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## Something Punny to Precede the Colon: Marking Whiteness and Exploring Blackness in Standup Comedy

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Something Punny to Precede the Colon: Marking Whiteness and Exploring Blackness in  
Standup Comedy

Andrew DeStaebler

American Studies Honors Thesis

Advisor: Professor Laura Saltz

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## Introduction

“I am everyone that I create”

-Richard Pryor

### **Overview**

This project aims to investigate strategies and approaches used by comedians who rely heavily on racial humor in their standup comedy acts. This comes in an effort to understand the cultural implications of this type of humor. Specifically, I focus on the work of Dick Gregory, Richard Pryor, and Dave Chappelle, all African American male comedians, and on humor that considers blackness and its relationship to whiteness. I argue that jokes that juxtapose black experiences with white experiences can reflect imbalances of privilege and power from the level of systemic racism to everyday encounters with bias and microaggressions. Furthermore, I understand jokes as reliable indicators of cultural trends and social and political relationships, and claim that the work of these three comedians explores how black masculinities have been regulated and policed and made to feel vulnerable and abject in American society.

I chose to focus on Gregory, Pryor, and Chappelle for this study because of the high volume of content that they provide, their ability to reach incredibly broad, diverse audiences, and the ways in which each has profoundly changed American standup comedy. Gregory, an activist in addition to a comedian, began performing in the 1950's, and considered the first black stand up to consistently integrate social and political critiques into his act. Matthew Daube, author of “Laughter in Revolt: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity in the Construction of Stand-Up Comedy,” explains that Gregory “[pioneered] a model of how African American comics could intervene in a racial discussion within comedy that had been initiated by non-blacks. Dick

Gregory became the first to break the so-called color barrier” (Daube, 117). Gregory effectively carved out space for black voices in American standup and claimed agency over representations of his identity that had previously been defined by white comedians. Daube explains that Gregory never aligned his comedic style with vaudeville performances,<sup>1</sup> but rather used his platform as a means of social and cultural critique (Daube, 117). He underscores the fact that Gregory’s comedic style greatly differed from the styles of his black counterparts during the era; he was one of the only black comedians to stray from vaudeville performances typically associated with middle-class entertainment and to craft material more wrapped up in his personal identity.

Pryor and Chappelle are both icons of the standup genre, and their work has contributed to the evolution of the genre itself. Both have won multiple Grammys for Comedy Album of the Year, and clearly have the support and recognition of both fans and critics. Pryor had his first major breakthrough in 1971 with his filmed special *Live and Smokin’*, enjoying his peak popularity throughout the 1970’s and into the 1980’s. Chappelle represents the most recent comedian of the three. His first breaks came in 1992 and 1995 when he gained credit for his performances at Def Comedy Jam, and followed that success with three HBO specials between 1998-2004. He is perhaps best known for creating and starring in *Chappelle’s Show*, which ran on Comedy Central from 2003-2006 until he walked away from a lucrative contract. Chappelle finally returned to the standup stage in 2017, and produced four Netflix specials between 2017-2018.

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<sup>1</sup> Vaudeville performances hosted performers who could “sing, dance, play music, tell jokes, and do comic impressions.” Daube makes this distinction not only in reference to vaudeville theaters designed for whites, but also vaudeville for black performers performing in front of black audiences.

## **Scholarly Precedents: Humor Theory and Theories of Standup**

In this study, I rely upon a long tradition of humor studies to help situate the work of Gregory, Pryor, and Chappelle. The always evolving field of humor studies burst into academic discourse with Sigmund Freud's seminal text, *Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious* (1916). This text catalyzed conversations that consider why we laugh and what we laugh at, providing a comprehensive analysis of the psychology of wit and the comic. While the book focuses more heavily on wit and witticisms than more structured jokes, Freud makes a distinction between "wit" and "the comical." He writes, "Wit is made while the comical is found; it is found first of all in persons, and only later by transference may be seen also in objects, situations, and the like" (Freud, 289). With this quotation, Freud expands on a previous claim that the comical needs only two parties to complete the "pleasure-bearing process": "one who finds the comical, and one in whom it is found" (Freud, 289). In other words, Freud claims that the comical (jokes) only needs a teller and a receiver. All other parties are superfluous, and add nothing to the "comic process," but simply reinforce it (Freud, 289). This binary relationship—the joke teller and the joke receiver—has served as a model for much future scholarship in the field of humor studies.

A more modern survey of humor and joke theory can be found in Simon Critchley's *On Humor* (2002). In the book's introduction, Critchley categorizes the three theories of humor that he has encountered in his study. Critchley explains that people laugh when they have a feeling of superiority over others; when there is a "release of pent-up nervous energy"; or when there is a "perception of the incongruous" or "felt incongruity between what we know or expect" (Critchley, 2, 3). Like Freud, Critchley grants much authority to the listener to decide what he or

she finds funny. Critchley writes, “When it comes to what amuses us, we are all authorities, all experts in the field. We know what we find funny” (Critchley, 2). To Critchley, like Freud, the joking process is binary and individualized; the receiver of the joke has the authority to determine what is funny and what is not.

In this paper, I hope to depart from understandings of humor that focus on the individual teller or listener, and instead to conceive of jokes as collectively felt experiences, especially in the context of the genre of standup comedy. I rely heavily on Eric Shouse’s theory of jokes and standup, which he provides in an essay titled, “The Role of Affect in the Performance of Stand-Up Comedy” (2007). In this paper, Shouse acknowledges the utility of the same three theories of humor provided by Critchley (incongruity, superiority, and relief), as they provide tangible, identifiable explanations for the act of joking. However, Shouse explains that isolating interpretations of jokes to the individual level limits one’s understanding of the social aspects of joking, and also removes jokes from the context of performance (Shouse, 38, 39).

Shouse relies on affect theory to construct his argument that jokes should be understood as complex social experiences influenced by other people and the environment rather. He writes:

An affect-centered conception of humor alerts us to full complexity of our embodied experiences of humor. At any moment during a live humorous performance we are consciously aware of very few sensations... However, all three of these things produce sensations that are registered at an unconscious level. Those sensations and hundreds of others are enfolded by our bodies and combine to produce our level of intensity in a given situation. This is affect... Affect is what makes our feelings ‘feel’ and, therefore, it is what makes humor seem funny. (Shouse, 35)



This distinction is significant because it accounts for the non-cognitive aspects of a standup performance that influence how jokes are perceived. The performer's body, the performer's tone of voice, the environment of the venue, and more all influence how audiences react to jokes. Considering the role of affect allows for a more complete understanding of a joke told within the context of a standup performance. Furthermore, affect is transmittable between and among performer and audience, which troubles Freud and Critchley's understanding of humor as individually-focused.<sup>2</sup> The experience of standup comedy is a shared phenomenon because of the transmission of affect, and this transmission can lead to a collective, albeit unnamed, interpretation of performance and performer. Analyzing jokes as individual units can be helpful to underscore social and anthropological trends, but, to examine the content of a joke without contextualizing it within the performance in which it was told would foreclose the ability to consider the affective responses it produces.

### **Applying Theory: Tracing and Understanding Racial Humor**

This paper will consider different instances in which Gregory, Pryor, and Chappelle rely on racial humor in their acts. The examples provided are all charged with pointed and sometimes jarring representations of black male experiences in the United States, I argue that racial humor

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<sup>2</sup> In his 2005 essay titled, "Feeling, Emotion, Affect," Shouse describes affect as "prepersonal" and "a non-conscious experience of intensity." Unlike a feeling, which he defines as "a sensation that has been checked against previous experiences and labelled" or an emotion, "the projection/display of a feeling," affect is far more abstract and unformed because it is "always prior to and/or outside of consciousness." The difficulty (and perhaps impossibility) to put words to affect underscores its power. Because it is so unformed, it is transmittable, which blurs the line between the "individual" and the "environment" when considering experience (Shouse, 2005). Intensities of feeling are therefore not exclusive to the individual, but are often shared, shaped by affective responses transmitted by others and influenced by environment.

allows comedians to critically engage with social issues, but I do not seek to argue whether or not these jokes subvert societal expectations or racial stereotypes. Many scholars have debated this question in the past, and definitive claims that argue racial and ethnic jokes subvert or reinforce stereotypes remain contested. For example, Joseph Dorinson and Joseph Boskin ponder the tension between the subversion and reinforcement of norms in their essay, “Ethnic Humor: Subversion and Survival” (1985). The authors cite a dispute regarding a specific Polish joke, explaining that one scholar interpreted the joke as prideful while another interpreted it as demeaning. They then ask, “Is either position correct?” and appear to have no definitive answer (Dorinson and Boskin, 82). The essay concludes by highlighting the ambiguity of ethnic humor in its relation to subversion, which problematizes claims related to the subversive qualities of racial, ethnic, social, or political jokes.<sup>3</sup> While it may be true that jokes subvert the psychology of what is expected, it is vital to consider cultural histories when interpreting jokes because of the ways in which minority identities have historically systemically subjected to repression and manipulation in American society.

In this essay, I instead ponder questions such as: what can humor do that direct political action cannot? How does the intersection of personal and on-stage identities inform the content

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<sup>3</sup> Gregory, Pryor, and Chappelle were all very conscious of how their jokes could be interpreted by audiences differently than they intended. In his 1961 album, *In Living Black and White*, Gregory recounts a story in which a man interpreted a joke meant to satirize bus segregation quite literally, and asked him to travel to Mobile, Alabama to advocate for bus segregation, not against it (Gregory, 1961). In 1982, Pryor stopped using the n-word as frequently as he used to, and in *Live on the Sunset Strip* explains that he understood the word as a weapon to cast black people as subservient by describing their “wretchedness” (Pryor, 1982). Whether Pryor actually reinforced stereotypes or not, he was, at the very least, conscious of his word choice. Finally, Chappelle left his hit *Chappelle’s Show* and a promise of \$50 million after considering the possibility that his sketches were reproducing racial inequality instead of challenging it (Snyder, 314).

of racially charged jokes? How are race and the black body represented within standup performances—through both the content of jokes and the actions that each comedian performs on stage? And how do these representations contribute to collective understandings of blackness? To answer these questions, I analyze jokes that Rebecca Krefting might label as examples of “charged humor.” Krefting constructs this multifaceted term in her book, *All Joking Aside: American Humor and Its Discontents* (2014) in an effort to look beyond “satire, political humor or biting humor” (Krefting, 25). Charged humor is intentional, “self-locating,” and “springs from a social and political consciousness desiring to address social justice issues,” designed to evoke a response from an audience by providing social critique (Krefting, 25).<sup>4</sup> Considering this, I argue that the power of racial humor, then, is not the ability to universally subvert hegemonic ideas, but rather the ability to empower comedians to uncover and address aspects of society that otherwise remain hidden, to force audiences to confront their own positionality by hurling social issues at them in the form of jokes, and to grant a performer the authority to represent his or her own identity.

### **What’s to Come: Chapter Outlines**

Chapter One focuses on different examples in which Gregory, Pryor, and Chappelle juxtapose whiteness and blackness in their acts. I draw on Greta Fowler Snyder’s term “marking

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<sup>4</sup> Krefting further claims that charged humor is a “solution-oriented style of comic performance” that “deftly points to social inequities and supplies possible solutions” (Krefting, 27). Unlike Krefting, I do not claim that Gregory, Pryor, or Chappelle tell charged jokes in an effort to suggest solutions for issues of racial inequality. Instead, I choose to focus on the first portion of her definition of charged humor located above, and to consider the ways in which racial humor can serve as an alternative form of social critique to political action and a means to represent one’s identity.

whiteness.” In “‘Marking Whiteness’ For Cross-Racial Solidarity” (2015), she coins the term to describe strategies that force the “hyper-visibility” of whiteness. This happens through the portrayal of “average” white behavior, with the understanding that whiteness, especially in predominantly white spaces, is often rendered “invisible”—invisible in the sense that whiteness is often seen as unimportant, neutral, a non-factor to white people (Snyder, 301). Gregory, Pryor, and Chappelle mark whiteness using three dominant strategies: the use of the first-person narrative, the construction of white characters, and the construction of black characters. I argue that the practice of marking whiteness acts as an important form of social critique as it forces audience members—specifically white audience members—to encounter aspects of their identity that afford them unearned privileges in American society.

Chapter Two considers the ways that Pryor and Chappelle explore blackness in jokes specifically about the police. As in Chapter One, I analyze instances in which these comedians mark whiteness to underscore imbalances of privilege and power between whites and blacks, but here I focus specifically on interactions with the police. Additionally, I argue that joking about the police acts as a way for Pryor and Chappelle to explore the ways in which black masculinities are regulated, policed, and vulnerable. I consider the role of affect in this chapter, and rely on Sarah Ahmed’s theorization of “affective economies” to consider how the institution of the police continually reinforces harmful stereotypes that paint the black man in the United States as criminal, and to argue that the institution of the police actively participates in constructing blackness as abject in the United States.

## Chapter 1

### “Racism Connoisseurs”: Confronting Privilege and Marking Whiteness

#### **Argument**

This chapter will consider the ways in which Dick Gregory, Richard Pryor, and Dave Chappelle define and locate blackness, especially as it relates to whiteness, in their performances. Each frequently frame blackness and whiteness directly next to each other, often to reveal racial paradoxes of American society that result in instances of undue white privilege. This chapter will focus specifically on examples of jokes that underscore ever-present manifestations of racism, from the level of segregation laws codified by the government to microaggressions experienced daily. These three frequently rely on storytelling through the use of the first person narrative and the creation of characters to pose white and black experiences side by side and to relay their everyday subjugation to racism and bias. Gregory, Pryor, and Chappelle effectively reclaim these experiences by reducing them to the absurd, and, indeed, the hysterical.

Standup is an especially useful medium to locate instances in which racial dynamics are juxtaposed and critiqued because, as Stephanie Koziski writes, the role of the standup comedian is comparable to that of a cultural anthropologist. The difference, she argues, is that the anthropologist acts as a “sympathetic outsider” while the standup comedian acts as a “cynical insider” within a given society (Koziski, 63). Gregory, Pryor, and Chappelle all live within the American society that they perform to, which makes jokes about their experiences with racism and bias especially relevant. As African Americans, their viewpoints are molded by the society

that they are critiquing. Relaying one's own experience to an audience through the non-threatening medium of joking can work to reveal differences in experience that would otherwise remain unmarked or unnoticed, and these experiences, while framed humorously, carry much significance and authority because the comedian draws upon lived experiences within a given society. Here, the revelation is made to white people in a given audience, whereas black audience members are more likely to identify with the jokes that come from the "cynical insiders" that are Gregory, Pryor, and Chappelle.

In "'Marking Whiteness' For Cross-Racial Solidarity" (2015), Greta Fowler Snyder analyzes the ways in which certain entertainers juxtapose blackness and whiteness. In this piece, Snyder uses the term "marking Whiteness" as a term to describe strategies that force the "hyper-visibility" of whiteness through the portrayal of average white behavior. This strategy, she argues, does two critical things. First, it effectively dissolves any argument in favor of "colorblindness" and deconstructs the notion that we now enjoy a post-racial society, and second, it implicates white people as being guilty of reproducing systemic inequality through complacency, ignorance, and willful participation in an unequal society (Snyder, 299). In their routines, Gregory, Pryor, and Chappelle all "mark whiteness," make it hyper-visible, to force audience members to grapple with the implications of race in American society. Doing so, they confront issues of white privilege and power, and the use of humor makes each comedian's critique of polarizing racial issues easier to impart on a mixed race audience.

Gregory, Pryor, and Chappelle "mark whiteness" using three key strategies. First, these three comedians draw from their own, everyday experiences, and frame these experiences through the first-person narrative form to convey differences in privilege and power between

black and white comedians. In their critiques, these comics reveal not only outward, blatant manifestations of racism, but also more nuanced, harder to identify incidents that ultimately shape the totality of one's experience and make the black experience of America profoundly different than the white. In other words, these comedians are able to mark both manifestations of white privilege and more subtle experiences of bias and microaggressions through humor that are otherwise too invisible or too taboo to discuss.

The second strategy these comedians use to mark whiteness is to play black characters on stage, most notably seen through Pryor's recurring character of "Mudbone." According to Audrey McCluskey, Pryor's Mudbone, an old black man hailing from Tupelo, Mississippi, showcases Pryor's profound awareness that black comedy does not need to answer to the confines of a white vision, but rather represents "black people's ways of knowing and being in the world" (McCluskey, 4). The character's construction draws upon a rich folk tradition and embodies the persona of a "revolutionary trickster," a symbol of wit and resilience within the African American oral and literary traditions. Mudbone's character acts as a symbol of resistance and perseverance, he is part of a long lineage of characters who appear vulnerable but are in fact cunning and able to outwit their white counterparts despite a disadvantaged situation.

The third way in which they mark whiteness is by playing white characters on stage. I will focus on Chappelle's frequent use of the white voice (a persona that he adopts when impersonating various white friends).<sup>5</sup> Chappelle's white voice calls into question and openly mocks the typical ignorance and obliviousness commonly found as a result of a privileged

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<sup>5</sup> Drawing on the work of Marvin McAllister, Snyder described Chappelle's white voice as "not representative of his own intimate experiences with a diversified Whiteness" (qtd. In Snyder, 2015), but rather in a generic, "singular" fashion (qtd. In Snyder, 309).

existence, and is an obvious marker for bits that critique race relations through the strategy of marking whiteness. The white voice allows Chappelle to explore interactions with ignorant whites on stage by literally embodying whiteness in its most generic form.

Together, these strategies of revealing differences in experience between whites and blacks are significant because they suggest an unfortunate level of consistency surrounding race relations in the United States. Although Gregory and Chappelle are separated by decades of “progress,” the themes found in jokes told by these black comedians remain alarmingly similar. Mary Douglas claims that “a joke is seen and allowed when it offers a symbolic pattern of a social pattern occurring at the same time. As I see it, all jokes are expressive of the social situations in which they occur” (Douglas, 98). Humor, therefore, can provide insight into social relationships within a given society in a unique way, and standup comedians, the “cynical insiders” who are experts at interpreting culture, have continued to joke about racially driven imbalances of power by marking whiteness. While racist policies of segregation are not codified into law in the present era, the cultural effects of racism and bias felt at the level of daily experience have remained constant. The ongoing need to reveal, expose, and reduce the effects of white privilege through joking suggests that whiteness is, generally speaking, still indicative of privilege, power, and complacency in the United States.

### **Reveling in the Absurd**

Gregory began performing in the mid-1950s, taking the stage at an incredibly volatile time in the history of United States racial and social relations. In addition to his standup career, Gregory acted as a staunch civil rights activist off stage. He was involved in groups such as the



Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and spoke passionately at events such as “Freedom Day,” an event hosted in Selma, Alabama on October 7, 1963 that aimed to register as many black voters as possible. Howard Zinn recounts Gregory’s speech, which lasted nearly two hours, and explains that Gregory publicly ridiculed many white officials in the county, the first time a black man had done so directly and in front of an audience (Zinn, 58). His 1964 autobiography, titled *Nigger*, recounts much of his early life and illuminates a multitude of racist encounters he was forced to endure. The provocative title sets the tone of the autobiography, as Gregory effectively reclaims and strips of power the word so often used to degrade him by his white peers. It is no surprise that Gregory’s standup is highly political and critiques the same inequalities that he dedicated much of his life to eradicating through activism and scholarship.

Gregory’s standup reflects many of his own political views, and humor acted as an alternative medium to impart social critique in front of an audience. Gregory was one of the first black comedians to perform in front of any audience, let alone a mixed race audience. In an interview with Bill Dana and Jeni Matz, Gregory acknowledges that he did not know the restrictions on black comedians trying to perform in white nightclubs, and points to the fact that black entertainers were historically reduced to brief singing and dancing skits, which prevented them from using the stage to represent themselves and their experience. Despite his charged content and his controversial personal life as a high profile civil rights activist, Gregory maintained such a strong relationship with his audiences because he had a profound respect for audience members and their desire to be entertained (Dana and Matz, 13). While this may have limited the amount of targeted and radical social critique that he could impart, Gregory used

humor as a cover to discuss his political and social views. As Matthew Daube notes, “Gregory blended gentle generic jokes with sharp social critique, carefully calibrating humor and one-line structure to make some very pointed barbs under cover of congeniality, before his anger burst into direct political activism off-stage” (Daube, 117). His jokes, which were seemingly light-hearted and innocent, gave him access to large, mixed race audiences, while at the same time allowing him to critique aspects of racism by marking whiteness. As Daube later writes, “He educates his white audience how one can be *both* an individual and a Negro—indeed, that everyone in the United States is both their own person and a member of at least one racial group, even though many whites have the luxury of going through life ‘unmarked’” (Daube, 130). Gregory’s standup may not have enacted the kind of policy reform that his off stage activism did, but his comedy exposed white people to aspects of their privilege that would have otherwise gone unquestioned.

In his album *In Living Black and White* (1961) Gregory provides multiple examples of the contradictions and inequalities created by a historically racist United States and they ways they have affected his own life. To do so, he uses first-person narrative to communicate everyday experiences and encounters. While there is no way to know if the stories he recounts are actually true, the use of the first person makes his standup inherently personal, and suggests to the audience that what he says on stage reflects his experience. For example, he discusses various exclusionary practices in a bit that starts with him claiming that he has saved money due to racism, a playful take on his own experience. Gregory, explaining how black people can buy so many Cadillacs while holding inferior jobs, says, “Racial segregation buys us Cadillacs. You have a country club you can join, I can’t, so I save \$500 a year. You know damn well I’m not

taking my family to Florida this winter, that's another \$1500 I save. [If I] walk out of here tonight and get hit by a bus, I'm not going to the best hospital where they gon' charge me \$2500, so I go to city hospital for free" (Gregory, 1961). Gregory "saves money" through exclusions from these luxuries reserved for white people, which, in turn, enables him to save enough to buy a Cadillac. Here, Gregory tackles the topic of exclusionary segregation policies brought upon by Jim Crow laws by jokingly framing them as positives (he is saving money after all). Working within the notion that racism saves him money, he uses "you" to establish whiteness and "I" to establish his own blackness. In this bit, it is exclusively Gregory's race that bars him access both to luxuries enjoyed by whites (country clubs and vacations) and adequate health care (a good hospital).

This joke, which quite blatantly and obviously satirizes the social implications of racism, is received well by the audience, and Gregory skillfully reveals incongruities between his own experience as a black man and those of his white peers. The audience, despite Gregory calling out its white members with the use of "you," resolves the joke with a unanimous laughter. Audience members remain engaged throughout the rest of the performance, and this instance supports Daube's observation that Gregory's guise of playful comedy allowed him to fairly openly critique practices of discrimination. Again, Douglas can help to understand why this process is important, and how joking really can reveal certain aspects of experience that other forms of interaction or performance may not. Her claim that jokes have the power to reveal the totality of a social situation (Douglas, 98) suggests that jokes can be used as distinct anthropological or historical markers, and that the content of a socially or politically charged joke can help one understand specific relationships of power. Gregory clearly reflects the social

situations of the society in which he is performing—Jim Crow era segregation—and points to a level of his experience that may have been otherwise invisible. Although racism was literally codified into law during this era, audience members both perceive and permit this joke (they respond with laughter) and the joke itself reveals Gregory’s experience of exclusion.

In addition to Douglas’s argument about the anthropological and historical significance jokes carry, an application of affect theory to the experience of standup comedy adds the important non-cognitive elements of performance to the conversation. Affect theory encourages analysis that extends beyond the content of a joke, and helps define the unconscious work that takes place during a standup performance that transforms joking from an individual to a shared experience. In his essay, “The Role of Affect in the Performance of Stand-Up Comedy: Theorizing the Mind-Body Connection in Humor Studies” (2007), Eric Shouse argues that the transmission of affect is one of the most crucial processes that happens during a standup performance. Standup comedy cannot be understood at the individual level alone precisely because the performance of standup relies on the transmission of affect, which is “dependent on context and performance” (Shouse, 35). He problematizes the three theories of humor previously traced by Critchley (incongruity, superiority, and relief), arguing that the unconscious transmission of affect between performer and audience, between audience and performer, and among audience members makes humor a more social, collective, and complex experience. This understanding of affect theory is crucial to complete an analysis of a joke told in a standup performance for two reasons. First, it centers the unsaid yet understood aspects of performance internalized by our unconscious, which, if we accept that affect is “what makes humor funny,” profoundly influence an audience’s conception of a given performance. Second, and related to

audience, the experience of standup comedy is a shared phenomenon because affect is transmittable, which can lead to a collective, albeit unnamed, interpretation of performance and performer.

This understanding is incredibly important when considering jokes told using the first person. In his essay, “Stand-Up Comedy as a Genre of Intimacy” (2008), Ian Brodie argues that the ambiguity of truth that results from comedians framing jokes and stories in the first person grants a considerable amount of power to the audience. He writes, “Stand-up comedians are characters in their own narrative, of their own making. They profess to have had certain experiences and express certain opinions not merely in front of but to an audience... The audience is expected to try to determine what is true and what is play” (Brodie, 175). Brodie concludes his piece by further discussing the relationship between performer and audience. He argues that while the performer has the greatest agency to create and present content, the nature of the standup genre places much power into the hands of the audience and how it responds (Brodie, 176). In other words, the performer and audience share power, which leads to a relationship that Brodie labels as “intimacy.” Simply considering the textual elements of standup neglects this vital relationship, and therefore standup can only be fully understood within the context of the totality of a performance, which charges jokes with more meaning, depth, and intensity.

Without actually naming it, Brodie here describes the significance of the transmission of affect among an audience, and because affects are transmittable, audience responses should be read as social and collective rather than individual. Conceptions of what is true and what is not can therefore be collectively formed even without direct communication, influenced by all of the

non-cognitive aspects of performance encountered before (other audience members, the performer's body, the performer's delivery, the environment). Because the transmission of affect happens so frequently during a standup performance, the very act of listening to a performer can have the effect of dialogue because joking turns into a social experience. Lawrence Mintz also considers the significance of the audience. In "Standup Comedy as Social and Cultural Mediation" (1985), he writes, "The *experience* of public joking, shared laughter, and celebration of agreement on what deserves ridicule and affirmation fosters community and furthers a sense of mutual support for common belief and behavior" (Mintz, 73). Reducing racism to its most absurd and then ridiculing it through the act of laughter begins to negate its power, and this act, heightened by the transmission of affect, creates a shared community of understanding. Gregory's joking allows him to discuss his political points of view to an audience, and has an even higher chance of his audience coming to a shared understanding than through an argument-driven political protest.

Gregory, therefore, does not necessarily need to rely on intense political content to continue conversations on racial inequality in the United States. Instead, humor diversifies the ways in which his views and experiences are presented to the public, and therefore reach a broader audience. His use of humor allows people who may be completely averse to his politics to share the same space as Gregory, and the transmission of affect heightens the intensity of his jokes and creates a greater possibility that they will be received and understood similarly by the audience through the creation of a shared community of laughter. While the joke about the "benefits" of racism will almost certainly not change deeply held racist beliefs, the social

commentary that Gregory imparts through his humor at the very least forces audience members to acknowledge that his viewpoint exists.

Constructions of first-person narratives to mark whiteness continue to recur in the present. Chappelle, a self-proclaimed “racism connoisseur” (Chappelle, 1998), also uses this strategy to create a commentary on broader racial dynamics within the United States. Although he begins performing in the early 1990s, dozens of years removed from Gregory’s first standups, many of the themes in his comedy are similar to those of Gregory’s. The country had gone through the entirety of the Civil Rights Movement in the time separating the standup careers of Gregory and Chappelle, but Chappelle continues to use the platform of the standup stage to explore and critique American racism. This continuity suggests that despite the tangible progress afforded by different social movements (racial segregation rendered illegal by law), black Americans still encounter racism on a daily basis through different manifestations of bias and harassment.

For example, in his comedy special *For What It’s Worth* (2004), Chappelle explains to the crowd, “I’ve stopped smoking weed,” and after a brief pause that gives the audience space to respond with a smattering of claps and cheers, he continues, “With black people... Every time I smoke weed with my black friends, all you talk about is your trials and tribulations... I’m smokin’ weed to run away from my problems, not to take on yours” (Chappelle, 2004). On its own, the language of this joke provides ample content for analysis, starting with his use of “you.” Whereas Gregory uses “you” to address his white audience members, Chappelle uses it to speak to his black audience members. After addressing his black audience, Chappelle explains that he smokes weed to get a reprieve from his own day to day issues, and that this escape is

compromised by hearing about similar experiences from his fellow black friends. By designating this experience to specifically his black friends, Chappelle implies that these “trials and tribulations” aired when smoking with his black friends are inherently racialized, a direct association with one’s blackness. He does not stop here, however, and continues his bit, saying, “From now on, I smoke weed exclusively with white people... All white people talk about is other times that they got high” (Chappelle, 2004). With this statement, Chappelle creates a clear dichotomy between an experience shared among his white friends and his black friends—while his black friends complain about their problems so often that it has become unbearable, none of the white people that he alludes to do so. Instead, they simply reminisce about the other times that they were drinking and smoking together, suggesting a far simpler, more enjoyable existence.

In this bit, Chappelle uses a similar strategy as Gregory despite the differing content; he makes a clear distinction between black and white worlds under the guise of a playful banter about his times smoking weed with his friends. Chappelle marks whiteness and its inherent privileges. The consistent storyline throughout the bit is that white people simply do not experience the same day to day problems as blacks, and Chappelle forces the audience to come to this collective understanding. This scenario provided by Chappelle is, of course, racial bias manifesting itself in a different form than in Gregory’s experience. Chappelle is not legally confined to the back of the bus, and he can be far more candid and uncensored on stage than Gregory in front of white audiences. However, Chappelle does still mark the fact that black Americans experience the world differently than their white counterparts. While he and his black friends can indulge in the same activity, they do not share the luxury of carelessness that their



white peers experience. Bringing this distinction to the forefront forces white audience members to confront their privilege, and implies a high level of complacency among those who choose to ignore their privilege.

Just as in Gregory's case, analyzing this joke using an affect-centered approach can help to underscore why an offhand joke about smoking weed with friends actually carries a heavy level of significance. After he asserts that he now exclusively smokes with white people, Chappelle pauses briefly. This pause allows the audience to interpret the joke, and gives space for the implications of what Chappelle has just said to be interpreted throughout the room. While it is of course impossible to know for certain the exact interpretation of the joke among all audience members, the effects of Chappelle's bit are amplified by the transmission of affect. The pause allows people in the crowd to digest the joke and interpret it as a collective, and to consider the implications of the claim that whites enjoy significantly more privilege than blacks in America, which gives white people the luxury of not constantly having to consider their racial or ethnic identity.

### **Mudbone and the Folk Tradition**

On many occasions, both Pryor and Chappelle construct characters rather than first-person narratives to make distinctions between whiteness and blackness. Pryor's most recognizable characters are all black— his beloved Mudbone, an old, endearing storyteller from Tupelo, Mississippi, and the often somber, serious embodiment of a town wino or junkie who has been completely relegated to the rock bottom of society. These are complex characters that create representations of black Americans profoundly influenced and affected by white power

structures in the United States. Though these characters embody many stereotypes historically used to deride black intelligence and self-worth (for example, Mudbone is slow talking and appears to be generally clueless, and the town junkie is always unemployed and of course addicted to drugs or alcohol), they should not be read as Pryor attempting to perpetuate these stereotypes to his audience. Rather, as Audrey Thomas McCluskey argues, “With his character-driven comedy, [Pryor] understood, like few before him, that black humor derived not from exotica, or burlesque minstrelsy created for white audiences, but from black people’s ways of knowing and being in the world” (McCluskey, 4). Mudbone falls in line with other traditional black folkloric characters who use their wit and storytelling ability to survive and endure life, while the town junkie signifies the consequences that arise from the ways in which black Americans have been systematically enslaved, raped, and belittled by American society throughout history.

Mudbone’s character derives from a long lineage of African American folklore centered on storytelling. Mudbone, often labelled as a “revolutionary trickster” (Coleman, 1984; McCluskey, 2008) can be read as a character who, while having the appearance of a dim-witted, easily fooled person, actually uses this perception to his advantage, capitalizing on his street smarts. Maxine A. LeGall traces the history of this character archetype, citing examples discussed by legendary authors Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and others. She explains that African American culture has long flourished, even under the watchful eyes of their oppressors, and that code switching and the creation of a distinct vernacular allowed people to practice taboo traditions in plain sight. This strategy has its roots in the era of slavery, and eventually these coded storytelling and vernacular customs, which feature characters who appear

defenseless on the outside but are actually quite cunning on the inside, seeped into the African American literary canon, and remain relevant today. This culminated into the character trope of the trickster, an often goofy, lighthearted character who symbolized endurance and wit (LeGall, 80, 81).

Reading Mudbone as a trickster in the folkloric tradition reveals a depth to his character that would be otherwise invisible. On the surface level, Mudbone is simply an old, tired black man who likes to reminisce about his youth. His stories, while often vulgar, are generally harmless, and suggest a level of naiveté. Mudbone travels to Hollywood to land the royal role of King Kong only to find out that he is trying out not for an actual king but a gorilla (Pryor, 1976); he laments an instance in which he urges a young boy to tie his shoe and is met with a shocking “fuck you!” from the boy in return (Pryor, 1983); and he recounts several humorous sexual escapades, some successful and some woefully cringeworthy. Mudbone is, at the most basic level, a storyteller, and has a loveable innocence that excites crowds every time Pryor changes his voice inflection and recites Mudbone’s famous opening line, “you know!”. Despite this lightheartedness, Mudbone’s ability to game the system and outwit his peers has drawn comparisons to traditional folktale characters such as Br’er Rabbit<sup>6</sup> (LeGall, 81) and Langston Hughes’s Jessie B. Semple (Cooper, 2007).<sup>7</sup> For example, as told in *Bicentennial Nigger*, when

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<sup>6</sup> LeGall, drawing on *The Book of Negro Folklore* by Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps (1958), explains that Br’er rabbit became a folk hero in the African American oral and literary traditions. Br’er rabbit appeared to be both frightened and helpless, but always found a way to survive. Br’er Rabbit’s most significant and empowering character trope was his ability to consistently “outwit bigger and stronger animals,” which served as a metaphor for the black experience during slavery and beyond (LeGall, 81).

<sup>7</sup> Arthur P. Davis analyzes Jessie B. Semple’s (“Simple” for short) character in his essay “Jesse B. Semple: Negro American” (1954). He describes Simple as intensely human and universally relatable, and argues that Hughes created a character that blacks could laugh at “without feeling ashamed” (Davis, 21). Davis additionally argues that readers would laugh with Simple rather

serving in World War I, Mudbone refuses to wear a gas mask out of a distrust for white folks, and then returns back to America clad with medals that he stole from a hospital, giving himself the appearance of honor and valor despite the fact that he spent the entire war chasing women (Pryor, 1976). Mudbone, with all of his laziness and general disregard for safety, ends up surviving the war and manages to construct a heroic and noble identity through his stolen medals. He uses his wit and good fortune to survive the war with little dedication and even fewer consequences, which reinforces his role within the trickster archetype.

Additionally, Mudbone's humorous, playful character contributes to the African American tradition of adding humor to stories and folktales in an effort to distract from the pain of sustained oppression. Turning again to LeGall,

Humor became a coping device against unrelenting oppression, helping them to blunt their pain with laughter. Humor, and the folk culture it reflected, helped black people sublimate their rage against their oppressors, and prevent their own self-destruction through 'cruel and dehumanizing situations... through it all— slavery, Jim Crow laws, to the hopeful years of the Civil Rights Movement and beyond— laughter remained a tool of regeneration, transformation, and re-creation. (LeGall, 80)

This quotation begins to explain the importance of humor and storytelling found in the African American folk tradition. By creating unique genres and vernaculars, African Americans utilized humor not only as a distraction from constant oppression, but also used it as an opportunity to gain agency over representations of blackness. Character-driven, humorous storytelling can affect one's consciousness differently than mediums such as political protest or a thesis driven

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than at him, which felt therapeutic and challenged commonly held notions surrounding "the race question" (Davis, 21).

argument. This type of storytelling is not necessarily politically or intellectually driven, but still allows for people to own an identity and forge its representation in a way that is liberatory to the storyteller.

Pryor contributes to this rich tradition through Mudbone's character, who reminds us to not take life too seriously and to find strength and power in humor. In Mudbone's final lesson featured in *Live From the Sunset Strip*, he dedicates an extensive monologue to offer a sort of meta-commentary to put life into perspective. Speaking through Mudbone in this special appears to be a cathartic experience for Pryor, once quoted as saying, "I am everyone I create" (McCluskey, 6), and who had just suffered a near-death experience following an explosion caused by freebasing cocaine. In this bit, Pryor says (in the character of Mudbone):

What I'm sayin'... What the point I'm tryin' to make is... that there is no point to be made. That's all that there is. There ain't no point to it. 'Cause you didn't ask to come to this motherfucker... and you sure can't choose how to leave. 'Cause you don't know when you're gonna go. So don't take this shit serious. You better have some fun and plenty of it. 'Cause when the shit old and you ask for a recharge, it's too late. So all I can say is keep some sunshine on your face. (Pryor, 1982)

Through Mudbone, Pryor reminds his audience to keep life's issues in perspective, and takes solace in his humor and optimism to cope with a lifetime of pain felt at the individual level (i.e. drug abuse and poor physical condition) and at the collective level (i.e. widely felt instances of racism). Pryor again turns towards folk tradition and transforms his personal experience into something that can be shared and learned from through the vehicle of Mudbone. Like Gregory before him and later Chappelle, Pryor does not necessarily set out to subvert stereotypes through

his comedy, but instead channels his own experiences and transforms them on stage, presenting them to an audience through the character of Mudbone.

In the case of the standup comedian, this form of storytelling elicits affective responses from entire audiences. Shouse's claim that passion in standup comedy is not conveyed solely through the comedian's words, and is expressed and amplified by "voice, rhythm, gestures, and expressions that resonate with an audience" (Shouse, 41) unlocks the potential influence of character-driven comedy. Mudbone's high-pitched southern drawl, his expressive body language, and his often contorted facial expressions all affect the audience and contribute to the intensity and the memorability of a performance despite the vast potential differences in white and black understandings of these jokes. The transmission of affect among audience members contributed to Mudbone's incredible popularity and an audience's immediate recognition of the character, which makes his stories and lessons especially potent and charged with meaning.

### **Chip and the White Voice: Creating Anti-Minstrel Characters by "Playing White"**

Chappelle's most common recurring character is his caricature of a white person (not always named the same, but always embodying similar traits), which is characterized by the use of his "white voice." An embodiment of this character can be found in *Killin' Them Softly* (2000) with Chappelle's depiction of his white friend Chip. Chip, from his name to his mannerisms, is generic, ambivalent, and non-threatening, and relies on ignorance—plays dumb—to get out of potentially dangerous situations. Chappelle uses different voice inflections from other characters in his stories, makes his movements more forced and awkward, and exaggerates his facial

expressions to distinguish Chip from other characters in his narratives. The character is singularly and generically white.

Snyder claims, “While [Chappelle] exploit[s] a comedic recognition among the Black and Brown segment of his interracial public, he also reflect[s] to White people a way in which they are perceived by (some) non-White people” (Snyder, 309). In other words, Chip’s character is an amalgamation of traits historically used to mimic whiteness by racial minorities in the United States, and the aspects of Chip’s character that make him funny are immediately recognizable by black audience members. Chappelle’s satirizing of whiteness through Chip draws on recognizable symbols to be represented in front of a black audience, and simultaneously forces white audience members to encounter aspects of their identity that lead to a more privileged experience. Black identity has been manipulated and perverted in performance by white Americans for centuries by way of blackface, minstrelsy, and vaudeville shows. Chappelle turns the script on its head and exposes the ways in which white Americans have historically exercised an immense amount of privilege by “playing white” on stage. In essence, Chip is constructed as a sort of anti-minstrel character. Through Chip, Chappelle provides a vehicle for whiteness to be displayed and subsequently interrogated.

Through Chip, Chappelle takes audience members on a trip revolving around multiple interactions between white people and various police officers. For example, Chappelle and Chip had again just smoked some weed, and were wandering around a city lost. Chip, brimming with confidence, decides to approach a cop to ask for directions, despite the fact that he is high. He says, “Excuse me” to no avail, and proceeds to physically shake the cop to gain his attention (which Chappelle mimics by rattling his microphone stand). Chappelle prefaces the interaction

by saying that Chip started confessing things that he should not confess, and then continues in Chip's voice, who says to the cop,

"I'm a little high. All I wanna know: which way is Third Street." The cop was like, "Hey! TAKE IT EASY... You're on Third Street. You better be careful. Go ahead. Move it. MOVE IT!" That's all that happened. That's the end of the story. Now I know that's not amazing to some of you, but you ask one of these black fellas, that shit is fucking incredible, isn't it? (Chappelle, 2000)

By playing Chip's character, Chappelle reveals the absurdity that he witnesses when seeing white people interact with authority. While this action is "not amazing" for white people, the address to "some of you"—to any black man in the room—suggests that this sort of interaction is nothing short of a miracle. In this bit, Chappelle implies that it is Chip's whiteness that allows him to appear unthreatening in front of this police officer— while Chip's calmness in the face of authority is commonplace for white people, Chappelle explains that a black man finding himself in a similar scenario would be nothing short of a miracle. The "black fellas" in the audience that Chappelle addresses sit in amazement because their story almost certainly would not end here, and Chappelle leaves space for audience members to imagine what conflict might happen instead. Here, Chip's whiteness no longer remains neutral or unimportant, but rather accounts for his privilege that leaves him without consequence.



## Chapter 2

### Spreading Cheeks: Exploring Vulnerability, Masculinity, and Abjection Through Police Joking

#### **Argument**

While Chapter One focuses on the strategies in which comedians broadly “mark whiteness,” this chapter will narrow my focus to more targeted jokes that specifically address the relationship between black Americans and the police. Jokes about distrusting the police, police brutality, and racial profiling have been constants in the work of these comedians, particularly that of Pryor and Chappelle. Drawing Mary Douglas’s call to view jokes as existing within the total social situation, I argue that the consistency of this content suggests that, despite years dedicated to “progress,” there is still a gross imbalance of power between state policing power and African American citizens. Like the jokes presented in Chapter One, these jokes do not necessarily “universally subvert” the structures that allow for racial inequality to be systematized in the form of state power. They do, however, present the police as an institution that constructs the stereotype of the criminal black man through a reproduction of fear. I rely on Sarah Ahmed’s theorization of “affective economies” to trace the ways in which fear, hate, and misrecognition have influenced the relationship between black Americans and the police.

These comedians draw attention to systemic problems that arise from the ways in which state power is expressed differently and unequally through relationships with black versus white subjects. This line of joking centers on a topical issue and forces audiences to, at the very least, confront the fact that blacks are more susceptible to police bias than their white counterparts. This is significant in two ways. First, these comedians reveal a distinct difference between the ways in which black Americans interact with the police versus white Americans, which is

effectively another instance in which these comedians mark whiteness. Second, the fact that Gregory, Pryor, and Chappelle all repeatedly reference fear felt when dealing with the police underscores the continuity of this issue that spans multiple decades. Both Pryor and Chappelle almost exclusively rely on first-person narrative strategies rather than character comedy in bits about the police, which underscores issues related to their own identities and also grants authority to their stories. Although stories may be exaggerated or imagined, this narrative style makes them inherently personal. Chappelle, in the early 2000s, would not be forming bits that are nearly identical to those of Gregory in the 1960s and Pryor in the 1970s if the present social conditions that allowed for a joke to be received had actually changed.

I further argue that these jokes raise broader issues of the vulnerability of the black body in the United States. It is significant that each of these three comedians identify as male, black Americans, and this identity is frequently mentioned in material specific to interactions with the police and with material related to feelings of general vulnerability. Just as these comedians use humor to “mark” some of the influences of white privilege and power, joking about the very real feeling of vulnerability felt when dealing with the police and other authorities centers this issue and makes it hyper-visible to an audience. Relationships with the police are just one manifestation of the physical and mental abuses that black Americans face on a daily basis as a direct result of their racial identity, and the humor of Gregory, Pryor, and Chappelle exposes this reality and tracks it with alarming consistency. Unlike the trends traced in the first chapter, in which racism has largely been de-codified in law and is now practiced more subtly through personal and structural manifestations of bias, police brutality and racial profiling still remain as

imminent threats to the black body. The institution of the police continues to be a vehicle for systemic violence against black Americans.

### **Marking the Issue: Distrust, Brutality, and Profiling**

As discussed in Chapter One, one of the key strategies that these comedians use to describe the relationship between black Americans and the police is to employ a targeted marking of whiteness, the process of making whiteness hyper-visible to an audience in an effort to expose unequal balances of power and privilege (Snyder, 2015). Often employed to reveal daily run-ins with bias and microaggressions, manifestations of racism that are smaller and harder to locate or describe, this strategy is also used in the more specific discussion of differing relationships with the police between white and black Americans.

For example, Pryor highlights a tangible divide black and white audience members' understandings of how police use physical force to subdue suspects, using his own impending fear of the police to show this difference. In his concert film, *Live in Concert* (1979), he describes a time in which he angrily wants to kill (destroy) his car in a drunken rage following a breakup with his wife in an effort to prevent her from driving off in his vehicle. While Pryor rationalizes and absolves himself of responsibility for this clearly violent destruction of property, the more important issue he cites is the potential response from the police. Pryor says,

Pryor: "And then the police came, I went in the house [to hide]. Because they got Magnums, too. And they don't kill cars, they kill nig-gars. Police got a choke hold they use out here, though, man, they choke niggers to death. I mean, you be dead when they through, right, did you know that?"

Audience: “Yeah.”

Pryor: “The nigger’s are going, yeah, we know. The whites are going, no, I had no idea. Yeah, two grab your legs, one grab your head, and snap. Oh, shit, he broke. Can you break a nigger, is it okay? Let’s check the manual. Yup, page 8, you can break a nigger, right there, see. Let’s drag him downtown, okay.” (Pryor, 1979)

He destroys private property, and frames it as literally “killing” his car, but explains that the police are far more destructive than he will ever be. Pryor fears that the police will respond by taking his life, and ties this feeling to his black identity when he says that police “don’t kill cars, they kill nig-gars.” White people are importantly left out of this potential threat to one’s life, which implicitly marks a privilege that makes life for whites inherently less dangerous than for African Americans. This example additionally targets the use of the chokehold to provide a focal point for these different levels of understanding of police violence. By singling his black audience members out as nodding along and explaining the confused looks on his white audience members’ faces, Pryor characterizes his crowd as a microcosm of the broader United States population. These white audience members would more likely be ignorant of the existence of this unnecessary use of physical force than black audience members—they, and their fellow white American counterparts, do not experience the same constant threat of being targeted based on their racial identity.

By addressing the volatile topic of police brutality in this bit, Pryor shows that the standup comedian can be viewed as a kind of cultural anthropologist, which again refers to Koziski’s positioning of the standup comedian as a “cynical insider” compared to the anthropologist’s role as a “sympathetic outsider” (Koziski, 63). Expanding on these labels,

Koziski writes, “[The standup comedian] exaggerates or distorts his observations as a participant observer talking to people in his own society about the familiar cultural rules and behavior patterns in *their* and *his* society” (Koziski, 61). Pryor does just as Koziski claims in this bit; he uses humor to relay an experience that he has had as an active participant in American society, which represent behavior patterns of the police and the broadly felt anxieties of African Americans. The actual transcript of the joke is grim and violent, and admittedly not very funny to read to oneself. Pryor’s delivery— his tone, his exaggeration of different syllables, his cadence— allows this bit to be perceived as a joke, while the content remains harshly real, and uses graphic detail to describe the relationship between African Americans and the police. While Koziski does not consider the racial implications in her use of “their” versus “his,” Pryor implicates the police in targeting black Americans disproportionately more than white Americans, in a sense constructing two distinct societies. In this example, marking differences in cultural practices between “their” society and “his” society can be read as Pryor not only distinguishing his own vulnerable position in the hands of the police from that of his audience, but also the vulnerability that all black Americans face when confronted by the police.

Pryor explains to his audience that cops “don’t kill cars, they kill nig-gars” twelve years before the senseless beating of Rodney King was caught on video in 1991 that later prompted LA riots a year later. This video was the first to capture an atrocity to this degree, and the ability to actually see a defenseless black man get beat within inches of his death set into motion a long overdue nationwide conversation on the realities of police brutality. Locating Pryor’s stand-up along this historical timeline helps strengthen the claim that his narratives have the power to uncover and critique social conditions in the United States. Although his first person narratives

often blur the line between truth and fiction, Pryor's ability to represent tangible cultural issues through storytelling and humor adds significant authority to the first person narratives he constructs in performance.

As seen through Pryor's standup two decades earlier, discussions of police brutality circulated within minority communities for years before the pivotal turning point of Rodney King beating in 1991. Nine years after video of this beating circulated around the country, Chappelle reveals the radically different understandings of police brutality that persisted between black and white communities. In *Killin' Them Softly*, Chappelle explores the ways in which police brutality has been perceived differently in black and white communities. Following a joke in which he "recounts" an officer telling him to "spread your cheeks and lift your sack" after a traffic stop, Chappelle says,

That's that whole brutality thing. See, that's common knowledge then. See there was a time when only minorities really knew about that. I'm not gonna say white people didn't believe us, but you were a little skeptical. You were a little skeptical. I mean, I don't blame you. And then "Newsweek" printed it, and you knew it was true. In the "Newsweek," White people are like: (Said in his White Voice) 'Oh my God. Honey, did you see this? Apparently, the police have been beating up Negroes like hotcakes. It's in the main issue.'" (Chappelle, 2000)

In this bit, he exposes the willful ignorance of white people regarding the issue of police brutality, and through this joke claims that whites would not even entertain the idea that racially-driven police brutality exists until a more "trusted" publication wrote about it. Even though brutality was common knowledge in non-white communities in the United States,

Chappelle implies that those conversations were either silenced or disregarded by white Americans. For example, Chappelle playfully delivers the line, “You were a little skeptical,” which even solicits a laugh from the audience. His focus, however, is quite serious. This joke reveals that black Americans not only face disproportionate brutalization at the hands of the police, but that they also feel continually discredited by their white counterparts when trying to voice this issue. While this joke may not have a transformative effect on an audience’s perception of racial profiling and targeting by the police, it does give Chappelle a platform to vocalize his experience. Just like Gregory before him, Chappelle uses humor as a guise to broach hotly contested topics and then insert his own form of critique.

Chappelle also centers the felt incongruities associated with the police by incorporating his audience into bits that mark whiteness. In *Killin’ Them Softly*, Chappelle says,

See, Black people are very afraid of the police. That is a big part of our culture. Don't matter how rich you are, how old you are... We're just afraid of 'em. We got—we got every reason to be afraid of 'em. You know what I mean? You, a White lady. You ever been pulled over before? You know, and what do they (the cops) say?

[Speaking directly to woman in the audience] “Let me see your driver's license and your registration,” right?

See? See, I'm just guessing. That's not what they say to us. You wouldn't believe what they say to us, either. (Chappelle, 2000)

In this section, Chappelle uses the first person plural (“we” and “us”) to explain his experience with getting pulled over by the police, which signifies an effort to describe a feeling shared among all black Americans. He amplifies the racial and gendered implications of his statement

by singling out a white woman in the crowd as a juxtaposition of his own experience as a black man. By doing so, Chappelle not only gets across his first message of the bit, which is that black people generally fear the police, but also marks the radically different treatment that white people get when interacting with cops. His use of “us” at the end of the bit additionally extends this issue to his broader racial community, implying that this issue is not specific to Chappelle but rather one that is commonly felt throughout communities of color. In addition to the woman he singles out, he exposes all white audience members in the audience to the idea that cordiality from police extends only to one race.

Tracing the discussion of police violence against blacks from Pryor to Chappelle reveals a continuity between both the actual issue and how comedians represent it on stage. At a rather obvious level, the way in which Chappelle talks about police brutality reinforces that it is still a present issue plaguing American society. Black Americans are still targets of the police, and the silencing of minority voices continues to this day, and Chappelle’s standup reflects a similar society as Pryor’s. The stories that Pryor and Chappelle tell in the first person are not necessarily factual, but their delivery gives off the appearance of truth and are reflections of each comedian’s unique experience and viewpoint. Framing stories this way allows the performer to claim agency over the material that he presents regardless of its truth, and creates an interactive and, to use Brodie’s language, intimate relationship with an audience.

Brodie concludes his piece by further discussing the relationship between performer and audience. He argues that while the performer still has the greatest agency to create and present content, the nature of the standup genre places much power into the hands of the audience and how it responds. He continues, saying that this is why a transcription of standup is often “elusive



and odd” (Brodie, 176). In other words, the textual elements of standup can only be fully understood within the context of the totality of a performance, which charges jokes with more meaning, depth, and intensity. Without actually naming it, Brodie here describes the significance of the transmission of affect among an audience. Of course police don’t refer to a manual to see if you can “break a nigger,” and odds are that Chappelle has never had to “spread his cheeks and lift his sack” as a form of identification. However, because of the nature of the performative mode of standup comedy, the use of the first person, different tones, pauses, and voice inflections, and the comedians’ physical bodies all affect the audience, who then interpret a joke or a bit. The content of these jokes reveals a rather steady continuity historically, and perhaps just as significantly the performance and delivery of jokes about the police have also remained constant, which signifies more broadly the vulnerability that the black male body continues to face.

### **Vulnerability, Abjection, and Masculinity**

By turning to affect theory, I will trace the broader cultural implications of jokes about the police. While the bits provided by Pryor and Chappelle remain quite focused on the actual issues of police brutality and racial profiling, and mark the radically different treatment felt between blacks and whites, they can also be used to consider the ways in which the black male body has been made to feel both vulnerable and abject in American society. This discussion will consider the ways in which black masculinities are regulated and policed, and trace how the institution of the police has actively participated in constructing blackness as abject in the United States.

In his album titled *That Nigger's Crazy* (1975), Pryor provides his most targeted critique of the police in a bit that he titles "Niggers vs. The Police." The title alone elicits images of conflict and disagreement; he heightens the racial tension felt between the two groups through the use of a dehumanizing racial slur, and literally frames these two groups as opponents through his use of "versus." Like the bit previously referenced from *Live In Concert*, "Niggers vs. The Police" marks whiteness, but does so in a way that is dark and almost sinister, and points to the physical vulnerability of the black body. Pryor says,

"See, white folks get a ticket, they pull over: (said in his own variation of the white voice) 'Hey officer... Yes, glad to be of help, here you go!' Nigger got to be talking about: 'I-am-reaching-into-my-pocket-for-my-license... 'Cause I don't want to be no motherfucking accident!'" (Pryor, 1975)

A basic analysis of this joke shows that Pryor here is discussing his vulnerability when getting pulled over by the police. The "joke" here is that white people can freely dig around their car to find a driver's license, whereas black people have to be methodical and slow in their movements, which Pryor mirrors by slowing down the cadence of his delivery. The "punchline" is that a black person's failure to adapt to these standards could result in death; an officer could mistake a rapid movement as threatening and turn a minor traffic stop into, as Pryor says, a "motherfucking accident." With this, Pryor describes the possibility that a police officer may misrecognize the action of a black American reaching for a license as reaching for a weapon, and foregrounds the potentially deadly consequences.

The relationship that Pryor describes can be better understood using Sara Ahmed's model of "affective economies," particularly her discussion of the circulation of hate and the

misrecognition of bodies and signs. In her essay titled “Affective Economies” (2004), Ahmed develops affect theory to trouble the idea that emotions are private, individual entities, and then expands on this claim by analyzing relationships of hate and fear. In this piece, she quotes a section of Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* at length, in which Fanon describes a young white boy seeing him shiver on a cold winter day. The white boy becomes fearful of Fanon, and finds protection in his mother’s arms after mistaking Fanon’s act of shivering as him “quivering with rage” (Ahmed, 126). Using this encounter as a reference, Ahmed claims, “Fear does not bring the bodies together: it is not a shared feeling, but works to differentiate between white and black bodies,” which is facilitated by past histories of racism “sticking” to the present (Ahmed, 126). Likewise, Pryor suggests that the relationship between black Americans and the police is one built on fear and misrecognition. The officer’s fear of the black other, a fear constructed through long histories of racism, results in the transformation of the black subject, the one who is truly vulnerable, into a perceived threat. In the scenario put forth in “Niggers vs. The Police,” just as in Fanon’s story, “the object of fear remains the black man, who comes to feel the fear as his own, as threatening his existence” (Ahmed, 126).

It is significant that in Ahmed’s understanding, fear in the relationship between black Americans and the police is not confined to one individual or body, but rather is reproduced by a collective. Turning again to Ahmed, “In contrast, my account of hate as an affective economy shows that emotions do not positively inhabit any-body as well as any-thing, meaning that ‘the subject’ is simply one nodal point in the economy, rather than its origin and destination” (Ahmed, 121). Applying this theory to Pryor’s bit, Pryor’s individual body or behavior is not the cause of a police officer’s fear. The misrecognition of reaching for a form of I.D. is not only or

primarily a result of a fear of Pryor, but of the historical demonizing of blackness by constructing it as an “other;” something that is threatening and opposed to whiteness. The histories that have culminated in creating the conditions for a misrecognition of fatal proportions are not confined to a singular body, but rather are stuck to culturally constructed images of blackness.

Ultimately, Pryor frames the affectively constructed relationship between blacks and the police, and the physical and psychological vulnerability that blacks face as a result, as abjection. In his book *Stand-Up Comedy in Theory, or Abjection in America*, John Limon offers a two-part definition of abjection. First, it is simply “abasement,” the embodiment of humiliation or degradation. Second, in relation to the work of Julia Kristeva, abjection is “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” (Limon, 4). In other words, abjection is not just a feeling of humiliation that stems from an isolated incident, but rather a constant psychological stress that stems from the body. Limon also uses Pryor as a case study in his work, and, referencing a bit in which Pryor reenacts a heart attack and collapses to the floor appearing to writhe in pain, writes, “Pryor’s refusal of the usual standup posture—the standing up of abjection— is the result, I think, of his self-identification in an abjected race. He is not the sufferer of abjection, he *is* the abjection, the body that is repudiated yet keeps returning” (Limon, 5). This argument holds when Pryor uses the first person narrative to describe a broader idea, theme, or experience. To cite a previous example, Pryor explains his fear of the police when he went crazy and destroyed his car. Anxieties about the police are widely felt among black Americans, but Pryor singles himself out, and uses his own body to communicate this feeling. In “Niggers vs. The Police,” however, Pryor does not rely on his own individual body to convey a

feeling of abjection, but rather conveys that blackness, regardless of the individual, is abject in American society. Black bodies have been repressed through language (use of the n-word) and physical force exercised by state authority (police brutality), which culminates in the constant “psychic worrying” about the inalienable aspect of oneself that Limon alludes to.

Unlike the previous example in which Pryor uses the first person to describe his vulnerability, Pryor explicitly includes any black body in this fear of becoming a “motherfucking accident.” He does not say “I got to be talking about,” but rather says “Nigger got to be talking about,” and continues the bit from there. This shift is significant for two reasons. First, it clearly signals to the audience that the need to be cautious around police officers is born from one’s blackness rather than from one’s individual character. Second, Pryor’s use of the N-word is loaded with implications. In *Live on The Sunset Strip*, a special filmed seven years later, Pryor denounces his past use of the N-word, and publically explains his belief that he had been perpetuating, keeping alive, a word used to describe his own “wretchedness,” and that using it in any context works to dehumanize blacks (Pryor, 1982). This is, of course, not the only interpretation of the use of the n-word; many have used their positionality to reappropriate the word into their own vocabulary to strip it of its power. However, in *Live on The Sunset Strip*, Pryor states his belief that his own use of the word had indeed perpetuated some of the negativity associated with the n-word, and afterward he used it far less frequently in his acts, removing it almost entirely from his routines. While this transformation had not yet taken place when Pryor delivered “Niggers vs. The Police,” the word’s power remains. He does not say “I got to be talking about,” but instead casts the subject of the bit as the n-word. I argue that Pryor’s use of the n-word here works to describe a police officer’s conception of African Americans as less

than human, a mentality that makes irrational violence easier to commit and justify. This bit about police “accidents” therefore should not be read as a response to an isolated incident, but rather as a way to understand the continual devaluation of black lives and their vulnerability when in the hands of the police.

While the joke itself can elicit different responses in the audience, the affective relationship between Pryor’s body and the bodies in the audience lessens the importance of the actual content of the joke and redirects attention to its complex sociality. For example, the two peaks of laughter of this entire bit come immediately after Pryor says “I-am-reaching-into-my-pocket-for-my-license” and “Cause I don’t want to be no motherfucking accident!” One audience member can hear this joke and think that Pryor is spot on in his recounting of interactions with the police, while another could hear this joke and be totally offended and think to themselves that Pryor’s joke is totally ungrounded, but this is not necessarily important. The fact that two of the darkest, most cynical parts of this bit created the most laughter suggests at least some level of agreement felt between audience and performer. As Eric Shouse claims, “In terms of context, affect describes the energy within a space and the way a performer either taps into that energy and heightens it, or fails to do so” (Shouse, 41). In this example, Pryor masterfully taps into this potential energy among the crowd, and doing so allows him to fill the room with laughter and applause while putting his own vulnerability and that of his fellow black Americans on display.

Two decades later, Chappelle also points to both issues of misrecognition and feelings of abjection in his standup, although does so in a way that involves less explicit and graphic material than Pryor. For example, in his HBO Comedy Half-Hour special, Chappelle narrates an

account of extreme racial profiling to his audience. He talks about entering a police station hoping to bail out a friend, and is met with the response from a police official character, “Okay. And while you’re here, you do fit a description” (Chappelle, 1998). After hearing this, Chappelle, speaking as himself, says, “That’s how they always get us” (Chappelle, 1998). While he does not use the overt signifiers of opposition that Pryor uses in “Niggers vs. The Police,” the use of “they” sets up a conflict for the rest of the bit. Rather than fulfilling their supposed role of protection, the authorities at this fictional police station are framed by Chappelle a type of enemy, a force that is inherently constructed to be in opposition to Chappelle and his fellow African American citizens.

Chappelle continues this bit about racial profiling, and jokingly blames sketch artists as the cause for the unwarranted accusations implied by the police officer he is talking to. He says,

Now I could be bitter and blame all the police, but no! I’ll tell you who I blame... It’s those fuckin’ sketch artists. They keep drawing the same brother over and over again.

Who is this generic man we all look like? (Chappelle, 1998)

Here, Chappelle uses the “generic man” continually reproduced by these “sketch artists” as a metaphor for all forms of racial profiling. Here, the black man has been wholly stripped of individuality, reduced solely to the color of his skin. The “generic man” who can be drawn from memory, or better yet traced from a stencil, represents an identity that is systematically discriminated against and policed by state power. In this sense, individual physical appearance does not actually matter— it is one’s blackness that has the power to implicate someone in a crime, to automatically make someone a suspect. This bit points to the notion that the black body is simultaneously hyper-visible and invisible in American society. In this instance, the term

“hyper-visibility” is used differently than in the previous chapter, which explored the strategy of marking whiteness to render often overlooked examples of privilege and power “hyper-visible.” Chappelle here does not make whiteness hyper-visible, but rather explores the concept of the hyper-visibility of black men. Though more frequently associated with black feminist studies<sup>8</sup>, Chappelle addresses the notion that the black body is hyper-visible, always monitored and on display, but is paradoxically rendered invisible at the same time, as lacking individuality, personality, and, in this case, any distinct physical qualities.

After discussing his issues with these sketch artists, he describes a fictional interview between a witness of an attempted robbery and a sketch artist. The “interview” begins fairly innocently, with the witness describing the suspect’s height and his clothing. However, when the witness says that the suspect is black, the sketch artist takes over the conversation and needs no more information to outline this suspect. Starting with the witness speaking, the bit reads,

[Witness]: “He was black.”

[Sketch Artist]: “Okay, big lips, big nose, dick hanging out, say no more sir. I’ll draw him from memory. Let me get my stencil, I think we can trace this guy and save some time.

[Chappelle]: “They get on the radio and shit: ‘Calling all cars, calling all cars. Be on the lookout for a black male between 4’7 and 6’8, between 120 and 380 pounds. He’s wearing Nikes. Get this man!’”

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<sup>8</sup> Rasul Mowatt, Bryana French, and Dominique Malebranche investigate the paradox of the hyper-visibility and invisibility of the black female body in their essay, “Black/Female/Body Hypervisibility and Invisibility: A Black Feminist Augmentation of Feminist Leisure Research” (2013). In this work, they trace histories that have rendered the black female body “hyper-visible,” which manifests in highly sexualized representations of black women and negative stereotypes (the Jezebel, the “Mammy,” the angry black woman, and the matriarch) (Mowatt et al., 2013). In other words, actions are highly visible and highly scrutinized, and representations of the black female identity are constructed through stereotype.



With these statements, Chappelle illustrates how a certain stereotype has transcended the individual, and is unable to be contained in singular bodies. Blackness has been so obviously perverted by the police that individual identities are no longer relevant. The fear of and discrimination against the black body is thus collectively practiced, informed by histories of misrepresentation and misrecognition, and cannot be confined to a singular event or individual.

These bits also provide an explanation of how blackness has been culturally constructed as abject, as something alienable from actual bodies, in the United States. In this example, the presumably white sketch artist needs nothing other than two signifying descriptions to construct an entire identity: black male. The Nike-wearing, dick dragging, criminal black male has become so ingrained as a stereotype that every black man, whether he be 4'7 or 6'8, 120 pounds or 380 pounds, is vulnerable to being painted this way. While these stereotypes have no basis in truth, they nevertheless exist, and produce an affective response in people similar to that described by Fanon. Stereotypes and profiling are not confined to singular bodies, but rather attach to every black body, which, as Ahmed says, allows fear and hate to circulate and slide among various subjects. With this understanding, it is clear that racist acts are not isolated incidents, but are manifestations of histories of culturally constructed stereotypes and biases that, as Ahmed would say, “stick” to certain identities: this is the the transmission of affect.

It is significant to note that Chappelle's interactions with the police at the affective level have not remained static, as seen in some of his more recent comedy. He certainly still critiques the police and the ways in which they mistreat minorities in the United States, but his own interactions at the personal level have evolved. In other words, he no longer experiences abjection in the same way that he did when performing his 1998 special. In his 2017 Netflix

special *Age of Spin*, Chappelle describes a night in which a friend saw him leaving a club in Los Angeles, again relying on the first person narrative. The friend urges Chappelle not to drive, and offers to drive Chappelle's car instead. All is going well on their drive home until they see a cop pull up behind them, lights flashing, telling them to pull over. As they pull over to the side of the road, Chappelle says,

Now, I should tell you, the friend that was driving me was black, which really doesn't have anything to do with the story other than to let you know there was fear in the car. Not my fear. I'm black, but I'm also Dave Chappelle. So, I figured, you know, shit will probably be fine. Traffic stop started off on the right foot. The cops came up to the driver's side. "Hi. How are you guys doing tonight?" And he recognized me immediately. "Oh. Dave Chappelle." And I looked at my friend like, "We're getting out of this shit."

(Chappelle, 2017)

In this scenario, Chappelle is immune from the affect of fear because of his fame. He is confident that his status as a celebrity will nullify the risk of a violent misrecognition by the police, which, as he explains, it does. His friend, however, clearly does not share the same status as Chappelle, and his fear is palpable within the car. In this instance, fear is recognizable, and circulates throughout the environment within the car, but is internalized differently between each individual despite sharing similar black, male identities.

Continuing with this story of the L.A. traffic stop, Chappelle explains that he turned the traffic stop into a game of sorts. Chappelle's friend failed to comply with the police officer's request to take a breathalyzer test, and ended up getting apprehended, so Chappelle, still

intoxicated, was left with his own car and no one to drive him home. After explaining to the cop that he wanted to drive home rather than call a cab, Chappelle says,

And then suddenly, the shit turned into Vegas. He was like... "I'll let you blow for it." I said, "Excuse me?" He said, "If you blow in my breathalyzer—" I said, "Oh, nigga, I thought you was trying to get your dick sucked. What's the— Whew! Whew!" "If you blow in my breathalyzer and pass, I'll give you the keys to the car." I said, "Uh... set 'em up, nigga. Let's play." And I blew in that thing. And it made a noise. "Beep!" I said, "Uh-oh." And he looked at it. He said, "Oh, well, Mr. Chappelle, I guess you're free to go." I said, "I am?" I didn't know that thing didn't pick up weed. I drove home on the 10 going 30 miles an hour. (Chappelle, 2017)

In this scenario, the traffic stop goes miraculously well, with Chappelle claiming that the cop even even allowed him drive away illegally. Unlike his friend, Chappelle shows no signs of fear in this bit, and bargains his way out of the inconvenience of calling a cab and getting his car impounded. While this is a story representing an individualized case, it nevertheless reflects a change in Chappelle's own personal interactions with the police. He no longer gets interrogated for "matching a description," but now feels able to interact with the police without the fear of becoming a victim of racial profiling or police brutality. Chappelle can now distinguish himself from the generic black man stencil used to unfairly criminalize blackness, and be seen as an individual in the eyes of an authority. This is, of course, a low bar to set, but still represents a change in the way that fear is circulated between Chappelle's body and those of the police. This also represents a radical departure from Pryor's interactions with the police, who shared a similar level of stardom with Chappelle, and was, if anything, more famous. In Pryor's scenario, fame

could not be used as a shield from the realities of police brutality, and his blackness presented itself as more recognizable than his individual stardom.

Despite this fame, Chappelle still very clearly understands his own positionality due to his stardom, and while he performs this bit regarding his own security in this traffic stop, makes a point to acknowledge the uniqueness of this scenario. While the bit is lighthearted and Chappelle's interactions with the policeman that pulled him over are almost playful, the bit is titled "Fear in The Car" on the album version of *Age of Spin*. With this decision, Chappelle chooses to center the fear that his friend feels as a result of this interaction rather than his own comfort. Chappelle, because of his stardom, is able to experience some level of comfort when dealing with the police, but this privilege does not extend to all black Americans, and the black body is still susceptible to fatal misrecognition. Chappelle also acknowledges this by referencing a specific example of police brutality that had happened in Los Angeles just three years prior. After describing how he drove home after the stop, he pauses for a moment, and says to the crowd, "It all worked out. I'm one of the lucky ones," and proceeds to recount an incident of a black woman getting beaten up by a cop. He explains that the incident was so bad that the woman did not even need to go to court to earn a \$1.5 million settlement (Chappelle, 2017). By including this story, Chappelle broadens the vulnerability of the black body as extending beyond just black males. The video he cites shows the elderly woman victim as totally defenseless, a complete physical violation of her body. Her defenselessness implies that the emotion circulated in this scenario was not fear, but hate, a hatred harbored by the policeman that resulted in the transformation of the woman's black body as an object of vulnerability, which in turn, as Ahmed says, threatens her existence. Even though Chappelle's fame affords him some privilege—a

greater level of security and comfort around the police—the possibility of mortal violence encountered with Pryor in 1975 still persists.

## Conclusion

“To be rendered powerless does not destroy your humanity. Your resilience is your humanity.”  
-Hannah Gadsby

### Summary

Standup comedians have a profound ability to mark and critique racial issues in front of an audience. To return to my introductory argument, racial humor in standup comedy gives comedians an opportunity to explore aspects of society that remain otherwise hidden or too taboo to discuss (act as an anthropologist), to force audience members to confront their own positionality within current social and political hierarchies (mark whiteness), and to represent one's own identity through performance. For Gregory, Pryor, and Chappelle, this manifests most clearly through the ways all three critique racial power dynamics by marking whiteness and the privileges that it affords people, and the ways that Pryor and Chappelle explore feelings of vulnerability and abjection that stem from inhabiting black male bodies.

Analyzing these jokes across time periods reveals both changes and continuities regarding racism in American culture. Pryor does not joke about codified segregation laws and his fear of lynchings like Gregory, but he does joke about his fear of getting killed by the police. Decades later, Chappelle does not rely on the folkloric tradition to disguise his critique of white Americans or relay the same fear of becoming a “motherfucking accident” at a traffic stop like Pryor. He does, however, still construct characters that invert histories of whites misrepresenting black identities to point to current racial paradoxes, and tells audiences that regardless of fame or social standing, traffic stops still produce “fear in the car.” American race relations have

certainly evolved since Gregory took the stage in the 1950s, but stereotypes rooted in fear and hate remain effectively “stuck” to the black male body in the present.

### **Humor, Trauma, and Memory**

In “Black Study, Black Struggle” (2016), Robin Kelley writes, “Trauma is real; it is no joke... But reading black experience through trauma can easily slip into thinking of ourselves as victims and objects rather than agents, subjected to centuries of gratuitous violence that have structured and overdetermined our very being” (Kelley). While much of this paper focuses on abjection and vulnerability, it is crucial to understand that the jokes encountered in this study do more than simply recount trauma. I argue that these three comedians have located areas of mistreatment and misrepresentation, and relayed these experiences in a way that allows for critique and mediation on race-based violence (both physical and psychological). By taking the stage and crafting narratives that out the very powers that have contributed to histories of violence, stereotyping, and repression, Gregory, Pryor, and Chappelle claim their narratives as their own, acting as agents over their own experiences.

Hannah Gadsby provides an alternative interpretation on the relationship between humor and trauma in her Netflix special, *Nanette*. In a closing monologue, she says, “And what I had done, with that comedy show about coming out, was I froze an incredibly formative experience at its trauma point and I sealed it off into jokes. And that story became a routine, and through repetition, that joke version fused with my actual memory of what happened” (Gadsby). Although Gadsby, a white woman, discusses jokes surrounding her coming out rather than her race, this selection of her performance is relevant to any sort of joking about one’s own personal

identity. Identity based violence, whether it be physical or emotional, can of course have disastrous psychological ramifications, and for Gadsby, joking about her experience rather than confronting it head on truncated her ability to grow and accept her own identity. Continually re-representing her experience through humor distorted her memory to the point in which her jokes became her reality, and joking reduced her past traumas to nothing more than a setup for a punchline.

Much of Gadsby's critique of the standup comedy show rests on the impact that self-deprecating humor can have on her memory. For Gadsby, relying on jokes about her identity results in a distortion of memory and an inability to process trauma. I argue, however, that Gregory, Pryor, and Chappelle do not suspend their experiences at various trauma points when presenting racial humor in their acts, but rather transform them on stage in an effort to claim those experiences as their own.

A final example can be found in Pryor's conclusion of his 1976 special titled *Bicentennial Nigger*, which addresses the most horrifying process in American history: the slave trade. In this track, Pryor focuses on the relationship between memory and pain. The timing of this special is extremely important; as the title and date suggest, Pryor released this album in the midst of a year long celebration of America's bicentennial. As the country swelled with patriotic fervor, Pryor grounds listeners in his own memory of the past, and forces his audience to consider what a celebration of American history means to a black American versus a white American. In this bit, Pryor again plays a character, this time embodying the "Bicentennial Nigger," a minstrel character that he envisions white people bring out to talk about all the good times had in America. Speaking in character, he says:



I'm just so thrilled to be here, over here in America. So glad y'all took me out of Dahomey. I used to could live to be a hundred and fifty, now I die of high blood pressure by the time I'm fifty-two, and that thrills me to death. I'm just so pleased that America is gonna last. They brought me over here in a boat. It was four hundred of us come over here. Three hundred and sixty of us died on the way over here. I love that. That just thrills me so. I don't know, you white folks are so good to us. Got over here, another twenty of us died from disease. But you didn't have no doctors to take care of us. I am so sorry you didn't. Upset you all some, too, didn't it? Then they split us all up. Yesirree. Took my mama over that-a-way, my wife that way, took my kids over yonder. I am just so happy. I don't know what to do, I don't know what to do if I don't get two hundred more years of this. Lawd a mercy. Yesirree. I don't know where my old mama is now. She up yonder in that big white folks in the sky. Y'all probably done forgot about it, but I ain't gonna never forget. (Pryor, 1976)

Pryor makes those caught up in celebration consider the raw, unromanticized version of history that he will never forget. "Battle Hymn for the Republic," a a cheery, patriotic tune composed during the Civil War, plays in the background, and the "Bicentennial Nigger" stains this song with imagery of slave ships, family separation, and death. The song completely cuts out when Pryor says, "But I ain't gonna never forget," suggesting that not even the spirited patriotism of the bicentennial can distract from this violent history. Pryor forces his white audience members (he addresses the whites listening directly when he says, "you white folks have been so good to us) to encounter the painful history that Pryor reckons with everyday.

This can be read as yet another example of marking whiteness: white Americans do not have to reckon with histories of trauma brought upon by slavery and can fondly look to a romanticized past. As Snyder argues, “Public memory largely reflects the record embraced by the dominant group in society; hence, in the United States, public memory largely is a reflection of the White narrative” (Snyder, 305). Pryor challenges those who write and remember whitewashed versions of American history, and forces his own narrative into the collective memory of the past. This not only confronts the harrowing realities of slavery, but also those who exist in the present and choose to ignore that history. This is important because, as Snyder suggests, “Individuals need to see that they (again, by virtue of being White) are an integral part of what is a historical *and* contemporary problem” (Snyder, 305). The “Bicentennial Nigger” shows that the battle for memory and recognition rages on in the present, and de-centers narratives constructed by whites who default on their privilege and silence histories of black oppression.

Through the “Bicentennial Nigger,” Pryor not only uses the past to mark whiteness, but also understand his own heritage as rooted in resistance. Audrey McCluskey asserts, “In this highly satirical piece, the blues self does not surrender the painful memory, but rather forges it into his consciousness and identity. This character is drawn from the African American folkloric tradition of the ‘revolutionary trickster’ who manages to survive overwhelming circumstances through his wit and guile” (McCluskey, 3). This interpretation adds to Kelley’s triangulation of violence, trauma, and resistance in African American heritage. Continuing in “Black Study, Black Struggle,” Kelley writes, “To identify anti-black violence as heritage may be true in a general sense, but it obscures the dialect that produced and reproduced the violence of a regime

dependent on black life for its profitability. It was, after all, the resisting black body that needed ‘correction’” (Kelley). Jokes that imply vulnerability and feelings of abjection should not, therefore, simply be read as these comedians confining their experiences to a retelling of trauma. Yes, the jokes encountered construct a narrative that black bodies have been constructed as “other” by white power structures in the United States and made to feel vulnerable by institutions that uphold these powers. But the vulnerable body, the abject body, is simultaneously the resisting body, one that has, through “memory, tradition, and witness” (Kelley), continually overcome the forces so determined to oppress it. The black radical tradition, with its roots in art, literature, poetry, and scholarship, has long found ways to transcend restrictions imposed by white powers designed to keep bodies and thoughts in check. Jokes, while they do not necessarily “subvert” expectations or stereotypes, can tap into this presentation of the world, live beyond the domain of the rational, and forge “new consciousness and identity.” Gregory, Pryor, and Chappelle only add to this tradition.

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