵ Mailer, "The White Negro."

¹²⁶ Review of Lenny Bruce, *Variety*, April 9, 1958, 111.

who knew only that felt qualified to hold a vehement opinion. Families divided and old friends drew daggers on each other.”¹²⁷ Bruce’s fans, the rounders, had become what Richard Schechner calls an integral audience. Unlike an accidental audience, which goes to “the theater [where] the performances are publically advertised and open to all, “[. . .] An integral audience is one where people come because they have to or because the event is of special significance to them. Integral audiences include the relatives of the bride and groom at a wedding, the tribe assembled for initiation rites, dignitaries on the podium for an inauguration. Avant-garde performers who send out mailings or who gather audiences mostly of people who have attended previous performances are in the process of creating an integral audience for their work, a supportive audience.”¹²⁸ The squares observed Bruce’s show from an accidental audience’s perspective, unaware that the punchline was their squeamishness. The rounders observed it from an integral audience’s perspective, taking pleasure in the shared feeling of superiority over the squares. Humor theorists might say Bruce created “superiority humor,” where one laughs because one feels superior to someone else.¹²⁹ Not surprisingly, critics bristled at Bruce’s and his fans’ air of superiority. “Evidently,” one wrote, “this hep youth thinks everybody else is ‘from Squaresville’ (his phrase). But on my score it is he who is the zero.”¹³⁰ Another felt that “Much of his material is not funny, nor in good taste, nor is there an air of wisdom and wit about it. But there is a gloss which gives the impression of being heady and iconoclastic. It’s these facets that keep him in high favor with the beat generation and their successors.”¹³¹ In Miller’s assessment, “many of [Bruce’s] followers get a lot of satisfaction imagining themselves as members of a new Hellfire aristocracy.”¹³²

As proof that Bruce was heady and iconoclastic, a rounder needed only to glance at the newspapers and magazines trashing Bruce’s shows. Reviewed more than a dozen times in *Variety*, Bruce almost always lost points for filthiness. One critic noted that audiences needed “intestinal fortitude” to watch Bruce, who worked “under some warped impression that a stream of non-sequiturs interlarded with back-fence language, qualifies as humor.”¹³³ Bruce’s language might have been appropriate behind closed doors or perhaps, as another critic joked, in a zoo “because there the more worldly are always able to take the young and uninitiated away from the front of a cage where the inner emotions of an animal bring on an obvious effect. Bruce’s

¹²⁷ Jonathan Miller, “The Sick White Negro,” *The Partisan Review* 30 (1963): 149.

¹²⁸ Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 186.

¹²⁹ Thomas Hobbes writes, “Sudden Glory is the passion which maketh those Grimaces called laughter, and is caused either by some sudden act of their own that pleaseth them, or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves.” See *Leviathan* (London: Andrew Crooke, 1651), 27.

¹³⁰ Gene Knight, *New York Journal-American*, March 11, 1960, 23.

¹³¹ Review of Lenny Bruce, *Variety*, May 17, 1961, 66.

¹³² Miller, “Sick White Negro,” 155.

¹³³ Review of Lenny Bruce, *Variety*, March 16, 1960, 67.

delivery and timing are excellent and his use of filth seems to be for shock alone.”¹³⁴ Yet another implied that his language belonged in a book on sexual perversity. He declared, “Lenny Bruce is billed as a comic but in spite of the billing he displays no humor nor real jokes. [The] Bulk of his act rotates around obscenity. The few times a fair gag dribbles out of his mouth it’s immediately shadowed in the foam of smut he lathers. If unprintable four-letter words and forced attempts at humor based on perversions heretofore limited to Kinsey’s Report are entertainment—then let the missiles fly.”¹³⁵ Not only *Variety* critics, but critics from dozens of publications, including *Time*, *Billboard*,¹³⁶ the *New York Post*,¹³⁷ the *New York Journal-American*, and *Cue* generally agreed that “no one can out-coarse him. He can and does flash some fine wit, but the pointless off-base belting tends to undermine his effect overall.”¹³⁸

Bruce’s legacy is based on the division between squares and rounders. For example, in the 1971 Broadway play *Lenny*, the squares and rounders map easily onto the protagonists and antagonists. The antagonists/squares include the First Cop (“it’s against the law. I’m gonna have to take you downtown”), the Second Cop (“You know that word you used? I got a wife and kids”), the D.A. (“Your honor, he said . . . blah-blahblah”), the Judge (“Blah-blahblah. This I never heard. He said blah-blahblah?”) and the Woman (“He’s guilty guilty guilty”). The protagonist, Lenny, has this to say about the antagonists: “Now if anyone in this room or in the world . . . finds those two words ‘to come’ decadent, obscene, immoral, amoral, asexual, if you think I’m rank for saying it, if you the beholder think it’s rank for saying it, if you, like that peace officer, would go into a courtroom and describe the act ‘to come’ as ‘perverse,’ then you probably can’t come.”¹³⁹ Aligned with Lenny, theatergoers could elevate themselves over those who once found “to come” disturbing. When the real Bruce said these same words, recorded for the album *To Is a Preposition, Come Is a Verb*, they could elevate themselves above the wave of critics who described Bruce’s move from strip clubs to mainstream nightclubs and comedy albums as the act of a “sick” mind.

As critics saw this happening, they openly resented the social capital Bruce had gained. A writer for *Cue*, a New York-based magazine, wrote, “He reminds me of the rather plain young man who wanted to join the leader group in high school and auditioned for membership by deliberate use of swear words in front of the little girls.” The *Cue* critic undermined Bruce’s class mobility by noting that he mispronounced big words: “A neophyte sesquipedalian, he sprinkles his monologues with polysyllabic words which, more likely than not, he mispronounces. The word subliminal, came out *sub-line-al* the night I attended his seminar at the Blue Angel.”¹⁴⁰ The

¹³⁴ Review of Lenny Bruce, *Variety*, October 12, 1960, 62.

¹³⁵ Review of Lenny Bruce, *Variety*, September 7, 1960, 53.

¹³⁶ Bob Rolontz, “Bruce Could Be Fine Comic—But,” *Billboard*, March 21, 1960, 32.

¹³⁷ Earl Wilson, “It Happened Last Night,” *New York Post*, March 11, 1960, 10.

¹³⁸ Review of Lenny Bruce, *Variety*, April 27, 1960, 64.

¹³⁹ Julian Barry, *Lenny: A Play by Julian Barry, Based on the Life and Words of Lenny Bruce* (New York: Grove, 1971), 83-91.

¹⁴⁰ Tim Taylor, “Comics with a Method,” *Cue*, March 26, 1960, 78.

Cue critic outed Bruce as a “prole.” As Fussell notes in his book *Class*, “Proles signal their identity partly by pronunciation, like the Texan on the Buckley show who said *pro-mís-kitty* and ‘I am a prole’ at the same time.”¹⁴¹ If Bruce had used filthy humor to create an in-group by outing middle-class critics as anal retentive and un-hip, the critic tried to reverse this process by outing Bruce as an uneducated prole.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, an Authentic Black Comic!!”

How Pryor’s Filth Became Associated with Hegemonic Impressions of African Americans

In their history of 20th-century American comedians, Laurence Maslon and Michael Kantor note, “When Lenny Bruce said [the n-word] in his act, it was shocking. When Pryor used it, it was an authentic statement.”¹⁴² While critics regularly accused Bruce of being inauthentic—of being shocking by pretending to be someone else—none ever accused Pryor of being inauthentic. Off-stage, Bruce was a white man, but when he went on stage and opened his mouth, he became a Jewish, lower-class joker. Off-stage, Pryor was a black man and when he opened his mouth before a white audience, he remained in their eyes a black man—Pryor’s working-class characters only further confirmed his blackness in a white audience’s eyes. Bruce became the grotesque as boundary phenomenon as he went on stage whereas Pryor was the grotesque as the “Other” both on-stage and off.

This characterization of Pryor’s relationship with white audiences might seem to contrast sharply with every other scholarly analysis of Pryor’s stage work. Mel Watkins’ history of African-American Humor, Bambi Haggins’ history of Post-Soul Black Comedians, and the essays in the edited collection *Richard Pryor: The Life and Legacy of a “Crazy” Black Man* focus mainly on Pryor’s talents as an actor and comedian. Two essays published elsewhere, one by Herman Beavers on Pryor and Eddie Murphy, the other by Glenda R. Carpio on Pryor and Dave Chappelle, make the important observation that, on stage, Pryor consistently referenced the pain inflicted by white supremacist ideology. Their observations suggest that Pryor served as an exception to bell hooks’s observation that “Black males are unable to fully articulate and acknowledge the pain in their lives. They do not have a public discourse or audience within racist society that enables them to give their pain a hearing. Sadly, black men often evoke racist rhetoric that identifies the black male as animal, speaking of themselves as “endangered species,” as “primitive,” in their bid to gain recognition of their suffering.”¹⁴³ Pryor gives his

¹⁴¹ Fussell, *Class*, 165.

¹⁴² Laurence Maslon and Michael Kantor, *Make 'Em Laugh: The Funny Business of America* (New York: Twelve, 2008), 351.

¹⁴³ bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 34.

pain a hearing in, for example, *Live on the Sunset Strip*, a concert film released in 1982, when he tells the audience that

Racism is a bitch. You know, I mean, white people, it fucks you up, but what it does to black people is a bitch, because no matter—it's hard enough being a human being. It's really fuckin' hard enough just to be that. Right, just to go through everyday life without murdering a motherfucker. It's hard enough just to walk through life . . . decent . . . as a person. But here, there's another element added to it when you're black. The mothers've got that little edge on us—*it's enough to make ya crazy*. It's if you're in an argument with another man and he may be white, but it's man on man, and for a minute the shit get rough, and he ends up calling you “nigger!” You gotta go, “Aw shit. Fuck. Now I ain't no man no more, *nigger*, now I got to argue with that shit. Throw my balance all off.” But you know, it's an ugly thing. I hope someday they give it up.

By conveying his feelings of exasperation, Pryor uses the intimate relationship comics have with their audiences to develop a political subjectivity. These include his exasperation over the lack of African-American characters in Hollywood: “I went to see *Logan's Run*, right? They had a movie in the future called *Logan's Run*. Ain't no niggers in it! I said, ‘Well, white folks ain't planning for us to be here!’”¹⁴⁴ And over racial injustice in the south: “They give niggers [prison] time like it's lunch down there. You go down there looking for justice, that's what you find: Just Us.”¹⁴⁵ Pryor did not reduce his pain to a punchline. Functioning as a coping mechanism, the humor arose instead from highlighting the absurdity of racism—by taking the banality of hatred and making it funny.

Nevertheless, while no one would question that Pryor's immense talents enabled him to defend before white audiences anti-racist political views, discourses surrounding Pryor's legacy tend to downplay how racism problematized his relationship with white audiences. An almost exclusive focus on Pryor's achievements is problematic, because it enables one to assume that Pryor had somehow conquered racism. Pryor's quandary evokes an observation Henry Louis Gates, Jr., makes in *The Future of the Race*, that we lack “a way of speaking about black poverty that doesn't falsify the reality of black advancement; a way of speaking about black advancement that doesn't distort the enduring realities of black poverty.”¹⁴⁶

Pryor did have white fans, but few openly admitted, as did the *Times* critic quoted earlier, that they first wanted Pryor to stop being “a very scary man, a black Lenny Bruce . . .”¹⁴⁷ A brief look at *Richard Pryor: Live and Smokin'*, a film shot in a New York night club in 1971, shows how white audiences might have once seen Pryor as “scary.” During the show, Pryor says as an unseen group of people walk out during his show, “I hate to see folks leave when I be talking! I hope y'all get raped by black folks with clap! . . . And nothing worse than black clap.” Unlike his later work, in which Pryor seems relatively jovial as he jokes about racial profiling,

¹⁴⁴ Richard Pryor, *Bicentennial Nigger*, Warner Bros. BS 2960, LP, 1976.

¹⁴⁵ Richard Pryor, *Is It Something I Said?*, Warner Bros. MSK 2285, LP, 1975.

¹⁴⁶ Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Cornel West, *The Future of the Race* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1996), 38.

¹⁴⁷ Leonard, “Vidcult.”

here Pryor sneers disdainfully as he remembers growing up in his grandmother's brothel. "White people," he says, would

come through our neighborhood to help "the economy." Nice white dudes though, 'cause I coulda been a bigot, you know what I mean? I coulda been prejudiced! [*Pauses for four seconds as he eyes the room.*] I coulda been prejudiced! I coulda been, man! But I met nice white men. They used to come up and go, [*in a nerdy white-guy voice*] "Hello little boy, is your mother home? I'd like a blowjob!" I wonder what would've happened if niggers had've gone through white neighborhoods. "Hey man, is your mama home? Tell the bitch we wanna fuck."¹⁴⁸

Even if Pryor were not prejudiced, he was clearly and justifiably angry. At this point in his career, however, as he later told *Sepia*, "I couldn't get a job nowhere except for about three clubs. It was mostly pimps, whores, and junkies who liked me—the same people I was 'doing' onstage. They could relate. They was my whole audience for a few years. Middle-class blacks turned their backs. But I said I ain't going to change my shit just because they say I shouldn't talk that way . . . I didn't change, I just kept going, and the niggers that was kickin' my ass now want my autograph."¹⁴⁹

Despite his claims to the contrary, Pryor did go on to "change his shit" by seeming less angry. By 1974, signs of Pryor's anger had subsided as his album *That Nigger's Crazy* "crossed over to a white audience, went gold, and won the Grammy."¹⁵⁰ He co-starred in two Lily Tomlin comedy specials for television, made regular appearances on TV talk shows, and began taking on major roles in Hollywood films. Even when he discussed racism, as he did in his appearance on Dinah Shore's daytime talk show in 1975, he appeared relaxed and congenial:

SHORE: I don't know how you feel about the title of your album, but I find it difficult to say.

PRYOR: You do? Most white people—it's hard to say "crazy." [*The studio audience laughs.*]

SHORE: You tell them the title of the album, I can't say that.

PRYOR: The title of the album is *That Nigger's Crazy*, and don't that nigger look crazy? [*Shows the audience the album cover.*]

SHORE: See, you can just say that! If I said that, wouldn't you get mad?

PRYOR: I'd punch you out! [*Everyone laughs.*]

SHORE: Of course! I knew it! [*Starts to mumble.*]

PRYOR: See, niggers can say nigger with different feelings. "Hey nigga, what's happening? Nigga! My nigga!" But white people say, "Hey nig-ger." [*Drops into a southern, hillbilly accent.*] "C'mon nigger, I'm gonna tell you something. See that tree? Go hang yourself on it."¹⁵¹

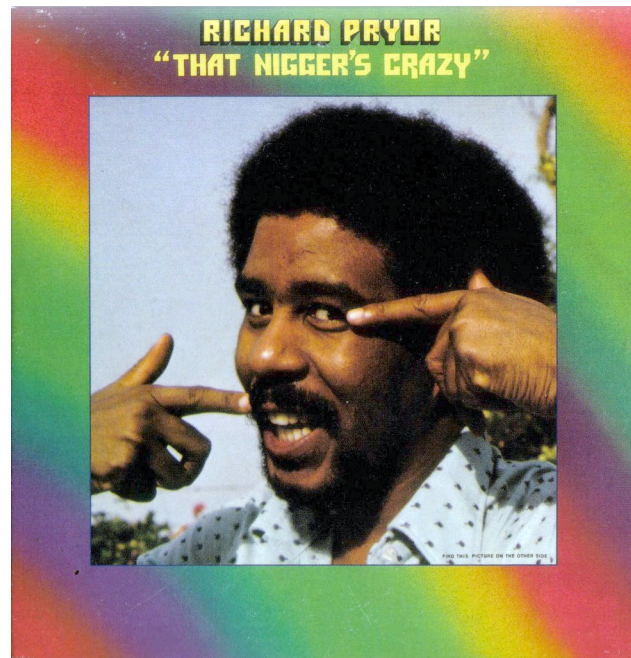
¹⁴⁸ Richard Pryor, *Live and Smokin'*, directed by Michael Blum (Orland Park, IL: MPI Home Video, 2001).

¹⁴⁹ Pauline Terkel, "Richard Pryor: UNCENSORED!" Interview with Richard Pryor, *Sepia*, August, 1977, 30.

¹⁵⁰ Maslon and Kantor, *Make 'Em Laugh*, 351.

¹⁵¹ *Life of Pryor: The Richard Pryor Story*, (BBC, October 14, 2006), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SGDCuAiwOHk>

When Shore says, “I knew it,” she hints at the subtext of Pryor’s use of the n-word. She senses that her use of the word would inflict pain on Pryor, who resignifies *That Nigger’s Crazy* as a metaphor for “That Oppressed Person Is Traumatized.” Using the word to demonstrate the painful impact it has had on him, Pryor evidently succeeds given that in their interaction Shore begins to reflect upon how the n-word has “become the site for the power to injure.”¹⁵² In order to further emphasize the word’s injurious role, Pryor impersonates a white southerner who uses the word to persuade an African American into hanging himself.



As she looked at the cover of Pryor’s album, talk show host Dinah Shore admitted she found “it difficult to say.” She sensed that her use of a racial epithet would inflict pain on Pryor, who resignified *That Nigger’s Crazy* as a metaphor for “That Oppressed Person Is Traumatized.”

On the other hand, the word’s rhetorical limits are evident: his use of the word is open to misinterpretation, considering that Pryor needs to clarify himself.¹⁵³ Within the context of a daytime talk show hosted by the cheerful Shore, the focus turns away from Pryor’s trauma; the lasting impression is, instead, Shore’s and Pryor’s ability to laugh and smile throughout their conversation, as if they share the same point of view. Perhaps it was moments like this that went

¹⁵² Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 100.

¹⁵³ The similarities between Pryor’s dilemma and that of comedian Dave Chappelle’s have been explored in Glenda R. Carpio, “The Conjuror Recoils: Slavery in Richard Pryor’s Performances and Chappelle’s Show,” in *Laughing Fit to Kill: Black Humor in the Fictions of Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 72-117 and Kimberley A. Yates, “When Keeping It Real Goes Right,” in *Dave Chappelle: Critical Essays*, ed. K.A. Wisniewski (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2009), 139-155.

into Pryor's decision in 1980 to drop the n-word from his act. "Its connotations weren't funny, even when people laughed," Pryor wrote. "I felt its lameness. It was misunderstood by people. They didn't get what I was talking about. Neither did I."¹⁵⁴

By the mid-1970s, when Pryor began seeming less angry, white critics began noting that both white and black audiences could appreciate the humor. Pryor, they wrote, "speaks to blacks in terms blacks understand but any save a very thin-skinned white can [also] appreciate,"¹⁵⁵ and "can talk about sex in a way that would make anybody, black or white, fear to try it again for fear of making a fool of himself."¹⁵⁶ David Felton, the *Rolling Stone* journalist who attended the performance where *Live in Concert* was filmed, estimated that the audience "was seventy-percent white." Writing from the perspective of a white audience member, he added, "I think what happens is you come to the show with all these fears inside you—racial, cultural, sexual—and Pryor assaults you with them right off the bat. But now you experience these fears under the warm shelter of mass laughter. It puts you at ease, with yourself and the people around you. And it puts you at ease with Pryor."¹⁵⁷ By "all these fears inside you," Felton conflated the fears of black and white audience members, if only because a white audience member's racial fears would have presumably differed from a black audience member's. Implicit in these assessments by white critics was an assumption that Pryor allowed white audiences to see themselves as citizens of a post-racial world where they had the same experiences black audiences did.

This part of Pryor's crossover appeal distinguished him from other black artists. For example, as Phillip Brian Harper argues, Diana Ross and the Supremes' crossover appeal "effaced" their "black identity . . . in an appeal to the wide 'pop' audience in which a recognizably 'professional' 'style' is the factor of paramount importance."¹⁵⁸ White audiences identified with the Supremes' desire for upward mobility and lived vicariously through the Supremes' success. In contrast, white audiences saw Pryor as an authentic (i.e. working-class) black man. Felton admitted as much when he shared his first impression of Pryor. "Pryor was far better, far blacker and truer to life than television's official black comic of the time, Bill Cosby," he wrote in 1974. "At any rate I expected that Pryor's talent would soon overshadow Cosby's in the minds of America's vast viewing public. But that has yet to happen, and, thanks to television and all other white-controlled media, I no longer expect it to."¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁴ Pryor and Gold, *Pryor Convictions*, 175. Although more than 30 years have passed since Pryor's trip to Africa, which he claims led him to renounce the n-word in his act, the word remains as polarizing as ever. For a close analysis of Pryor's use of the term, see Jacquelyn Rahman, "The N Word: Its History and Use in the English Language," *Journal of English Linguistics* (July 31, 2011): 1-35, doi:10.1177/0075424211414807.

¹⁵⁵ Review of Richard Pryor, Zulema, *Variety*, October 16, 1974, 64.

¹⁵⁶ Review of Richard Pryor, Etta James, Johnny Shine, *Variety*, October 16, 1975, 13.

¹⁵⁷ David Felton, "Richard Pryor's Life in Concert," *Rolling Stone*, May 3, 1979, 52.

¹⁵⁸ Phillip Brian Harper, "'Synesthesia,' 'Crossover,' and Blacks in Popular Music," *Social Text* 23 (Autumn-Winter, 1989): 109.

¹⁵⁹ Felton, "Life in Concert," 42.

By “Pryor,” Felton meant a stage persona based partly on the wide range of characters Pryor acted out in his routines. The characters, as most analyses of Pryor’s performances have stressed, all avoid the minstrel stereotype. Writing in the *New York Times* in 1975, James McPherson noted that his characters include

a philosophical wino who hands out advice to passersby, including Dracula and a junkie; the denizens of an after-hours joint; a meek blue-collar drunk who picks his weekly fight in a barroom, is beaten, then goes home to his wife bragging that he will make love to her, only to fall asleep; a pool shark named The Stroker; a braggart named Oilwell who showers policemen with muscular rhetoric; a white policeman named Officer Timson; a whore named Big Black Bertha; black preachers, hillbillies and assorted minor characters—all of whom have individualized qualities. Not one is a stereotype.¹⁶⁰

Pryor allowed white viewers to believe they were not viewing a cruel minstrel stereotype. “[T]he stereotype,” as Homi Bhabha defines it, “is a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always ‘in place,’ already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated.”¹⁶¹ Pryor’s range of characters subverted the minstrel stereotype by supplanting what Bhabha calls its “fixity.” By moving rapidly from one character impression to the next, Pryor turned his performance into a site where notions of an African-American identity could not be reduced to a singular, “fixed” concept. And by stressing the irreducible differences between each character, Pryor participated in the kind of discourse Bhabha encourages. What is denied the colonial subject, both as colonizer and colonized,” Bhabha writes, “is that form of negation which gives access to the recognition of difference. It is the possibility of difference and circulation which would liberate the signifier of *skin/culture* from the fixations of racial typology, the analytics of blood, ideologies of racial and cultural dominance or degeneration.”¹⁶² Pryor’s juxtaposition of different African-American types discouraged audiences from reducing blackness to a fixed type. As Carpio notes, “Without Pryor’s unmatched gift for delivery, his play with stereotypes could be seen as simply vulgar or even scandalous (especially since it involves his controversial use of the ‘N’ word).”¹⁶³

But while white viewers could imagine they were not viewing a cruel stereotype, they could nevertheless appropriate Pryor’s performances for their own ends. As white audiences saw Pryor’s stage character as more sanguine and less “scary,” they found him to offer a safe glimpse into purportedly authentic black culture. In fact, when Pryor crossed over, most of his criticism came from black critics. *Ebony*, *Jet*, *Sepia*, and *Encore American & Worldwide News*, magazines with mostly black readerships, all published critical reactions to Pryor’s popularity. In letters to the editor, readers objected to “the characters he plays—wild and ignorant niggers without any morals,”¹⁶⁴ to the popular belief that his “four letter words have something to do with black

¹⁶⁰ James MacPherson, “The New Comic Style of Richard Pryor,” *The New York Times*, April 27, 1975.

¹⁶¹ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2004), 94-5.

¹⁶² Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, 108.

¹⁶³ Carpio, “The Conjuror Recoils,” 72.

¹⁶⁴ Letter to the Editor, *Ebony*, March 1978, 14.

culture and black manhood,”¹⁶⁵ and to the “language he uses when talking about women, both black and white.”¹⁶⁶ A minority of published letters defended Pryor. One wrote that “his use of the word ‘nigger’ doesn’t mean to downgrade us. We use it in everyday talk. It’s slang black to black.”¹⁶⁷ Another claimed that even though he did not find Pryor’s vulgarities “too funny,” he still believed that “the man carries a message, and I don’t think I’m sickening for listening. I know how to face reality, baby. Don’t criticize him because Richard Pryor, myself, and other listeners know what’s happening.”¹⁶⁸

While some black listeners claimed to “know what’s happening,” others showed concern with how Pryor represented black people to white people. One reader surmised that the reason “Whites won’t believe that there are Black lawyers or brain surgeons is because people like Pryor are constantly portraying Black women as prostitutes and Black men as winos.”¹⁶⁹ Whites, the reader warned, will use Pryor’s performances as confirmation of their beliefs that black people belong within a subjugated class. Pryor was well aware that some white audience members had misinterpreted his performances as a window into black culture. A *Jet* reporter explained,

Pryor’s humor has been described as coarse, crude and ribald, but [Pryor] insists, “What I talk about is real in a segment of the Black community. Understand me, a *segment* of the Black community. We have Black pilots, congressmen, publishers and other important people. But we also have the people who I talk about—junkies, prostitutes, pool shooters and drunks. And everyone knows about them.

“I always get mad, though,” Pryor continues, “when people think I’m talking about *all* Blacks when I do my show. I’m just talking about one segment.”¹⁷⁰

Sepia publisher Beatrice Pringle implied in an editorial that no matter Pryor’s intentions, white audiences would see a correspondence between his characters and racist stereotypes. Describing Pryor’s use of motherfucker and the n-word as “filth,” Pringle declared that it reflected poorly on Pryor’s race because it “cater[ed] to all the racial stereotypes with which white bigots have long branded [black people].”¹⁷¹ Whenever black people used these words in the presence of white people, they marked themselves as the underclass, which white people would take as confirmation of racist stereotypes.

Although white critics and reporters did not explicitly equate all black people with Pryor’s referent, the black underclass, they did come close. A *Variety* critic reassured white

¹⁶⁵ Letters, *Sepia*, December 1977, 8.

¹⁶⁶ Letters, *Sepia*, July 1977, 6.

¹⁶⁷ Letters, *Sepia*, July 1977, 6.

¹⁶⁸ Letters, *Sepia*, October 1977, 6.

¹⁶⁹ Letter to the Editor, *Ebony*, April 1978, 18.

¹⁷⁰ Robert A. DeLeon, “Richard Pryor Looks to ’75,” *Jet* January 9, 1975, 59-60.

¹⁷¹ Beatrice Pringle, “Racial Profanity,” *Sepia*, January 1977, 5.

readers that Pryor's obscenities were not really obscenities, because these were "terms blacks understand": "After awhile, words like nigger and other [well-known] black street terms, which might be profanity in some situations, are hardly noticed. Pryor speaks to blacks in terms blacks understand, but any save a very thin-skinned white can appreciate it, too."¹⁷² A white person can appreciate it, "it" referring apparently to the way purportedly authentic black people talk. Another critic noted that Pryor is "playing to 'his' people, but he doesn't go out of his way to make it difficult for others to share in the fun. He needles 'whitey,' but assorted soul brothers also get jocular jabs."¹⁷³ This critic implied that Pryor did not engage in reverse racism because he ribbed soul brothers and whitey. Yet another critic admitted of Pryor's stand-up performances that "There is perhaps more than some people can stand, or will consider 'necessary' to get a laugh. In defense of the latter, Pryor does not use a scatological line to shock and bring about laughter. He will use a line of profanity in the manner that it is heard within the Inner City."¹⁷⁴ Pryor's obscenities apparently reflected what one heard within the inner city, by which the critic meant urban black communities. Obscenities became what another critic called "a meaningless ritual that hardly shocks anybody these days. He just uses those words as a rhythmic background to some exceedingly funny concepts."¹⁷⁵ Unlike Bruce, who shocked because he might lead white, middle-class audiences astray, Pryor did not shock. Critics implicitly reassured readers that white audiences would not emulate Richard Pryor, because the "rhythmic," filthy aspects of his routines applied only to "his people." The term "rhythmic" seems racially charged, suggesting a kind of tribal, inherently musical speech.

In one sense, Bruce and Pryor did play similar roles. Compared to a white norm, both seemed "Blacker," i.e. more like the Other. They enabled white audiences to fulfill their "desire to make contact with those bodies deemed Other." By expressing "no apparent will to dominate," this contact, bell hooks explains, "assuages the guilt of the past, even takes the form of a defiant gesture where one denies accountability and historical connection."¹⁷⁶ As someone who was actually African American and who impersonated lower-class African Americans, Pryor did not represent white audiences in the same way Bruce did, however. Noting that Pryor spoke to "his people," critics referred to a divide between themselves and Pryor. In Pryor's case, since he remained black when he walked off stage, he could never represent whiteness and would remain a troubling symbol of America's racist past and present. But in Bruce's case, fans re-whitened Bruce by ritually resignifying his filth as a healthy form of catharsis.

¹⁷² Review of Richard Pryor, Zulema, *Variety*, October 16, 1974, 64.

¹⁷³ Review of Richard Pryor, Pointer Sisters, *Variety*, June 4, 1975, 58.

¹⁷⁴ Leroy Robinson, "Pryor Puts True Soul in Comedy," *Billboard*, May 4, 1974, 39.

¹⁷⁵ Review of Richard Pryor, Etta James, and Johnny Shine, *Variety*, October 16, 1975, 13.

¹⁷⁶ bell hooks, "Eating the Other," in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston, MA: South End, 1992), 25.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, He’s Actually Authentic!!”

How Bruce Became Known as an Authentic Ritual Overseer

Whether Bruce was authentic or inauthentic is not the point here. The point is, first, that the appeal of Bruce’s performances to white hipsters lay in their violation of boundaries surrounding acceptable behavior. Second, fans denied this appeal by framing Bruce as an authentic figure who spoke “the truth.” The dominant narrative is that Bruce was a heroic critic whose truth-telling inspired a mass following. This version of history started while Bruce was still alive and was supported by tales implying that he oversaw a *ritual* as opposed to a *theatrical* event.

According to Schechner, the distinction between ritual and theater is blurry, with the two situated on opposite ends of a continuum. In general, participants view theater as mere entertainment and ritual as an event that produces results:

EFFICACY Ritual	↔	ENTERTAINMENT Theater
results		fun
link to an absent Other		Only for those here
symbolic time		emphasis now
performer possessed, in trance		performer knows what s/he’s doing
audience participates		audience watches
audience believes		audience appreciates
criticism discouraged		criticism flourishes
collective creativity		individual creativity

Ritual vs. Theater¹⁷⁷

Bruce’s shows did contain theatrical elements—he expressed individual creativity, the audience was supposed to have fun and was not supposed to heckle. Fans, however, have downplayed the theater, preferring instead to emphasize his performance’s ritualistic elements. Speaking as a fan, Kofsky claims that Bruce’s language—described by Bruce as being “flavored with the jargon of the hipster, the argot of the underworld, and Yiddish”¹⁷⁸—had the sole “purpose of conveying his own attitudes, his own stance vis-à-vis the dominant culture.”¹⁷⁹ Reducing the function of

¹⁷⁷ Schechner, *Performance Theory*, 116.

¹⁷⁸ Lenny Bruce, *How to Talk Dirty and Influence People* (New York: Fireside, 1992), 5.

¹⁷⁹ Kofsky, *Social Critic*, 73.

Bruce's language to the act of personal expression mystifies Bruce's social role and allows fans to see themselves as righteous worshippers. One such worshipper is Barry Sanders, who claims in *Sudden Glory: Laughter as Subversive History*, "It was [. . .] Bruce's penchant for the truth in his terms—let the chips fall where they may—that accounted for both his ever-growing following (especially among the young), and the equally growing wave of persecution and vilification to which he was subjected."¹⁸⁰ What this kind of narrative emphasizes is not Bruce's role as a stage performer but rather his role as a ritual overseer. Even when fans noted that Bruce was funny, they privileged Bruce's truth-telling. For instance, jazz critic Ralph J. Gleason wrote, "With Shaw's concept that if you wish to tell people the truth you must first make them laugh, holding them like a safety-belt in a hot rod. Bruce burns rubber as he sheers across our safety zones."¹⁸¹

Fans did not describe Bruce as an actor who brought about a fun time. Even though Bruce was an actor and his fans did have a fun time, his followers denied the performance's theatricality. Instead, they framed Bruce as having "had a mission: to tell a new story, to narrate the world differently. Here was the revolution he handed audiences, showing them carnival as a continuous way of life, the world upside down as the normal state of affairs. And if he could do it, so could anyone else. This was no act. Unlike Shelley Berman or Mort Sahl, he assembled no character up there on the stage. He was all Lenny Bruce."¹⁸² Both fans and critics reframed Bruce as a ritual leader by claiming that his performances produced results, for better or for worse. Even Bruce, without a hint of irony, defended his routines by comparing himself to Christian evangelist Billy Graham.¹⁸³ One of Bruce's first admirers in the press, Herb Caen of the *San Francisco Chronicle*, called Bruce "a rebel, but not without a cause, for there are shirts that need unstuffing, egos that need deflating, and precious few people to do the sticky job with talent and style."¹⁸⁴ The unstuffing of shirts, in the view of Bruce's critics, had harmful results. As the executive director of the Protestant Council told the court during Bruce's obscenity trial in New York City, "the constant use of both foul language, the offensive use of words and images would in my judgment . . . if anything, incite and increase the feelings of hostility towards others in the community."¹⁸⁵ Not long after his death, public opinion swayed strongly in Bruce's favor, but public discourse stayed focused on the impact he had. As William Paul put it, "In the elevation of Bruce, nonetheless, no one wanted to claim he died to make us dirty. Rather, praise focused on something quite different. . . . Bruce had *redeeming social importance*—

¹⁸⁰ Kofsky, *Social Critic*, 61.

¹⁸¹ Ralph J. Gleason, "Total Satire: The Comedy of Dissent," *Contact* 2.5, June 1960, 147.

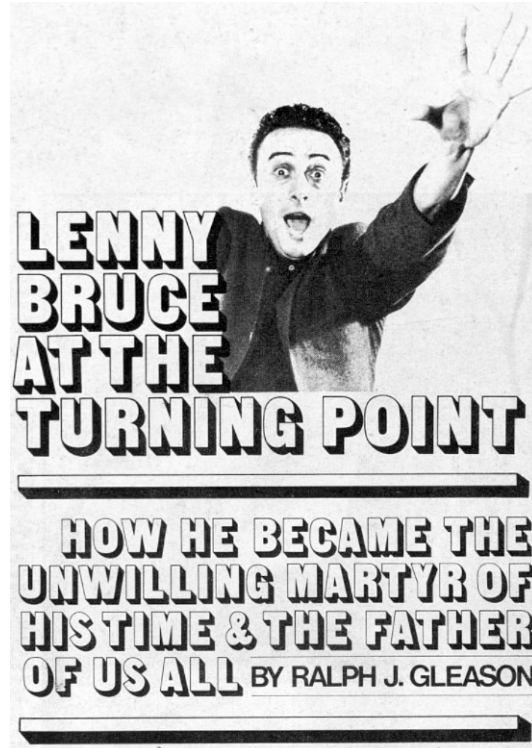
¹⁸² Barry Sanders, *Sudden Glory: A History of Subversive Laughter* (Boston: Beacon, 1995), 256.

¹⁸³ *Lenny Bruce: Swear to Tell the Truth*, directed by Robert B. Weide (New York, NY: HBO, 1998).

¹⁸⁴ Qtd. in Larry Siegel, "Rebel with a Cause," *Playboy*, February 1959, 78.

¹⁸⁵ Qtd. in Ronald K. L. Collins, and David M. Skover, *The Trials of Lenny Bruce: The Fall and Rise of an American Icon* (Naperville, IL: Source MediaFusion, 2002), 273.

obscurity did not exist for its own sake in his act, but rather provided a means to something higher.”¹⁸⁶



The headline to Ralph J. Gleason’s *Rolling Stone* profile of Bruce includes the kicker “how he became the unwilling martyr of his time & the father of us all.”¹⁸⁷

Bruce was to some extent a preacher, but he was also funny. And yet to acknowledge that obscenity existed for its own sake—that audiences enjoyed the filth and the theatricality—would allow critics to question the newfound “Hellfire aristocracy.” As a *Life* magazine critic remarked about the Broadway play *Lenny*, which opened in 1971 and ran for a year, it “polishe[d] Bruce’s cult-image, thus upping the sale value of his published works . . .”¹⁸⁸ The biopic *Lenny* (1974) further polished Bruce’s cult-image by telling two stories. The first is about a fun-loving comedian who loved his mother, found true love, worked hard at his act, and became the voice of his generation. This first story is supposed to make the audience enraged at the second story about how the censors destroyed Bruce’s life. A critic for *Texas Monthly* wrote about the film, that “for all the claims of authenticity, [the] screenplay pulls several punches—omitting many unflattering episodes, and glossing over much of the sickness and seediness of Lenny’s later years. We never learn, for example, about his penchant for ratting on his friends to mitigate his

¹⁸⁶ William Paul, *Laughing Screaming*, 41.

¹⁸⁷ Ralph J. Gleason, “Lenny Bruce at the Turning Point,” *Rolling Stone*, October 26, 1972, 32.

¹⁸⁸ Tom Prideaux, “Bruce, You’re Five Years Later,” review of *Lenny*, *Life*, June 25, 1971, 16.

own dope busts, or his compulsive sexual meanderings. And the ugly fact of his habit (mainlining drugs) is too lightly treated.”¹⁸⁹

Polishing Bruce’s cult-image involved drawing attention away from Bruce’s social position, which led to such wild claims as the following: “The most sedulous scholar would find it nearly impossible to demonstrate that [Bruce] owed anyone anything. . . . Comedically Bruce grew by himself in his own meager soil. It was watered and irradiated and polluted by the same things that affected his contemporaries, but where in them it produced weird growths common to them all, in him it produced a most exotic and monstrous plant, a fabulous fungus, a wonderweed.”¹⁹⁰ The plant metaphors (watered, irradiated, polluted, growths, fungus, wonderweed) make Bruce out to be some evolutionary miracle, ignoring Bruce’s contrived invocations of Jewishness, Blackness, and the lower classes, as well the disavowal of his comedic influences, many of which Albert Goldman highlights in his book. Bruce’s autobiography, first published serially in *Playboy* from 1963 to 1965, further erased any notion of class belonging. He wrote, for instance, “My friend Paul Krassner once asked me what I’ve been influenced by in my work.” After jokingly mentioning a few things (“my father telling me that my back would become crooked because of my maniacal desire to masturbate”), Bruce wrote, “It was an absurd question. / I am influenced by every second of my waking hour.”¹⁹¹

Playboy was an appropriate forum for Bruce’s pontificating. As editor Hugh Hefner explained in his “Playboy Philosophy,” the magazine allowed “enlightened self-interest” to flourish and frowned on those who “live out their entire existence in a group, of a group and for a group—never attempting to explore their own individuality, never discovering who or what they are, or might be.”¹⁹² Hefner and Bruce justified any ribald pleasure one might take in their work by claiming they had a higher purpose—to put their own individuality on display. William Karl Thomas, who helped Bruce write the autobiography, has commented on Bruce’s refusal to admit he belonged to a group. “As the book began to shape up,” he wrote, “I suggested to Lenny that it might be more realistic and inspiring to hear him acknowledge moments of recognition, evolution, and redirection in his career, to know that he had shared and respected the creative talents of others, and that he was not born super-hip, that there was the slightest glimmer of humility in him. But it seemed his concept of the book was that the message of the comedy material and the court cases was paramount, and anything in between had to be ribald anecdotes.”¹⁹³ Goldman remarked that, at the very least, Bruce could have acknowledged Joe Ancis, the legendary underground comedian, one-time friend of Bruce’s, and widely noted model for Bruce’s comedic voice. According to Goldman, Bruce barely knew any Yiddish until he saw Ancis perform and decided to incorporate it into his act.¹⁹⁴

¹⁸⁹ Katharine Lowry, Review of *Lenny*, *Texas Monthly*, January 1975, 39.

¹⁹⁰ Tony Hendra, *Going Too Far* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1987), 114-115.

¹⁹¹ Lenny Bruce, *How to Talk Dirty*, 188.

¹⁹² Hugh M. Hefner, “Playboy Philosophy,” *Playboy*, July 1963, 49.

¹⁹³ William Karl Thomas, *Lenny Bruce: The Making of a Prophet* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1989), 119.

¹⁹⁴ Goldman 146-170.

Fans have further scrubbed the filthiness from Bruce's legacy by drawing attention away from the pleasure they take in hearing filth and turning attention toward the squares who openly criticized Bruce. Constantly remarked upon by critics and by Bruce himself, those who walked out of his show became a remarkable part of his performance. Goldman illustrates these moments by re-enacting a scene where Bruce divides the showroom into squares and rounders:

With all the laughter, Lenny is getting walkouts [those so offended they walk out of Bruce's show]. One middle-aged man, very red in the face, is hustling his wife into her mink stole as he glares disapprovingly around the room. He isn't going to pay his money to hear this filth! [. . .]

The walkouts make the people who remain feel even closer to Lenny. They're the insiders. They dig what he's putting down. Fuck the squares!¹⁹⁵

By dwelling on the walkouts' response to Bruce's filth, fans have denied the theatrical aspects of Bruce's performances and instead focused on the ritualistic aspects. The walkouts' responses reinforce the group formations his performances created through cultural ritual. As Schechner notes, the relationship between the audience/spectators and the performance is a key difference between theater and ritual:

Theater comes into existence when a separation occurs between spectators and performance. The paradigmatic theatrical situation is a group of performers soliciting an audience who may or may not respond by attending. The audience is free to come or stay away—and if they stay away it is the theater that suffers, not its would-be audience. In ritual, staying away means rejecting the congregation, or being rejected by it, as in schism, excommunication, or exile. If only a few stay away, it is they who suffer; if many stay away, the congregation is in danger of schism or dissolution.¹⁹⁶

When those who disagree with the performer's (lack of) values walk out, those who remain regard the walkouts with disdain. In Bruce's case, the walkouts became a punchline whose anti-social behavior deserved some commentary. The added commentary is itself a way of reframing the performance as a ritual. For example, when a couple walked out during the Chicago show that led to another obscenity arrest, Bruce reassured his fans that these walkouts—these people who stayed “away”—had not put “the congregation” “in danger of schism or dissolution.” He said, “They were very nice people, they could have been very ugly about it, they could have been. No, they were cool, gentle—they didn't like it and they split.”¹⁹⁷

This reframing of Bruce's performances as rituals let fans avoid consciously acknowledging the exploitative dimensions of Bruce's performances. For example, Kofsky sees the “How to Relax Your Colored Friends at Parties” sketch as evidence that Bruce was a moral critic who championed the underdog. While this is true, Kofsky goes a step further by claiming that Bruce was “culturally Black.”¹⁹⁸ Instead of underscoring the moral message, Kofsky underscores the role blackness plays in Bruce's heroic status. Bruce himself co-opts blackness in

¹⁹⁵ Goldman, *Ladies and Gentlemen*, 58.

¹⁹⁶ Schechner, *Performance Theory*, 121.

¹⁹⁷ Qtd. in Bruce, *How to Talk Dirty*, 142.

¹⁹⁸ Kofsky, *Social Critic*, 90-91.

another bit, in which he says, “I got white shoes now. I really like them. This is the first present I ever got. The guy said to me, he said, ‘I really dug your work and I wanna give you a pair of shoes.’ / I felt colored. Cause that’s what they gave colored people—shoes. Shoes, or, ‘I’ll give you a jacket.’”¹⁹⁹ It would not be the only time Bruce claimed to know what it felt like to be “colored.” As he told Justice Thurgood Marshall (who would later become the first black Supreme Court Justice), his censorship trial was treating him “like a nigger who wants to use a toilet in Alabama.” When Marshall said, “You’re not a Negro, Mr. Bruce,” he replied, “Unfortunately not, Your Honor.”²⁰⁰ Bruce declared his desire to be black, but his performances in no way problematized his imaginary concept of blackness. In fact, according to Thomas, Bruce would “make the same mistake of many non-blacks, who thought that because ‘some of their best friends were black’ they understood the ‘black experience’ which, in reality, is as large and diverse a complex of attitudes and subcultures as any other ethnic group.”²⁰¹ Thomas adds, “He felt safe with the image of the [‘Amos ’n’ Andy’ character] ‘Kingfish’ and all the black hookers, but was uneasy in any straight black society, and all the more so among cultured blacks.”²⁰² Bruce makes his ignorance toward racial inequality apparent when he implies in the routine “Negro ‘Help’ Help” that by the 1960s black people had achieved equality in the workplace.” He claimed that “there’s no more ‘help’ help. Negroes knew that, that you were considered *schwarzes*, second-rate help. The Negro’s gone now. Puerto Ricans? Too much garbage to get them to help us. So there’s nobody left. Would any contemporary Negro serve you fried chicken and watermelon? I doubt it. Nor would they send their children to tap-dancing school to entertain Boss Charley.”²⁰³ Bruce’s performance was good enough, however, to persuade Kofsky that Bruce “was too intimately involved with Black people—they comprised, he estimated at one point, about 30 percent of his audience—not to know that they would scarcely be grateful for tokenistic gestures on the part of white liberals.”²⁰⁴ Statements such as these have been part of the ritual redefining of Bruce’s filth. Instead of describing Bruce as a comedian who masqueraded as an outsider, Kofsky reduces Bruce’s role to the one in his book’s subtitle: “Social Critic and Secular Moralist.”

To have admitted that one enjoyed Bruce's filthiness, given that Bruce was a white man, was to call into question whiteness as a middle-class and respectable category. One may have enjoyed filthiness because it generated social capital, but one could not actually point to filthiness and call it filthiness without troubling whiteness (as implicitly mongrelized through ethnic and class diversities). Pryor constantly critiqued whiteness, but because he was black, white critics did not see his filthiness as a symbol of *white* filthiness. Instead, by announcing how

¹⁹⁹ Bruce, *Essential Lenny Bruce*, 23.

²⁰⁰ Qtd. in Paul Krassner, *Confessions of a Raving, Unconfined Nut: Misadventures in the Counterculture* (Berkeley, CA: Soft Skull, 2012), 121.

²⁰¹ Thomas, *Prophet*, 121-122.

²⁰² Thomas, *Prophet*, 123.

²⁰³ Bruce, *Essential Lenny Bruce*, 23.

²⁰⁴ Kofsky, *Social Critic*, 43.

much they enjoyed Pryor's comedy, they made his criticisms of white people out to be just a joke (i.e. not threatening). As I argue in the next and final section, they became part of a mainstream discourse that reframed Pryor as a performer who belonged strictly in the world of the theater.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, He’s Actually Just an Actor!!”

How Pryor Became Known as a Theatrical Performer

In “Lenny Bruce: Hyperrealism and the Death of Jewish Tragic Humor,” Ioan Davies observes that “often Bruce is consumed with playing word games to show how the verbally obscene is normal, and how the language of the ‘people’ should be accepted as the language of the establishment (a strategy that has become successful: almost all of the words can be heard and viewed daily by anyone who has a VCR). But, if this is true, it is important to establish the context within which the “people” will continue to speak, even after their words are appropriated.”²⁰⁵ Davies’ claim, that “it is important to establish the context within which the ‘people’ will continue to speak, even after their words are appropriated,” implies problematically that there is an authentic, knowable and homogenous group of people out there. From whose point of view is a group of people to be “located and authenticated”? Davies’ claim recalls Gayatri Spivak’s critique of Western intellectuals whose representations of the Other are intended to preserve the intellectual’s purported objectivity. While “first-world intellectuals” may claim to be “interested in the voice of the Other,” Spivak writes, “one must nevertheless insist that the colonized subaltern *subject* is irretrievably heterogeneous.”²⁰⁶ Spivak’s critique of representations of the third-world subject in Western discourses speaks to a critique of mainstream assessments of Pryor, who represented the “voice of the Other,” the Other being an ostensibly homogenous group known as African Americans. As critics declared that Pryor’s filth was presented “in the manner that it is heard within the Inner City,” they associated filth with Otherness, not with whiteness. Whereas Bruce’s filth reflected poorly on white audiences, Pryor’s apparently did not. Pryor’s stand-up comedy certainly did criticize white people, and to an extent, reporters and critics acknowledged the truth of his anti-racist critiques. That said, he has not reached the level of Bruce’s sainthood. When Bruce became regarded as a ritual overseer, he became resignified as a healthy performer who showed the world how to live. In contrast, the emphasis on Pryor’s theatricality contested Pryor’s identity as a truth-teller. His alleged theatricality undermined his critiques by coding them as fiction, fun, and separate from important social problems.

²⁰⁵ Davies, “Hyperrealism,” 112.

²⁰⁶ Gayatri Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (London: Macmillan, 1988), 284.

Although, as Carpio thoroughly demonstrates, Pryor offered racial critiques that might have spurred audience self-reflection, I want to stress that Pryor often receives praise based on how well he could simultaneously entertain black and white audience members. Critics have described how audiences watched Pryor in awe of his talents, how everyone laughed, and how Pryor had perfected the art of stand-up comedy. Moreover, unlike Bruce, Pryor was not described as the same person on-stage and off; instead, the press portrayed Pryor as an actor who never realized in his off-stage life the genius he achieved in his on-stage character. Seeing Pryor in this way, white audiences could repress Pryor's efforts to implicate them in a racist history.

For example, in *Stand-up Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America*, the only book-length, scholarly study of stand-up comedy, John Limon's chapter on *Richard Pryor: Live in Concert* focuses on how the black and white audience, despite having to "live as a division," manage to "laugh as a unity."²⁰⁷ The question of Pryor's unifying powers also comes up in Richard Zoglin's history of American stand-up in the 1970s. He writes, "The black comics who reached out to white audiences before [Pryor] tried to foster racial understanding by stressing how much alike we are. Pryor rubbed our noses in the differences—and made us feel their universality."²⁰⁸ By "[rubbing] our noses in the differences" between people, Pryor was depriving certain groups of people of their dignity. He contrasted the social realities of racism with his own idealized perspective, in which people are not only created equal, they are all equally base. Viewed side-by-side, Pryor's character sketches constituted an appealing utopia where every conceivable object was equally oblivious to its apparent baseness. Limon makes this point, observing that during *Richard Pryor: Live in Concert*, whites and blacks may not laugh for the same reason but they do "laugh together and they laugh for the same duration."²⁰⁹ Limon refers to the opening minutes when Pryor "divides" the audience by distinguishing between the black and white members. He writes,

Who is at risk? First, the blacks: "You niggers takin' a chance in Long Beach, Jack." But no—a Richard Pryor concert is not white country, even at the Long Beach venue. "This is the fun part for me when the white people coming back after the intermission and find that niggers stole their seats. [One of Pryor's white voices, nasal:] 'Weren't we sitting there, dear?' [Black gangster voice:] 'Well, you ain't sittin' here now, motherfucker.'"²¹⁰

Pryor invokes "a cliché of black lawlessness and vulgarity,"²¹¹ but also announces that the white members are returning not just from any old place—they are apparently coming back from "the bathroom." By associating the black members with a base stereotype and the white members with a base activity, Pryor equalizes them: "Whites forfeit their class advantages when the abject

²⁰⁷ John Limon, *Stand-up Comedy in Theory, Or, Abjection in America* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2000), 84.

²⁰⁸ Richard Zoglin, *Comedy at the Edge: How Stand-up in the 1970s Changed America* (New York: Bloomsbury USA, 2008), 63.

²⁰⁹ Limon, *Abjection in America*, 85.

²¹⁰ Limon, *Abjection in America*, 83-84.

²¹¹ Limon, *Abjection in America*, 84.

calls; they have been separated in the process, but when they return, they have been equalized.”²¹²

While I am not criticizing Zoglin and Limon for celebrating Pryor’s talents, I do want to point out how their chapters on Pryor each describe him as a theatrical performer whose power lay not in persuading audiences to acknowledge racial inequality but rather in putting on a fun show where everyone laughs together. The whites are “equalized,” but only during the show; after the show, the material and symbolic realities of race remain intact. Critics could have framed Pryor as a ritualistic overseer had they focused on how well he may or may not have convinced audiences to recognize racist realities. But his overdetermined blackness prohibited Pryor from becoming known as a ritualistic overseer while, at the same time, it authenticated him before white audiences. As such, most framings went the route of David Felton’s 1974 *Rolling Stone* profile. Felton wrote that Pryor “has expanded stand-up comedy to the dimensions of pure theater, and has accurately presented the times we live in, perhaps in the only way the times we live can be presented accurately. Because of his ability to fragment his life and the life around him into bits and pieces, and to recreate those fragments onstage without contrivance, with intense feeling and absolute truthfulness.”²¹³ According to this framing, Pryor showed the audience “absolute truthfulness.” But a theatrical staging of truthfulness, as opposed to a ritualistic staging of it, moves the emphasis away from any redressive or reparative action once the performance is over. The concept of rituals of redress is important here. Carpio claims that Pryor used “the ‘N’ word and his host of stereotypical characters . . . to stage rituals of redress that would have a profound impact on the popular treatment of slavery in American culture and black comedy more generally.”²¹⁴ Carpio considers Pryor’s impact on Dave Chappelle, the African-American comedian who similarly tried to stage rituals of redress. While I agree that Pryor staged rituals of redress, my argument is that mainstream culture appropriated these rituals as theatrical events with little redressive value. Instead, Pryor’s performances became known less for their indictment of racism than for how everyone laughed while he poked fun at racial differences. The emphasis on black and white people laughing as a unity opens up an opportunity for white people to imagine Pryor’s performances helping wipe racism away and ushering in a post-racial America.

This problematic reframing of Pryor’s image is one Ed Guerrero has found in Pryor’s biracial buddy films with Gene Wilder, in particular *Silver Streak* (1976) and *Stir Crazy* (1980). In *Silver Streak*, Pryor plays Grover Muldoon, a happy-go-lucky thief who through a series of wacky mishaps winds up helping a white man named George Caldwell (Gene Wilder) rescue his love interest (Jill Clayburgh) from the clutches of Devereau, a white, smarmy, upper-class criminal (Patrick McGoochan). Pryor helps Wilder again in *Stir Crazy*, in which he plays actor Harry Monroe who along with Skip Donahue (Wilder) lands in jail after the pair are framed for armed robbery. As Guerrero notes, the films’ most famous scenes are also their most racially problematic. In *Silver Streak*, Grover helps George slip past the police by smearing shoe polish on George’s face and showing him how to act “black.” Similarly, in *Stir Crazy*, Skip acts black

²¹² Limon, *Abjection in America*, 85.

²¹³ Felton, “Jive Times: Richard Pryor, Lily Tomlin & the Theater of the Routine,” *Rolling Stone*, October 10, 1974, 42.

²¹⁴ Carpio, “The Conjuror Recoils,” 81.

when Harry tells him to “act bad”—code for “acting black”—because “if you don’t act bad [in jail], you’re gonna get fucked.” By suggesting that “blackness” is a contrived facade, each scene reinforces the myth that an African American’s presentation of self—including their request for empathy—is simply a pleasurable performance that should be treated frivolously, as if it were a fun theatrical form. While the suggestion that racial identity is a performance has subversive potential, here the performance seems pleasurable—as he acts “black,” dancing and shouting “outta sight!” and “that’s my man!,” George finally appears to be loosening up. He shows what bell hooks would later call “[t]he desire to make contact with bodies deemed Other,” which “establishes a contemporary narrative where the suffering imposed by structures of domination on those designated Other is deflected by an emphasis on seduction and longing where the desire is not to make the Other over in one’s image but to become the Other.”²¹⁵ In Pryor’s case, his anti-racist discourse is buried beneath the white character’s attempt to emulate his performance. Ironically, the apparent authenticity of Pryor’s star image, which had emerged out of a candidly political stand-up comedy act, worked to legitimize the scene’s racist subtext. Guerrero writes that “one could not imagine either of these scenes surviving without protest if it were not for Pryor’s star power or negotiating presence in them.”²¹⁶ Gene Wilder thought the same thing, as he explains in his autobiography: “There was one scene in *Silver Streak* that I thought might be its Achilles heel—when I’m in the men’s room putting on shoe polish, trying to pass as black. Before casting started, I told Laddie that I thought there was only one person who could play that scene with me and keep it from being offensive, and that was Richard Pryor. Laddie said, ‘That’s who we want.’”²¹⁷ And as Pryor himself told *The New York Times* in an interview from 1976, “Gene does a scene in black face, and they felt that having a real black actor in the movie would sort of make it all right. So I’m the token black, a modern Willie Best. It was a career move, and I’m not sorry I did it. But I’ll be glad when the movie is out and over with.”²¹⁸ (Willie Best was an African-American actor who, in Hollywood films from the 30s and 40s, played the stereotypical lazy, unintelligent, and servile black man.) Pryor described himself as “a *real* black actor”; perhaps what he meant is that his political, anti-racist star persona helped to legitimize Wilder’s blackface. The two scenes gain the apparently authentic impersonation of a black male that Pryor had developed in his stand-up act.

Even though Pryor’s stand-up routine invited audiences to acknowledge racial inequality, Hollywood cast Pryor in roles that catered to desires to regard Pryor’s pleas for empathy as a scam carried out by an African-American man who refused to take responsibility for himself. *Silver Streak*’s theatrical trailer serves up this closes with a clip where Pryor is obviously faking his trauma in an apparent effort to gain sympathy. “This has been a nerve-shattering experience

²¹⁵ hooks, “Eating the Other,” 25.

²¹⁶ Ed Guerrero, “The Black Image in Protective Custody,” In *Black American Cinema*, ed. Manthia Diawara (New York: Routledge, 1993), 241.

²¹⁷ Gene Wilder, *Kiss Me Like A Stranger: My Search for Love and Art* (New York: St. Martin's, 2005), 163.

²¹⁸ Guy Flatley. “At the Movies,” *New York Times*, August 6, 1976.

for me, sir!” he says to someone off-camera.²¹⁹ In two other scenes, a white character calls Grover “nigger.” The Pryor from his stand-up routines would not have let the moment pass without stressing the word’s injurious effects, whereas in the film Grover responds differently. The first instance occurs when a night watchman (Raymond Guth) catches Grover trying to steal a car off the watchman’s lot. He points a shotgun at Grover and says, “Hold it right there, nigger.” Feigning ignorance, Grover perks up and cheerily replies, “Hey! How you doing, old dude? What’s happening! . . . I was listening to the engine, man, sounds real good—does it come with white walls?” After George saves Grover by jumping the watchman from behind, Grover laughs heartily and the pair speed away. The second instance occurs when Grover, pretending to be a porter so as to infiltrate Devereau’s scheme, intentionally spills coffee on Devereau, who exclaims, “You ignorant nigger!” This time, Pryor pulls out a gun and shouts back, “Say man, who you calling nigger, huh? You don’t know me well enough to call me no nigger. I’ll slap that taste out your mouth. You don’t even know my name. I’ll whoop your ass, beat the white off your ass.” In the first instance, the film frames Grover as a subtle version of the Uncle Remus stereotype whose “mirth . . . has always been used to indicate the black man’s satisfaction with the system and his place in it.”²²⁰ In the second instance, Grover engages in male posturing, behaving like the stereotypical buck, “the white man’s notion of the all-powerful brutal black man.”²²¹ And in neither instance do we sense that Grover has suffered. Moreover, instead of indicting white supremacist ideology, the film attributes racism to a couple of bad apples.

Even though Pryor does appear to experience real suffering in *Stir Crazy* (he’s “stir crazy”), the film depoliticizes Harry’s pain as a product of his own idiosyncrasies, diminishes his pain to an emotional state shared with his white buddy, and finally displaces his pain entirely onto the buddy for whom Harry must care. Most of Harry’s comical moments feature him screaming hysterically as his situation goes from bad to worse, but in each—for example, Harry having a nervous breakdown as he’s marched into his cell for the first time—Harry comes off as someone suffering from his own demons. To further demonstrate that Harry’s hysteria has nothing to do with racism, the film pairs him with the even more hysterical Skip. Equating the black man’s experiences with the white man’s is a trope of the biracial buddy film which, as Cynthia J. Fuchs, explains serves as historical revisionism by erasing racial differences.²²² “[A] narrative of shared victimization,” bell hooks notes, “not only acts to recenter whites, it risks obscuring the particular ways racist domination impacts on the lives of marginalized groups.”²²³ In *Stir Crazy*, Harry’s role is largely to give Skip a dose of reality, to help him escape from

²¹⁹ “Movie trailer – Silver Streak,” *YouTube* video, 0:29, March 25, 2008, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NXwMClqVPhs>.

²²⁰ Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (New York, NY: Continuum, 2009), 8.

²²¹ Bogle, *Toms*, 242.

²²² Cynthia J. Fuchs, “The Buddy Politic,” in *Screening the Male*, eds. Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Park (Routledge: New York, 1993), 202-6.

²²³ hooks, “Eating the Other,” 13.

prison, and to ensure that in the end he gets the girl. Such films perpetuate the racist myth that an African American's duty is to care for his white masters.²²⁴

White audiences flocked to Pryor's bi-racial buddy films. *Silver Streak* was a surprise hit, thanks largely to Pryor's role which most critics claimed was the best thing about the picture.²²⁵ *Stir Crazy* was also a success, the third-highest grossing movie of 1980.²²⁶ As several scholars have noted, the Hollywood studios found in Pryor's bi-racial buddy films a genre that would appeal to both black and white audiences.²²⁷ Spelling the demise of blaxploitation and replacing it as the primary vehicle for black actors, the bi-racial buddy films erased any hint of racial oppression. In general, through such films, Pryor's star image was altered, from that of a black male asking America to acknowledge racism's painful effects on African Americans, to an idiosyncratic African American who exists for the audience's amusement. Pryor's problematic public image did not begin with his Hollywood film career, however, for Pryor's stand-up comedy was also being assessed for its capacity to provide an authentic representation of blackness and its capacity to unite mixed race audiences. When white critics assessed Pryor's film career, they dwelt on his inability to recreate the apparent authenticity of his stage act. In a *Rolling Stone* article titled "What's Wrong with Richard Pryor?," Michael Sragow bemoaned "Pryor's choice in fictional material," noting that "his movie characters have come off mostly as pale reflections of himself."²²⁸ Similarly, in her review of *Silver Streak*, Pauline Kael regrets the film's erasure of Pryor's "demonic, frazzled blackness": "Interracial brotherly love is probably the one thing that Richard Pryor should never be required to express. It violates his demonic, frazzled blackness. The suspense built into watching him is that we don't know what's coming out of him next, or where he's coming from. Those deep-set somewhere-else eyes and that private giggle don't tell us much, but they do tell us this: his comedy doesn't come from love thy white neighbor." As Jim Haskins remarks in his biography of Pryor, Kael "was about one hair breadth away from celebrating him as a 1970s version of the noble savage."²²⁹ This notion that Pryor should play only certain character types suggests that Kael valued his stand-up comedy for

²²⁴ Melvin Donalson, *Masculinity in the Interracial Buddy Film* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006), 9.

²²⁵ Review of *Silver Streak*, *Variety*, December 1, 1976.

²²⁶ "1980 Yearly Box Office Charts," *Box Office Mojo*, <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/yearly/chart/?yr=1980&p=.htm>.

²²⁷ See Catherine Squires, *African Americans and the Media* (Cambridge: Polity, 2009), 128-9; Krin Gabbard, *Black Magic: White Hollywood and African American Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2004), 175; Linda Holtzman and Leon Sharp, *Media Messages: What Film, Television, and Popular Music Teach Us About Race* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2000), 366; Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies*, revised ed. (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 1994), 332; Ed Guerrero, "Black Violence as Cinema: From Cheap Thrills to Historical Agonies," *Violence and American Cinema*, ed. J. David Slocum (New York: Routledge, 2001), 216.

²²⁸ Michael Sragow, "What's Wrong with Richard Pryor?" *Rolling Stone*, February 17, 1983, 41.

²²⁹ Haskins, *Richard Pryor*, 105.

its capacity to give her the experience of studying a racialized Other. She does not mention “the truth” of his performances, but rather their mimetic, theatrical aspects.

I contrast this discourse of Pryor as theatricalized Other with the discourse of Bruce as ritual overseer in order to emphasize that narratives pairing Pryor and Bruce together as stand-up’s founders conceal the critical differences between the roles each has played in the white imaginary. Pryor’s theatricality became an instance of what Stallybrass and White call the bourgeoisie using “the whole world as its theatre in a particularly instrumental fashion, the very subjects which it politically excludes becoming exotic costumes which it assumes in order to play out the disorders of its own identity.”²³⁰ Bruce used blackness to play out the disorders of his identity much in the way Pryor’s bi-racial buddy films projected blackness onto Pryor so as to play out the disorders of the white protagonist and his white audiences.

We also saw Pryor being framed as a theatricalized Other in the press. As Pryor’s stardom continued to rise, thanks in part to his charismatic performance in *Silver Streak*, the press began constructing Pryor’s public persona as a gifted actor and a failed human. Apparently, his off-stage troubles—a long-running drug addiction, domestic disputes, jail time for tax evasion, lackluster movie roles and brush with death when he set himself aflame—meant there were two Richard Pryors: the actor whose stage character indicted racism and the real Pryor whose foibles made his indictment of racism ring hollow. In a clear example of the press’ desire to look beyond Pryor’s performance in order to discover a flawed self, TV critic Kay Gardella dismissed Pryor’s 1979 interview with Barbara Walters as a failed attempt to indict a racist society:

The unpredictable comic, whose hostility to whites is expressed in cruel but brilliant humor, feels he will never achieve recognition. He wants people to look at him with their hearts, he tells Barbara. “Whatever you feel about me when you see me right now is the truth and don’t ever forget it,” he says. . . .

Either I was missing a few pieces of the Pryor puzzle or Barbara knows something she did not see fit to share with her viewers. It’s an effort to gloss over a subject, to help him present the image he prefers, but one the facts contradict.²³¹ Pryor’s private life did not “contradict” his politics, although they did divert attention away from it. Nevertheless, the press sought to draw attention to stories about the supposed “real” Pryor. For example, in 1978, *Parade* magazine published and responded to a letter from a reader who questioned whether the painful stories he told about growing up in his grandmother’s brothel were at all factual:

Q: Richard Pryor, the black comedian from Peoria, has been married how many times? Have all of his wives been black? Was he really raised in his grandmother’s bordello, or is that just publicity to make him glamorous?—B.R., Decatur, Ill.

A: To date Richard Pryor, 37, has been married five times—twice to white women, three times to black. He claims to have been reared in his grandmother’s brothel, and there is no reason to doubt him.²³²

²³⁰ Stallybrass and White, *Politics and Poetics*, 200.

²³¹ Kay Gardella, “Barbara Walters’ Big Trap,” *New York Daily News*, May 29, 1979.

²³² *Parade*, Letter to the Editor, April 23, 1978, Billy Rose Collection, New York Public Library.

(Note that his grandmother owned three brothels, not one, and that at this point in his life Pryor had actually been married three times, not five.) Pryor described his feelings without describing himself as flawed or as abnormal whereas certain others did the opposite; in this case, gossiping about interracial marriage (a taboo subject) amounted to a conspiracy to frame Pryor as deviant. Similarly, Pryor's director in *Blue Collar*, Paul Schrader, told *Newsweek* that Pryor's success depended on how well he could discipline himself: "Richard will be the biggest black star in history if he can keep the reins on himself or [bite] his tongue."²³³

In general, the press tried to pathologize Pryor's anger while in the same motion sweep aside his politics. A *Playboy* profile of Pryor from 1979 does both when it implies that Pryor has no right to express his pain because, apparently, racism has been to his *benefit* and not to his detriment:

It's difficult to describe this schizophrenic, torn, often unfunny funnyman. A former close friend, a witness to his blinding changes of temperament, probably comes closest: "He is, I think, a black, berserk angel." [. . .]

He may complain, as he did to Barbara Walters, that racism prevents him from being the biggest comedian in the business. But the obvious reply is that were it not for racism, he wouldn't be a big comedian today.²³⁴

As Krin Gabbard demonstrates in *Black Magic: White Hollywood and African American Culture*, the many Hollywood films featuring African Americans as angels "displace the realities of African American history into more viewer-friendly narratives."²³⁵ Something comparable occurs in the *Playboy* quote, with the author using the angel metaphor to frame Pryor as someone suffering from his own demons. Rather than grounding his demons in the material effects of racism, the author obscures Pryor's realities as berserkly angelic. The desire to frame Pryor in this way mirrors a widespread suspicion among white Americans that in the post-civil rights era black Americans had pressed for enough change, that America had moved into a post-racial era, and that the country had solved racial inequality. In other words, if African Americans were oppressed, they had only themselves to blame. Pryor's status as a "berserk angel" lets white people imagine themselves free from any social responsibility for racism.

The angelic/demonic status is wrapped up in Pryor's status as a theatrical performer, which allowed the white imaginary to envision his stage and screen work as a fictitious sideshow from the purportedly real Pryor, the "schizophrenic, torn, . . . black, berserk angel." This depoliticization set the stage for Pryor to buddy up with Bruce in a historical narrative about stand-up comedy that equates Pryor and Bruce as cultural spokespeople. Of course, Pryor remains central to the history of stand-up comedy, but by pairing him with Bruce as co-founding fathers, mainstream discourses perpetuate the bi-racial buddy formula. In this historical (as opposed to cinematic) narrative, Pryor assumes the status his character has in his bi-racial buddy films with Gene Wilder. As Bruce's black sidekick, he diverts attention away from Bruce's masquerade as a lower-class Jew who appropriated black culture. And as Pryor's white sidekick, Bruce draws attention toward Pryor's purported role as the lower-class, racialized Other who validates white people and assuages their guilt. Pryor has become part of what Sharon Willis

²³³ Maureen Orth, "The Perils of Pryor," *Newsweek*, October 3, 1977.

²³⁴ William Brashler, "Berserk Angel," *Playboy*, December 1979.

²³⁵ Gabbard, *Black Magic*, 144.

calls “indexes of paranoid fantasies that situate African Americans as the ones who know the truth about race, while avoiding any occasion for a reciprocated gaze that would cause the dominant culture to look at itself through another’s eyes.”²³⁶



The kicker to “Berserk Angel” read, “Richard Pryor is the most plugged-in, high-voltage comedian in the business . . . but you don’t want to be around him when the sparks fly.” The *Playboy* profile framed Pryor as an entertainer whose performances hid the real, bersekly angelic Pryor.

Dozens of articles about Pryor mention some connection to Lenny Bruce. A *Variety* critic justified Pryor’s profanity because he was “a black Lenny Bruce, or perhaps Jackie Mason, in that behind the humor there is a foundation of intelligence.”²³⁷ According to *Newsweek*, since the passing of Lenny Bruce, “only Richard Pryor has been in his class as a comic who made us laugh at the naked truth.”²³⁸ One critic made the unfounded claim that “Pryor gives Bruce credit for teaching him how to be funny.”²³⁹ A Canadian film critic claimed, without any further explanation, that while Pryor “has solidified a reputation as the black Lenny Bruce,” he is actually “the black [George] Carlin.”²⁴⁰

²³⁶ Sharon Willis, *High Contrast: Race and Gender in Contemporary Hollywood Film*, (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1997), 5-6; qtd. in Gabbard, *Black Magic*, 121-122.

²³⁷ Review of Richard Pryor, Zulema, *Variety*, October 16, 1974, 64.

²³⁸ “All I Want for Christmas,” *Newsweek*, December 7, 1992, 70.

²³⁹ Shawn Price, “Box Set Features Lenny Bruce, Who Taught Us to Take Comics Seriously,” *Ottawa Citizen*, October 14, 2004.

²⁴⁰ Jay Scott, “Pryor No Longer Sahl: He’s the Black Carlin,” *The Globe and Mail*, March 30, 1979.

The notion, as one critic puts it, that “Pryor is a son of Lenny Bruce and a father to almost everyone else”²⁴¹ goes only so far, however, applying mainly to those whose canonization as stand-up comedians complements what I have outlined here: the mainstream media’s efforts to privilege a white, male, middle-class agenda. In the next chapter, I see something similar happening with Andrew “Dice” Clay, a comedian whose affiliation with the white working class prevented his filthiness from achieving Bruce’s and Pryor’s cleanliness.

²⁴¹ Drew Jubera, “Revisiting Richard Pryor, Comedy's Great Emancipator,” *The Atlanta Journal*, Oct 15, 2000.

Chapter Two

The Transformation of Andrew “Dice” Clay, from Harmless Put-on Comic to Menacing Symbol of the White Working Class

When I was a struggling comic, coming up playing clubs for 10 years, when I would get written up, whether it be in Texas or New York, it was always things like “the hoodlum of humor,” and they sort of got what I was doing. Then the day after my special, *The Diceman Cometh*, *The New York Times* wrote up “The Demise of Western Civilization.”—Andrew “Dice” Clay²⁴²

Ladies and Gentlemen, He’s *Not* Lenny Bruce!!
But He *Was* the King of Filthy Stand-up Comedy!!

Quoting from a publicity notice, an article in the June 1990 issue of *Vanity Fair* opened with an inadvertent suggestion for the direction this chapter should take:

“First there was Lenny Bruce. Then there was Richard Pryor. Now there’s Andrew Dice Clay.”

That was how the office of Sandy Gallin, one of Hollywood’s reigning talent managers, beckoned show-biz bigwigs to the Roxy on Sunset Boulevard for “a special presentation performance” by his newest client, the controversial comic who bills himself as “the Brooklyn Bad Boy.”²⁴³

Taking its cues from the office of Sandy Gallin, this dissertation moves from a chapter on Bruce and Pryor to one on Andrew Dice Clay.

The grouping of these three comics into one category is not an easy or obvious move. In fact, when Andrew “Dice” Clay shot to stardom twenty-five years ago, many observers warned not to make comparisons to Lenny Bruce: “The Diceman is no Lenny,” ran the headline of a *Newsday* article, in which the reporter noted that “where Bruce took society and its mores to task—examining and reevaluating common-held attitudes—Clay’s standup character merely

²⁴² Interview with Tavis Smiley, *Tavis Smiley*, July 24, 2013, PBS, <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/tavissmiley/interviews/comedian-actor-andrew-dice-clay/>

²⁴³ Bob Colacello, “In Your Face,” *Vanity Fair*, June 1990, 146.

tries to push the boundaries of good taste with absolutely no pretension that he's working to change the world."²⁴⁴ In an *Entertainment Weekly* opinion piece titled "The Diceman Numbeth," Joyce Carol Oates wrote, "There is none of Lenny Bruce's passion, moral indignation, or courage. . . . [H]is comedy isn't surreal, intellectually engaging, or imaginatively disturbing on any level."²⁴⁵ It was not Clay but Richard Pryor, wrote the *Village Voice*'s Richard Goldstein, "who came closest to inheriting [Bruce's] mantle."²⁴⁶ Clay's "Sado Stand-Up," as Goldstein deemed it, came closer to slasher flicks and "porn."

The differences between Clay and Bruce were so stark, one wonders why anyone would warn against making comparisons in the first place. While Bruce was a conscious intellectual who gave humorous insights into social and political strife, Clay was a comedian best known for such dirty nursery rhymes as

Little Miss Muffet
Sat on her tuffet
Eating her curds and whey
Along came a spider
He sat down beside her
He said, "Eh? What's in the bowl, bitch?"
Ohhhhhhhh!²⁴⁷

To this day, Clay remains a put-on comedian whose routine revolves around a simple rhetorical question: "If you're good and ya know it, why hide it?"²⁴⁸ To prove he is good, he intimates that he is really good at being a man and that certain others—especially his male audience members—are not. As he struts about the stage—proudly displaying his leather jacket, coolly lighting cigarette after cigarette, eyeing the audience with disdain—Clay makes clear he is the manliest of all men. Departing from a male comedian's standard repertoire of heckler retorts,²⁴⁹ he screams at a heckler on the album *The Day the Laughter Died Part II*,

You mothafucka! You prick cocksucka! You don't even get to fuck the chick you brought in here! Look how fuckin' stupid you are. Because you got a dick the size of a fuckin' thumbtack. That's what I think. And that's what I think of you. I think you like takin' it up the ass! I think you like blowin' little boys. That's what I think about you. You're a prick! I'd like ta fuckin' suck out yer eyeballs an' skullfuck you. That's what I think, Okay! Where's your big comeback now, huh,

²⁴⁴ Hank Gallo, "The Diceman Is No Lenny," *New York Daily News*, July 6, 1990.

²⁴⁵ Joyce Carol Oates, "The Diceman Numbeth," *Entertainment Weekly*, July 27, 1990, 47.

²⁴⁶ Richard Goldstein, "Sado Stand-Up," *Village Voice*, December 12, 1989.

²⁴⁷ Andrew Dice Clay, *Dice*, 1989 by Def American, R236490, 1 compact disc.

²⁴⁸ Andrew Dice Clay, *The Day the Laughter Died*, 1990 by Def American, R 236491, 2 compact discs.

²⁴⁹ Jeff Conway, "You're Ugly, Your Dick Is Small, and Everybody Fucks Your Mother: The Stand-Up Comedian's Response to the Heckler," *Maledicta* 11 (December 1994): 34-46.

tough guy? I'll push ya fuckin' face through the fuckin' piano! I'll make ya one of the fuckin' keys, you mothafucka!²⁵⁰

According to the character he plays on stage, Clay sleeps with every woman he meets—his mantra is “Two tits, a hole, and a heartbeat—that’s all it takes for me.”²⁵¹ He does not like “takin’ it up the ass” nor does he “have a dick the size of a fuckin’ thumbtack.”²⁵² He’s handsome, well-built, and ready to knock any guy’s teeth out. Most tellingly, he dominates women (see the title of his album, *Face Down Ass Up*, released in 2000). This, for Clay, is what masculinity is all about. He goes so far as to ask a male audience member on the album *The Day the Laughter Died* (Part I),

Don't you know having a girlfriend is like having your own delivery service?
That's what they do! And then when they're good and they behave, you bring 'em out, give 'em a little wine, take 'em home, bang 'em, the next day they're cleaning again! Don't you know that? Ha! There's a lot of work to be done here. Like I saw a commercial a few nights ago. This woman is scrubbing a toilet with Comet. You know, and she's wearing an apron, and she's on her knees. And I just got a chill. Right up my spine. I said, “It looks so right.” I mean guys shouldn't do that stuff!

Devoid of any indication that that the off-stage Clay—the “real” Clay—rejects his on-stage character, this misogynistic display is a far cry from Lenny Bruce. Indeed, given the anti-social sentiments throughout Clay’s corpus—his concert film, cable-TV specials, and comedy albums—one should not be surprised to hear Clay, when asked whether Bruce was an influence, say, “I don’t give two shits about Lenny Bruce.”²⁵³

Nevertheless, Clay’s status as his generation’s most vilified comic makes him a critical part of stand-up comedy’s history. This chapter critiques the concept of the filthy stand-up comedian by arguing that Clay’s status as a filthy comic was not merely a product of what he said on stage. Condemnations of Clay’s act were instead motivated by a desire to shore up stand-up comedy’s status as a legitimate form of mass entertainment. While critics generally accused Clay of reinforcing misogynistic, racist, and homophobic sentiments, a close reading of press coverage, mainstream criticism, and remarks made by Clay’s fellow comedians suggests that Clay threatened stand-up comedy’s ascendant cultural status. Focusing not on Clay’s act but rather on Clay’s audiences, disapproving critics implied that Clay’s working-class disposition was recruiting audiences with a relatively small amount of cultural capital. What seemed to threaten critics most was not the deep misogyny of Clay’s act, but his appeal to a working-class audience. In this sense, Clay is Bruce’s and Pryor’s successor: Bruce’s “filthy” label stemmed from his reputation as a left-wing, Jewish intellectual; Pryor’s from his reputation as an “angry” black man; Clay’s from his reputation as a white, working-class thug.

²⁵⁰ Andrew Dice Clay, *The Day the Laughter Died: Part II*, 1993 by American Recordings, R 236492, 1 compact disc.

²⁵¹ Clay, *Dice*.

²⁵² *Laughter Died: Part II*.

²⁵³ Frank Owen, “The White Trash You Love to Hate,” Interview with Andrew Dice Clay, *Spin*, February 1991, 44.

Born and raised in Sheepshead Bay, a working-class neighborhood in South Brooklyn, Clay was born Andrew Clay Silverstein in 1957. He began performing locally in 1978 before moving to Los Angeles in 1980 to begin a dual career as an actor and a stand-up comedian. Although he would go on to become the most loved and loathed comedian of his generation, to date there is only one academic reading of Clay. It occurs in an essay on the Marx Brothers, in which the author compares “ethnic” comedians who celebrate American immigrant experiences to “the arrival on the US comedy circuit of openly racist, sexist and homophobic performers like Andrew Clay, known for a while as ‘The Dice Man’, whose phenomenally successful HBO Cable shows in the late 1980s were justified on the grounds of freedom of speech, guaranteed under the Constitution.” The author claims that

Clay and his poisoned ilk with his Nuremberg-rally style of delivery where his “fans” would chant and punch the air in unison offers only prejudice and hatred as the ground-bed of his so-called humour. Clay has come under attack from a variety of well-meaning and not so well-meaning groups and this is where we can begin to see a problem with the original subjects of this study, The Marx Brothers. In this postmodern, politically correct age, where DWEMs (Dead White European Males) are being lined up for reappraisal, can aware, intelligent, thoughtful people find the sight of a Jewish con-man, a guy with a fake Italian accent playing it stupidly for laughs, and a vocally challenged underachiever, amusing? In the opinion of this writer, of course we can! The Marx Brothers were, and remain, brilliantly funny.²⁵⁴

The author’s rhetorical question uses a bait-and-switch joke. After realizing the author is talking, respectively, about Groucho, Chico, and Harpo Marx, the reader must first think that Clay was “a Jewish con-man, a guy with a fake Italian accent playing it stupidly for laughs, and a vocally challenged underachiever.” Apparently, Clay was a “Jewish con-man” because a proper Jewish man from New York City (Woody Allen?) does not have a thick, stereotypically Brooklyn accent, nor does he flaunt his virility. Those who did like Clay were not “aware, intelligent, thoughtful people” but “poisoned ilk.” As will be argued, the author’s dismissal reflected an anti-working-class bias and was typical of Clay’s press coverage during his rise to, and fall from, fame.

This is not to imply that ethical criticisms against Clay’s comedy did not have merit. Some of his fellow comedians did take an ethical stance, arguing that Clay’s comedy hurt the social good. Despite Clay’s repeated claims that it all was a put-on, comedian Richard Belzer suggested that those who saw it differently might get hurt. “I don’t think he sees the degree to which he is hurting people,” he told ABC’s *Primetime Live* in a report on Clay’s stardom. “I think he thinks it’s a put-on. He’s doing this character. But he doesn’t really see the depth of what he’s doing.” *Saturday Night Live* cast member Nora Dunn justified her decision to boycott *SNL* the week Clay hosted by making a similar argument. Clay’s comedy “doesn’t provoke me to thought,” she told the *New York Times*. “It just makes me feel bad.”²⁵⁵ More recently, when

²⁵⁴ C. P. Lee, “‘Yeah, and I Used to Be a Hunchback’: Immigrants, Humour and the Marx Brothers,” In *Because I Tell a Joke or Two: Comedy, Politics, and Social Difference*, ed. Stephen Wagg (London: Routledge, 1998), 175-176.

²⁵⁵ Jeremy Gerard, “Comic Is Protested as ‘Saturday Night Live’ Host,” *New York Times*, May 11, 1990, C34.

comedian Todd Glass came out on the *WTF with Marc Maron* podcast, he called out Clay's comedy for having fostered an environment hostile toward LGBT people. Agreeing with Glass, Maron cited an exemplary joke from the album *Dice*:

That's why I don't understand this whole faggot thing, ya know? To me, that's common sense. I don't see how a guy lays on the beach, looks at another guy's hairy ass and says, "Oh yeah! Oh I gotta have that! I ain't leavin' the beach 'til I see him, yeah! And they're too sensitive, they don't know if they wanna be called gays, homosexuals, fairies. I call 'em cocksuckers. I think it spells it out! What's the big debate about already? Yeah, they want their rights, I'll give 'em rights.

Ten percent off of Vaseline. Now get the fuck back in the closet!"²⁵⁶

Unquestionably, somebody listening to this bit might feel hurt. Similarly, as someone who spent ten years in speech therapy and whose stutter has caused great pain and led to many missed job opportunities and countless botched social situations, I felt hurt upon hearing Clay say in the concert film *Dice Rules*, "What about stutterers, huh? Talk to one of these guys? 'T-t-t-t-t—' 'What the fuck are you trying to say? You're thirty years old. Talk like other people!'"²⁵⁷ In writing this chapter on Clay, I am not trying to defend him or to imply that anyone who felt hurt was to blame for their own reactions to Clay's comedy. What I am trying to do is to point out that most of the criticism leveled against Clay did not invoke the trauma his comedy may have catalyzed. Instead, Clay's critics, as I will show, were most troubled by Clay's valorizing of the white, working class, a group his critics dubbed "white trash."²⁵⁸

In what follows, I begin by providing evidence that Clay did not become a controversial comedian simply because he said controversial things on stage. As two reviews published early in Clay's career suggest, live audiences tended to regard Clay as a sort of "put-on" comedian—a comedian who amused audiences by playfully pretending to endorse the anti-social character he played on stage. Negative press coverage of Clay's performances occurred only when Clay's performances became primarily known to the public through their dissemination in the mass media. Clay's newly mediated image, I will go on to explain, divested critics of the engaged mentality required to appreciate live, put-on comedy. Instead of interpreting Clay through the lens of an appropriate genre, critics began comparing Clay, a put-on comedian, to Bruce, a social satirist. This disregard for Clay's genre led critics to explain Clay's popularity by arguing that Clay and his audience were degenerates in search of anti-social satire. A widespread campaign attacking Clay for his association with a purportedly filthy class of people, I conclude, resulted in Clay's enduring status as a filthy stand-up comedian.

²⁵⁶ *Dice*.

²⁵⁷ *Dice Rules*, directed by Jay Rubin (Los Angeles, CA: Seven Arts, 1991).

²⁵⁸ John Leland, "Moving Images," *Spin*, December 1989, 83.

Ladies and Gentlemen, Andrew Dice Kaufman!!

Why Andy Kaufman, not Lenny Bruce, Is the Model for Clay's Comedy

Before he broke in 1989, comedy club audiences tended to regard Clay as more of a character than as a public spokesperson. The two pre-1989 reviews of Clay's act make this clear enough. The first, published in *Variety* in 1984, compared Clay not to Bruce and Pryor but to an altogether different performer, a put-on artist who intentionally gave audiences a false impression of himself: "The late Andy Kaufman opened his club act by pretending to be a would-be comedian with a weird foreign accent and no sense of humor before switching to an electrifyingly accurate impersonation of Elvis Presley. This first name-sharer [Andrew, i.e. Andy] similarly stumbles onstage as the utterly inept 'Eugene Moskowitz' before metamorphosing into a black leather-jacketed, obscenity-spouting hoodlum."²⁵⁹ Clay had been using this opener since his inaugural performance in 1978 at the Brooklyn comedy club Pip's. Throughout the 1980s, he gradually began to drop the *Nutty Professor*-inspired opener (the only reference to Clay's Jewish ethnicity) from his act and perform solely in the guise of "The Dice Man." Regardless of whether he included this opener, he remained a character in the audience's eyes, as a second review implied. Published in the *New York Post* in 1986, this review compared Clay to a zany children's entertainer who finds joy in virtually everything:

If you have fond memories of the gang on the corner or never miss a Sylvester Stallone movie, then you'll love Andrew "Dice" Clay, appearing tonight through Sunday at Caroline's.

Clay's brand of humor is character comedy—when the comedian takes on a different persona and tells jokes from that person's point of view. A current character-comedy favorite is Paul Ruben, who performs as Pee Wee Herman.

Clay's character "The Dice Man" is a chain-smoking leather-jacketed greaser with rapid-fire raunchy streetcorner humor; sort of Rocky Balboa as a standup comedian, Lords of Flatbush style.²⁶⁰

Comparisons to Kaufman and Herman placed Clay in the subgenre of "put-on comedy."²⁶¹ The "put-on" is an aggressive form of comedy in which the comics misrepresent their true/off-stage characters, leaving the audience wondering just who the comics really are. As Erving Goffman explains in *Frame Analysis*, put-on artists intentionally confuse their audiences by exploiting the audience's assumption that the artists will try to represent themselves accurately. The joke is that the artist/speaker does something that "evoke[s] a ready correction, and only then a realization on the part of the corrector that he has been led into showing his willingness for

²⁵⁹ Harry Harris, "New Act," Review of Andrew Dice Clay at Comedy Factory Outlet in Philadelphia, *Variety*, November 28, 1984, 96.

²⁶⁰ Arlene Schindler, "'Dice': Boys Night Out," review of Andrew Dice Clay at Caroline's, *New York Post*, November 20, 1986, 24.

²⁶¹ Zoglin, *Comedy at the Edge*, 109.

minor triumphs, since it soon becomes clear that the speaker was merely acting naive and wanted his act to become gradually apparent.”²⁶² By putting the performer’s intentions in doubt, put-on comedy problematizes the pretense of theatre and encourages the audience to view the entire performance as a hoax. Put-on comedy offers no moral sentiments, mocks audiences for assuming that the performance mirrors reality in any meaningful way, and, in Kaufman’s and Clay’s case, enrages those audience members who take the performance seriously. Audience members who recognize the put-on ask themselves, Why are we here? Do we have any idea who the performer really is? Does the performer have any idea what he or she is doing? Isn’t theater rather banal? Is the performer mentally unstable?

In order for the audience to classify a performance as a put-on, the performer must subtly “wink” in some way. This makes put-on comedians both similar to and different from the Boy Who Cried Wolf, whom Wayne C. Booth in *A Rhetoric of Irony* calls a “‘put-on’ artist.”²⁶³ Like the Boy, put-on comedians do not mean what they say; unlike the Boy, put-on comedians give the audience “clues”²⁶⁴ not to take what they say seriously. In Kaufman’s case, he would confuse the audience by opening in the guise of an Eastern European immigrant who did hopelessly bad impersonations of celebrities. His wink would come later in the form of an uncanny Elvis impersonation, leading the audience to realize Kaufman had tricked them into believing they were watching an inept comedian. All along, he had purposefully pretended to be terrible. In contrast, on the album *The Day the Laughter Died*, Clay pretends not to be a terrible comedian but rather a terrible person—an extreme narcissist who insults everyone, including the audience. During his closer, he winks at the put-on by thanking the audience for their tolerance and making amends with those he has spent the past two hours berating.

CLAY [*to a pianist*]: Uh, gimme like a nice soft—*soft*.

PIANIST: Something soft. [*Soft piano music begins.*]

CLAY: Because you know I do wanna thank all of you for comin’ in here, and uh, I know maybe I said a few things that were, uh, maybe a *tinge* off-color. [*Audience laughs. Clay addresses a male audience member sitting with his wife and two daughters.*] You know, I accused you of fuckin’ your daughters. [*Audience laughs.*] You know, I didn’t mean that. I don’t know if you’re fuckin’ ’em. I’m not there. [*Audience laughs.*] I mean I haven’t peeped since I looked in my aunt’s window when I was a kid. . . . [*Later, to another male audience member who has been watching the show with his girlfriend’s friend.*] And you. Dunsy. I didn’t mean that. You’re a nice guy. You don’t have to fuck your girlfriend’s friend. [*Audience laughs.*] You should fuck her! C’mon, you know you wanna chomp away on that little slice of hers. But that’s your business. Maybe you’ll just drive her home, and you’ll go home and just think about her and jerkoff. Whatever makes you happy! [*Audience laughs. Clay then addresses one more audience member.*] And Janet. Janet, the divorcée. I don’t care if she blows you. She should love you.

²⁶² Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 87.

²⁶³ Wayne C. Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 48.

²⁶⁴ Booth, *Rhetoric of Irony*, 48.

Repeatedly telling his audience he “didn’t mean that,” Clay acknowledges his transgressions of social mores and affirms a reasonable line between immoral and moral behavior. His atonement makes his character seem confused if not completely stupid, which encourages the audience to regard the entire act as a charade and not as a rhetorical exercise designed to promote misogyny, racism, and homophobia. Although the audience is free to ignore this cue and to believe that the off-stage Clay is just like the on-stage Clay, the laughter and cheering suggests that a significant number of audience members are willing to participate in the joke.

Clay winks at the audience not only at the end of the performance but also throughout *The Day the Laughter Died*. Clay recalls Steve Martin, whose put-on comedy on such albums as *A Wild and Crazy Guy* is so absurd that audiences know instantly Martin is putting them on. Martin’s “stand-up comedy as a philosophy of meaninglessness,” as Tracy Wuster calls it, “is based on the interplay of signifiers that don’t refer to any deeper meaning—social or otherwise. . . . Martin’s humor resides precisely in the failure of his comedic signifiers to attain any meaningful signification.”²⁶⁵ Audiences know his craziness—wearing an arrow-through-the-head, claiming he can “suck this piano into [his] nose,” and forgetting to speak into the microphone—has no meaningful signification because it seems controlled, polished, and calculated. Similarly, by making anti-social comments in the guise of a complete idiot, Clay discourages audiences from seeing the comments as an accurate reflection of his off-stage self. The way he describes his refusal to give his sexual partner sexual pleasure emphasizes his absurd point of view: “Now they gotta have their pleasure. Well, what did they do to earn it, huh? Did she clean the lint off your desk? Did you build that other room like I told ya? Why should you have pleasure? When you do those things—when you rotate the tires on your car—then—*then*—maybe. Until then, it’s one stroke—done. [*Pause.*] Maybe that’s the wrong attitude. I don’t know.”²⁶⁶ The final line drives home his cluelessness. The audience has wasted its time listening to a man spout off about something he knows nothing about. Realizing they have wasted their time, most break out laughing. The audience playfully engages Clay in his put-on routine when one audience member, referring to a joke from Clay’s previous album, *Dice*, asks Clay whether he actually gave a woman a rimjob at the bank:

CLAY: Oh, yeah, that really happened. That whole thing, I was on line at the bank, I stuck my tongue up a girl’s ass. True story! Everything I say is true! *No lies* involved in this act.

MALE AUDIENCE MEMBER: Did you get a blowjob?

CLAY [*Sounding irritated*]: Yeah, I got a blowjob, too. Picked the teller up, right on the fuckin’ counter. Licked her ass, fucked ’er, dropped a load down ’er t’roat, [then] left. That’s what I did—that day. I do it three times a week!

Clearly, Clay does not have sex in public with a bank teller three times a week. The audience member of course knows this. While he presumably enjoys other aspects of the performance—e.g. hearing Clay describe wild sex scenes in detail—he also enjoys watching Clay pretend to be a complete moron.

Part of a put-on’s pleasure derives from the audience’s inability to understand completely the comedian’s intentions, which, as Jacob Brackman notes, never resolves in any easily digestible “truth”: “The put-on is an *open-end* form. That is to say, it is rarely climaxed by

²⁶⁵ Tracy Wuster, “Comedy Jokes,” 37.

²⁶⁶ *The Day the Laughter Died*.

having “the truth” set straight—when a truth, indeed, exists. “Straight” discussion, when one of the participants is putting the others on, is soon subverted and eventually sabotaged by uncertainty. His intentions, and his opinions, remain cloudy.”²⁶⁷ During his act’s closer, when Clay tries to clarify that he does not intend any malice, he clouds his intentions by not explaining why he has berated the audience in the first place. The pleasure found in witnessing a comedian keep his or her intentions cloudy falls into the Freudian category “‘comic’ pleasure.”²⁶⁸ According to Freud, we all expend a great deal of psychic energy trying to categorize our experiences. But when a comedian confronts us with a scene that does not require our understanding (because we realize there is nothing to understand), we save our psychic energy and experience comic pleasure. Freud gives the example of the humor we might find in a child’s naïve remarks. “The naïve [individual],” he writes, “would be a species of the comic in so far as its pleasure springs from the difference in expenditure which arises in trying to understand someone else”²⁶⁹ When we realize that the child has expended much less energy than we would have if we had made the same remarks, we empathize with the child, living vicariously through her, and this “difference in expenditure” between what we were prepared to expend and what we will now expend “becomes capable of discharge and may thus be a source of pleasure.”²⁷⁰ According to Freud, we experience this pleasure while witnessing “mimicry, disguise, unmasking, caricature, parody, travesty, and so on.”²⁷¹ While watching a put-on artist, the situation is a bit different given that the audience laughs upon realizing they had naively tried to understand an intentionally opaque performance. All along, the put-on artist had not acted naïve; rather, the audience was naïve for assuming the artist knew what he was doing.

Interviews with Clay published prior to his breakout cable special *The Diceman Cometh* tried to recreate this dynamic, with Clay as the put-on artist and the reader as the naïve audience. Instead of trying to locate the “real” Andrew Dice Clay, interviewers participated in Clay’s “put-on” by printing his amusing fabrications verbatim. After noting that “Clay started cracking jokes professionally after dropping out of Kingsborough College and by 20 was making the rounds of New York’s comedy clubs,” one reporter added, “The name Dice? ‘My mother gave birth on a crap table,’ he insists.”²⁷² By juxtaposing facts with jokes, the reporter tried to recreate an audience’s impression of Clay as a ridiculous construction with no underlying essence worth discovering. If she had wanted readers to gain insight into Clay, the reporter would have scrutinized Clay’s memories of junior high: “‘It was a maximum-security school,’ he says, rising off the couch to stretch his 6-foot frame. ‘You don’t graduate; you get paroled. I walked

²⁶⁷ Jacob Brackman, *The Put-on: Modern Fooling and Modern Mistrust* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1971), 19.

²⁶⁸ Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. James Strachey (W. W. Norton: New York, 2008), 232.

²⁶⁹ Freud, *Jokes*, 232-233.

²⁷⁰ Freud, *Jokes*, 233.

²⁷¹ Freud, *Jokes*, 234.

²⁷² Donna Rosenthal, “A ‘Casual’ Acquaintance,” *New York Daily News*, April 21, 1988.

into English class and the teacher said, ‘Give me a preposition.’ So I said, ‘All right, honey, what are you doing Saturday night?’ I quit in the eighth grade because the cafeteria wouldn’t take a personal check.” Instead of challenging Clay, the reporter played along, the same way a late-19th century sideshow talker might have mocked a freak show exhibit. In these instances, “The fabrications, the appearance of the freak, and the overall presentation were so outlandish that both the manager and most of the audience shared a sense of the ridiculous. The lecturer would acknowledge his participation in the farce with asides, humor, and commentary.”²⁷³ Clay’s boorish character was so obviously a hoax that critics and interviewers, at least at this stage in his career, did not take his bluster seriously. They seemed to revel in the pleasure that an uninterrupted, put-on shtick allows.

Clay’s pre-1989 press coverage was attuned to the put-on but also to the fact that Clay’s particular brand of put-on humor was designed specifically for a working-class audience. As a close analysis of a long-form joke on *The Day the Laughter Died* suggests, Clay’s fans and critics enjoyed not merely the put-on but also the working-class perspective that his performances privileged. The joke, “Milk & Shampoo,” demonstrates Clay’s put-on capabilities in the context of a working-class anecdote, thus exemplifying two important aspects of Clay’s comedy: the put-on form and the working-class perspective. The bit begins with Clay declaring his disinterest in whether the audience wants to hear about his trip to the grocery store:

CLAY: My girlfriend sent me to get a container of milk today. Wanna hear about it?

MALE AUDIENCE MEMBER: No.

CLAY: Hmm? You don’t? Well, why don’t you shove your head up your ass if you don’t wanna hear about it. [*Audience laughs*] ‘Cause I’m gonna TALK about it. And I might TALK about it for a fuckin’ HOUR now. [*Audience laughs*]

Clay sends an empowering message that his character, the working-class male, will not abide by the audience’s bourgeois expectation that he entertain them on command. Clay instead decides to ruin the man’s—and everyone else’s—night by talking about something banal and everyday. And yet, as the audience remains seated and the home audience continues to listen, both audiences should begin to see themselves as naïve for expecting a conventional show wherein the comedian does what the audience wants. Defying expectations, Clay forges ahead with his story: “Yeah, she sent me to get milk. I figured, ‘All right, two minutes outta my day. It don’t mean nothin’.’ So, I walk in. Right? Hmm? I go over to the milk—now, milk’s come a long way. I mean, normally, *she does that*. But I figure, ‘I’ll be a nice guy.’ ” At this point, Clay’s intentions have become cloudier. Clay might intend to put the audience on, but then again, he might not. Like Andy Kaufman, who would spoil a night of comedy by reading *The Great Gatsby* in its entirety and barking at bark at disgruntled audience members, Clay might be ready to ruin the audience’s night. Here, he presents himself as someone who uses our society’s sexist division of labor as an excuse not to purchase milk and who, on the rare occasion when he does purchase milk, proclaims his benevolence. This ugliness is exacerbated by the fact that Clay’s on-stage character treats the audience as though they should feel blessed to be in his presence. As the story continues, Clay implies that everyone and everything, including the entity in charge of milk distribution, should honor his greatness in one way or another:

CLAY: You could have a nervous breakdown in the milk department, you know that? You got all kinds of milk. You got *buttermilk*. *Skim milk*. *Low-fat, two-percent fat*, no *FUCKIN’ fat whatsoever*. [*Audience laughs*] ‘Cause the

²⁷³ Robert Bogdan, *Freak Show* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1988), 114.

homogenized shit, nobody wants to know from anymore, you know. That's the old shit! Nobody's drinkin' THAT NO MOR-R-R-R-R-E. And with each time, they take a little fat outta the milk, they charge ya an extra buck, those fuckin' pricks. Now, how do I know there's no fat in no-fat milk. You see what I'm sayin'?

MALE AUDIENCE MEMBER: Yeah.

CLAY: So, you know what I do? I take the homogenized container. Nobody's lookin', right? I spill it out all over the fuckin' floor. I take the no-fat, I pour it into the homogenized container, I'm savin' myself a buck-fifty. Nobody knows nothin', where the money went, nothin', right?

We hear a stereotypically buffoonish, working-class male implying that economic exploitation has resulted in feelings of alienation. He notices price differences of a mere buck, agonizes over the trendiness of no-fat milk, and feels that buying milk is emasculating. Although the audience recognizes the working-class buffoon and laughs at him, what they do not hear is the working-class buffoon making apologies for his buffoonery. Clay somewhat inadvertently defends working-class women, too: he shows the simple “female” task of buying milk to require some skill and understanding of the market; in making himself look like a buffoon, he is also showing how a buffoon cannot really buy milk properly—i.e. women's work is not for buffoons. Living vicariously through Clay, who fearlessly embraces every trait the middle class have held up as proof of the working class' inferiority, the audience does not have to fear the condescension of upper-class snobs. This anecdote supports the observation John Smoler made in *The Nation*, that “some of Clay's material provides intriguing evidence of his audience's ‘class consciousness’.”²⁷⁴ Aware of his class position, Clay makes no apologies for it, tries to improve his position by taking matters into his own hands, and proudly boasts of his bold initiative: “Nobody fucks with Dice! Dice does the fuckin'!”

Clay foregrounds not only his class but also his whiteness—especially through racial and ethnic jokes. On the album *Dice*, for instance, Clay drops into a blackface impression when he explains why “ya never see a black guy who's gay. I mean, ya don't see that. How do ya give a guy head when he's three blocks away? Blacks hold their penises. They hold it like someone's gonna rip it off! You seen 'em comin' down the street. ‘Yea-ahhhh. You know, a lotta people says to me, ‘Moby, why is you always holdin' your dick?’ Well, you know it wouldn't be gentlemanly to leave it draggin' on the ground behind me 'n' shit!’ ” The racism is obvious—Clay's character perpetuates the myth of the black man as hypermasculine savage; however, I caution against reading the popularity of his character among working-class whites as evidence that the lower a person's social class, the more xenophobic they tend to be. Although journalists would use such jokes to denigrate his audience, Clay's performances mirrored the ambivalent and complex attitudes working-class whites have displayed historically toward blacks. As Eric Lott notes in *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*, there is a “widespread tendency to project white racial hostility onto the working class, the duped ‘masses.’ Hence the thrice-obvious conclusion that, as a counterfeit popular form indulged by the vulgar mind, blackface stroked its audiences' racist common sense.”²⁷⁵ To say, as a *New York*

²⁷⁴ Fredric Paul Smoler, “Letters,” *The Nation*, December 3, 1990, 666.

²⁷⁵ Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford UP, 1993), 104.

Times critic did, that Clay showed only “contempt” for “anyone different—blacks, gays, the homeless, all those who might not fit into the macho, beer-drinking universe of a white lower-middle-class neighborhood,”²⁷⁶ was to perpetuate the tendency that Lott observes. Clay’s attempts to imitate black men were obviously problematic but also indicative of his identification with them. For instance, on *The Day the Laughter Died*, Clay identifies with his imagined notion of the black man’s masculinity by invoking another racist myth, that black men dominate women. “Believe me, the black guy don’t stand for no bullshit,” he says, referring to one of the audience members. “He don’t take no fuckin’ shit. NO MUTHERFUCKIN’ SHIT. He knows, right?” While Clay projects depraved qualities onto black men and distances himself from them through mockery, he also declares interracial solidarity with black men and presents this solidarity as evidence of his own masculinity. This declaration is comparable to the ways minstrelsy was a collection of “fantasies of black male aggression”²⁷⁷ through which white, working-class men lived vicariously and imagined themselves to have gained mastery over their own environments. In pointing this out, I am not defending Clay or denying that the audience has an unproblematic relationship with him. My aim here is to explore how Clay’s sudden reputation as a filthy stand-up comedian closed off nuanced interpretations that would account for his immense popularity.

Ladies and Gentlemen, a Mediatized Comedian!!

How Clay’s Media Presence Negated His Put-on Comedy

Before *The Diceman Cometh*, Clay’s image was mediated by a handful of reviews and interviews, as well as supporting roles in the TV crime drama *Crime Story* (1986-1988) and a few Hollywood comedies (*Night Patrol* [1984], *Private Resort* [1985], *Pretty in Pink* [1986], *Casual Sex?* [1988]). Whereas the early reviews were based entirely on the first impression made by Clay in his live show, critics would eventually come to learn of Clay through controversial news items as well as the performances mediated by his albums: *Dice* (1989), *The Day the Laughter Died* (1990), *Dice Rules* (1991); by HBO cable specials: an eight-minute appearance in *Rodney Dangerfield: Nothin’ Goes Right* (1988) and an hour-long appearance in his own special, *The Diceman Cometh* (1989); by his controversial MTV spot (1989) and the negative press coverage that ensued; by his hosting of *Saturday Night Live* (1990); by his leading role in the action-comedy *The Adventures of Ford Fairlane* (Renny Harlin, 1990); and by his concert film *Dice Rules* (1991).

²⁷⁶ John J. O’Connor, “Tasteful to Tasteless with a Flick of the Dial,” *New York Times*, January 8, 1989.

²⁷⁷ Lott, *Love and Theft*, 131.

When critics began basing their impression of Clay on these mediated performances, Clay became, to use a contested term in performance studies, “mediatized.”²⁷⁸ Before his mediatization, audiences lacked the resources to put Clay’s performances under the microscope. Whether they saw Clay perform live, watched him play a character in a film, or read an article about his put-on comedy, the audience lacked what Peggy Phelan refers to as “a coherent point of view” that “provides the spectator with a stable point upon which to turn on the machinery of projection, identification, and (inevitable) objectification.”²⁷⁹ Mediatization gave audiences “a coherent point of view” because it enabled audiences to control the medium through which they observed Clay and, thus, to counteract the power Clay’s put-on comedy had over them. Although, as Phelan notes, “Much Western theatre evokes desire based upon and stimulated by the inequality between performer and spectator—and by the (potential) domination of the silent spectator,”²⁸⁰ Clay had power over the live audience because his put-on comedy reversed this relationship between performer and spectator. By attacking the audience as he hid his own “true” intentions, Clay discouraged the live audience from making judgmental claims about his behavior. Clay was beholden to the audience’s approval, but his overt disdain for the audience compromised their power over him. “See, I always worry about the audience,” Clay jokes during his set in *Down and Dirty with Jim Norton* (2008). Addressing the people in the front row, he adds, “because the comics that come up, they know what they’re doin’. It’s guys like you I worry about—you know what I mean?—assholes in the front row who weren’t smart enough to sit in the back. Why would you ever want to sit in the front row of a show I’m on? Let me tell ya somethin’, if I wasn’t me, I’d never come to see me. Even if I was my biggest fuckin’ fan, because I know what I do.” He goes on to call one audience member “asshole-head, jerkoff-face—that’s you.” Even during his arena shows, as seen on the Madison Square Garden show filmed for *Dice Rules*, he berates the front rows. “This your chick?,” he says to an unfortunate male audience member on *The Day the Laughter Died*. “This your date? Love of your life? The girl who’s gonna suck you for every fuckin’ dime you make over the next few years, is that who this is? Your ball-and-fuckin’-chain? Your ‘what-time-are-you-coming-home’-girl? Is that who it really is? Heh? Hmm? We’ll get to the bottom of all these relationships here. Aw yeah, we’re gonna work *everybody*. [*To someone else.*] And how are you tonight, yeah? Look at you. Just fuckin’ look at you. [*To someone else.*] And I thought you were a fuckin’ jerkoff.” Clay works the entire room, treating the stand-up comedy event not as a mimetic work of art but rather as a ritual—an all-out assault on the audience who, unlike the comics, have no idea “what they’re doin’.” In this sense, the audience becomes the show’s characters and Clay becomes the audience who stands on stage judging the people sitting before him. Seeing themselves as characters, as people who are being judged by the comedian, the audience loses a coherent point of view. This loss is the subversive crux of put-on comedy; by shattering the barrier between the performer and the audience, Clay makes the theater space dangerous and exciting.

²⁷⁸ See Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2008), 4; Roberta Mock, “Introduction,” in *Performing Processes*, ed. Roberta Mock (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2000), 5; and Cormac Power, *Presence in Play: A Critique of Theories of Presence in the Theatre* (New York: Editions Rodopi B. V., 2006), 157.

²⁷⁹ Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 163.

²⁸⁰ Phelan, *Unmarked*, 163.

Incidentally, Limon sees all stand-up comedians doing what Clay does in his performances. “Stand-up,” he writes, begins with aggression toward an audience in order to submit that aggression to the law, which it hopes to mollify. The progress is to convert Audience to Law for the purpose of winning the Law back as Audience. [. . .] The comedian works from above his audience (audience seated, comedian doing “stand-up”); he looks down on them as upon children and lectures them. But they make his jokes into jokes, or refuse to, by a reaction that is more final, less appealable, than a judgment. He wishes to humiliate them and they submit; but they think he is childish for craving their unchallengeable approval so desperately, and he knows this. There are child singers, child dancers, child actors, but no child stand-ups: an actual child would block this vacillating infantilism.²⁸¹

Part of the joke is that Clay, and all stand-ups, belittle themselves by pleading with the audience to laugh. They reverse the performer-audience relationship by asking the audience to satisfy them. The performer’s hostility conceals his neediness, making it seem as if he exists merely to satisfy the audience. In a sense, then, all stand-up comedians are put-on artists, with Clay being an extreme version. Even Lenny Bruce, as Brackman noted in his article on the put-on, was a put-on artist, insofar as his jibes at the audience left them thinking, “Wonder what he meant by that.”²⁸²

Stand-up comedy’s liveness allows for “the absolute ‘directness of artist/audience communication’,” which David Marc claims “is the definitive feature of [stand-up comedy].”²⁸³ What the direct address provides is added context, which the audience uses to give the performer “ironic distance” from his or her character. When this occurs, audience members say to themselves, as Wayne Booth puts it in *A Rhetoric of Irony*, “The author I infer behind the false [in Clay’s case, anti-social] words is my kind of man, because he enjoys playing with irony, because he assumes my capacity for dealing with it, and—most important—because he grants me a kind of wisdom; he assumes that he does not have to spell out the shared and secret truths on which my reconstruction is to be built.”²⁸⁴ The audience we hear laughing on *The Day the Laughter Died* appears to feel Clay is their “kind of man” because they know Clay is putting them on and Clay does not need to spell this out for them. They presumably enjoy distinguishing themselves from those who do not get the put-on and who set themselves up for a severe tongue-lashing. These unfortunate audience members become central characters in Clay’s show, as heard throughout the album. For example, when Clay says:

CLAY [*to a male audience member, who’s going to the bathroom*]: Where are you goin’, you gonna go take a dump? Heh? [*Laughter*]
 FEMALE AUDIENCE MEMBER (FAM): She got some sense, she’s leaving.

²⁸¹ Limon, *Abjection*, 26-27.

²⁸² Jacob Brackman, “The Put-On,” *The New Yorker*, June 24, 1967, 72.

²⁸³ David Marc, *Television Comedy & American Culture*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1997), 13.

²⁸⁴ Booth, *Rhetoric of Irony*, 28.

CLAY: It's a guy, jerkoff. [*Laughter*] We got a chick jerkoff here, our first of the night. Just listen up, shut your mouth, and pay attention, maybe you'll do a little better next time.

FAM: Shut up!

CLAY: You shut up! You shut your fuckin' hole! Where did you come from anyway?

FAM: You're such a jerk!

MALE AUDIENCE MEMBER (MAM): You stink!

FAM: You are such a jerk! You're not so funny.

MAM: About as funny as a bottle of milk.

CLAY: Exactly! Did you like the jerkoff segment? What was it that threw you? The ass-eating? [*Laughter.*] The, uh, I don't know, maybe it was something I said that annoyed 'em? [*As the couple leaves the club.*] Have a Happy New Year! [*Laughter.*] . . . It took 'em an hour to figure out this is filthy.

This couple does not see Clay's act as a put-on, but the laughter suggests that many audience members do. By laughing with Clay, the live audience implies that they do not empathize with the couple, presumably because the couple has transgressed a comedy club's golden rule: do not interrupt the comedian. Moreover, they have created a great deal of drama by doing what no other audience member will do out of either fear or respect for the show: yell at Clay. From the live audience's point of view, the interrupting couple have stumbled into the trap of Clay's put-on and are getting the tongue-lashing they deserve. With those audience members, Clay has created the community necessary for the irony to take hold. As Linda Hutcheon notes, "it is the community that comes first and that, in fact, *enables* the irony to happen."²⁸⁵

The approving audience members make up what Richard Schechner calls "an integral audience," a group of people for whom "the event is of special significance."²⁸⁶ In contrast, those who were not part of Clay's community were "an accidental audience," a group of people who attend a show, or listen to a recording of a show, under the assumption that it is "open to all."²⁸⁷ By reviewing Clay's recorded performances from the perspective of an accidental audience, critics missed the irony intended for Clay's working-class audience. For example, when *Time* magazine warned parents about Clay, the authors could not explain why anyone would want to listen to it: "Clay spills his latest secrets on a double comedy album, *The Day the Laughter Died*, which, the warning label advises us, 'contains filthy language and no jokes!!!' Talk about truth in advertising: in 100 minutes of banter there are not half a dozen good dirty jokes."²⁸⁸ Since they themselves did not recognize the put-on, the critics could not credit Clay's integral audience with its ability to recognize the put-on.

Clay's mediatized status led critics not to see a put-on but to see, instead, an anti-social performer spouting anti-social views to anti-social people. It all began on September 6, 1989,

²⁸⁵ Linda Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* (Routledge: New York, 1995), 85.

²⁸⁶ Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory*, revised ed. (London: Routledge, 1988), 186.

²⁸⁷ Schechner, *Performance Theory*, 186.

²⁸⁸ Corliss et al., "X Rated," 92.

during Clay's performance at the MTV Video Music Awards. On stage to introduce Cher, Clay went off script and told a few dirty nursery rhymes, for which he is particularly well known, including:

Jack Sprat could eat no fat
His wife could eat no lean
So Jack ignored her flabby tits
And licked her asshole clean²⁸⁹

According to the *New York Daily News*, the "obscene poetry and unprintable references to obese women and sex" resulted in up to a 100 viewers calling and complaining to MTV,²⁹⁰ which issued a statement the next day declaring Clay banned for life from the music video channel.²⁹¹ After the debacle became a national news story featuring Clay as the villain, Clay's act became mediatized insofar as critics began to base their reviews less on the show itself and more on this negative, mediated image. It was almost immediate. Just a few days after the MTV ban, Clay's live performance in Chicago garnered reviews in the *Tribune* and the *Sun-Times*, both with a tone and focus notably different from Clay's early reviews. Instead of considering the possibility that Clay was putting the audience on, the critics based their reviews on Clay's mediatized status as an anti-social person performing for anti-social people.

Clay did attempt to reassure critics he was different from the anti-social stage character. For example, both *The Diceman Cometh* and *Dice Rules* preface Clay's concert performances with a biopic so absurd anyone watching knows it is fictional. *Diceman Cometh's* includes a scene featuring Young Andrew Dice Clay (played by eight-year-old Jarrett Lennon), sporting slicked-back hair and a leather jacket while eating dinner with his parents.

MOTHER: So, Andrew, tell us what you learned in school today.

YOUNG CLAY: Well, Abe Lincoln freed the slaves.

MOTHER: Very good.

YOUNG CLAY: And June Carter don't wear no panties.

FATHER: No, no, she *doesn't* wear no panties.

YOUNG CLAY: You noticed that, too, pop? Hey! You shoulda said somethin'!

The vignettes follow Clay through his teens and into adulthood, all the while making clear that the Diceman was a pig from the get-go. In contrast, *Dice Rules'* opening biopic dramatizes the act referenced in the 1984 *Variety* review. It shows Clay, as a nerdy pushover with a domineering wife, morphing into the Dice Man once he tries on a leather jacket. Whether conscious or not, the biopics are designed to wink toward the fictitiousness of Clay's act. At the same time, Clay would often undermine efforts to emphasize that his performance was a put-on. In interviews and self-promotional materials, Clay's arrogant bluster made his off-stage self seem not entirely unlike his stage character. He drew attention to his off-stage self two days before the Rodney Dangerfield special by taking out a full-page ad in *Variety*, which represented

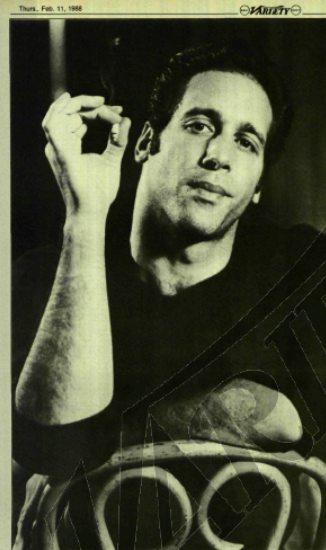
²⁸⁹ Colacello, "In Your Face," 148.

²⁹⁰ Hank Gallo and Elizabeth Jensen, "Comic Riles MTV," *New York Daily News*, September 8, 1989, 105.

²⁹¹ Jean Rosenbluth, "Young's Win, Clay's Lingo Surprises of MTV Awards," *Variety*, September 8, 1989, 2.

a moment in his gradual transformation from the public's perception of him as a near-invisible put-on comedian to a comedic superstar. Next to a publicity photo, the text read,

I NEVER STUDIED MUCH / IN SCHOOL, / (TOO BUSY DAYDREAMING)
// BUT WHEN I TURNED / ON THE TUBE, THERE WAS / ELVIS THE
KING, / BUDDY RICH WITH HANDS / LIKE LIGHTNING, / TRAVOLTA
SANG & DANCED, / LEWIS MADE ME LAUGH, / SLY KNOCKED ME
OUT, / BRANDO MADE ME POUT, / BOGIE TOOK BACALL, / DEAN HAD
US ALL, / GLEASON WAS THE / GREAT ONE, / CAGNEY YOU WERE #1, /
MURPHY AND PRYOR BOTH / GREAT NO DOUBT, / BUT IN '88 IT'S
"DICE" / THEY'LL SHOUT. // I NEVER STUDIED / MUCH IN SCHOOL . . .
// *BUT I DID STUDY*²⁹²



THURS, FEB. 11, 1988

I NEVER STUDIED MUCH
IN SCHOOL,
(TOO BUSY DAYDREAMING)

BUT WHEN I TURNED
ON THE TUBE, THERE WAS
ELVIS THE KING,
BUDDY RICH WITH HANDS
LIKE LIGHTNING,
TRAVOLTA SANG & DANCED,
LEWIS MADE ME LAUGH,
SLY KNOCKED ME OUT,
BRANDO MADE ME POUT,
BOGIE TOOK BACALL,
DEAN HAD US ALL,
GLEASON WAS THE
GREAT ONE,
CAGNEY YOU WERE #1,
MURPHY AND PRYOR BOTH
GREAT NO DOUBT,
BUT IN '88 IT'S "DICE"
THEY'LL SHOUT.

I NEVER STUDIED
MUCH IN SCHOOL . . .
BUT I DID STUDY

ANDREW DICE CLAY
in
"RODNEY DANGERFIELD'S NOTHIN' GOES RIGHT"
HBO SPECIAL • SAT., FEBRUARY 13 • 10 P.M.

Chris "The Knife" Black
Management:
Kathy Lymbereopoulos
To Kathy & Rodney
You're O.K.!

XXXX (213) 859-4484 (213) 282-2754

The publicity spot conjured up the image of a narcissistic yet reverential performer who aimed to join Elvis, Rich, Travolta, Lewis, Stallone, Brando, Bogart, Bacall, Dean, Gleason, Cagney, Murphy, and Pryor in the pantheon of stars. He clearly wanted to be seen as a symbol of legitimate culture. And despite having rejected the kind of education that might have earned him a ticket out of the working class, he nevertheless believed that he belonged in legitimate culture.

The press did not see Clay in this way, however. Instead, he became a shining example of what Bourdieu calls "the sacrilegious reuniting of tastes": "The most intolerable thing for those who regard themselves as the possessors of legitimate culture is the sacrilegious reuniting of tastes which taste dictates shall be separated. This means that the games of artists and aesthetes

²⁹² *Variety* advertisement, February 11, 1988, 7.

and their struggles for the monopoly of artistic legitimacy are less innocent than they seem.”²⁹³ This quote from *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* applies to Clay’s critical reception, which was not as innocent as it may have seemed. Instead of trying to speak up for those who may have been hurt by Clay’s act, critics and reporters tended to treat Clay as a symbol of what happens when the lower orders invade legitimate culture. While there were legitimate criticisms to be made—for example, Clay’s effort to disavow a lack of class power by emphasizing a supposed gender superiority—most critics took a different line of argument. Unaware that the audience saw Clay’s behavior as a put-on, critics argued that the audience, as working-class people, needed Clay to validate the anti-social behavior purportedly inherent in working-class communities.

Ladies and Gentlemen, the People Are Revolting!! (You Can Say That Again!!) How Clay Became a Symbol of Working-Class Revulsion

The changing tone in one reporter’s coverage of Clay’s career illustrates the role Clay’s mediatized status played in his increasingly negative image. Over a span of five years, from 1986 to 1991, *New York Daily News* reporter Hank Gallo wrote at least five profiles of Clay. The first intermingled fact and fiction:

. . . Indeed, this caustically funny guy who insists “there’s nobody like me, there can never be anybody like me, this happens once,” has had practice pumping up that id.

“Let me put it this way,” he says, running a hand through his dark hair, “when I was 6 months old, my parents had another kid just to suck my thumb.”²⁹⁴

A year later, Gallo continued to intermingle fact and fiction by playing with his authorial status. In this article, he switched between a serious reporter’s voice and a masquerade as Clay:

Yo, people! Look who’s here: Whadda ya know? Brooklyn’s own **Andrew (Dice) Clay** is back in town. You might remember him as the club doorman in “Pretty in Pink.” No? Well, then, you’ve probably seen him as Max Goldberg, one of the regular bad apples, on TV’s “Crime Story”? Still no? Hey, what do youse young people do for fun if youse don’t go to movies or watch TV? Forget about it—don’t answer dat. I’m sure I don’t wanna know.²⁹⁵

²⁹³ Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 56-57.

²⁹⁴ Hank Gallo, “The Dice Man Cometh,” *New York Daily News*, May 23, 1986, page unknown.

²⁹⁵ Hank Gallo, “Enter Laughing,” *New York Daily News*, July 17, 1987, 43.

Six months later, when Clay got a big break by doing eight-and-a-half minutes of stand-up on Rodney Dangerfield's HBO special *Nothin' Goes Right*, Gallo continued the masquerade:

Well, it was only a matter of time before Hollywood caught on. Tough-talking Andrew Dice Clay, once described as “a sort of Fonzie on ludes,” called the other day to tell us that he, the one and only Dice Man, is doin' good—real good, ya know? The regular on NBC's “Crime Story” (he plays Max Goldman) assured us we wouldn't believe how great things were goin'—but being the trusting types we are, we do believe him. After all, he's got an honest face, and more importantly, he and his friends, a couple sensitive kids named Punch and Judo, know where we live.²⁹⁶

Once the airing of Clay's hour-long HBO special *The Diceman Cometh* put Clay in the national spotlight, however, Gallo changed his tone and published a cautionary profile. At this point, while he continued to sound like a sideshow talker at a freak show, he turned his focus toward Clay's fans:

He lectures women—whom he refers to as “pigs,” “sluts” and worse—on proper sexual technique. He takes hitherto harmless nursery rhymes and transforms them into raunchy chants. And he asks audience members for the most intimate boudoir *details* imaginable.

As you might have suspected, when comic Andrew Dice Clay is performing, he ain't got no couth. But, hey, his fans love it that way. Granted, they may be deeply disturbed, but they are loyal. And—*gasp!*—they are growing.²⁹⁷

Along with this newfound focus on Clay's fans, framed by Gallo and most journalists as “deeply disturbed,” press coverage also questioned whether the Diceman was really the character he said he was. Clay addressed this worry in the same Gallo piece:

“The thing is,” he insists, “I know the difference between the performer and the person.”

On stage, he adds, “I am not the boy next door. But off stage, I am. That's the difference. What people should understand,” he concludes, “is that it's a joke.”²⁹⁸

Since Gallo published this article in December 1988, the majority of Clay's interviews have dwelt on whether Clay endorses his stage persona. In every one, Clay has made clear that he does not.

But when Clay became a national phenomenon in 1989, critics concluded that Clay failed as a comedian because he did not live up to the standard Bruce and Pryor had established. Rick Altman criticizes this sort of maneuver in his essay, “A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Genre”: “Now, quite obviously, no major [film] genre remains unchanged over the many decades of its existence. In order to mask the scandal of applying synchronic analysis to an evolving form, critics have been extremely clever in their creation of categories designed to negate the notion of

²⁹⁶ Hank Gallo, “Enter Laughing,” *New York Daily News*, January 29, 1988, 49.

²⁹⁷ Hank Gallo, “Dice on a Roll: This Misplaced Biker Is Gambling on Raunchy Humor,” *New York Daily News*, December 29, 1988, 35.

²⁹⁸ Gallo, “Dice on a Roll, 35.

change and to imply the perpetual self-identity of each genre.”²⁹⁹ In Clay’s case, critics assessed his performances by implying that stand-up comedy was a fixed and narrowly defined genre of performance, exemplified by Bruce and his stylistic successors, from George Carlin to Pryor to Bill Hicks. Exemplifying this maneuver was a Richard Roeper column in the *Chicago Sun-Times*, written shortly after Clay’s performance at the 1989 MTV Video Music Awards. “Clay’s stardom,” Roeper wrote, “has me convinced more than ever that stand-up comedy as an art form is dying and is being replaced by McComedy: packaged, mass-marketed, identifiable products instead of true comics.” For good measure, he added, “Comparisons of Clay to Lenny Bruce and Richard Pryor—even Sam Kinison—are ridiculous. Those comics were original minds who jolted audiences with their thought-provoking, sometimes painful observations about the dark side of human experience. Clay is nothing but a marginally talented actor playing one note, again and again.”³⁰⁰ Understood within the context of Altman’s approach to genre, what Roeper meant was that Clay’s, Bruce’s, and Pryor’s performances employed similar semantic elements but different syntactic ones. By semantic elements, Altman means “the primary, linguistic meaning of a text’s component parts.” He contrasts these with a text’s syntactic elements, “the secondary or textual meaning that those [component] parts acquire through a structuring process internal to the text or to the genre.”³⁰¹ The comics employed the same semantic elements insofar as they went on stage as themselves, spoke directly to the audience, elicited laughter at regular intervals, used foul language, flaunted an irreverent attitude and made frequent references to sex and other “scandalous” subjects. They differed syntactically because, in Roeper’s view, Bruce and Pryor’s vulgarities delivered a moral message whereas Clay’s appeared to have none. In other words, Bruce and Pryor were artists; Clay was a hack.

By framing stand-up comedy as an art form undertaken by both artists and hacks, critics implied that Clay-as-hack had transgressed a moral boundary because he failed to deliver a clear message. Clay’s critics framed themselves as heroes who, like Bruce and Pryor, were fighting the good fight. They purportedly taught readers a valuable lesson about the difference between Bruce’s anti-authoritarian behavior and Clay’s anti-social behavior. Unlike Bruce’s act, “Clay’s act [was] juvenile, homophobic, misogynist, racist and xenophobic.” Roeper’s sampling of Clay’s dirty nursery rhymes, quoted from Clay’s MTV appearance, served as proof:

Rock a bye baby on the treetop

Your mother’s a whore, I ain’t your pop.

Roeper added, “That’s one of the more tasteful examples.” Swapping in taste for morality, or implying a link between the two, critics appealed to a purportedly universal standard of taste. They characterized Clay’s problematic rise to fame as what Adorno and Horkheimer once called the culture industry’s effort “to ensure that the simple reproduction of mind does not lead on to the expansion of mind.”³⁰² Used in this way, taste became one of what Altman refers to as the

²⁹⁹ Rick Altman, “A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Genre,” *Cinema Journal*, 23.3 (Spring, 1984), 12.

³⁰⁰ Richard Roeper, “The Diceman Cometh and Comedy Goeth,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, September 15, 1989, 11.

³⁰¹ Altman, “Semantic/Syntactic,” 15.

³⁰² Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford UP), 100.

“categories designed to negate the notion of change and to imply the perpetual self-identity of each genre.” By describing tastelessness as an instance of moral transgression, Roeper’s critique reduced the syntactic differences between Clay and Bruce to a matter of taste, whereby Bruce had moral (i.e. good) taste and Clay had immoral (i.e. bad) taste. In actual fact, the syntactic differences emerged in part out of the historical development of different subgenres. Bruce was clearly working within a long tradition of political satire. In contrast, as a put-on artist influenced by Andy Kaufman’s innovative comedy, Clay’s bad taste was too overt not to be at least partly intentional. As one of Clay’s few fans in the press noted in his review of a live show, “Granted, [Clay’s] material was juvenile, but that’s the point.”³⁰³

While Clay’s working-class appeal helped make him a top draw from the late-1980s onward, it also marginalized him within the stand-up comedy community, which to this day continues to undervalue Clay’s role in the history of stand-up comedy. To see why this has happened, it helps to understand that, during Clay’s rise, stand-up comedy was becoming a nationally recognized field of cultural production. Before the comedy “boom” in the mid-1980s, debates over stand-up comedy’s genre conventions were hardly matters of public consumption. During the boom and ever since, comedians, journalists, and even academics have weighed in to discuss publicly just what stand-up was all about. One of the most thorough investigations was Betsy Borns’ 1987 book, *Comic Lives: Inside the World of American Stand-up Comedy*, in which the author referred to a telling statistic: “Today, there are an estimated 250 to 300 paying (non-showcase) comedy clubs in the country; in 1980, there were approximately ten.”³⁰⁴ Borns quotes dozens of comedians and industry insiders, including comedian Tom Parks, who attributes stand up’s growth to cable television: “I think it’s all because of cable TV—that’s what exposed Americans to stand-up,” he told Borns. “In 1974 and 1975, it was the Improv and Catch [a Rising Star] in New York and the Comedy Store in L.A. and that was it; there were no comedy clubs. If you were in Birmingham, Alabama, and said, ‘stand-up comedy,’ people would think, ‘Bob Hope’ . . . that was all they knew. It took cable TV to expose America to comedy as an art form—and they sure went for it.”³⁰⁵ By the late-1980s, audiences and critics knew stand-up comedy was something more than what Bob Hope did for a living, but what exactly was it? Was it really an “art form”?

As criticisms of Clay’s act implicitly suggest, stand-up comedy was becoming middle-brow art. Pierre Bourdieu’s definition is helpful in understanding this term:

Middle-brow art is the product of a productive system dominated by the quest for investment profitability; this creates the need for the widest possible public. It cannot, moreover, content itself with seeking to intensify consumption within a determinate social class; it is obliged to orient itself towards a generalization of the social and cultural composition of this public. This means that the production of goods, even when they are aimed at a specific statistical category (the young,

³⁰³ Bill Ervolino, “Giant Leap from Feat of Clay,” *New York Post*, September 18, 1989, 27.

³⁰⁴ Borns, *Comic Lives*, 40.

³⁰⁵ Borns, *Comic Lives*, 47.

women, football fans, stamp collectors, etc.), must represent a kind of high social denominator.³⁰⁶

High-ranking, professional stand-up comedians put pressure on Clay, “obliging “ him to orient his comedy toward a higher social denominator. Legendary wisecrack Henny Youngman went so far as to publish a *New York Times* Op-Ed article lamenting Clay’s existence. “A guy I’d thought was my friend,” Youngman began, “played me a tape of Andrew Dice Clay, this hotshot kid comic from Brooklyn with the filthy mouth. After listening to a few gags, I realized Clay needs no introduction. What he needs is an act.”³⁰⁷ What he needed, to use Bourdieu’s terminology, was to make the compromises required to aim his comedy toward “a kind of high social denominator.” Clay’s colleagues made this point by accusing him of betraying the job description of “comedian.” As Jay Leno told *Playboy*, “I only get annoyed at [Clay’s act] because I’m a comedian. It’s like you’re a doctor and you see another doctor who’s screwing off and killing patients. ‘Do something else, will ya? Become an actor.’”³⁰⁸ The problem, Leno implied, was that he and Clay both worked under the banner of “comedian,” which apparently made Leno guilty by association. It seemed Clay was not making the kind of compromises which, Bourdieu notes, are required of artists working within a middle-brow genre:

On the other hand, middle-brow art is most often the culmination of transactions and compromises among the various categories of agents engaged in a technically and socially differentiated field of production. These transactions occur not only between controllers of the means of production and cultural producers—who lie more or less locked into the role of pure technicians—but also between different categories of producers themselves. The latter come to use their specific competencies to guarantee a wide variety of cultural interests while simultaneously reactivating the self-censorship engendered by the vast industrial and bureaucratic organizations of cultural production through invocation of the “average spectator.”³⁰⁹

When one of the “controllers of the means of production,” comedy television guru and *Saturday Night Live* producer Lorne Michaels, promoted Clay’s act by having him host *SNL*, rival “cultural producers” responded. As reported in the *New York Daily News*, one comedian called out Clay for his betrayal of “intelligent humor”: “Apparently there’s no love lost between comedians **Bobcat Goldthwait** and **Andrew Dice Clay**. After Clay’s controversial—but highly successful—debut on “Saturday Night Live” last weekend, Goldthwait sent a wreath to *SNL* executive producer **Lorne Michaels** with a note attached reading, “In Loving Memory of Intelligent Humor on ‘Saturday Night Live.’ Rest in Peace. You must be proud and rich.”³¹⁰ Not only were Clay and Michaels guilty of making unintelligent humor, they were also “rich.”

³⁰⁶ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, Edited by Randall Johnson, London: Polity Press, 1993, 126.

³⁰⁷ Henny Youngman, “‘Nem di Gelt’ (Take the Money),” *New York Times*, July 31, 1990, A19.

³⁰⁸ Dick Lochte, “Playboy Interview,” interview with Jay Leno, *Playboy*, December 1990, 61-62.

³⁰⁹ Bourdieu, *Cultural Production*, 126.

³¹⁰ Marilyn Beck, “SNL Gets an RIP,” *New York Daily News*, May 17, 1990, 58.

These two accusations went hand in hand, with critics routinely criticizing Clay for having “parlayed street-corner lewdness into a presumably profitable gig.”³¹¹ Each accusation set up a dichotomy between mind (i.e. intelligence) and body (i.e. frivolous pleasures, wealth), which distinguished the critics much in the way “a bourgeois world . . . conceives its relation to the populace in terms of the relationship of the soul to the body.”³¹²

Criticisms also concentrated on Clay’s audience. As Goldthwait told *Vanity Fair*, “It’s his audience that bums me out. The audience isn’t going to see a parody; they’re going to see someone who’s finally saying what they want to say.”³¹³ As I argue in the next section, however, such criticisms had an altogether more problematic agenda in mind.

Ladies and Gentlemen, A Working-Class Audience!!

How Critics Demonized Clay for His Affiliation with the Working Class

Amidst the wealth of criticism heaped on Clay during his fall from grace, two authors noted that much of the opposition stemmed from a bias against working-class people. Writing for *The Nation*, Fredric Paul Smoler noted that “Clay’s audience has one striking distinction: It is the only social formation politically correct to despise.”³¹⁴ In *Spin* magazine, Frank Owens declared that Clay’s critics were prejudiced against white, working-class people. “The case against Andrew Dice Clay,” he wrote, “is actually a social-purity crusade conducted by professional humanists disguised as cultural critics intent on reforming white working-class tastes. Hence the preachy disdain and self-righteous tone of most of the articles written about Andrew Dice Clay, which say more about the cultural class warfare that exists in this supposedly classless society than they do about the Diceman.”³¹⁵ The marking of Clay’s audience as white trash is in keeping with contemporary representations of whiteness. “Perhaps most sensationally,” writes scholar Annalee Newitz, “whiteness emerges as a distinct and visible racial identity when it can be identified as somehow primitive or inhuman. For example, to see a white as a white, rather than “just another person,” that white needs to be marked out as different from those whites who—

³¹¹ O’Connor, “Tasteful to Tasteless.”

³¹² Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 19.

³¹³ Colacello, “In Your Face,” 192-193.

³¹⁴ Fredric Paul Smoler, “As Nasty as He Wants to Be,” *The Nation*, October 8, 1990, 387.

³¹⁵ Owen, “White Trash,” 42.

implicitly or explicitly—observe him.”³¹⁶ While critics rarely describe white artists as “white” or their white audiences as “white audiences,” they regularly observed that Clay’s audiences were white. White novelist Joyce Carol Oates noted that Clay’s performances were “supported by a howling, uncritical audience made up almost exclusively of young whites (male and female both).”³¹⁷ Other critics racialized Clay’s audience by associating them with Brooklyn. Now more commonly associated with white hipsters, in 1990 Brooklyn was widely viewed as a place where the white residents were both ethnic and working class. Sheepshead Bay, the neighborhood Clay grew up in, is still decidedly working class.

As the critics’ expressed their agenda by exploring what Susan Sontag calls “the peculiar question of the *value* of [Clay’s] art,”³¹⁸ they dropped enough clues to indicate they were more interested in marking Clay’s audience as white trash. This racial marking, Annalee Newitz and Matthew Wray write, frames the target “as something that must be discarded, expelled, and disposed of in order for whiteness to achieve and maintain social dominance.”³¹⁹ For example, in his review of *Diceman Cometh*, the *New York Times*’ John O’Connor claimed that the cable special’s perceived lack of value derived from Clay’s working-class demeanor. After asking in his opening sentence “What’s it to be: gentility or barbarity?,” he went on to compare *Diceman Cometh* with an episode of PBS’ *Masterpiece Theater*, which he praised for “bringing a familiar measure of good taste and, yes, exquisite manners, to a violence-tinged tale of loneliness.”³²⁰ *Masterpiece Theater*’s “typically accomplished *British* treatment, featuring the usual display of *fine* acting” (italics mine) contrasted with Clay’s “street-corner lewdness,” which hailed from “the macho, beer-drinking universe of a *white lower-middle-class* neighborhood” (italics mine). The decision to contrast *Diceman Cometh* with *Masterpiece Theater* suggested that Clay’s art lost value not merely because of any ethical failing but mainly because it appealed to a purportedly degenerate audience—i.e. working-class/lower-middle-class people—as opposed to a purportedly purer audience—i.e. those who revered the British upper class. By marking Clay’s audience as white trash, O’Connor and other critics suggested that Clay’s working-class whiteness threatened the purity of upper-class whiteness, as displayed by *Masterpiece Theater*’s fine, British treatment.

³¹⁶ Annalee Newitz, “White Savagery and Humiliation, or a New Racial Consciousness in the Media,” *White Trash: Race and Class in America*, eds. Matt Wray and Annalee Newitz, New York: Routledge, 1997, 134.

³¹⁷ Oates, “Numbeth,” 47.

³¹⁸ Susan Sontag, “Against Interpretation,” in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Picador, 2001), 3.

³¹⁹ Annalee Newitz and Matt Wray, “What Is White Trash?,” *Whiteness: Race and Class in America*, eds. Matt Wray and Annalee Newitz (Routledge: New York, 1997), 169.

³²⁰ O’Connor, “Tasteful to Tasteless.”

Tasteful to Tasteless With a Flick of the Dial

WHAT'S IT TO BE: GENTILITY or barbarity? Television can give you either, as long as a demand is detected. On tonight's *Masterpiece Theater* presentation, "A Wreath of Roses," we can find British actors bringing a familiar measure of good taste and, yes, exquisite manners to a violence-tinged tale of loneliness. Then, in the barbarity sweepstakes, some of the extremes have reached a point that must give pause to students of contemporary civilization. Submitted for evidence is "The Diceman Cometh," a Home Box Office "On Location" comedy special that had its debut New Year's Eve and will be rattling around the HBO schedule for a couple more weeks. The star is Andrew "Dice" Clay, a former Brooklynite who has parlayed street-corner lewdness into a presumably profitable gig. The pay-cable service is carefully promising that the program will never be shown earlier than midnight. As one executive murmurs: "Put the children away for this one."

■
Masterpiece Theater is undergoing some basic changes this season. There will be more "one-shot" dramas, presented in a single evening instead of being stretched into a mini-series. And there will be fewer pieces done in period costumes. Coming up in a few weeks, on Feb. 12, for example, is Alan Bennett's "Bed Among the Lentils," taken from a series of six monologues he wrote for



TV critic John J. O'Connor used *Masterpiece Theater* as a point of comparison against Clay's HBO Special, *The Diceman Cometh*.

The difference between Clay's audience's reaction and O'Connor's mirrored what Bourdieu calls the difference between "popular reaction" and that of "aesthete." According to Bourdieu, the aesthete, "who, as is seen whenever he appropriates one of the objects of popular taste . . . introduces a distance, a gap—the measure of his distant distinction—via-à-vis 'first-degree' perception, by displacing the interest from the "content," characters, plot, etc., to the form, to the specifically artistic effects which are only appreciated relationally, through a comparison with other works which is incompatible with immersion in the singularity of the work immediately given."³²¹ By separating content and form—the form in this case being the put-on, the content being antisocial behavior—O'Connor could compare Clay's show to *Masterpiece Theater* and argue that one upheld "good manners" while the other did not. This maneuver, however, committed what Sontag calls the error of assuming "a work of art *is* its content. Or, as it's usually put today, that a work of art by definition says something."³²² In fact, the whole point of put-on comedy is to mock anyone who wonders, "What is the comedian trying to say?"

Instead of acknowledging that the audience is aware of the put-on, the critic assumed the audience was interpreting the show through a different form—the fascist rally. This was one of

³²¹ Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 34.

³²² Sontag, "Against Interpretation," 4.

the most common accusations leveled against Clay by his critics. As O'Connor put it in his review of *Diceman Cometh*, "At this particular performance, taped in Philadelphia, the white young men jump to their feet raising clenched fists every time Dice gets off another offensive sally, obviously considering his demeaning maliciousness the very height of wit. . . . [Clay] seems determined to ignore the fascistic reverberations."³²³ Referring to "raising clenched fists," O'Connor used the analogy of fascism to understand *Diceman Cometh*. In the same vein, Roger Ebert's review of *Dice Rules* noted that "You never see anyone just plain laughing, as if they'd heard something that was funny. You see, instead, the behavior more appropriate at a fascist rally, as his fans stick their fists in the air and chant his name as if he were making some kind of a statement for them."³²⁴ The constructed notion of "plain laughing" suggested that some types of laughter are more legitimate than others. Quite possibly, however, Clay's shows were not like fascist rallies but were more in line with Bourdieu's definition of "popular entertainments":

The most radical difference between popular entertainments—from Punch and Judy shows, wrestling or circuses, or even the old neighbourhood cinema, to soccer matches—and bourgeois entertainments is found in audience participation. In one case it is constant, manifest (boos, whistles), sometimes direct (pitch or playing-field, invasions); in the other it is intermittent, distant, highly ritualized, with obligatory applause, and even shouts of enthusiasm, at the end, or even perfectly silent (concerts in churches).³²⁵

In the case of O'Connor and Ebert, we have two critics who reviewed forms (television shows and films) that encourage bourgeois participation (i.e. restrained reaction). When they reviewed a performance in which the audience behaved less restrained, they took note of the lack of bourgeois participation and implied that the audience was morally corrupt.

Their criticism of the audience's bodily movements—standing up, fists pumped, hooting and hollering, chanting along with Clay—aligned the audience with viewers of pornography, horror, and women's weepy films. These body genres, Linda Williams writes, have been excluded from serious study on the grounds that they are "excessive."³²⁶ Specifically, their audiences have "excessive" bodily reactions: ejaculating during a porno; screaming during a horror film; crying during a weepy. Williams excludes comedy from the class of body genres, given that audiences do not mimic what they see on the screen. Likewise, Clay's mediated comedy does not belong within the class of body genres, given that audiences presumably do not stand up and cheer for Dice from the comfort of their living rooms. Critics did not treat *Dice Rules* and *Diceman Cometh* as belonging to a genre of anything, however; they objected to the films because they appeared to legitimize live stand-up comedy as a body genre in itself. Clay's productions were especially offensive because they visually represented the audience's reactions. Unlike porno, horror, and weepies, which critics can only assume provoke bodily reactions, *Dice Rules* and *Diceman Cometh* showed these reactions. Both productions legitimized bodily

³²³ O'Connor, "Tasteful to Tasteless," 1989.

³²⁴ Roger Ebert, review of *Dice Rules*, *Chicago Sun-Times*, May 17, 1991.

³²⁵ Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 487-488.

³²⁶ Linda Williams, "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess," *Film Quarterly*, 44.4 (Summer 1991), 4.

reactions to any work of art, and as Williams points out, the audience's "almost involuntary mimicry" of what they see onscreen is "what may especially mark these body genres as low [. . .]".³²⁷

The bodily reaction suggested to critics that Clay's audience did not have the sophistication to see his performance as a put-on and that they viewed the performance as a rhetorical act—i.e. as if the act were persuading them to view the world in a certain way. This criticism was made explicit during a *Nightline* panel discussion on Clay's popularity. When *Saturday Night Live* producer Lorne Michaels defended his show's decision to invite Clay to guest host, feminist academic Phyllis Chesler said that Clay's audience, like "the Nazi brownshirts," was "mindlessly cheering this violence":

Michaels: Can I point out that within the last week, Andrew Dice Clay has been on *The Arsenio Hall Show*, and he's also been on *Friday Night Videos*. We haven't even been on the air yet, and everybody's sort of concluded that our show is offensive.

Chesler: Well, you know, the Nazi brownshirts were all over Germany. It was all the rage.

Michaels: Yeah, I know, but they didn't do *Friday Night Videos*.

Chesler: Well, that was because the technology didn't allow them to do it yet.

Michaels: Well, when did we just jump to Hitler here? [. . .]

Chesler: Well, I'm concerned with the crowds that are mindlessly cheering this violence. And in fact, what's increasing is not the thought police, but the violence against people, minorities, blacks, gays, women. I'm worried about the crowds who cheer Dice Clay on. What do they do when they go home at night? What do they do on the streets?³²⁸

Chesler did not say why this particular audience might do terrible things on the streets after watching *SNL*. Her description of Clay's audience as "crowds that are mindlessly cheering this violence" reflected an assumption that working-class people, when brought together and riled up, do bad things to others. It echoed French critic Gustave LeBon whose book on the French working class, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*, describes a mass gathering of people as a mindless mob incapable of reason and vulnerable to suggestion: "A chain of logical argumentation is totally incomprehensible to crowds, and for this reason it is permissible to say that they do not reason or that they reason falsely and are not to be influenced by reasoning. Astonishment is felt at times on reading certain speeches at their weakness, and yet they had an enormous influence on the crowds which listened to them, but it is forgotten that they were intended to persuade collectivities and not to be read by philosophers."³²⁹ LeBon characterizes the crowd within a rhetorical framework by noting that the crowd is "influenced" by poorly reasoned arguments. Chesler took up this line of reasoning by inferring that Clay's show might have persuaded the audience to do terrible things. Although we cannot know one way or another exactly how Clay's audiences viewed his performances—the *Vanity Fair* profile did interview

³²⁷ Williams, "Film Bodies," 4.

³²⁸ Chris Wallace, "Entertainment or Bad Taste?," *Nightline*, ABC News, May 11, 1990, transcript, LexisNexis Academic.

³²⁹ Gustave LeBon, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (New York: Macmillan, 1897), 52.

several fans, each of whom implied that Clay was putting them on—the rhetorical perspective led critics to make condescending, classist remarks.³³⁰

This classist attitude made its way into reviews of Clay’s live shows and his recorded shows. A live Chicago show, held shortly after the MTV debacle, garnered reviews in the *Tribune*, which compared the audience to “a classroom full of degenerates,”³³¹ and in the *Sun-Times*, which painted a more elaborate portrait of the audience:

The crowd at the raunchy comedian’s much-ballyhooed, sold-out Arie Crown performance Thursday night was an ocean of black leather, bulging biceps, too-small T-shirts and hip-numbing jeans.

The air, which smelled decidedly of industrial strength mousse, was thick with “dems” and “doses,” gum popping and various trendy macho obscenities.

It was—dare I say it?—like attending a Sylvester Stallone retrospective film festival during a Patrick Swayze clone convention at midnight in Brooklyn.

These are the people who’ve made the Diceman what he is today.³³²

By mocking their clothes, hair products, vocabulary, and preference for chewing gum, the critic marked Clay’s audience as working class. She suggested that the members of the audience must mirror the character of the Dice Man, whom another critic described as “a character from the insular world of white working-class Brooklyn where anything unknown is mistrusted and anyone is fair game to be offended.”³³³ One *New York Times* critic, in a review of a show at Madison Square Garden, explicitly articulated the commonly held critical assumption that “as [Clay] lashes out against women, gays, the Japanese, or anyone else who would seem to stand in his way, his popularity shows that others identify with his anger, whether he intends to exercise it or stoke it.”³³⁴ Unlike the audience members of other comedians, it seemed, Clay’s were hate-filled people who wanted Clay to affirm their hostility toward women, racial minorities, and non-heterosexuals. Rarely did critics credit the audience with understanding that they were watching a put-on artist and enjoying the revelry of watching a buffoon, or finding pleasure in not knowing where to locate truth and in so simply—and refreshingly—abandoning the search. They were thought to be too working-class to identify or embrace such nuances. Smoler identified the obvious fallacy in this line of argument. He wrote, “Clay can connect powerfully with people—it is presumably the palpable strength of that connection that disturbs his critics—but we must not conclude that it is only what is vile in him that moves his audience. Critics on

³³⁰ Colacello, “In Your Face,” 191.

³³¹ Rick Kogan, “Andrew ‘Dice’ Clay: The Hot, Loathsome, Comic of the Moment,” *Chicago Tribune*, September 16, 1989, 11.

³³² Patricia Smith, “The Diceman’s humor is hot, nasty—and very painful,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, September 16, 1989, 21.

³³³ Eric Snider, “Once the Shock Wears Off, It’s Painful,” *St. Petersburg Times*, February 10, 1989, 27.

³³⁴ Jon Pareles, “A Little Hate Music, Please,” *New York Times*, February 24, 1990, 15.

the left should be a little less eager to assume that an immense popular success is due only to the baseness of ordinary people.”³³⁵

Critics and reporters intent on uncovering the “real” Andrew Dice Clay did not try to hide their prejudices against Clay’s audience. *Village Voice* reporter Ivan Solotaroff marked Clay’s audience as working-class—because they wore leather and drank cheap beer—and noted that, despite their class position, they were “surprisingly subdued”:

A hundred or so surprisingly subdued leather boys and *their women* are guzzling cans of Budweiser and Bud Light on a bottlenecked New Jersey transit bus to the sold-out 21,000-seat Brendan Byrne Arena. . . . I get the feeling this entire busload is *completely fuckin’ disgusted*, either from working all week or with their lovers, or both. Twenty-six rows deep, *everyone* is coupled up. A rough census of diamonds, ring fingers, and averted glances, shows the majority here are wed or engaged, and no one’s manifestly overjoyed to be so.³³⁶

Compounding a classist perspective with a sexist one, Solotaroff coded the “neutral” category of fans/audience as male, whereas the women were identified only in association with legitimate (i.e. male) audience members. Moreover, the italicized “*their women*” suggested that working-class men, and only working-class men, treat romantic partners like property. Solotaroff did not italicize “these people,” but if he had, he would have drawn attention to his apparent disdain for the great unwashed. Not only were they all in loveless marriages, they were all white, which must have meant something: “I haven’t seen a black or Latin face since the bus left,” he wrote. “But for a 60-year-old Marielito manning the elevator to the Byrne Arena’s VIP lounge and one extremely funny, heavily booed lead-off act, Ed Griffin (introduced as ‘the talented, young black comedian Dice personally found at the Comedy Store’), I won’t see another till I get back to Port Authority. I can’t escape the feeling I’m in the middle of some Erskine Caldwell story about a leisurely Saturday afternoon lynching.”³³⁷ Segregated audiences were not, and are still not, unusual for a lot of American entertainers. (Reviews of Jerry Seinfeld’s concerts never make any mention of the audience’s racial makeup, which is almost entirely white.) The attention to the audience’s racial makeup was relevant to Solotaroff, however, because it supported his thesis that Clay’s comedy represented the rise of a diseased working class—one with an always-present potential for violence. Apparently, the working-class’ purported degeneracy prevented them from attaining the middle-class’ enlightened attitudes toward race and gender—an attitude that exists in rhetoric much more than in practice, as a class-based analysis might reveal.

Journalists were amateur sleuths trying to confirm their suspicions that both Clay and his audience were like a foul disease. Solotaroff’s article was less a review and more of an ethnographic study of the audience, who were “standing straight up, like a field of denim and leather asparagus stalks, against the walls or in the aisles of the arena, chain-smoking while *their women* wait on endless lines for the bathrooms and concession stands” (again, italics Solotaroff’s). He interrogated one of Clay’s fans to figure out just who “these people” are: “I ask Paul what he does for a living and his expression—a bit cocksure but extremely open and likable

³³⁵ Smoler, “Nasty,” 387.

³³⁶ Ivan Solotaroff, “Snake Eyes: Andrew ‘Dice’ Clay Slithers Through the Meadowlands,” *The Village Voice*, December 12, 1989, 35. Italics in original.

³³⁷ Solotaroff, “Snake Eyes,” 35.

during our dialogue—becomes dumbstruck, like a winning contestant on a game show who’s just had the spotlight turned on him. ‘I deliver furniture for a rich woman in the Slope,’ he says, waving the question away dismissively [. . .] .”³³⁸ Perhaps Paul dismissed the question because he did not see why his profession had relevance to his interest in Clay. It had relevance to Solotaroff, it seemed, because it helped the reporter mark Clay’s fans as working class.

Solotaroff was but one among many reporters who covered Clay’s concerts in an effort to (a) declare that Clay’s fans were working class and (b) to use their class position as proof that Clay was a hack. When Clay sold out the Nassau Coliseum in September 1989, a *Spin* reporter happily reported that only “white trash” populated the VIP lounge. He condescendingly contrasted Clay’s female fans with the kind of woman the reporter himself associated with: “The companion of a local daily newspaper leans forward and asks [me], ‘Wouldn’t you be embarrassed to admit you paid to see Andrew Dice Clay?’ She does not consider Dice funny. Just dumb.”³³⁹

A lot of women did like Clay’s act, but when critics referred to his female fans, they condescended toward them. For example, a *Newsday* article titled “The Fans of Andrew Dice Clay” included quotes from several female fans, all of whom, the reporter insinuated, were in physically abusive relationships. Wondering how they traveled with their “boyfriends” to the show (which repeated the sexist assumption that female fans were appendages to the real fans, the males), the reporter mused, “The women rode in the trunks of the cars. Or else, tied to the underbodies of the cars. Or tied like deer to the front bumpers, out of the way.”³⁴⁰ Making an equally condescending assumption, *Time* magazine aligned women who enjoy Clay’s comedy with participants at the 1934 Nuremberg rally:

Yet some of the loudest laughter comes from women. Good sports at their own immolation, they giggle and groan along with their beaux. Perhaps proving they are tough is as important to them as it is to men. Others have found the spectacle less edifying. One woman at Madison Square Garden listened to Clay’s sluice of abuse and said she felt like a Jew at the 1934 Nuremberg rally. Remember, she said, when pop culture was not naughty but nice? Once there was a single official pop culture: white, middle class, mid-cult, status quo. Pretty much everybody hummed the same tunes, saw the same movies, laughed at the same genteel jokes.³⁴¹

The article’s authors aligned the lone woman with the middle class. If middle class meant “genteel” or “status quo,” then working class meant something else altogether. Joyce Carol Oates suggested that it meant “defiant.” She marked Clay’s female fans as working class by describing their applause as “rowdy,” which she interpreted as “a defiant cry to parents, elders, and custodians of authority: You don’t control us after all.”³⁴² For Oates, working-class defiance

³³⁸ Solotaroff, “Snake Eyes,” 36.

³³⁹ Leland, “Moving Images,” 84.

³⁴⁰ Paul Vitello, “The Fans of Andrew Dice Clay,” *Newsday*, November 4 1990.

³⁴¹ Corliss, Mary Cronin, Jeanne McDowell, “X Rated,” *Time*, May 7, 1990, 92.

³⁴² Oates, “Numbeth,” 45-6.

appeared to be a bad thing, requiring essays like hers to quash it. In contrast, Smoler empathized with Clay's working-class fans by offering a more nuanced analysis of a routine from *Dice*, in which Clay says to a panhandler, "Whaddayah think you're gonna do wit' a quawduh, start yer own fuckin' business? Why don't you go rob somebody and earn your money, you fuckin' piece of shit." Instead of bemoaning the line's obvious anti-social tone, Smoler wrote, "I read this as a coded double admission, first that neither panhandlers nor Clay's listeners have the wherewithal to start their own businesses, and second that the thought of violence—the imagined violence of mugging, the rhetorical violence of Clay's comic persona—may be a more appealing response to a situation of defeat than broken-spirited pretenses of civility."³⁴³ While "the thought of violence" was not materially empowering, the subtext of the critics' remarks suggested that Clay's fans were not entitled to their own thoughts about anything.

Critics justified their claim that Clay's audience endorsed violence because Clay did not sufficiently distance himself from his character. Distance or "self-awareness" was what *New York Times* critic Stephen Holden felt was lacking in Clay's act. He described Clay as "a macho screamer who wears a black leather jacket and flings mud at everybody, especially women and homosexuals. His poison is partly diluted by a self-awareness that periodically breaks through the pose."³⁴⁴ A supposedly minute level of self-awareness suggested to some critics that Clay's audience was not responding to a put-on but were actually endorsing his character's blatantly anti-social beliefs. One critic explicitly argued that while "Clay has said in the past, when pressed, that this character is just that—a character, a parody of a sleazeball . . . that's not what the audience is reacting to, and Clay never shows any distance from the character while he's on stage. He's just the most venal, and most popular, guy on the American comedy scene. And, yes, that's frightening."³⁴⁵ The critic wanted Clay to show "distance from the character while he's on stage," presumably because "distance" would have reassured the critic that Clay himself did not hold anti-social views. The correspondence between the audience's laughter—i.e. their "rowdy" laughter or lack of "plain laughter"—and Bakhtin's concept of festive laughter suggests instead that the lack of distance enabled Clay's fans to become swept up in a carnivalesque atmosphere. Those who laugh during carnival, Bakhtin writes, do not soberly distance themselves from a humorous spectacle; instead, "they live it, and everyone participates because it embraces all the people."³⁴⁶ Applying this quote to Clay's performances, we should define "everyone" to mean "those in attendance," the point being that Clay's audiences were not being persuaded of something so much as they might have been celebrating a temporary autonomy from bourgeois critics who regarded the audience's laughter as an inferior version of their own laughter. Bakhtin refers to this hierarchy of laughter when he notes that "The bourgeois nineteenth century respected only satirical laughter, which was not actually laughter but rhetoric."³⁴⁷ In a

³⁴³ Smoler, "Nasty," 388.

³⁴⁴ Stephen Holden, "Laughing and Dancing Into 1989," *New York Times*, December 30, 1988.

³⁴⁵ Jim Sullivan, "The Grotesque Sensation of Comic Andrew Dice Clay," *Boston Globe*, November 10, 1989, 86.

³⁴⁶ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Islowsky (Indiana UP: Bloomington, 1968), 7.

³⁴⁷ Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 51.

parenthetical aside, Bakhtin adds that actual laughter, not unlike Clay's audience's laughter, "was compared to a whip or scourge." Clay and his audience clearly took offence to the critics' denigration of their laughter, as they demonstrate in *Dice Rules* when Clay says to immense applause, "I know I've been getting' a lotta bad press about the kind of language I use and the things I talk about. But lemme tell ya this one thing: If the press doesn't understand how funny it is for twenty thousand people to gather in places like Madison Square Garden and to tell dirty Mother Goose poems, they can take their newspapers and wipe their fuckin' asses with 'em."

Viewing Clay's act from a rhetorical perspective led critics to demand that Clay's on-stage character make clear that the off-stage performer did not embrace his character's anti-social beliefs. This reassurance is critical to the workings of rhetorical irony, as Booth notes: "No matter how firmly I am convinced that a statement is absurd or illogical or just plain false, I must somehow determine whether what I reject is also rejected by the author, and whether he has reason to expect my concurrence."³⁴⁸ And yet, although Clay was not deploying rhetorical irony—i.e. encouraging the audience to reject his immoral statements—this does not mean he was encouraging the audience to agree with him. By playing the triumphant fool, Clay participated in a contemporary manifestation of a medieval carnival, where "a reversal of hierarchic levels" saw that "the jester was proclaimed king."³⁴⁹ Clay's put-on comedy prevented audiences from knowing "whether what [they] reject is also rejected by the author," but in the world of carnival, this knowledge is irrelevant. Clay's recreation of a carnival atmosphere suggested that what attracted audiences was not a belief that Clay endorsed racism, sexism, and homophobia, but rather that Clay shared their class consciousness. Clay crowned himself the working-class buffoon by performing what in the 1980s became a white trash stereotype: an inner-city thug hostile toward political correctness and suspicious of women, foreigners, and non-heterosexuals. He catalyzed the carnivalesque through a Rabelaisian obsession with the lower bodily stratum, which explains his asking male and female audience members whether they went to the bathroom to take "a dump" or "a squirt" or to jerkoff. A fusion of humor with such detailed creations of X-rated imagery, as Constance Penley notes in her analysis of hard core film pornography, aligns with and affirms "white trash sensibilities."³⁵⁰

Clay fit in well on the cover of the July 1991 issue of *Penthouse*, the "less-classy" version of *Playboy*; however, he might have been more appropriate for the even less-classy *Hustler*, which Laura Kipnis has described as "counterhegemonic in its refusal of bourgeois properties."³⁵¹ "*Hustler* sexuality," Kipnis writes, "is far from normative," as was Clay's. Despite his homophobic and misogynist persona, he constantly emasculated himself: by extolling the virtues of "ass-eating," by declaring there's "nothing like a nice vagina . . . a nice, big, hairy,

³⁴⁸ Booth, *Rhetoric of Irony*, 11.

³⁴⁹ Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 81.

³⁵⁰ Constance Penley, "Crackers and Whackers: The White Trashing of Porn," *White Trash: Race and Class in America*, eds. Matt Wray and Annalee Newitz (New York: Routledge, 1997), 94.

³⁵¹ Laura Kipnis, "Male (Desire) and Female (Disgust): Reading *Hustler*," *Hustler*, eds. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Aulor Nelson, Paula A. Treichler (Psychology Press: New York, 1992), 375.

stinky, smelly, fuckin' skanky bush," and by claiming he once dated a woman with "so many dicks goin' through 'er [he] had to double-park [his] on her ass." He reveled in sex with "fat chicks" and defended white trash symbol Roseanne Barr when the *TDTL* audience laughed at the very mention of her name:

CLAY: Aw, c'mon. What? 'Cause she's a little overweight? . . . Let me tell ya somethin'. I was watchin' [Roseanne's] show the other night. And I turn off the TV. And I saw that I was jerkin' off all over myself. [*Pause*] I didn't even realize it. [*Pause*] What if I had family over? [*Audience laughs*] It's like the hand is on automatic pilot! [*Later, to a female audience member.*] . . . You don't like fat girls?

FEMALE AUDIENCE MEMBER: No!

CLAY: No? Wait 'til you hit thirty-five, honey. We'll see how ya don't like 'em anymore.

Partly for his celebration of white trashiness, Clay became a regular guest on the radio show hosted by Howard Stern, whom Penley praises for making a spectacle of "a masculinity no longer sure of its godgiven privilege and sense of entitlement that was for so long the taken-for-grantedness of law, government, and religion. Stern puts his body on display, phobic, farting, flailing, a male body lashing out at all the feared others—women with beauty, smarts, and power; strong, sexually confident blacks; those men with the kinds of superior qualities that attract women but who willfully choose to be gay."³⁵² Although Penley's description of Stern applied to Clay, a difference between Stern and Clay lay in the sexual presentation of Clay's body. Pimping himself in tight pants, a broad-shouldered leather jacket, and a "wind-tunnel-tested hairdo," Clay challenged a frigid, white, middle-class masculinity. By calling attention to his whiteness (in *Diceman Cometh*, Clay referred to East Asian immigrants as "urine-colored people"), by calling attention to his hypermasculinity, and by calling attention to his class position, Clay troubled whiteness and maleness and celebrated his role in promoting their symbolic impurities.

In order to prove that this challenge was a fraud, critics and reporters zealously reported on Clay's life, looking for anything that might suggest Clay's off-stage self was as socially unsustainable as his on-stage self was. The press struggled to find clues. Articles with headlines such as "In Search of the Real Andrew Dice Clay"³⁵³ were short on salacious details. When a *Vanity Fair* reporter relayed a moment when he witnessed Clay asking his girlfriend to make him a sandwich,³⁵⁴ a *Toronto Star* reporter argued, incredibly, that the passage "adds up to a lurid mural of manipulation and misogyny."³⁵⁵ In lieu of any clear indication that the real Clay was similar to the fictitious Clay, the press pounced on indications that the real Clay was more emotional than a hegemonic masculinity allowed. First, the *New York Post* published quotes

³⁵² Penley, "Crackers," 103.

³⁵³ Patrick Goldstein, "In Search of the Real Andrew Dice Clay," *LA Times*, June 3, 1990, 6.

³⁵⁴ Colacello, "In Your Face," 188: "'Trini,' said Andrew Dice Clay, collapsed on a couch. 'I think I should have a turkey sandwich now.' Trini went to the buffet of cold cuts wrapped in yellow cellophane and made it."

³⁵⁵ Craig MacInnis, "Vanity Fair Gives Andrew Dice Clay Needed Perspective," *Toronto Star*, May 30, 1990, F3.

from love letters Clay had sent to his then-wife.³⁵⁶ Then, when Clay teared up in on *The Arsenio Hall Show*, he became a laughingstock. After talking to Hall about the ethics of his humour, Clay took a risk by dropping out of character and referring to himself by his birth name. He said,

People go, ya know, ‘Who’s the real Andrew Clay Silverstein? Who is that other, ya know, opposed to Dice?’ Because I get, ya know, ‘Who’s Dice? Who’s Andrew Clay? Who’s the Jewish kid? Who’s the guy who’s actin’ Italian?’ Well, you wanna know who he is? I’ll tell ya. [*To the audience’s cheers, Clay stood up off the couch and walked to the edge of the stage.*] Andrew Clay—now lemme get this straight. And everybody watchin’, everybody in the studios should hear it. [*His voice starts to tremble.*] Andrew Clay is a guy who came out here about ten years ago. [*Fighting back tears.*] And broke his ass. You know what I mean? [*Recomposed.*] He broke his ass, believed in himself, and became the hottest comic in the world. And anybody who doesn’t like it can wipe their ass with whatever they say about me.

Although he may not have wiped his ass with his column, John O’Connor did devote an entire article to the affair. After noting that Clay has “the hostility of a certain lower-middle-class kind of white, uneducated, heterosexual male,” O’Connor added that the “tough character has suddenly turned pathetic.”³⁵⁷ In his *Times* Op-Ed, Henny Youngman mocked Clay for saying “how nobody understands him, how he’s a sensitive artist. I kid you not, he almost started crying.”³⁵⁸ This was “the real Andrew Dice Clay” critics and reporters had been searching for. He was not a pig, but a vulnerable puppet master. The discovery did not vindicate Clay, however, because Clay’s fans apparently could not tell that Clay was an actor playing a character. His tears suggested that the supposed power Clay had amassed would disappear because fans would no longer like Clay. O’Connor imagined that “[e]ven his most rabid fans are beginning to cringe.”

By this point in Clay’s career, his reputation as a filthy (i.e. depraved as a function of his social class) comedian had run full course. Although Clay would continue to have a solid fan base, the press stopped showing interest in him—the filthy label having exhausted its use as a reinscriber of classist and racist boundaries between middle-class, white comics like Jerry Seinfeld and working-class, white comics like Clay. While Clay has of late received positive notices for his Showtime stand-up special *Indestructible* (2012) and for his turns in Woody Allen’s *Blue Jasmine* (2013) and the HBO series *Entourage* (2004-2011), he has come to symbolize the alleged machismo excess of the late-1980s—for instance, see his recent interview with *Salon*, headlined “Andrew Dice Clay Still Won’t Apologize.”³⁵⁹ The label does retain some currency, however, among a new wave of comedians. As I argue in the next chapter, there has been a significant increase in the number of women recognized nationally as filthy stand-up

³⁵⁶ “Clay’s Pen Is Mushier Than His Mouth,” *New York Post*, March 7, 1990, 6.

³⁵⁷ John J. O’Connor, “Taking a Pratfall on the Nastiness Threshold,” *New York Times*, July 22, 1990, 25.

³⁵⁸ Youngman, “Take the Money.”

³⁵⁹ Drew Grant, “Andrew Dice Clay Still Won’t Apologize,” *Salon*, August 9, 2011, www.salon.com/2011/08/09/andrew_dice_clay_interview/

comics. But rather than tell us anything important about their work, the reputation as filthy comics tends to obscure their relationships with audiences—just as it did for Andrew “Dice” Clay.

Chapter Three

Medusas, Mothers, and Motherfuckers: Some Filthy Women in Stand-up Comedy

Every woman has known the torment of getting up to speak. Her heart racing, at times entirely lost for words, ground and language slipping away—that's how daring a feat, how great a transgression it is for a woman to speak—even just open her mouth—in public. A double distress, for even if she transgresses, her words fall almost always upon the deaf male ear, which hears in language only that which speaks in the masculine.—Hélène Cixous³⁶⁰

Ladies and Gentlemen, Women Can Be Filthy, Too!!

How Women Joined the Ranks of America's Filthy Stand-up Comedians

At one point during *The Day the Laughter Died*, Clay asks the audience whether a woman comedian will follow his set. Learning that no women are slated to perform that night, he says to the crowd,

Lucky for you. Lucky for anybody. But I guess women are funny, they always have been, right? It's like, in school, they were always the *class clown*. Throwin' shit at the teacher. Ruckus. Right? And you go to a party with your chick. She's got people on the floor, tellin' real filthy jokes, makin' a real asshole outta herself. Right? NO. WRONG! Then whatta they doin' on stage tellin' fuckin' jokes? They all got the same rap! All of 'em! "I wanna get married 'n' have children." THEN START FUCKIN'!! I don't wanna marry Bozo, I want a fuckin' blowjob! Whatta they tellin' jokes—there's a million things chicks can do. Ya ever been to Forty-second Street? The little booths, right? They got chicks shittin' bananas outta their asses! They're wigglin' their asses! They're smokin' outta their pussy! That's a job! I'll go 'n' watch that for two hours! Don't tell jokes! If I was a chick, I'd be on a street suckin' dick 'til I had a mansion! So much more for them to do. [*To a woman in the audience.*] You're a lady, don't you agree?

³⁶⁰ Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs* 1, no. 4 (Summer, 1976), 880-881.

Although the tirade is part of Clay's put-on comedy, it nevertheless reflects widespread prejudices against women stand-up comedians. (The put-on stems not from Clay's misogyny but rather from his extreme rhetoric—as he expresses a widely-held belief, he compromises his position by telling women to become prostitutes.) Clay's comedic persona claims that women comics are marriage-obsessed whiners incapable of telling filthy jokes. As such, they should not speak at all—instead of talking about filthy things, they should do filthy things. Of course, then and now, woman comics have been killing audiences with filthy jokes.³⁶¹ But like the deaf male ear Cixous refers to, Clay's ear cannot hear the transgressions of filthy female comics. Since his character gets more satisfaction out of a woman who gives him a blowjob, he belittles women comics by implying that they subvert bourgeois gender norms, which expect a “lady” to say nothing and to serve her man sexually. (At the same time, the joke is that Clay thinks women should be subverting bourgeois norms by “suckin’ dick ’til [they have] a mansion.”) Clay's routine indicates that a woman who performs stand-up comedy—who goes on stage with a primary aim of using verbal humor to make the audience laugh—is subverting a performative space built upon problematic traditions.

To say, however, that women comics can be filthy, too, does not mean that they always become known as filthy comics for the same reasons that the men do. In support of this assertion, I spend this chapter looking at how two women stand-ups—Amy Schumer and Sommore—have framed their performances as filthy by seizing upon contemporary attitudes toward race, gender, and class. My analysis is based in part on Robert C. Allen's approach in *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture*. Allen looks at how widespread attitudes towards class and gender influenced the formalization of the burlesque show, a prominent venue for women in comic performance from the mid-19th century until the 1960s. Two of the form's functions, Allen writes, were to objectify the female performer as “an object of male scopical pleasure” and to silence her “as a speaking, ordinating subject.”³⁶² Most relevant for my purposes is Allen's close reading of “antiburlesque discourse” from the late-1860s, in which “the image of the displayed theatrical woman condenses bodily filth, disease, foreign contamination, and the collective excrescence of the urban poor.”³⁶³ The antiburlesque uproar was directed specifically at a British burlesque troupe's tour through the United States in 1868 and 1869. What made Lydia Thompson's troupe “so fascinating and so transgressive to bourgeois audiences,” Allen writes, was its combination of “visual elements of feminine spectacle with the impertinence and inversiveness of the burlesque form—a merger effected onstage almost entirely by women and expressed through their bodies, language, movements, and gestures.”³⁶⁴ In other words, their perceived filth was partly a function of their performance of gender. Thompson and her “British Blondes” played male and female parts in a parody of the Greek myth of Ixion, “a general

³⁶¹ Clay the performer, not the character, has supported the careers of women comics. In the 1990s, he helped comedian Judy Toll develop her Andrea “Dice” Clay character and, unlike most male headliners, Clay often features a woman, in his case Eleanor Kerrigan, as his opening act.

³⁶² Allen, *Horrible Prettiness*, 240.

³⁶³ Allen, *Horrible Prettiness*, 153.

³⁶⁴ Allen, *Horrible Prettiness*, 137.

lampoon of classical culture and mythological allusion composed in punning rhymed pentameter,” consisting of “topical allusions, popular songs, familiar airs to which new lyrics had been composed, dances, and even more outrageous puns.”³⁶⁵ The show was a hit in New York City and elsewhere, but generated a torrent of criticism directed at its “monstrosity,” as one critic called it: “And by monstrous I do not mean wicked, disgusting, or hateful, but monstrously incongruous and unnatural. The peculiar trait of burlesque is its defiance both of the natural and the conventional. Rather, it forces the conventional and the natural together just at the points where they are most remote, and the result is absurdity, monstrosity. Its system is a defiance of system. It is out of *all* keeping.”³⁶⁶ While this statement can be reread as a positive take on burlesque as a celebration of gender bending, these and other criticisms Allen quotes suggest that the women performing in Thompson’s troupe did not provide certain audience members with adequate assurances that the actresses abided by hegemonic notions of femininity. Through direct audience address, each female performer dissolved the distinction between her stage character and her real self, making herself seem complicit “in her own sexual objectification.”³⁶⁷ This intrusion of reality was problematic for male bourgeois spectators, who would connect the performer with “his wife or his sister” and feel guilty for having become aroused. Given that actresses of the late-1860s were widely viewed to be prostitutes, it follows, Allen reasons, that the degree to which the bourgeois male spectator “submitted himself to the allure of her low-other sexuality, he risked contamination and corruption through her implicit connection with the working class and with prostitution.”³⁶⁸

In the ensuing decades, burlesque became formalized as a girlie show, which diffused the British Blondes’ transgressive power. While it retained the Blondes’ “charismatic female sexuality,”³⁶⁹ the girlie show featured voiceless female performers who titillated a largely male, working-class audience. Without a voice, the female body lost its claims to a subjectivity that undermined patriarchal relations.³⁷⁰ And without the presence of a seemingly vulnerable bourgeois audience, the working-class woman’s contaminations were quarantined. While Allen acknowledges that throughout the twentieth century, female performers such as Sophie Tucker, Mae West, Moms Mabley, and Bette Midler would play sexualized versions of themselves at the margins of popular culture, “[i]n each performer, expressive sexuality was yoked to another, ‘inappropriate’ cultural category, producing what for WASP, bourgeois culture was a grotesque hybrid: sexuality and age; sexuality and (nonwhite) race; sexuality and nonexotic ethnicity; sexuality and the nonfetishized, excessive body.”³⁷¹ These female performers had something in

³⁶⁵ Allen, *Horrible Prettiness*, 11-12.

³⁶⁶ Quoted in Allen, *Horrible Prettiness*, 25.

³⁶⁷ Allen, *Horrible Prettiness*, 129.

³⁶⁸ Allen, *Horrible Prettiness*, 155.

³⁶⁹ Allen, *Horrible Prettiness*, 281.

³⁷⁰ Allen, *Horrible Prettiness*, 240.

³⁷¹ Allen, *Horrible Prettiness*, 272.

common with Richard Pryor whose “gutter gab” was excused by white critics on the grounds that it offered a glimpse into (purportedly) authentic, inner-city life. Instead of subverting bourgeois gender norms, women who told filthy jokes could be recuperated within the dominant order as a purportedly authentic Other. Moreover, their filthiness could be taken as evidence of the Other’s filthiness—the Other being a member of a subordinated class, race, or ethnicity—and not as a stain on white, bourgeois womanhood.

Offering an optimistic take on this historical narrative, Allen adds that “[i]t would be possible . . . to interpret the history of burlesque nostalgically—as the eruption of a new, woman-centered form of theatrical expression with strong progressive, antipatriarchal leanings, which was quickly drained of most (or all) of its sexual-political force in order that it could be recuperated within patriarchal hegemony, but whose spirit has infused the work of female performers from Sophie Tucker and Mae West to Bette Midler and Roseanne Barr.”³⁷² In this chapter, I take Allen’s nostalgic/optimistic point of view. Applying it to contemporary times, I look at how Schumer and Sommore apply their filthy stand-up comedy to progressive ends. In doing so, I hope to point out what Clay’s character refuses to see—that is, the specific ways in which women comics can and do transgress the patriarchal realm of stand-up comedy. I am particularly interested in the contemporary era, which boasts a large number of filthy women comics and makes for a remarkable point of contrast to preceding generations.

Arguably, the first woman stand-up comedian to become known nationally as both feminist and filthy is Roseanne Barr (b. 1952), who became a star in the late-1980s, a time when the two most prominent women stand-ups were Phyllis Diller (1917-2012) and Joan Rivers (b. 1933). The first nationally recognized woman stand-up in America, Diller was an outrageously dressed wisecrack who mocked her failure to perform her gender role. “When they fit me for a bra, they use a level,” she would joke, adding, “a friend told me I should stuff my bra with Kleenex. I wish to hell she woulda told me to take them outta the box. For two weeks I had square boobs! I didn’t give milk, I gave lint!”³⁷³ Emulating Diller’s self-deprecatory humor, Rivers says things like “Number 13’s unlucky for me. It’s my bust size.”³⁷⁴ Unlike Diller, she regularly wades into filthy territory. For instance, as she points out in the documentary *Joan Rivers: A Piece of Work*, she made jokes about abortion in the late-1960s “when you weren’t even supposed to say the word on television.”³⁷⁵ Before a televised audience, she once joked, “I have a friend who just got married. The woman is thirty-two years old. She had fourteen appendectomies—if you know what I’m telling you. You know, back and forth to Puerto Rico, she never stopped flying! She walked down the aisle in *white*. Every usher went—[mimes elbowing].” By 1970, *Variety* was predicting that Rivers “could well become the Don Rickles of the Women’s Lib movement,” noting that “[h]er excoriations include marriage, the double standard, domestic travail, trendy fashion twists and turns.”³⁷⁶

³⁷² Allen, *Horrible Prettiness*, 283.

³⁷³ Phyllis Diller, *On Location* (New York, NY: HBO, 1977).

³⁷⁴ Quoted in Army Archerd, “Just for Variety,” *Variety*, October 23, 1970, 2.

³⁷⁵ *Joan Rivers: A Piece of Work*, directed by Ricki Stern and Anne Sundberg (New York: IFC Films, 2010).

³⁷⁶ Review of Joan Rivers, *Variety*, August 9, 1970, 43.

Barr represents a break from Diller and Rivers, both of whom directed their anger, as Philip Auslander argues, “onto the female subject herself, rather than outward onto the social conditions that made it necessary for Diller and Rivers to personify themselves in this way in order to have successful careers as comics.”³⁷⁷ In contrast, “Barr’s housewife persona speaks out petulantly against husbands, children, and the social expectations and limitations imposed on women.” As a number of scholars have argued,³⁷⁸ Barr has been a transgressive, feminist voice whose comedy directly represented the experiences of working-class mothers. After saying, for instance, “I’m a housewife, I never have any fun,” she adds, “A lot of stuff bugs me about husbands. You know, like, when they—all the time—wanna talk to ya. I hate that. But he says to me, ‘Hey Roseanne, don’t you think we should talk about our *sexual problems*.’ You know, like, I’m gonna turn off *Wheel of Fortune* for that. ‘Put it on a gift certificate, babe!’”³⁷⁹ In this short bit, marriage seems like a raw deal for housewives, who “never have any fun,” the best they can hope for being an entertaining episode of *Wheel of Fortune*. All the while, they must endure whiny husbands offering mediocre sex.

Barr criticized not herself, but rather the people around her who refused to acknowledge her hard work or to shoulder a share of her labor. As Kathleen Rowe notes, she displayed herself proudly—including those aspects that some would prefer to remain hidden. She writes, “The disruptive power of Roseanne Barr’s persona in her standup comedy and sitcom (1988–1997) arose from her refusal to conceal the reproductive aspects of her fat, menstruating body and the consequences of her sexuality—in a word, her children, and the necessity of assuming primary responsibility for their day-to-day care.”³⁸⁰ Barr departed from Rivers and Diller because she was completely unapologetic. “This was an awful morning,” she would joke. “I get up this morning and put on my maxi pad adhesive side up.” Jokes like this one partly explain her reputation as a filthy comic; however, unlike the current crop of comics, the filthy label did not have a positive connotation. As Susan Douglas notes, Barr’s “incredibly hostile treatment she has gotten in the press” resulted from being “four things TV women are not supposed to be, working-class,

³⁷⁷ Phillip Auslander, “‘Brought to You by Fem-Rage’: Stand-up Comedy and the Politics of Gender,” in *Acting Out: Feminist Performances*, eds. Lynda Hart and Peggy Phelan (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1993), 326-327.

³⁷⁸ See Zita Z. Dresner, “Roseanne Barr: Goddess or She-Devil,” *Journal of American Culture* 16, no. 2 (June 1993), 37–44; Suzanne Lavin, *Women and Comedy in Solo Performance: Phyllis Diller, Lily Tomlin, and Roseanne* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Alessandra Senzani, “Class and gender as a laughing Matter? The Case of Roseanne,” *Humor* 23, no. 2 (2010), 229-253; Melissa Williams, “‘I Kinda Prefer to be a Human Being’: Roseanne Barr and Defining Working-Class Feminism and Authorship,” *Spectator* 25, no. 2 (Fall 2005), 26-38.

³⁷⁹ Roseanne Barr, “Roseanne Barr VHS,” YouTube video, 2:22, posted by John Wylie, December 29, 2007, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UIBNO5y66xA>

³⁸⁰ Kathleen Rowe, *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1995), 11.

loudmouthed, overweight, and a feminist.”³⁸¹ If Barr were a filthy comic, it was not a label to be proud of.

The filthy label is not as stigmatizing as it once was—for women as well as for men. In fact, among men, there are no longer any truly filthy comics—by which I mean there are no male stand-up comedians marketed as voices hated by anal-retentive authority figures. Even Clay’s reputation has softened to the point where he was recently invited on *The View* (1997-2014) where Barbara Walters treated him as if he were the boy next door—she even showed, and giggled over, old clips of Clay telling dirty nursery rhymes. In contrast, a significant number of women are being marketed as transgressive voices. Since 1991, the year Allen published *Horrible Prettiness*, the landscape of stand-up comedy has broadened to include a wider array of women with national reputations as filthy comics, among them: Margaret Cho, Whitney Cummings, Lisa Lampanelli, Natasha Leggero, Kristen Schaal, Iliza Schlesinger, Amy Schumer, Sarah Silverman, and Wanda Sykes. What is also noteworthy about their emergence is the extent to which they comfortably wear the label “filthy.” Whenever a critic calls them “filthy,” it is intended as a sign of the comics’ charm. For example, Silverman’s stage act has been summed up as “A Charmingly Filthy Encounter,”³⁸² “Pretty girl saying filthy things”³⁸³ and “Funny Girl, Filthy Girl.”³⁸⁴ *The New York Post* once compared her to “haggis, that really nasty Scottish foodthing that’s made from a sheep’s stomach bag, a dash of deer liver, a chunk of mutton fat, and, yes, oatmeal. Not everyone’s favorite dish. While just being in its presence is enough to make most people projectile vomit, others (Scottish others to be specific) just can’t get enough of it. Just like Silverman.”³⁸⁵ Silverman broke out in 2005 with the theatrical release of her concert film *Jesus Is Magic* which consists mostly of stand-up comedy plus a few skits as segues. She is a direct descendant of the Dumb Dora character—a woman oblivious to her own cluelessness. (Gracie Allen’s stage character is the most famous example. In her act with husband George Burns, Burns would feed her setups such as “Gracie, did the maid ever drop you on your head when you were a baby?” To which she would reply, “Don’t be silly, George. We couldn’t afford a maid. My mother had to do it.”) Only Silverman’s stage persona is oblivious to her own racism, narcissism, selfishness and overall insensitivity. Moreover, since she performs solo and lacks a straight man like Burns to set her up, Silverman sets herself up. After claiming, “I was raped by a doctor,” she reveals her insensitivity by adding “Which is so bittersweet for a Jewish girl.”³⁸⁶ She takes Dumb Dora further by becoming Indifferent Dora, a woman who delights in

³⁸¹ Susan J. Douglas, *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media* (New York: Times Books, 1994), 284.

³⁸² Rob Salem, “A Charmingly Filthy Encounter,” review of *Sarah Silverman: Jesus Is Magic*, *The Toronto Star*, September 8, 2005.

³⁸³ Basem Boshra, “Filthy, Sure, But Funny?” *National Post*, March 1, 2007.

³⁸⁴ Jim Higgings, “Funny Girl, Filthy Girl,” *Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel*, May 7, 2010.

³⁸⁵ Linda Stasi, “Silverman Has a Point—New Comedy Crosses Lines,” *New York Post*, January 31, 2007.

³⁸⁶ Sarah Silverman, *Jesus Is Magic*, directed by Liam Lynch (Los Angeles, CA: Roadside Attractions, 2005).

saying what a lady should not say. “If you take a shower with your boyfriend,” she tells the women in her audience, “I guarantee by the time you step out of that shower, your breasts will be sparkling clean. *Sparkling*. Clean.”

It might seem, then, as a *New York Times* reporter implied in 2011, that today any stand-up comedian can be filthy, regardless of gender. In an article headlined “Female Comedians, Breaking the Taste-Taboo Ceiling,”³⁸⁷ the reporter cites an oft-quoted line from a 1979 *Rolling Stone* interview with then-king of late night Johnny Carson. The full exchange reads as follows:

ROLLING STONE: Is it especially hard for a woman to be a comedian?

CARSON: *Very difficult*. It’s because of the old role models that are assigned. A woman is feminine, a woman is not abrasive, a woman is not a hustler. So when you see a gal who does “stand-up” one-liners, she has to overcome that built-in identification as a retiring, meek woman. I mean, if a woman comes out and starts firing one-liners, those little abrasive things, you can take that from a man. The only one who really does it is Joanie Rivers, who’s had, I think, great success with being a stand-up *comedian*. The other gals, like Lucille Ball, who was obviously a great comedy actress, and Carol Burnett—it’s a different role that they play than standing onstage and doing jokes. I think it’s much tougher for women. You don’t see many of them around. And the ones that try [stand-up comedy], sometimes are a little aggressive for my taste. I’ll take it from a guy, but from women, sometimes, it just doesn’t fit too well.”³⁸⁸

While this “attitude is certainly durable,” the *Times* reporter notes, “it no longer holds sway.” He presents routines by Silverman and Amy Schumer as evidence that dominant tastes have changed to the point where women comics can be found among “a certain strain of stand-up, dating to Lenny Bruce” where “it’s essential to talk about what’s taboo.” Interestingly, while the mainstream media of the early-1990s were determined to claim that Andrew “Dice” Clay did not belong to the so-called Lenny Bruce tradition of speaking truth to power, this *Times* reporter claims that “Ms. Silverman belongs to this tradition, under the guise of a shallow bigot. What she proved is that there are areas of aggressive, shocking comedy where women could go further than men. To put it another way, her humor would make Johnny Carson uncomfortable.” The reporter conceives of “aggressive, shocking comedy” as a genre that men have been practicing for decades and that women have only recently begun to practice. As I have argued in chapters one and two, however, the term “filthy stand-up comedy” is deployed not to accurately describe a genre of performance but rather to conceal social relations. For instance, when Bruce was called a filthy stand-up comedian, the label concealed his real crime: mocking the pretenses upon which white, middle-class people dignify themselves. In contrast, when critics call Silverman and Schumer filthy, they gloss over the problematic gender relations their comedy exposes.

While it is significant that women stand-ups are being called “filthy,” I find this label misleading because it conceals gendered power relations. By aligning Silverman with Bruce, the *Times* reporter does what others have done when they align Bruce with Pryor: erase real and significant differences between a dominant and an oppressed group. In fact, Silverman is very

³⁸⁷ Jason Zinoman, “Female Comedians, Breaking the Taste-Taboo Ceiling,” *The New York Times*, November 15, 2011.

³⁸⁸ Timothy White, interview with Johnny Carson, *Rolling Stone*, March 22, 1979, 54.

different from Bruce, who has been recuperated as a performer who somehow “assembled no character up there on the stage.”³⁸⁹ As the reporter himself notes, Silverman is very much a character—she performs “under the guise of a shallow bigot.” When she jokes, “I think the best time to get pregnant is when one’s a black teenager,” she clearly puts distance between the real Sarah Silverman and her overtly racist stage character. Silverman the performer does not wear the filthy label to nearly the same extent her fictitious character wears it. Of course, men and women need not tell different jokes in order to make the audience laugh. The point is that the new wave of so-called filthy female stand-ups has a filthy reputation in part because they are negotiating gender relations in ways different from their male counterparts.

In this chapter, I analyze performances by two stand-up comedians. I chose the first, Amy Schumer, partly on account of her popularity at the time of this writing. Born on Long Island in 1981, Schumer became a professional stand-up in 2004 and soon became a headliner, her career receiving a boost when she finished fourth on NBC’s reality show *Last Comic Standing*. She is currently the most successful female stand-up in America: her comedy special *Mostly Sex Stuff* was Comedy Central’s second-highest rated special in 2012; she has the starring role in director Judd Apatow’s next feature film; and her large male and female fan following resulted in her landing a Comedy Central variety show, *Inside Amy Schumer* (2013-2014), which consists of sketches, stand-up comedy, and *vox populi* interviews. A channel rep told *The New York Times*, “Amy celebrates being a girl and being girly. Amy gets 50-50 male-female demos. Her relatability is amazing.”³⁹⁰ Schumer “celebrates being a girl” by putting less distance than Silverman does between herself and her stage character.³⁹¹ She closes this distance visually: whereas Silverman wears jeans and sporty tees, Schumer wears mini dresses. She also closes it aurally when she shares plausibly real moments from her life. For example, she describes getting a bikini wax from a woman raised in “the killing fields of Cambodia . . . [who] has seen some shit, you know?” The woman “should hate me because I’m like—we’re the worst—white, entitled girls. I walk in chewing gum, I’m on my phone [*mimes chewing, holding a phone*]. I’m like, ‘don’t get any wax on my new Uggs.’” She continues:

Like, those chicks win every time ’cause what they do, and I always forget this, they go—she goes and gets a mirror, and she shows it to me. She shows me my own vagina. And I have to act like I’m not horrified. [*Audience laughs.*] And I’m horrified. It’s the worst thing in the world. And what she’s saying in that moment is, “Are you happy now, you dumb bitch? You just paid me to assault you. And now you look like a toddler.” Is that what—that’s not cool. It’s the worst thing you’ll ever see in your life. It’s red. It looks angry. It looks like an old man frowning. “Visit me!”³⁹²

³⁸⁹ Sanders, *Sudden Glory*, 256.

³⁹⁰ Jason Zinoman, “Amy Schumer, Funny Girl,” *New York Times*, April 18, 2013.

³⁹¹ This observation applies to Silverman’s older work. Her latest concert film (*We Are Miracles*, 2013) leaves the Dumb Dora character behind and moves closer to the Bruce genre of speaking truth to power.

³⁹² Amy Schumer, *Mostly Sex Stuff* (Comedy Central, 2012).

In this routine, Schumer uses a bald vagina to symbolize the filthy privilege of white American womanhood. A woman of color maintains Schumer's femininity by waxing her vagina, but Schumer's description of this process frames her femininity as absurdly filthy: absurd because femininity is incongruous with a vagina that looks like an old man's frowning face; filthy because her waxed vagina does not sound beautiful at all. Instead of being clean, sweet, and beautiful, she is a dumb, privileged "bitch."

As I argue below, the audience recognizes Schumer's character as an ironic version of an archetype of contemporary popular culture: the Girl Gone Wild (GGW). Personified by the stars of *Girls Gone Wild* videos and tabloid celebrities Kim Kardashian, Paris Hilton, and Lindsay Lohan, the GGW has a reputation as a young, white, independent, materialistic, and sexually liberated woman. The popularity of the GGW in part explains how filthy female stand-up comedians like Schumer can overcome what Carson called a woman's "built-in identification as a retiring, meek woman." As "a gal who does 'stand-up' one-liners," Schumer is not "an aggressive woman" but is rather behaving in accord with an emergent femininity. Like "Joanie" Rivers, who could win Carson's favor with "self-deprecating one-liners [that] were no threat," as Richard Zoglin puts it,³⁹³ Schumer can win over Jimmy Fallon with one-liners that mock the GGW's femininity.

Although the GGW is popular, she is also the target of much criticism. On one hand, more than one politician has mocked her as a vapid, hypersexual diva;³⁹⁴ on the other hand, a number of feminists have claimed she teaches young women to reduce their social value to their bodies.³⁹⁵ Schumer, a self-professed feminist, rejects such criticisms and is leery of the Girl Gone Wild becoming a victim of slut-shaming. She indirectly made this point when NPR's Terry Gross asked her whether she "thinks of [herself] as a slut." Schumer replied, "I think I have been promiscuous, and I think a lot of women have. So I like to talk about it as a way to maybe make those other women feel less alone and less strange and dirty about their own actions."³⁹⁶ Schumer performs a grotesque parody of the postfeminist woman, but whereas Silverman distances herself from this parody by taking on the more traditionally masculine position of the enlightened critic, Schumer refuses to distance herself entirely. Instead, she takes on the more traditionally feminine position of the hysterical woman who bristles at her humiliating and degrading social position. She jokes, "I don't even bleach anything—except my asshole. I tie-dye it!" After the audience laughs, she makes clear that her desire to asshole bleach is not simply her

³⁹³ Richard Zoglin, *Comedy at the Edge*, 192.

³⁹⁴ The McCain campaign attacked Obama by drawing a link between his popularity and Hilton's—as if they were popular for being equally vapid; Sen. Harry Reid (D-NV) once called tax breaks for the rich "the help Paris Hilton legislation"; and an ad for the television show *Amazing America with Sarah Palin* quotes Palin saying, "I think this world would be better off having more young women holding a fish in their picture than holding their camera in front of a bathroom mirror, taking a selfie."

³⁹⁵ See Paula Rothenberg, "Feminism Then and Now," *Counterpunch*, May 9, 2007, <http://www.counterpunch.org/2007/05/09/feminism-then-and-now/>

³⁹⁶ Interview with Amy Schumer, "Fresh Air," *NPR*, June 25, 2013, transcript, <http://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=188698578>

own. “Isn’t that sick? That it’s an option for us? To get our assholes bleached?”³⁹⁷ Schumer problematizes the filthy behavior she describes on-stage, but when she says things like, “I’m a little sluttier than the average bear,” she frames so-called “sluttiness” not as a sign of inferiority but as a legitimate mode of behavior at odds with competing definitions of femininity.

What is also remarkable about the *Times* article is that it focuses on two comedians—Silverman and Amy Schumer—while mentioning briefly Whitney Cummings and Phoebe Robinson. No other comedian who regularly employs filthy signifiers gets mentioned. The focus on Silverman and Schumer is understandable, I argue, because they represent the narrow conditions under which white patriarchy will permit a woman to be considered filthy and feminine. This new femininity celebrates a woman’s sexual commodification and objectification as a form of empowerment while also privileging white women’s advancement and white women’s bodies. As a result, few black women have access to the publicity machines that have propelled the careers of America’s nationally recognized comics. Consider *Comedy Central Presents*, the cable show that consists of a chosen stand-up comedian doing a 20-minute set before a live audience. In the 283 episodes that aired from 1998 to 2011, only five featured a black female comedian: Wanda Sykes (1998); Adele Givens (2002); Sheryl Underwood (2003); Tess Drake (2005); and Loni Love (2007). The show’s replacement, *The Half Hour* (2012-), has featured zero women of color in the 29 episodes aired as of December 2013. In total, out of a possible 312 episodes, a black woman has appeared on five of them.

The exclusion of black women from mainstream comedic showcases is a long-standing symptom of racism and sexism in the United States. Only four black women have been part of the cast of *Saturday Night Live*, the nation’s most prominent showcase for up-and-coming comedians. Over its 39 seasons, the vast majority of *SNL*’s 137 cast members have been white men. Worse, the show’s representatives have not been adequately aware of the problem. When Kenan Thompson, a black cast member, was recently asked why the show has not hired a black woman since Maya Rudolph left the show in 2007, he said, “It’s just a tough part of the business. Like in auditions, they just never find ones that are ready.”³⁹⁸ Thompson’s implication that black women are not ready for *SNL* prompted a “national dialogue,” with critics and performers quick to point out that the problem is not with a lack of talented comedians but rather with the show’s racist and sexist casting decisions. As Sommore, a black female stand-up comedian and the subject of this chapter, told an interviewer, “If we were all given the opportunity to do it, we could easily do it.”³⁹⁹ The show did issue a faux-apology when it invited Kerry Washington, a black actress, to host. During the cold open, Washington appeared as Michelle Obama, but when told that Oprah Winfrey had popped by the White House, Washington left the stage, changed costumes, and returned—the joke being that she was the only black woman available to play either role. At the end of the sketch, a voiceover noted the irony: “The producers at *Saturday*

³⁹⁷ Amy Schumer, *Cutting*, Comedy Central Records 30118, CD, 2011.

³⁹⁸ Sadie Gennis, “Kenan Thompson Blames *SNL*’s Diversity Issue on Lack of Talented Black Comediennes,” *TV Guide*, October 14, 2013, <http://www.tvguide.com/News/SNL-Diversity-Issue-Kenan-Thompson-1072056.aspx>

³⁹⁹ Roland Martin, “Wildin’ Out Wednesdays: Loni Love, Sommore, Kym Whitley,” *Roland Martin Reports*, October 23, 2013, <http://rolandmartinreports.com/blog/2013/10/wildin-out-wednesdays-loni-love-sommore-kym-whitley/>.

Night Live would like to apologize to Kerry Washington for the number of black women she will be asked to play. We made this request both because Ms. Washington is an actress of considerable range and tact. And also because *SNL* does not currently have a black woman in the cast. As for the latter reason, we agree this is not an ideal situation and look forward to rectifying it in the near future, unless, of course, we fall in love with another white guy first.” Two months after this sketch aired, *SNL* hired three black women: a cast member (Sasheer Zamata) and two writers (LaKendra Tookes and Leslie Jones).

Nevertheless, the work of black female stand-up comedians has been all but ignored by the mainstream press. When the *Times* reporter claimed that, nowadays, female stand-up comedians are “breaking the taste-ceiling taboo,” he meant white, female stand-up comedians. The only black female stand-up he mentioned was Phoebe Robinson, who had yet to achieve any modicum of fame and is still in the developing stages of her career. He did not mention Adele Givens, Sommore, Mo’Nique, and Miss Laura Hayes, who have been breaking the taste-ceiling taboo since the 1990s. After touring together in 2000, they released the concert film *The Queens of Comedy* (2001), described by the *New York Daily News* as “four raw and extremely racy acts that tackle issues of money, sex, relationships, beauty and self-esteem with rapid-fire wit, off-color language and dead-on delivery.” Although the Queens are immensely popular among African-American audiences, neither their tour nor their concert film received much mention in the mainstream press. To this day, as *The Washington Post* has observed, “three of ‘*The Queens of Comedy*’—Laura Hayes, Adele Givens and Sommore—remain largely unknown outside of black circles. Mo’Nique is the exception.”⁴⁰⁰

While any of the four Queens’ comedy would complement the subject at hand, in this section I look at one Queen in particular, Sommore. There are several parallels between her and Schumer, notably that she is the only Queen who matches Schumer’s recent comedic output. She has two comedy specials to her credit: *The Queen Stands Alone* (Comedy Central, 2008); and *Chandelier Status* (Showtime, 2013), both of which—in ways similar to and different from Schumer’s specials—demystify the perception that filth is the privileged domain of male comics. In addition, by infusing her filthy comedy with her progressive point of view, Sommore demonstrates that there is nothing problematic (sexist, racist, heterosexist, ablist, classist, etc.) inherent in comedy deemed filthy. On the contrary, like Bruce, Pryor, Clay, and Schumer, Sommore taps filthy comedy in order to toast a particular in-group. Whereas Bruce toasted white liberal middle-class men, Pryor black working-class men, Clay white working-class men, and Schumer white middle-class women, Sommore toasts black working-class women.

Born Lori Ann Rambough in 1966, Sommore grew up in Trenton, New Jersey. In the early-1990s, after attending college in Atlanta and becoming a high school algebra teacher, she adopted the stage name Sommore and became a stand-up comedian. As she told the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, “If people gave you something good what would you want? Some more. That’s how I chose my name.”⁴⁰¹ Her comedy, which she calls “adult,” explores the standard terrain of any filthy stand-up comedian: sexual activities and bodily orifices (the lower bodily stratum). She covers both in a routine from *Chandelier Status*, in which she observes that

⁴⁰⁰ Soraya Nadia McDonald, “On the Web, Black Actresses Avoid Hollywood Stereotypes, Find Breakout Roles,” *Washington Post*, November 12, 2013.

⁴⁰¹ D. Kevin McNeir, “Sommore Proves ‘Sistahs’ Can Shine as Comediennes,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, October 3, 2012.

If you are black, you need a rag. You need a rag for that ass. It starts off as a washcloth. But by the time it hits that ass, it's just a rag. Oh, it's a rag! Oh, we passionate about a rag! [. . .] That's just our shit. You ever be in a shower with your love? Y'all having a romantic shower. You wash his back, he wash your back. Y'all kiss a little bit. [*Smooches the air.*] Every now and then you roll around and rub up on the dick. [*Rubs her behind against the microphone stand.*] The shower is really romantic! But there comes an unspoken moment in the shower [*points at her eyes*] where y'all lock eyes. And everybody knows that it's time to go get your rag. So you break off into your own little corner [*feigns washing her behind*], and it's rag time. [*Audience howls.*]⁴⁰²

White people have assholes to clean, too, but according to Sommore, they do not use rags: “They take the soap, put it right on their skin. We seen the commercial!” For Sommore, the description of black and white cleansing rituals becomes an opportunity both to laugh at and to acknowledge racial difference.

In this chapter, I look at how Sommore and Amy Schumer convince the audience to laugh at their filthy humor. While the comedians in this study use descriptions of filthy behavior as opportunities to laugh and to acknowledge difference, they each negotiate this aim from a specific social position. As Andrea Greenbaum has argued, any successful stand-up comedian must convince the audience to see the world, if only temporarily, from his or her point of view. Stand-up comedy, she writes, “is an inherently rhetorical discourse; it strives not only to entertain, but to persuade, and stand-up comics can only be successful in their craft when they can convince an audience to look at the world through their comic vision.”⁴⁰³ Filthy comics are a special case, because their challenge is to convince an audience to sanction a stigmatized vision. Bruce’s vision was stigmatized by white critics who felt that it lampooned white conservative ideology; Pryor’s was stigmatized (at first) by white critics who felt it represented the Black Power movement and by black critics who felt it perpetuated black stereotypes; Clay’s was stigmatized by white critics who felt it defended the purportedly degenerate, white working-class. Neither Schumer nor Sommore have endured the backlash that Bruce, Pryor or Clay experienced, but this does not necessarily mean that their comedy is not stigmatized. On the contrary, the public condemnation of male comedians has functioned as a sign of their masculinity—they were portrayed as evil yet manly warriors. By ignoring women’s comedy, restricting it from appearing in the highest-profile venues, or implying that their comedy is an imitation of a male comic’s genuine filthiness, critics quietly reinforce the stigma that women are not funny.

In this chapter, I debunk the notion that a woman always becomes known as a filthy stand-up for the same reason a man does—for telling filthy jokes. Arguing against this myth, I explain that the comics’ filthiness—their tendency to transgress social norms—is in part a transgression of their social positions. I also analyze their rhetoric—that is, how they persuade the audience to laugh at their filthy jokes. Comics must negotiate the audience’s permission to transgress their social positions; however, this permission depends on the audience’s perception

⁴⁰² The routine recalls Redd Foxx’s comedy album *You Gotta Wash Your Ass* (Atlantic, 1976).

⁴⁰³ Andrea Greenbaum, “Stand-up Comedy As Rhetorical Argument: An Investigation of Comic Culture,” *Humor* 12, no. 1 (1999): 33.

of the comic. While I do not essentialize either comic or imply that their social positions determine their comedy, I show that each negotiates a different set of expectations.

In general, a white, middle-class, male comedian's filthy language does not reflect poorly on white men, whose diverse media representations prevent one filthy comedian—say, Daniel Tosh or Louis CK—from becoming emblematic of the entire group. In contrast, a filthy comic who belongs to a marginalized group risks reinforcing problematic stereotypes. Finding herself in a situation not unlike the one Richard Pryor experienced in the 1970s, Sommore enters into a mass culture that, for hundreds of years, has portrayed black women poorly. As Patricia Hill Collins notes,

Within U.S. culture, racist and sexist ideologies permeate the social structure to such a degree that they become hegemonic, namely, seen as natural, normal, and inevitable. In this context, certain assumed qualities that are attached to Black women are used to justify oppression. From the mammies, jezebels, and breeder women of slavery to the smiling Aunt Jemimas on pancake mix boxes, ubiquitous Black prostitutes, and ever-present welfare mothers of contemporary popular culture, negative stereotypes applied to African-American women have been fundamental to Black women's oppression.⁴⁰⁴

The problem becomes, for Sommore: How to present herself and her social group as dignified while describing herself and other black women doing undignified things? As I argue, Sommore foregrounds her comedy as adult, not as filthy. Moreover, her detailed explorations of social difference—difference premised on race as well as gender, sex, sexuality, age and class—function as a temporary leveling of hierarchical relationships. For example, her detailed descriptions of men's and women's bodies include pubic hair presentation. When she describes the aging process and its effect on dating, she says, "When you're over forty-five years old, there ain't a whole lot of men out there with abs and muscles 'n' shit. So . . . as a woman, you gotta find other shit to be attracted to. You do! Like me, I'm into the dick hair now. Ooh! Y'all ain't into the dick hair? What? Oh, that's the shit! Oh, I'm into the high dick hair. The dick hair that goes from the dick up to the belly button! Oh, shit! Ain't nothin' like the dick mohawk. [Audience laughs.] Oh my god! Oh that's some beautiful shit!" Such descriptions, Shayne Lee argues in *Erotic Revolutionaries: Black Women, Sexuality, and Popular Culture*, fight against demeaning portrayals of women:

In an entertainment world that regularly objectifies women, Sommore employs humor about male anatomy to level the playing field. By sexualizing men, female comics draw attention to the disproportionate ways men sexualize women in popular culture. Since men unabashedly treat the comic stage as safe space to sexualize every portion of a woman's body, Sommore implicitly perceives it as her feminist duty to reciprocate. Hence, Sommore's frequent references to male genitalia and sexual performance deconstruct the binaries of power regarding sexual objectification.⁴⁰⁵

⁴⁰⁴ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 5.

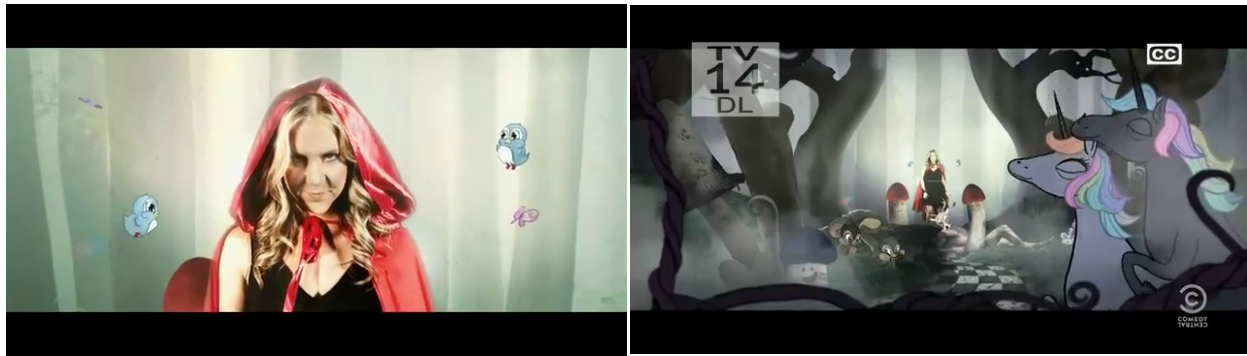
⁴⁰⁵ Shayne Lee, *Erotic Revolutionaries: Black Women, Sexuality, and Popular Culture* (Lanham, MD: Hamilton, 2010), 103.

While Lee sees Sommore's comedy as a reciprocation of female objectification, I see Sommore discouraging the audience from seeing filthy humor as problematic at all. She disavows the shame associated with both filthy humor and with any behavior that might be construed as a black stereotype. Unlike Schumer, who openly pretends to be the Girl Gone Wild stereotype, Sommore does not do a put-on whereby she pretends to be the jezebel stereotype (a lusty, lustful woman who lures men into her bed and destroys them). When Schumer aligns herself with the GGW, she engages in a kind of self-loathing—"we're the worst—white, entitled girls," she says—that acts as an apology for her white privilege. Sommore has nothing to apologize for; she instead proudly redeems her social position's much-maligned sexuality. Whenever she describes a black woman doing anything remotely connected to the stereotype, she makes clear that the specificities of the characters do not conform to the jezebel stereotype. Instead, as I go on to show, Sommore emphasizes the individuality of her own self as well as that of the black women she impersonates.

Ladies and Gentlemen, This Girl's Gone Wild, Wink Wink!! How Amy Schumer Is Not Always Being "Just as Filthy as the Boys"

While critics often imply that a female comic's filthiness is never any different from a man's, *Variety's* review of *Inside Amy Schumer* makes this point explicit: "Like a lot of female comics, Amy Schumer seeks to distinguish herself in part by proving she can be just as filthy as the boys, and other than genitalia, there's not much to differentiate 'Inside Amy Schumer' from countless others Comedy Central sketch shows featuring guys."⁴⁰⁶ Is Schumer being "just as filthy as the boys"? As my close reading of her stand-up comedy special *Mostly Sex Stuff* (2012) suggests, she does not merely evoke a male comedian's filthiness. Instead of proving she can be just as filthy as the boys, Schumer proves from a feminist point of view that a woman's filthiness can sometimes be a very different thing altogether. Not that women comics are essentially different from men comics, but that they each gain reputations as filthy comics by negotiating conditions specific to their social positions.

⁴⁰⁶ Brian Lowry, review of "Inside Amy Schumer," *Variety*, April 24, 2013.



Stills from the cold open to *Mostly Sex Stuff*

Mostly Sex Stuff opens on a medium-shot of Schumer grinning devilishly into the camera. As the camera zooms out, we see that Schumer is presiding over a perverse fairy tale—with cartoon birds chirping, a rainbow-maned male unicorn licking his female partner, exaggerated mushroom stalks that resemble dildos, twisted tree trunks enshrouded in mist, and the comedian herself wearing a red riding hood over a black mini-dress, her tousled hair blowing in the wind. The tableau’s erotically girlish imagery foreshadows the terrain Schumer will explore in her 40-minutes of stand-up: cultural constructions of womanhood as both hyperfeminine and hypersexualized. The darkly melancholic piano chords that crescendo as vines enwrap the forest suggest that these constructions loom ominously. But as Schumer removes her hood, we see that she is wielding a hatchet and is about to begin hacking away at the world laid out before her.

Schumer hacks away by oscillating between four characters: one who abides by hyperfeminine and hypersexualized constructions of womanhood; a second who sneers at these constructions as she embraces classier constructions of womanhood; a third who laughs at characters one and two; and a fourth who provides running, sober commentary on her performance. The oscillation between the four characters puts into practice Judith Butler’s theory of performativity whereby Schumer’s commentary on her characters provides “a counter-appropriation or restaging of offensive speech,”⁴⁰⁷ the offensive speech flowing out especially from her first character. This character features throughout her act—for example when she says she once told a lover to wear a condom because “it’s been a busy month!,” when she admits she’s been with only four people (“that was a weird night”), and when she shares the time she anally fisted a man “like you wouldn’t believe.” This character, the Girl Gone Wild (GGW) I will call her, is an archetype of contemporary American culture. She is known as the subject of *Girls Gone Wild* videos, a vacuous ingénue (e.g. Paris Hilton), and a hypersexual diva on such reality-TV shows as *Big Brother*, *Real Housewives of Orange County*, and *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*. By locating this character within contemporary culture, I do not mean to imply that Schumer reduces herself to this single character; rather, I mean to suggest that Schumer’s performance gains meaning in part because her audience is well-acquainted with the GGW. In fact, her running commentary restages and redeems this character’s offensive speech (offensive because, to some, it reflects poorly on her) from a feminist point of view.

⁴⁰⁷ Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 14.

The claim that Schumer is simply “proving she can be just as filthy as the boys” erases this important context for understanding her filth. Instead of being merely “just as filthy as the boys,” she is also being just as filthy as a contemporary archetype of young womanhood. The reasons why the GGW is deemed filthy are expressed in the book *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture*. The author, journalist Ariel Levy, describes FCPs (or GGWs as I have been calling them) as “women who make sex objects of other women and of ourselves.” The problem, she argues, is that the GGW reflects poorly on all women because she reinforces the sexist belief that a woman’s primary role is to titillate men with her body. She is filthy because she belongs to what Levy calls “raunch culture.” Her alleged raunchiness, or “raunch,” “provides a special opportunity for a woman who wants to prove her mettle. It’s in fashion, and it is something that has traditionally appealed exclusively to men and actively offended women, so producing it or participating in it is a way both to flaunt your coolness or to mark yourself as different, tougher, looser, funnier—a new sort of loophole woman who is ‘not like other women,’ who is instead ‘like a man.’”⁴⁰⁸ Levy implies that the GGW is filthy for the same reason Bruce, Pryor, and Clay were called filthy: she makes herself and, symbolically, all members of her social group out to be second-class citizens. Filth, as always, is a metaphor for a performance that appears to send a group of people into a lower class. According to Levy’s logic, the GGW boldly flaunts her sexuality in order to attain the status of a man, but by reducing her social value to the sexual pleasure she can bring a man, the GGW subordinates herself and symbolically reinforces patriarchal oppression. As we saw in chapter one, black critics claimed that Pryor’s filth reinforced racist stereotypes, and in fact, Levy sees a parallel between the GGW and an Uncle Tom—a black person who curries favor with white people by taking on a demeaning caricature.⁴⁰⁹ In both cases, the individual is deemed filthy because she or he becomes a symbol for an entire social group’s relegation to a lower class. The symbol is filthy, dirty, and something the marginalized group wants hidden from plain sight. Presumably, so long as it remains hidden, the dominant group will not see the symbol’s subordination as appropriate behavior for all members of the symbol’s social group.

Feminist critics, however, have not scorned Schumer in the way black critics scorned Pryor in the 1970s. At the feminist blog *Jezebel*, one writer told readers, “If you’re not watching Comedy Central’s *Inside Amy Schumer* then you’re missing out on one of the most important and freshest comedic voices coming squarely from a woman’s perspective.”⁴¹⁰ Schumer’s performances are fresh in part because they implicitly agree with the counterarguments third-wave feminists have leveled against Levy’s book. As *Nation* writer Jessica Valenti argues in *Full Frontal Feminism: A Young Woman’s Guide to Why Feminism Matters*, “Sure, we make mistakes. I’ve made plenty. But chastising younger women and telling us that we’re making bad decisions isn’t helpful. What’s important is that we try to understand *why* we’re making the decisions we do and how they’re related to what we see around us. Like, do we *really* want to

⁴⁰⁸ Ariel Levy, *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture* (New York: Free, 2005), 96.

⁴⁰⁹ Levy, *Female Chauvinist Pigs*, 103-108.

⁴¹⁰ Tracie Egan Morrissey, “‘Inside Amy Schumer’ Tackles the Bummer of Breast Cancer Awareness,” *Jezebel*, June 26, 2013, <http://jezebel.com/inside-amy-schumer-tackles-the-bummer-of-breast-cance-585136672>

flash our boobs (and if so, cool), or are we doing it out of some fucked-up desire to please someone else?”⁴¹¹ As Valenti indicates, the GGW finds herself within a double bind: on the one hand, patriarchy encourages young women to commodify themselves as GGWs, but on the other hand, a competing discourse belittles GGWs as “female chauvinist pigs.”

Schumer’s running commentary on her own filth functions as a feminist response to this conundrum. It singles out her “fucked-up desire to please someone else,” while simultaneously presenting the desire as her own. As such, she both indicts patriarchal culture without reinscribing women’s insubordination through the implication that those who act like GGWs have a gender identity in need of repair. Although Schumer is clearly mocking the GGW, she also allies her off-stage persona with the GGW. By telling stories of her own wild behavior—she is introduced as “Amy Schumer,” speaks in the first person, and addresses the audience directly—she redeems the GGW as an archetype through which she has developed a gender identity meaningful to her.

Schumer saves her chastising for patriarchal culture when she, for example, inverts a joke Jerry Seinfeld used to tell in the 1980s and ’90s. Serving as the cold open for an episode of *Seinfeld*, it goes like this:

I know that women often complain about the number of things you have to do get male attention, the high heels, the pantyhose, the makeup, but let me tell you, it’s even worse if you’re a man. Because if you’re a man you don’t know what to do. That’s why we’re building bridges, climbing mountains, exploring uncharted territories. You think we want to do these things? Nobody wants to build a bridge. It’s really, really hard! Designing rockets, flying off into space. I guarantee you, every astronaut when he comes back from space, goes up to a girl and goes: “So, did you see me up there?”⁴¹²

Although he is being tongue-in-cheek, Seinfeld nevertheless frames both the sexist division of labor and our beauty culture as a detriment to men, because it gives women a more clearly defined social role. Schumer’s version from *Mostly Sex Stuff* implicitly challenges Seinfeld’s joke by comparing the labor that goes into the stereotypical man’s and woman’s appearance. Men, she says, merely “put on a shirt. They give themselves one of these [*points her finger like it’s a gun*] in the mirror, and they’re out. That’s it!” After the audience’s applause, she says to the men, referring to her own attire—a maroon mini-dress, blonde windswept hair, beige high heels, blush, lipstick, eye shadow—“But look at the beautiful girls you’re with. It takes me ninety minutes to look this mediocre. Ninety. Minutes. We are circus freaks, women, we are. We put makeup on our face like we’re warriors. I’m wearing stilts! We wear heels all night. And we put a string in our buttocks. [*Walking like a marionette.*] Just [*Schumer hums circus music*]. ‘Um, am I pretty?’ [*Audience laughs.*]” She goes on to give humorous insight into the history of pubic grooming:

It’s work having a vagina, that’s work. Guys don’t think that it’s work, but it is. You think it just shows up like that to the event? It doesn’t. Every night, it’s like getting it ready for its first Quinceañera, believe me. [*Audience laughs.*] It’s a lot of work. It didn’t used to be work. I know that from watching vintage porn. It was

⁴¹¹ Jessica Valenti, *Full Frontal Feminism: A Young Woman's Guide to Why Feminism Matters* (Emeryville, CA: Seal, 2007), 43.

⁴¹² *Seinfeld*, “The Pilot” (May 20, 1993, NBC).

no work. Zero. I even—I remember my mom bottomless when I was a kid. And it was just—[*makes an explosion sound as she covers her groin*]. It looked like the black smoke monster from *Lost* was just following her. It's like, "Is mom being swarmed by bees?" And then something happened, I don't know. Like, 10, 15 years ago, all the dudes got together and had, like, a meeting. Like a fantasy football draft about our privates. They were like, "We can't get in there, it's like Vietnam. And then they just came to us, and they were just like, "Ladies, would you mind . . ."

Schumer redeems the GGW not by praising her but by lowering her perceived betters. Although the GGW is often criticized as an unsuitable role model for mothers, in this routine, mothers seem just as filthy. Schumer turns her critical eye toward men as well when she reminds audiences that waxing is a form of labor performed by and on women, and at the urging of men. Men are therefore enablers and beneficiaries of her filth.

Schumer places men on her own filthy level by highlighting their filth—for example, when she describes a man's cum shot:

Guys are so gross, right? Guys are gross. [*To a male audience member.*] You're gross, okay? They're so gross. I had sex with a guy recently—more semen than you've ever seen in your life. I was like, "Did you just get out of jail?" [*Audience laughs.*] [. . .] But that's what guys want 'cause they're so gross. If it were up to them, we'd all look like Carrie in the prom scene at the end, just [*feigns being covered in semen*] "UHHHHH!" [*Audience laughs.*] No girl wants that. We don't want that. We're lazier than you. If it were up to me, the cleanup would be me taking a Q-tip going, [*touches her arm*] "Boop!" Asleep.

The cum shot, as Linda Williams points out, is a trope of hard core pornography used to temporarily relieve "the perennial male problem of understanding women's difference."⁴¹³ The actress' ecstatic reaction to a man ejaculating on her face allows the male viewer to imagine that her pleasure is a function of his pleasure—that her pleasure is both knowable and unthreatening because it is simply her taking pleasure in his pleasure. When Schumer says, "I like to watch porn," she might lead some male viewers to wonder whether she is a mirror image of the female porn star who appears to want simply what the male porn star wants: for him to cum. But she then denies this fantasy by describing the receiver of a cum shot as "that poor girl," adding, "and we know, as soon as the director yells 'cut,' that she's just stumbling around like Helen Keller looking for a towel. [*Begins blindly fumbling around.*] Just where—'Did you guys go to lunch? This isn't cool.' " Schumer indicts pornography for privileging male pleasures and never ending with anything except a cum shot: "There's never a twist, right? He's never like—the guy is having sex with her, and he looks off camera in her backpack, he's like, 'Oh, are you reading that Nicholas Sparks book too? Oh, my god! What are the chances? Let's start a bed-and-breakfast together!' No, he just cums on her head." If the cum shot is designed, as Williams argues, to suppress the man's fear "that [the woman] does not possess the envy the man presumes her to possess" and "that she has desires different from his own,"⁴¹⁴ then Schumer has made these fears resurface. Schumer says that she herself takes pleasure in watching pornography, but by turning

⁴¹³ Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible"* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 119.

⁴¹⁴ Williams, *Hard Core*, 117.

the gaze back on to the male viewer and noting that they do not watch for the same reasons, she denies him the reassurance he seeks.

By exposing the patriarchal framework within which her filth is recognizable and by also recuperating her filth as a product of her own desires, Schumer constructs a feminist response to the double bind of womanhood: divulge your desires and be marked filthy; criticize systems of inequality and be marked a shrew. She demonstrates her response's effectiveness through a character I will call the Laughing Medusa. The LM co-exists with the GGW, using a humorous attitude to fend off condescending attacks on the GGW. Freud describes this attitude through the example of "a criminal who was being led out to the gallows on a Monday." When he "remarked: 'Well, the week's beginning nicely,' he was producing the humour himself; the humorous process is completed in his own person and obviously affords him a certain sense of satisfaction."⁴¹⁵ For Freud, this attitude marks "the triumph of narcissism, the victorious assertion of the ego's invulnerability. The ego refuses to be distressed by the provocations of reality, to let itself be compelled to suffer. It insists that it cannot be affected by the traumas of the external world; it shows, in fact, that such traumas are no more than occasions for it to gain pleasure."⁴¹⁶ When Schumer describes her GGW escapades, she maintains a smirking, unashamed tone that reflects a refusal "to be distressed by the provocations of reality." For example, after boasting she finally slept with her high school crush, she admits, "He, like, now expects me to go to his graduation. [*Audience laughs.*] . . . Like I know where I'm gonna be in three years, right? [*Audience laughs.*] I'm like whoa! Slow it down. Fuckin' kids, right?" Through her brazen delivery, she demonstrates before the audience her refusal to let the trauma of being stigmatized a depraved GGW affect her. Her comedic identity, in fact, is largely based on her refusal to see any personal trauma as a sign of inferiority. Consider the cover to her album *Cutting* (2011), on which she appears as a housewife.



Kneeling next to a mixing bowl, she appears to have just finished baking muffins, a tray of which she displays as if she is excited to serve them. In one sense, her appearance evokes that of a housewife who pleases her husband by dressing both properly (pearl necklace, hair tied up,

⁴¹⁵ Sigmund Freud, "Humour," 1927, *Standard Edition*, vol. 21, 1957, 161.

⁴¹⁶ Freud, "Humour," 162.

white dress) and sexily (her dress is hiked up to show her stockings and garter belt). In another sense, her smirk suggests control of her own sexuality, which turns the gaze back on to the viewer who might be passing judgment. The bruise she wears also opens itself up to these dual readings: is she an abused housewife or a willing S&M participant? Her dual role of a woeful archetype (the abused housewife) and a Laughing Medusa enables her to focus her critique on patriarchy itself, rather than on women immersed within it.

In “The Laugh of the Medusa,” Hélène Cixous does not say anything positive about Freud. Her conceptualization of laughter does, however, overlap with Freud’s theory of humor. The laugh of the Medusa constitutes a strategy whereby the woman displays her fearlessness against “phallogocentric values,” which encourage a woman to be “ashamed of her strength,” to see herself as “a monster,” and to interpret her “desires” as a sickness.⁴¹⁷ In retaliation, she sets out “to smash everything, to shatter the framework of institutions, to blow up the law, to break up the ‘truth’ with laughter.”⁴¹⁸ Schumer breaks up the alleged “truth” of the GGW’s inferiority by laughing at her filthiness. She also shows how, as Cixous implies, the laugh of the Medusa can move “beyond selfish narcissism”⁴¹⁹ and have the positive function of creating solidarity with a room full of women and men. By exposing the specificities of women’s negotiation of the filthy label, her stand-up performance levels gender hierarchies without denying gender difference. Schumer emphasizes the differences between men and women, while at the same time discouraging the audience from using these differences to reinscribe patriarchy.

Schumer works against slut-shaming by criticizing people who disavow the GGW. For example, at one point in *Mostly Sex Stuff*, she criticizes her friend Katie who refuses “to own” her “sluttiness”:

Like, as soon as she would have a boyfriend, she’d start acting like Mother Theresa. You know, she’d like [*adopts a hushed, ladylike voice*] walk different. She’d talk different. [*Reverts to normal voice.*] Like I remember one time she walked in with her new boyfriend. [*Reverts to ladylike voice, pretends to be holding a man’s hand.*] “Adam and I are thrilled you could join us for brunch.” [*Back to normal voice.*] I was, like, “I’ve helped you get cum out of your hair.” [*Points to her own hair.*] “Remember, we tried using peanut butter, ’cause we’re stupid?”

This ladylike character, the Northern Belle (NB), sneers at the GGW for seeming lower-class. Schumer inverts this hierarchy by implying that the NB is a mere performance—a role a woman takes on because she feels ashamed. As Schumer puts it when she describes Katie’s wedding shower with all her Connecticut friends in attendance: “Like these girls, they were all, like, very Stepford wife, you know? They all, like, wore, like, pastel cashmere cardigans and pearls and Burberry, like, tampons. [*Audience laughs. Schumer adopts the hushed voice.*] And they all spoke like this, like almost in a whisper. Like they all were—everybody just walked around whispering to each other. Like, ‘Oh, I guess we were just born with different vocal cords ’cause I was raised better. Do you ski?’ ” Schumer goes on to describe playing a game where they “all go around and admit something.” Because the NBs cannot own their filthiness, they admit things

⁴¹⁷ Cixous, “Laugh of the Medusa,” 876.

⁴¹⁸ Cixous, “Laugh of the Medusa,” 888.

⁴¹⁹ Cixous, “Laugh of the Medusa,” 883.

like “once I forgot to let the dog out all day!” and “sometimes, when Richard falls asleep, I get up and eat ice cream.” For her turn, Schumer can feel Katie “just glaring at me just like ‘don’t be yourself right now, bitch! This is my new life!’ ” But since she insists on being herself, Schumer says, “One time I let a cab driver finger me.” Schumer’s Laughing Medusa proudly defends the GGW’s class position vis-à-vis the NB by announcing that she has anonymous sexual relations with working-class men. (She makes a similar admission in her 20-minute special, *Comedy Central Presents* [2010], when she says she once slept with a homeless man.) When Katie says, “That’s not how you play, Amy,” she replies, “Really? ’Cause I feel like I won!” Schumer wins because she is more comfortable with her filth than anyone else is. She succeeds in fulfilling Cixous’ call for women to write “about femininity”:

about their sexuality, that is, its infinite and mobile complexity, about their eroticization, sudden turn-ons of a certain miniscule-immense area of their bodies; not about destiny, but about the adventure of such and such a drive, about trips, crossings, trudges, abrupt and gradual awakenings, discoveries of a zone at one time timorous and soon to be forth-right. A woman's body, with its thousand and one thresholds of ardor—once, by smashing yokes and censors, she lets it articulate the profusion of meanings that run through it in every direction—will make the old single-grooved mother tongue reverberate with more than one language.⁴²⁰

While Schumer owns her sexual desires, she also acknowledges gendered power relations; she does so without making her individual desires a mere function of them. By presenting herself as both an individual and a political activist, she successfully negotiates a woman’s double bind: (1) if she critiques her desires as a function of a patriarchal system, then she rejects her individuality; (2) if she owns her individual desires, then she submits to an unequal system of power relations.

At the same time, as we saw in her routine about vaginal waxing, Schumer does not want outright to celebrate those desires that exploit her racial privilege. She refers to her privilege in a routine about her plan to “go for the black guy,” a plan that marks her as filthy because of the racist stigma of interracial sex. “I’m going to black guys,” she says. “That’s what I’m trying to do. That’s what I’m doing, yeah. I’ve—I can’t believe I’ve never done it. I’m built for it. It seems weird I haven’t. Gotta go for the black guy.”

[. . .] But no, this dude comes up to me, this black guy, and he was into it ‘cause, come on. [*Audience laughs.*] And, uh, he walks over, and he’s like, “I’m Derek!” And I was like, “Derek?” He was like, “Derek!” And he had on, like, a nice shirt. And he had, like, a job. [*Audience laughs.*] And I was like, “Noooo. I want a brotha.” [*Audience laughs.*] If I’m gonna do it, I wanna really do it, you know? Not Derek. I want him to, like, not even have a name, just like nicknames. Everyone’s like, “Pookie!” He’s like, “What’s up?” [*Audience laughs.*] No job. We need, like, a ton of lube, but just, like, for his elbows, you know what I’m talking about? [*Audience laughs.*] Oh, that was insanely racist? You’re right. You’re right.

Schumer’s desire to “want a brotha” corresponds to bell hooks’s point in “Eating the Other” that racist ideologies value interracial encounters as enriching experiences for white people. Although Schumer becomes filthy for being with a black man, she also believes that she transforms herself

⁴²⁰ Cixous, “Laugh of the Medusa,” 885.

positively. She could have left the joke here; however, by narrating a scene where she does not encounter a stereotype, Schumer problematizes her desire.⁴²¹

In the next section, I analyze Sommore's comedy, in which she also professes her desire for black men. "Aint' nothin' like the essence of a black man," she says on stage. But unlike Schumer, she does not risk being stigmatized as a wanton woman, given that she is also black. That said, as a black female stand-up comedian, Sommore does risk being stigmatized in a number of other ways.

Ladies and Gentleman, She's a Chandelier!!

The Rhetorical Structure of Sommore's Filthy Comedy

At the outset of Sommore's first solo concert film, *The Queen Stands Alone* (2008), she acknowledges the current racial climate by referring to what Gwendolyn D. Pough has called two recent "public pedagogical moments."⁴²² The first was a racist rant by stand-up comedian and former *Seinfeld* star Michael Richards, who in 2006 responded to a black heckler by repeatedly calling him the n-word and saying such things as "50 years ago you would have been hung upside down with a fork up your ass." The second occurred in 2007 when shock jock Don Imus called the Rutgers women's basketball team "nappy-headed hoes." "Then there was the Jena Six," Sommore adds, referring to the overzealous prosecution of six black high school students in the assault of a white classmate. "It seemed like all hell broke loose." By opening

⁴²¹ The routine is similar to a gag that runs throughout Lisa Lampanelli's stand-up comedy, the joke being that black men are so horny they will have sex with any woman. "I bang a lot of black guys," she says on her comedy special *Take It Like a Man* (2011). "It ain't by choice. I just haven't lost enough weight to get a white guy to fuck me." She visualizes the joke on the cover of *Chocolate, Please: My Adventures in Food, Fat, and Freaks*, which has her presiding over a birthday cake held by a man who—whoops—forgot to button his apron. Lampanelli's knowing look suggests she is more interested in the baker's black, exposed, toned body than in the cake itself. In fact, Lampanelli wants two types of chocolate: the kind that makes her fat and the kind that stigmatizes her as a wanton woman. The back cover features shots of Lampanelli's face smeared with chocolate frosting, intimating her lust for chocolate as well as a black man's sperm. Being older and larger than Schumer, Lampanelli has a different motivation than Schumer does for wanting to sleep with a black man: she is too fat to attract a white man. The common thread in both routines is the comedian's put-on, they are filthy women for desiring black men.

⁴²² Gwendolyn D. Pough, "What It Do, Shorty?" *Black Women, Gender + Families* 1, no. 2 (Fall 2007), 81.

with these references before a mostly black audience, Sommore establishes a rhetorical goal for herself: how to persuade the audience to laugh at a time when the national culture is teeming with symbols that reinforce the oppression of black Americans.

Moving on to describe her response to the mire of racist symbolism, Sommore begins to achieve her goal:

Now, let me just explain to you how I feel about the word “nigger.” First of all, it’s 2007. Is that the best you can do to hurt my feelings is by calling me a nigger? Come on! [*Audience applauds.*] That’s right. Personally, I’m more offended when you don’t give me a good interest rate on my money, to tell you the truth! [*Audience laughs.*] And then, see, black people, we have to know our place in America. When our ancestors were released as slaves, this country promised them forty acres of land and a mule to each slave. And they did not fulfill their promise. Therefore, the scales will never be equal. And you want to know what that feels like? That feels like a motherfucker owe you money, and you see them with new shit on every motherfuckin’ day. [*Audience laughs and applauds.*]

Without discounting the trauma of being called the n-word, Sommore reminds the audience of the suffering inflicted by the material dimensions of racism. She implies that by looking beyond the symbolic dimensions, they can instead dwell on historical injustices (“they did not fulfill their promise”) and their effect on wealth disparities between blacks and whites (“our place in America”). This resistance requires a reconception of the n-word as a symbol of the white speaker’s failed attempt to assert his privilege (“Is that the best you can do to hurt my feelings?”). It also requires a reprioritization whereby the audience’s hurtful portrayal by white people (i.e. as n-words) becomes secondary to their economic exploitation by white people.

Sommore’s attentiveness toward social and sexual difference corresponds to Leslie McCall’s attentiveness toward the “intercategorical complexity” of intersectionality. “The point,” writes McCall, “is not to deny the importance—both material and discursive—of categories but to focus on the process by which they are produced, experienced, reproduced, and resisted in everyday life.”⁴²³ This scholarly methodology “begins with the observation that there are relationships of inequality among already constituted social groups, as imperfect and ever changing as they are, and takes those relationships as the center of analysis.” Sommore’s intersectional attitude toward the n-word takes into account the process by which racial inequality manifests itself; it also opens the door for looking at how the n-word’s symbolism overshadows racism’s effect on class divisions.

Sommore does not deny that the symbolic effects of racism are connected to the material effects, however. When she thanks the audience for coming to see the performance of *Chandelier Status* (2013), she tells them that their attendance “is the best thing you could ever do to show your support [for my comedy]. For some reason, Hollywood don’t fuck with me like that and do a whole lot of movies. So most of the time, I’m on my own protest. They don’t put me in their shit, I don’t put ’em in my shit. Any movie I ain’t in, I bootleg that bitch. [*Audience applauds*] I do! And I got a good bootleg man, too. I got a copy of the movie *The Help*, that bitch so clear, when they’re cleaning up, you smell Pine-Sol in that motherfucker.” Sommore’s reference to *The Help* (2011), a movie widely maligned for making a white woman the hero of a

⁴²³ Leslie McCall, “The Complexity of Intersectionality,” *Signs* 30, no. 5 (Spring 2005), 1784-5.

story about black women's oppression,⁴²⁴ calls attention to a problem specific to her position as a black woman in show business. This reference, in addition to her reference to the Don Imus quote from *The Queen Stands Alone*, indicates that Sommore is working within a climate of anti-black misogyny or what Moya Bailey of the Crunk Feminist Collective calls misogynoir.⁴²⁵ The term signifies the fact that while black and white women can rally against sexism, and black women and men can rally against racism, sexist and racist privileges allow white women and black men to abandon black women in the fight against inequality. This problem was demonstrated recently during Black Entertainment Television's Black Girls Rock! Awards. Instead of supporting black women in their efforts to counter their misrepresentation and underrepresentation within popular culture, dozens of white women took to Twitter to spread the hashtag #WhiteGirlsRock. One tweeter wrote: "How the fuck is there a #BlackGirlsRock show? If there was a #WhiteGirlsRock, black people would fucking riot."⁴²⁶

The misogynoiristic climate is reflected in a rash of stereotypes, many of which were recently delineated by a survey of black women's feelings toward their media representations.⁴²⁷ Reported in the November 2013 issue of *Essence*, the results identify ten "negative images that cause us pain": "Gold Diggers" (who trade sex for money), "Modern Jezebels" (who flaunt their sexuality), "Baby Mamas" (who raise children on their own), "Uneducated Sisters" (whose ignorance is played up for laughs), "Ratchet Women" (who act "sassy"), "Angry Black Women" (who teem with rage), "Mean Black Girls" (who are cruel to other black girls), "Unhealthy Black Women" (who are fat and eat poorly), and "Black Barbies" (who strive for white women's physical features). *Essence* also noted that respondents had mixed opinions about "jokesters": "While most associated this classification with positive words, like 'funny' and 'happy,' they also worried in their diaries that the wider world may not be in on the joke." As a professional jokester with a large black following, Sommore faces pressure to reassure her audience that the wider world will be in on the joke.

Essence did not mention the "filthy jokester," but, as we saw with Richard Pryor, a filthy black jokester may cause black audiences to question whether white audiences are taking their filthy humor as confirmation of racist stereotypes. Pryor, however, was performing in the 1970s, whereas nowadays, a black male comedian's filthy material is hardly controversial. On the other hand, as Sommore revealed in an interview with the *South Bend Tribune*, she does not enjoy the same treatment that a black male comedian enjoys. According to the interviewer,

Although some people use words such as raunchy to describe [her] style of humor, Sommore rejects that term. She says the word is a barrier used to limit the topics women comics can tackle.

⁴²⁴ See, for instance, Matthew W. Hughey, "Racializing Redemption, Reproducing Racism: The Odyssey of Magical Negroes and White Saviors," *Sociology Compass* 6, no. 9 (2012), 751–767.

⁴²⁵ Moya Bailey coined the term "misogynoir" in a blog post cited in Aisha Durham, Brittney C. Cooper, and Susana M. Morris, "The Stage Hip-Hop Feminism Built: A New Directions Essay," *Signs* 38, no. 3 (Spring 2013), 730.

⁴²⁶ Cited in Olivia Cole, "Why I'm Not Here for #WhiteGirlsRock," *Huffington Post*, November 4, 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/olivia-cole/why-im-not-here-for-white_b_4214132.html

⁴²⁷ Dawnie Walton, "Reflections of You and Me?" *Essence*, November 2013, 134.

Besides, Sommore says she's just giving her audience what they want. She's tried to sanitize her show, but audience response is better when Sommore returns to her adult-oriented material.

"If a man says the same things I do, he's just being funny," she says.⁴²⁸

Elsewhere, Sommore gives a slightly modified interpretation of the raunchy label, explaining that she says

raunchy things because that's what I do. That's what I like, but I'm intelligent and a problem that I have with comedy, especially when they listen to women, if you can get past the fact that we are cussing; listen to the message. My father used to always tell me people hear what they want to hear. And when people come up to me and say, oh my God you were so nasty, you were so filthy. That lets me know that you're narrow-minded because you didn't hear the whole message. You just heard the cussing. I just want people to know that I gave it my best and I intend to make a difference and that I'm intelligent. Intelligent and funny.⁴²⁹

The fact that Sommore is a black woman working within a profession that has excluded women of color makes the filthy label especially problematic. Seeing her as merely filthy as opposed to intelligent and funny, the label becomes a convenient excuse for gatekeepers to legitimize her exclusion from the ranks of "serious" professionals. Moreover, while a white male comic's privileged position might lead him to laugh off the filthy label (although he is called filthy, he knows his privilege protects him from the consequences of being seen as the embodiment of a stereotype), a black female comic's lack of privilege leaves her relatively vulnerable. The filthy label seems even more problematic when considering filth as a synonym for pornography. As Patricia Hill Collins argues in "Pornography and Black Women's Bodies," the exploitation and degradation of black female slaves' bodies endures in their subjugation within the pornography industry.⁴³⁰ Studies have since elaborated on what Alice Walker conveyed in "Coming Apart," a short story in which a black woman explains to her husband why she finds pornography degrading.⁴³¹ The husband, the narrator says, refuses to acknowledge "that where white women are depicted in pornography as 'objects,' Black women are depicted as animals. Where white women are at least depicted as human beings if not beings, Black women are depicted as shit."⁴³² Given our misogynoiristic society's inclination to believe that black women are actually filthy and not jokingly filthy, I run the risk of opening up Sommore to a label that does not mean to her legacy what it means to Lenny Bruce's, which nowadays is merely "filthy" in jest. Whenever one says Bruce is filthy, they now mean that he was once deemed filthy but no longer actually is.

⁴²⁸ Howard Dukes, "She's Living Proof You Can't Keep a Good Comic Down," *South Bend Tribune*, February 5, 2006.

⁴²⁹ Darryl Littleton, *Black Comedians on Black Comedy: How African-Americans Taught Us to Laugh* (New York: Applause Theatre & Cinema, 2006), 35.

⁴³⁰ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 137.

⁴³¹ See Alice Mayall and Diana E. H. Russell, "Racism in Pornography," *Making Violence Sexy*, ed. Diana E. H. Russell (New York: Teachers College Press, 1990), 167-178.

⁴³² Alice Walker, "Coming Apart," in *The Womanist Reader*, ed. Layli Phillips (New York: Routledge, 2006), 10.

In calling Sommore a “filthy stand-up comedian,” I hope to demystify the term, not to reinforce barriers between men and women or blacks and whites. If I did not call her a filthy comic, I would be implying that male comics such as Bruce, Pryor and Clay, and white female comics such as Silverman and Schumer, were categorically different. I use the label because she, along with each comedian, is already called a filthy stand-up comedian, albeit sometimes in gentler terms. *Jet* called her humor “unadulterated,”⁴³³ the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* called it “R-rated,”⁴³⁴ and *Essence* noted that “Some folks think all this New Jersey native (Sommore) has is a foul mouth and over-the-top raunchy routines.”⁴³⁵ None of the comics in this study is reducible to the label; however, the goal here is to learn more about how the label gets used and how the comedians subvert/negotiate it.

One of my main arguments is that the label has specific implications for comedians depending on their social position. While Sommore notes that the label stigmatizes female comedians, it also seems to serve as a warning for black women to avoid behaving in any way that might reflect poorly on all black women (i.e. make them seem lower-class). *Essence* issues this warning by noting that “For every good morning we share with the radiant, resilient Robin Roberts, for example, there’s a bad night that makes us wince over the raunchy behavior displayed by some of us on reality TV.” While a male comic such as Louis C.K., who shares every raunchy detail of his masturbation techniques with the audience, has the privilege of not worrying whether his jokes reflect poorly on white men, Sommore negotiates a different social reality. C.K.’s filthy jokes do not correlate to any demeaning stereotype, whereas her jokes that describe her sexual activities in vivid detail correlate to the jezebel or hoochie stereotype. This presents a problem since, as Collins notes, “Because jezebel or the hoochie is constructed as a woman whose sexual appetites are at best inappropriate and, at worst, insatiable, it becomes a short step to imagine her as a ‘freak’.”⁴³⁶

Remarkably, Sommore closes off any reading of her character as freakish. For example, when she describes herself as a sexual being, the joke stems not from any failing on her part but rather from the absurdity of beauty standards. “Like the ass that I got, this ain’t the ass that’s in style now,” she says. “Nah, this bitch is big but it’s flat. This is whatcha call an ’88, meaning this ass was in style in 1988.” Sommore goes on to explain how her man helped her get “ass confidence”:

He was like, “Why don’t you never wear the little boy shorts?” So I explained to him how I always had a complex about my ass being flat. I said, “And this is what I call an ’88. And you don’t put rims on an ’88. [*Audience laughs.*] You just keep an ’88 clean, you know!” . . . He said, “No, I see what it is. It’s not that the ass is flat. It’s just that the pussy’s so good, the ass is shy!” [*Audience laughs,*

⁴³³ “Candid and Sexy Comedienne: Sommore,” *Jet*, May 15, 2006, 46.

⁴³⁴ Doug Kaufman, “The ‘Queen of Hip-hop Comedy,’ Sommore, Offers R-rated Laughs,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, February 9, 2006.

⁴³⁵ Kenya N. Byrd, “Gimme Sommore,” *Essence*, July 1, 2001, 46.

⁴³⁶ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 83.

applauses.] So I speak up for all the '88s in the building. As a matter of fact, I'm gonna get the t-shirt: Flat Booty, Hot Cootie. Somebody got to speak up!⁴³⁷ Instead of silencing any talk of objectifying beauty standards ("big but it's flat"), Sommore faces them head on and juxtaposes them with other absurd beauty standards ("Hot Cootie"). This maneuver not only celebrates Sommore's individual beauty, but neutralizes racialized beauty standards within an absurd frame. Moreover, by performing this routine within a society that has historically reviled black women's bodies, she makes positive a contribution to what Collins calls "the meaning of Black womanhood." Historically, Collins writes,

Through the lived experiences gained within their extended families and communities, individual African-American women fashioned their own ideas about the meaning of Black womanhood. When these ideas found collective expression, Black women's self-definitions enabled them to refashion African-influenced conceptions of self and community. These self-definitions of Black womanhood were designed to resist the negative controlling images of Black womanhood advanced by Whites as well as the discriminatory social practices that these controlling images supported.⁴³⁸

Sommore's routine about her ass counters a discourse that, as Janell Hobson notes, continues to circulate in contemporary popular culture. Hobson cites the hysterical response to tennis star Serena Williams's court attire in 2002. "This negative attitude toward the black female body," she writes, "targets one aspect of the body in particular: the buttocks."⁴³⁹ Hobson also explores discourses intended to counter the fetishization of black women's backsides. These include Sir Mix-a-Lot's song and video "Baby Got Back," which reassures "thick soul sistahs / I wanna get with ya." While Sir Mix-a-Lot's "performance could be viewed as subversive in its critique of white beauty standards," Hobson writes, it also "reinforces the binary opposition between whiteness and blackness while reducing black women to one essential body part."⁴⁴⁰ Sommore's routine is arguably more successful given that she both problematizes beauty standards without reducing herself to one body part.

If Sommore is being "filthy" here, she is clearly not being filthy in the same way Amy Schumer is being "filthy." While the comedians both refer to their asses and pussies, they face a different set of audience expectations and compose their performances correspondingly. With a wink and a nod to the mostly white audience, Schumer convinces them that she is not as hypersexual as she pretends to be. Sommore, in contrast, performs from a social position whose sexuality is more often erased by, or reviled within, popular culture. As such, a wink and a nod may not be adequate assurance to the mostly black audience that Sommore is not playing into problematic myths about black women's sexuality. By even speaking about her sexuality, Sommore adopts a strategy that goes against the "public silence" that, as Evelyn M. Hammonds has shown, has long been encouraged by black women reformers who sought to counter

⁴³⁷ Sommore, *Chandelier Status*, directed by Kevin Layne (Los Angeles, CA: Showtime, 2013).

⁴³⁸ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 10.

⁴³⁹ Janell Hobson, *Venus in the Dark: Blackness and Beauty in Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 87.

⁴⁴⁰ Hobson, *Venus*, 97.

hypersexualized representations of black women. “In the late-nineteenth century,” she writes, with increasing exploitation and abuse of black women despite the legal end of slavery, US black women reformers recognized the need to develop different strategies to counter negative stereotypes of their sexuality which had been used as justifications for the rape lynching, and other abuses of black women by whites. . . . Although some of the strategies used by these black women reformers might have initially been characterized as resistance to dominant and increasingly hegemonic constructions of their sexuality, by the early twentieth century, they had begun to promote a public silence about sexuality which, it could be argued, continues to the present.⁴⁴¹

While Sommore is, on the one hand, a filthy stand-up comedian, she is nevertheless cognizant of the fact that the filthy, sexual stand-up comedian can be interpreted as a negative controlling image of Black womanhood. This leads to a second rhetorical goal: to persuade the audience not to “wince” or to see her filthy comedy reflecting poorly on black women in general. On the contrary, she sets out to present her performance as a positive part of the history of self-definitions of Black womanhood. Moreover, instead of repressing filth, she harnesses it as just one of the many ways through which African Americans, and African-American women more specifically, define their own experiences. Her humor becomes part of what Collins calls “individual expressions of consciousness” that “are articulated, argued through, contested, and aggregated in ways that reflect the heterogeneity of Black womanhood, a collective group consciousness dedicated to resisting oppression becomes possible.”⁴⁴²

One technique she uses is to stress her individuality and irreducibility to a type. This technique is reflected in the titles of her two concert films: *The Queen Stands Alone* and *Chandelier Status* (2013), the latter offering the chandelier as a counter to what Collins calls the controlling images of black womanhood. The opening shot is a darkened stage above which hangs a glowing chandelier. Before Sommore steps on stage, the cheering audience hears her explain the chandelier’s symbolism:

We are living in a celebrity-obsessed society. I believe there are very few stars. You see, a star has a particular, unique talent that is undeniable, whereas nowadays a celebrity is somebody who is popular. You could have a million Twitter followers and be considered a celebrity. There are no shortcuts to becoming a star. Now, I won’t get ahead of myself and call myself a star. But what I will call myself is a chandelier. A chandelier is a constant fixture. In this ever-changing world, it remains the same. It shines no matter what. Yeah, it gets older. But that just increases the value. When you’re a chandelier, you know you’re a chandelier. Oh, and believe me, they see you. My name is Sommore. I am a chandelier. And ladies and gentlemen, this is *Chandelier Status*.

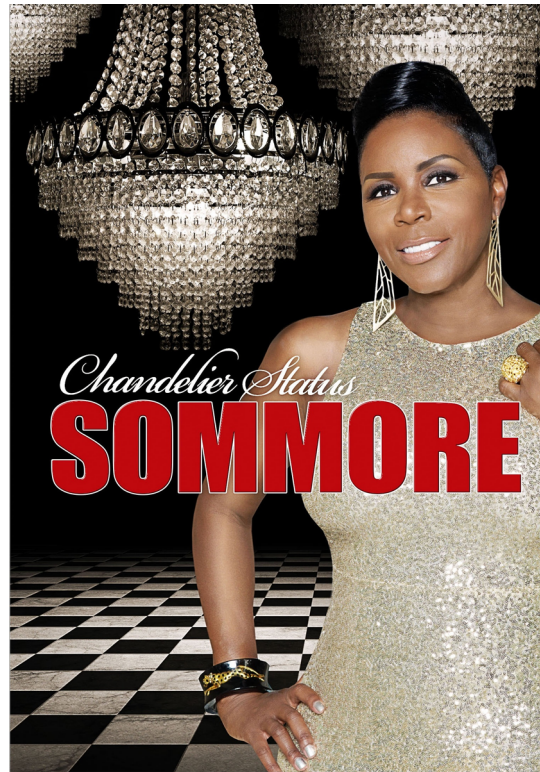
The chandelier, a radiant and cherished treasure, supplants the controlling images that “have been fundamental to Black women’s oppression,” as Collins describes them.⁴⁴³ By applying the

⁴⁴¹ Evelyn M. Hammonds, “Toward a Genealogy of Black Female Sexuality: The Problematic of Silence,” *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*, eds. M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty (New York: Routledge, 1997), 174.

⁴⁴² Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 36.

⁴⁴³ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 5.

chandelier to herself only, Sommore dissuades the audience from seeing her comic vision as the comic vision of all black women. While she does invite group identification by telling jokes about the differences between black people and white people, she alternately will foreground her particular, unique talent for stand-up comedy.



Schumer's put-on comedy does not emphasize her individuality to the same extent. As with Andrew Dice Clay, Schumer taunts the audience into wondering whether the performer is anything like the narcissistic, carefree, shameless character she portrays onstage. By telling fictitious stories about her dalliances with the lower class, she undermines her individuality and aligns herself with the *Girl Gone Wild* (GGW). For example, in her 20-minute performance for *Comedy Central Presents*, a story about her sexual escapades with the beautiful people of Miami is clearly a put-on. "Like, their homeless people are hot," she says.

[. . .] I made out with a homeless guy by accident. [*Audience laughs.*] I had no idea! He was, like, really tan, he had no shoes on, I just thought it was, like, his *thang*, you know. I'm like, "He's probably in a band!" Um, my friend's like, "He probably doesn't have a home." [*Audience laughs.*] And, like, the way I found out, we were sitting on this bench, and we were, like, kissing, you know, or, like, doing it—I don't really remember, uh—'cause it's, like, so bright down there, but—I was, like, "Listen, let's take this party back to your place," right? He was, like, "Bitch, this is my place." [*Audience applauds.*]⁴⁴⁴

The odds that this story actually happened are low. In fact, at times, Schumer makes clear that her stories aren't true, as when she brags about having slept with her high school crush. ("Now

⁴⁴⁴ Amy Schumer, *Comedy Central Presents* (Comedy Central, April 2, 2010).

he wants me to go to his prom.” “You look totally horrified,” she says to a woman in the front row. “I don’t fuck kids. That’s just a joke.” By admitting that she does not fuck kids, Schumer implies that she (the performer) is actually a socially conscientious person. Most of the time, however, Schumer grins blithely and does not undermine the put-on; instead, she relies on the audience assuming that a young, cute, middle-class white woman would never actually have relations with a homeless man. Schumer can make this assumption because the GGW is not an overpoweringly controlling image of white womanhood, at least not to the same extent the jezebel stereotype is for black womanhood. As Susan Douglas implies in *Enlightened Sexism: The Seductive Message That Feminism's Work is Done*, the media excuses the GGW as an escapist fantasy. For Schumer, pretending to be lower-class does not present as great a risk that she will be treated as lower-class when she walks off stage.

Since the media do not excuse the jezebel, Sommore excuses the jezebel by making clear that media representations of wild behavior are fantasies. She does this near the beginning of *Chandelier Status*, when she defends rappers from criticisms that they reinforce black stereotypes. “Then they try to blame everything on the rappers,” she says.

They try to say, “Well, because of the rappers, that’s why they don’t respect us!” Well, first of all, I support rap. [Audience applauds.] [. . .] Rap music is a fantasy, it’s not a fuckin’ reality! You think about this. You work hard, forty hours a week. You try to pay your bills, save as much money as you can. Don’t you want to hear about a motherfucka ballin’ out? I do! I wanna hear about how many bitches ya got! What kinda rims you’re ridin’ out! How you’re blingin’ out! Pourin’ champagne on bitches! ’Cause I can’t and I ain’t doin’ that with my money. [Audience laughs.]⁴⁴⁵

Instead of criticizing rappers and their fans for living vicariously through a fantasy, Sommore continues to reinforce a running theme of her act—that she and her audience should resist controlling images of blackness and of black womanhood. Not that they should necessarily condemn them, but that they should not internalize hegemonic interpretations of racialized symbols.

Sommore’s counterstrategy is not to boycott media products that reproduce the stereotype uncritically. Throughout her performances, she implies that the problem is not with black people who behave in ways deemed stereotypical. Instead, the problem is the judgment against any black person who behaves in ways deemed stereotypical. As Richard Dyer argues in his essay on stereotypes, the problem is not that stereotypes are inaccurate but that the dominant group constructs them so as to legitimize their power. In stereotyping, he writes, “the dominant groups apply their norms to subordinated groups, find the latter wanting, hence inadequate, inferior, sick or grotesque and hence reinforcing the dominant groups’ own sense of the legitimacy of their domination.”⁴⁴⁶ By implying that a social group’s members fall short of certain ideals, the dominant group positions its members as the actual embodiments of these ideals.⁴⁴⁷ In Sommore’s example of rappers, those who seem stereotypically black are viewed as lower-class

⁴⁴⁵ Sommore, *The Queen Stands Alone*, directed by Aaron Courseault (Los Angeles, CA: Comedy Central, 2008).

⁴⁴⁶ Richard Dyer, *Gays and Film* (New York: New York Zoetrope, 1984), 31.

⁴⁴⁷ Dyer is speaking specifically of gay stereotypes.

members of the group. But instead of condemning the symbol itself, Sommore dispels any myth that anyone who might resemble a stereotype is somehow flawed. Moreover, she implies that black people should not be discouraged from living vicariously through pleasurable fantasies and, as she notes earlier, that social inequality is rooted in the material, structural, and symbolic consequences of slavery, for which white people are responsible.

Her strategy corresponds to *The Invisible Man*, in which, as Russell W. Nash argues, Ralph Ellison “wrestles with stereotypes and social problems, converting them into symbols of the human condition.” By “cataloging and exposing stereotyped taboos Ellison performs the functions of sociologist and social therapist. He shows how we need authentic social types to replace warped stereotypes if interpersonal relations are to acquire meaning and reality in America.”⁴⁴⁸ Dyer explains the distinction between social types and stereotypes:

Types are instances which indicate those who live by the rules of society (social types) and those whom the rules are designed to exclude (stereotypes). For this reason, stereotypes are also more rigid than social types. The latter are open-ended, more provisional, more flexible, to create the sense of freedom, choice, self-definition for those within the boundaries of normalcy. These boundaries themselves, however, must be clearly delineated, and so stereotypes, one of the mechanisms of boundary maintenance, are characteristically fixed, clear-cut, unalterable. You appear to choose your social type in some measure, whereas you are condemned to a stereotype.⁴⁴⁹

When Sommore describes, for instance, “hood bitches” she converts the “hood bitch” stereotype into a social type—a woman who lives by the rules of society because, as Sommore implies, her role is to be your friend, albeit a friend who looks for any excuse to get you to keep the party going. She differs from “the bitches you work with,” another social type, because

you know [when] you with the bitches you work with you don’t do everything you do. . . . Let’s say, you out at the club, and you with the bitches you work with. Y’all in the club, y’all havin’ a good time, y’all drinkin’, gettin’ fucked up. All of a sudden, they see you swerve a little bit, they’re like, “Oh, uh-uh, Sommore, we’re cutting you off. That’s it. No more for you. That’s it.” Then you out with your hood bitches. Y’all in the club, y’all fucked up, drinkin’. All of a sudden, you feel your damn self swerve. You be like, “Ooh girl, uh-uh. That’s it, I can’t drink no more. I’m done. You know I gotta drive.” She gonna stop and be like, “Uh-uh, bitch! I paid seven motherfuckin’ dollars for that drink, girl. You better drink that motherfuckin’ drink! I know you gotta drive, bitch, but I just follow you home, bitch!” [Audience laughs.] You be like, “I don’t wanna waste this bitch’s seven dollars. Hold on.” [Takes a swig.]

While the audience is laughing at the hood bitches, they are not necessarily laughing at a stereotype but rather a humorous aspect of a social type. She swears off a hierarchical relationship between the audience and hood bitches when she later adds, “Ain’t nothin’ better than hood bitches.”

⁴⁴⁸ Russell W. Nash, “Stereotypes and Social Types in Ellison’s *Invisible Man*,” *The Sociological Quarterly* 6, no. 4 (June 1965), 357-358.

⁴⁴⁹ Dyer, *Gays and Film*, 355.

Much in the way Richard Pryor did in his stand-up comedy, Sommore describes a wide range of black social types. These include “grown women” and “old school bitches.” Comparing grown women to old school bitches, she says,

I love bein’ a grown woman. Bein’ a grown woman is the best motherfuckin’ thing in the world. I love bein’ grown! I ain’t old school yet though. I tell people all the time, “I’m old, but I’m not old school.” ’Cause you see, as a grown woman, you still make mistakes. Grown women, we’ll do some stupid shit. Like take a picture of your titty with your cellphone, send it to a nigga. [*Mimes posing. Audience laughs.*] You be like, “It’s just a titty, I ain’t gonna put my face in the picture.” . . . See, an old school bitch would never do no silly shit like that. Old school bitch would never take a picture of her titty. Old school would take a picture of something she *cooked* and send it to a nigga. She be like, “If this macaroni ’n’ cheese don’t get this motherfucka, I don’t need him anyway.” [*Mimes snapping a photo. Audience laughs.*]

Sommore frames their sexualities as functions not of race but rather of age and generation. The grown woman taking “a picture of [her] titty with her cellphone” does not, then, correspond to the jezebel stereotype but is rather making a personal decision influenced by age and experience.

Although Sommore puts people into categories, she destigmatizes certain categories by juxtaposing them with more privileged categories. For example, when she uses filthy humor to compare black women to white women, she notes that black women will do anything to keep their man—in contrast to white women who will do anything to keep their men *happy*. “Oh bitch, it’s a difference,” Sommore stresses. “See, keepin’ your man is sitting there and watching the game with ’em. Keepin’ your man happy is suckin’ his dick at halftime. Bitch, it’s a difference.” In this and other jokes, Sommore reveals the privileged group’s filthy habits. Privileged groups include white women and also socially mobile black women—for example, Oprah Winfrey’s best friend, Gayle King. When, in *The Queen Stands Alone*, Sommore compares herself to Gayle, she levels class hierarchies by mocking Gayle’s anal-retentive idea of fun. “Fuck Gayle. I don’t like Gayle,” she says. “What kind of friend is *Gayle*?”

. . . They did a whole segment on Oprah and Gayle driving from California all the way to New York. These motherfuckers didn’t stop, get no wine coolers. They didn’t get no weed. They didn’t fuck none of the camera crew. They didn’t flash their titties on the highway or nothing. I’m like, [. . .] hangin’ with Gayle is like hangin’ with an usher on the usher board. God damn. Bitch, you Oprah. Damn, I want to be Oprah’s friend, ’cause I can see it. I can see me and Oprah in a club. Me and that bitch, we party. Oprah getting fucked up, having a good time. All of a sudden, Oprah grab a stack of ones and stand up and make it rain on them hos. I’d be like, “Do it, bitch! Do it, bitch! Do it, bitch! Do it!”

Sommore jokingly implies that Oprah’s choice of friends reinforces a problematic hierarchy whereby she chooses Gayle’s friendship over Sommore’s because Gayle seems classier. Moreover, by comparing Gayle to an usher on the usher board, Sommore does not equate blackness with the working classes. Since usher boards are a prominent part of modern black churches, it is not any lack of “blackness” that makes Gayle a party pooper. Gayle, ushers on the usher board, and Sommore herself belong to different social types—Sommore distinguishes herself from them by being a better partier. As such, in this routine, Sommore continues to close off any reduction of her character to black culture; she also closes off any reduction of black culture to a classed stereotype.

The development of Sommore's character throughout *Chandelier Status* allows her to tell jokes that might otherwise seem like confirmation of black stereotypes. For example, when she compares a woman's sexual encounter with "a four-figure nigga" (a poor man) to that of "a ten-figure nigga" (a rich man), she describes behavior that might be construed as in line with the "gold digger" stereotype. This comparison comes near the end of *Chandelier Status*, however, by which point Sommore's rhetorical frame—that she is talking not about stereotypes but rather about social types—is well established. The placement of this routine at the end encourages the audience to see it within the rhetorical framework. When she says, "But ladies, surely your skills are a little bit different [when the man's pocket book is taken into account]," the audience is now more likely to interpret her behavior as a function of the social type she has constructed throughout the show. Regarding the poor man, when they are having sex, Sommore says as she grinds before the audience:

He about to come and you know he about to come. All of a sudden he start breathing real hard. He slow down and start trembling and shit. All of a sudden, you stop! Clench your butt together. Take your fist and say, "I wish to fuck you would come. All these bills we got around here, we don't need no more kids. Put your shoulders down! I wish the fuck you would come." [*Audience is in hysterics.*] As a matter of fact, you reach around and get that little sex rag off the nightstand. "I wish the fuck you would." . . . Now! You're fuckin' a ten-figure nigga. Surely your skills are a little bit different. [*Begins grinding again.*] You havin' a good time, he havin' a good time. He doin' his thing, you doin' your thing. He about to come, and you know he about to come. All of a sudden, he start breathin' real hard, "Ooh, ooh, ooh, ooh," he slow down and start tremblin' 'n' shit. All of a sudden he reach his shoulders up like this [*trembles, clenches shoulders, closes eyes*], ladies what you do? Stop! Clench your ass together, then lock your legs over him. You be like, "Let it happen, baby. Let it happen. I got you! It's just me 'n' you, it's just me 'n' you." [*Audience is in hysterics.*]

In this routine, the conditions under which the audience might see Sommore as filthy are clearly different than they were for Bruce, Pryor, and Clay, and even different than they are for Schumer. The potential filthiness stems from the audience's inclination to correlate the routine with the pervasive gold digger stereotype—a risk that does not present itself to the other comics in this study.

Consider the closer to *Chandelier Status*, in which she explains to the audience her attitude toward "suckin' dick." "See, you don't never want a man to ask you to suck his dick. That's degrading!" she says. "You gotta suck his dick when he least expect it." Her comfort with dick-suckin' is not filthy, Sommore notes, because it is the same attitude her grandmother had toward suckin' dick. "And I know I'm onto something, and I know I'm telling the truth, 'cause my grandmother proved it.," she says.

[. . .] First thing, Valentine's Day mornin', my grandmother called me. First thing in the mornin'. She was goin' to a dance in her senior citizen buildin'. She didn't know what to wear. She was like, "What should I wear?" I said, "Well, Nana, the rule of thumb is, whatever is your best asset, that's what you wear red on. Meaning if you got nice breasts, you wear a red shirt; if you got a nice ass, you wear red pants. My grandmother showed up to that *bitch* . . . Dressed in all *black* . . . With some red *lipstick on!* [*Audience roars.*] My grandma said, "If the head's right, niggas be there e'ry night."

This joke encapsulates the final step of Sommore's rhetoric. Here, Sommore juxtaposes the incongruous image of the sweet grandmother asking for fashion tips with the image of the same grandmother showcasing her fellatio techniques by wearing red lipstick. Discouraging the audience from seeing the grandmother as a hypersexual stereotype, Sommore implies that the grandmother has not degraded herself by obliging a man's request for fellatio. She owns her sexuality, makes no apologies for it, and even publicizes it. And with this joke, Sommore ends *Chandelier Status*, having successfully subverted the label of the filthy stand-up comedian.

Conclusion

The Filthy Stand-up Comedian as Modern Artist

As clichéd as it sounds, filthiness is in the eye of the beholder. Although each comedian's use of four-letter words, sexual imagery, and scatological puns contribute toward their filthy reputations, my main point is that a speaker is more likely to call a stand-up comedian filthy so long as the speaker believes the comedian has stained the speaker's social position. Bruce and Clay in their own ways troubled whiteness—Bruce by dissolving the distinctions between Jews and gentiles, whites and blacks, and working-class whites and middle-class whites; Clay by presenting his inner-city, hypermasculine, working-class, and ethnically Italian-American character as the epitome of white manliness—for which they took a tongue-lashing from mostly white, middle-class critics. (Clay is Jewish, but rarely refers to himself as such.) Pryor explicitly critiqued white people; however, his filthy reputation was most prominent among blacks, many of whom felt that Pryor represented black people poorly.

Women are rarely called filthy, plausibly because by calling a woman filthy, one undermines the patriarchal masculine/feminine binary. While the current wave of female comics, headed by Amy Schumer, do wear the filthy label, they wear it ironically—with a nudge and a wink, Schumer implies that any woman who acts like her is not really filthy (read: lower-class) at all. And finally, unlike Schumer, Sommore does not wear the label ironically. Instead of implying that she has acted lower-class, Sommore implies that her behavior should be taken as evidence of her innocent absurdity.

These five comedians interest me as a group because their shared status as filthy comics has ethical consequences. By lumping together a number of comedians under the banner of filth, critics neglect to consider that not all comedians become known as filthy for the same reasons—nor do they negotiate the filthy label in the same way. Moreover, through the filthy moniker, critics imply an artistic hierarchy, with Bruce and Pryor at the top and everyone else beneath them. If critics compare the comedians on the basis of how well they transcend their filth (i.e. their Otherness), they inevitably privilege Bruce, whose status as a white, middle-class man makes him the likeliest candidate for recuperation within a hegemonic framework.

Critics and comedians alike have come to believe that Bruce is an ideal performer. “I don't want to end up like Lenny Bruce,” comedian Margaret Cho told the authors of *The Trials of Lenny Bruce*, “but I want to be like him.”⁴⁵⁰ Yet Cho will never be like Bruce because the process by which Bruce achieved the status of a bona fide, comedic truth-teller is largely limited to white, bourgeois men. To see how this process of marginalization works, we can correlate it with Foucault's exploration of the Greek concept of parrhesia and its relationship to modern art. As Foucault explains, parrhesia “is a kind of verbal activity where the speaker has a specific relation to truth through frankness, a certain relationship to his own life through danger, a certain type of relation to himself or other people through criticism (self-criticism or criticism of other

⁴⁵⁰ Ronald K. L. Collins and David M. Skover, *Trials Of Lenny Bruce: The Fall and Rise Of an American Icon*, 449.

people), and a specific relation to moral law through freedom and duty.”⁴⁵¹ In the interlocutor’s eyes, the speaker of parrhesia becomes the bearer of truth because he is so committed to the truth that he will express it—even if by expressing it, he puts himself in danger. The danger, Foucault adds, “always comes from the fact that the said truth is capable of hurting or angering the interlocutor,” who is in a position of power over the parrhesiastes (the speaker of parrhesia). The parrhesiastes is, therefore, “less powerful than the one with whom he or she speaks. The parrhesia comes from ‘below,’ as it were, and is directed towards ‘above.’” By endangering his own life, the parrhesiastes displays his “courage” and becomes trustworthy. Courage is but one of his many moral qualities, each of which serves as “the proof that he has access to truth—and vice-versa.” Bruce had the status of a parrhesiastes insofar as fans saw his courage to tell the truth as evidence that he possessed “divine madness,” as one author calls it. The essential criterion was his “sheer audacity to take on the most heated issues of the day—Vietnam, racism, homophobia, censorship, oppression, fascism and do so with unrelenting courage.”⁴⁵²

Foucault observes that the parrhesiastic attitude toward truth, championed most prominently by the Cynics, resurfaces in modern art. Modern art is “laying existence bare and reducing it to its basics,” he writes. As “the site of the irruption of what is underneath, below, of what in a culture has no right, or at least no possibility of expression,” it “thereby establishes a polemical relationship of reduction, refusal, and aggression to culture, social norms, values, and aesthetic canons.”⁴⁵³ Foucault gives the example of Édouard Manet, who caused “great scandal” because his art critiqued the belief that the role of art is to represent the world faithfully. In his analysis of *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*, Foucault claims that Manet was calling attention to the painting as an object. By combining different perspectives on the canvas, Manet encourages the viewer to consider the multiple viewpoints from which “the painter has placed himself in order to paint the picture as he has done it, and where we must place ourselves in order to see a spectacle such as this.”⁴⁵⁴ Given that the painting “appears like a space in front of which and by rapport with which one can move around,” we become drawn toward the picture’s materiality and to the “pure and simple properties” of space. The goal is not mimesis, but expression, and perhaps more importantly, an emphasis on the artist’s interiority.

By laying bare his, or our, raw existence, the modern artist/parrhesiastes puts himself in danger and convinces the spectator that he is the source of truth. As the first stand-up comedian to go through this process, Bruce attained the status of a parrhesiastes and would later be called “the first of the modern comedians” by old-school comedian Steve Allen.⁴⁵⁵ He was modern, writes Richard Zoglin, because he “was incapable of separating the comedy from the

⁴⁵¹ Michel Foucault, *Fearless Speech* (Los Angeles, Semiotext(e), 2001), 19.

⁴⁵² Jeffrey A. Kottler, *Divine Madness: Ten Stories of Creative Struggle* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2006), 220.

⁴⁵³ Foucault, *The Courage of the Truth*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 188.

⁴⁵⁴ Foucault, *Manet and the Object of Painting*, trans. Matthew Barr (London: Tate Publishing, 2009), 78.

⁴⁵⁵ Steve Allen, *Funny People*, 76.

comedian.”⁴⁵⁶ He abided by the philosophy of the Cynics who believed in making life “really, materially, physically public,”⁴⁵⁷ which meant exposing what the dominant culture would prefer remain concealed. And by exposing his purported filth, he put himself in danger, landed a prison sentence, and died shortly thereafter.

No other comedian can lay claim to the same degree of parrhesiastic status. Of course, no other comedian has so publicly suffered as a result of telling filthy jokes. At the same time, as Foucault notes, only a select few individuals are capable of using parrhesia:

For although there is a text in Euripides where a servant uses *parrhesia*, most of the time the use of *parrhesia* requires that the *parrhesiastes* know his own genealogy, his own status; i.e., usually one must first be a male citizen to speak the truth as a *parrhesiastes*. Indeed, someone who is deprived of *parrhesia* is in the same situation as a slave to the extent that he or she cannot take part in the political life of the city, nor play the “parrhesiastic game.” In “democratic parrhesia”—where one speaks to the assembly, the *ekklesia*—one must be a citizen; in fact, one must be one of the best among the citizens, possessing those specific personal, moral, and social qualities which grant one the privilege to speak.⁴⁵⁸

I want to dwell on the paradox Foucault reveals but does not explore—that the speaker must be lower than the interlocutor, but that he must have enough status to gain an audience. He must, therefore, appear simultaneously low and high: low because he must seem lower than the interlocutors, high because he must qualify to have their attention. Bruce was an apt candidate for parrhesia because, on one hand, he could claim to speak from below (as a Jewish man who declared an affinity with the African-American underclass) while simultaneously appealing to dominant tastemakers on account of his maleness and whiteness. The other comedians in this study have a weaker case for parrhesia, given that their social position is often denied “the privilege to speak”: Pryor because he was black; Clay because his audience was low (working-class); Schumer because she is a woman; Sommore because she is a black woman with a predominately black audience. Each justifies their filthy humor by way of rhetoric, and as Foucault notes, the parrhesiastes does not resort to rhetoric; he does not try to convince the listener to take his point of view. He speaks naturally and freely; in fact, it is partly the refusal to rely on rhetorical devices that leads the listener to believe the parrhesiastes represents the truth. The parrhesiastes does not need rhetorical devices partly because he does not need to make up for a lack of privilege. As such, the parrhesiastic status of a filthy comedian is largely available only to those comedians who, on-stage, appear to speak from a lack of privilege, but who can gesture to their off-stage selves who have that privilege. Of course, all the comedians in this study have done well for themselves, but to place any of them into the category of filthiness invites unfair comparisons that conceal what is specific to each performer.

We see parrhesiastic, filthy comedy at work in *The Aristocrats*, one of the few documentaries about comedy that managed to secure a theatrical release. This 2005 feature film stars more than a hundred professional writers and comedians, each giving their version of a

⁴⁵⁶ Zoglin, *Comedy at the Edge*, 13.

⁴⁵⁷ Foucault, *Courage*, 253.

⁴⁵⁸ Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, 18.

decades-old filthy joke: “A vaudeville performer is describing his act to a skeptical booking agent. ‘It’s very simple. My wife and I shit on the stage, and then the kids come out and wallow in it.’ Agent, thunderstruck: ‘What kind of act do you call that?’ Vaudevillian, polishing his fingernails on his lapel: ‘We call it—‘The Aristocrats!’”⁴⁵⁹ In their retellings, the comedians keep the premise and the punch line, changing only the description of the act. The point is to be as filthy as possible—various retellings involve incest, pedophilia, rape, murder, bestiality, bowel movements, etc. In his rendition, Bob Saget manages to include virtually all of them. He says, “Father can’t help himself, smacks his wife in the mouth, knocks all of her teeth out. Sticks his fist—accidentally, mind you—down her toothless throat. Unbelievably, he actually fists her neck. [. . .] The mother clips the nails off her hand, puts it up her daughter and starts working her like a puppet. The father’s got smelling salts that he’s been giving to his kids, who keep passing out. Their heads are bleeding and they’ve been anally raped in front of an agent.” Arguably, one of the documentary’s goals is for the filmmakers to redeem the performers—almost all of whom are white and male—as artistic parrhesiastes who gain status as truth-tellers because they dare to say the vilest things possible. When the film’s producer, Penn Jillette, appears on-camera, he underscores the performers’ artistry because, as he puts it, each retelling has the joke-teller’s imprimatur, much in the way “you hear one note of Coltrane, you know it’s Coltrane.” They are “heroes,” the film’s director, Paul Provenza, writes in the introduction to his book *¡Satiristas!: Comedians, Contrarians, Raconteurs & Vulgarians*, because they “speak ‘truth to power’ ” and prove that “America loves to criticize itself.” Despite the danger they bring to themselves, they have to tell the truth.

But who are these truth-tellers? Only seven of the book’s 60 subjects are women; two are black men; one is a woman of color. Of the 105 comedians featured in *The Aristocrats*, 89 are white men, fifteen are women (only five tell the joke [the other 10 discuss the meaning of the joke]),⁴⁶⁰ and two are black. The documentary and the book’s lack of diversity frames filthy comedy as a ritual through which white men prove their artistry.⁴⁶¹ While Bob Saget is known as the understanding dad from the TV sitcom *Full House*, he displays the courage to undermine his wholesome image with a public display of his purportedly true, artistic self. He has, first, an official public image and, second, a platform through which he can now strip away at this image. As Chris Rock explains in his brief appearance in *The Aristocrats*, while, historically, white comics would tell the dirty Aristocrats joke behind closed doors, black comics did not need to reserve their dirtiness for special occasions. “A black comic could always be dirty,” he says, referring to the Chitlin’ circuit. “Couldn’t get on TV anytime so you weren’t really worried about who you offended or anything.” When he reappears during the film’s final credits, Rock stands out once again, this time because, unlike the other comedians featured in the credits, Rock is not laughing or telling jokes. As Danielle Jeanine Deveau explains in her critique of the film, “Rock

⁴⁵⁹ Gershon Legman, *No Laughing Matter: Rationale of the Dirty Joke: Second Series* (London: Granada Pub. 1978), 987.

⁴⁶⁰ They are Susie Essman, Judy Gold, Whoopi Goldberg, Wendy Leibman, and Sarah Silverman.

⁴⁶¹ Through the exclusion of women, the joke becomes, as comedian Kate Clinton called it in a scathing critique of the film, “a balm to the male spirit.” See *I Told You So* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2009), 9.

[. . .] is featured looking confused, cracking no smile and uttering not a word. He is not participating in the joke. His experience of the comedy industry is different. Rock's silent performance serves as a reminder that in order to be the victim of media censorship—as many white, male comics claim to have been—one must first obtain enough cultural authority to merit media representation.”⁴⁶² Regardless of whether the filmmakers intended it to be interpreted in this way, Rock's silent befuddlement and lack of comedic gestures speak volumes about the nature of censorship. Although the white comics are censored in their careers, they also have the privilege to reveal their censorship before a viewing audience who can then take the comics' brave revelations as evidence of their artistry. The value of their filthy comedy derives partly from their artistic renderings but also from the privilege that comes from having access to a wide audience. It is a white, male, heterosexual, middle-class tradition too often taken to be universal.



The image of Rock's befuddlement is an appropriate end to this dissertation, in which I have critiqued dominant discourses about filthy stand-up comedy. My goal has not been to discourage anyone from making or enjoying this filth; it has been, instead, to push dialogues about the subject in a direction that sees filthy stand-up comedy as neither good nor bad, but as, rather, a screen to deflect more pressing issues as they pertain to gender, class, and race relations. Once made visible, this screen will, ideally, cease to deflect and instead draw attention to salient cultural movements, both dominant and marginalized.

⁴⁶² Danielle Jeanine Deveau, “*The Aristocrats!*: Comedy, Grotesqueries and Political Inversions of the Masculine Code,” *Humor* 25, no. 4 (2012): 401-415.

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