

LAUGHING AT AMERICAN DEMOCRACY: CITIZENSHIP AND THE RHETORIC OF  
STAND-UP SATIRE

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## ABSTRACT

Michael L. Butterworth and Ellen Gorsevski, Co-Advisors

With the increasing popularity of satirical television programs such as *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and *The Colbert Report*, it is evident that satirical rhetoric has unique and significant influence on contemporary American culture. The appeal of satirical rhetoric, however, is not new to the American experience, but its preferred rhetorical form has changed over time. In this dissertation, I turn to the development of stand-up comedy in America as an example of an historical iteration of popular satire in order to better understand how the rhetoric of satire manifests in American culture and how such a rhetoric can affect the democratic nature of that culture. The contemporary form of stand-up comedy is, historically speaking, a relatively new phenomenon. Emerging from the post-war context of the late 1950s, the form established itself as an enduring force in American culture in part because it married the public's desire for entertaining oratory and political satire. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, a generation of stand-up comedians including Mort Sahl, Lenny Bruce, and Dick Gregory laid the foundation for contemporary stand-up comedy by satirizing politics, racism, and social taboos. The of generation of performers that followed in their wake, notably Richard Pryor and George Carlin, would further refine the form and reinforce the significance of its capacity to provide an outlet for satirical rhetoric. Drawing on examples from their satirical stand-up, I argue that the rhetorical nature of the form and its ability to serve as a vehicle for political satire provides what Kenneth Burke would call "equipment" for citizenship in a democratic society. Organized as a generic exploration of satirical stand-up comedy and an historical treatment of satirical rhetoric in American culture, this project demonstrates how satire and stand-up comedy offer alternative avenues of political expression and equipment for democratic citizenship.

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents for teaching me not to take myself too seriously,  
to my wife for not letting me,  
and to Hope because she is.

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## INTRODUCTION. RHETORIC, SATIRE, AND RADICAL DEMOCRACY

In our contemporary moment, Jon Stewart is the most trusted journalist in America.<sup>1</sup> *Jon Stewart* is the *most trusted journalist* in America. This should strike you as odd. Not because Jon Stewart is somehow nefarious or dangerous—though he may be considered dangerous to some—but because he is not a journalist. He is, or at least he was, a stand-up comedian. His career began at open mic nights in nightclubs where he, like so many others, delivered one-liners and bad jokes in hopes of “making it” one day. After a brief, failed stint as a talk show host, Stewart found a modicum of success as a Hollywood side-kick in *Big Daddy* and *Half-Baked*, but his starring role came on the small screen in 1999. That year, Jon Stewart took over for Craig Kilbourn behind the anchor’s desk of *The Daily Show*. From that moment forward, America and the American news media have never been the same. After all, we trust a single wayward comedian more than the army of professional journalists and broadcasters that we have raised for the expressed purpose of keeping us up-to-date on the events of our day.

More than just a televised court jester, Stewart’s comedy on *The Daily Show* has had significant impact on our contemporary political culture. Aside from his collection of Emmy and Peabody awards, he has interviewed past and sitting presidents, had candidates announce campaigns on set, held a march in Washington D.C., and effectively lobbied for actual legislation to aid the 9/11 first responders. While Stewart’s comedy, a blend of media criticism and sharp political satire, holds a place of prominence in our contemporary culture it is not unique to the American experience. During the Dwight Eisenhower administration, Mort Sahl made his living skewering politicians—notably President Eisenhower and Senator Joseph McCarthy—with the assistance of whatever daily broadsheet he found close at hand. What is more, Sahl’s emphasis

on topical satire drawn from the news of the day inevitably included, like Stewart, some critique of the press.

For example, on one of his early recordings, *At Sunset*, Sahl offers a lengthy narrative about a San Francisco daily's sensationalist journalism leading to higher subscriptions and copycat sensationalists—including an exposé about school crossing guards in a weekly ad sheet.<sup>2</sup> These observations about the way the press went about its business and his political commentary made his comedy, which his contemporary Shelly Berman claimed was “written by William Randolph Hearst” rather than Sahl himself, a de facto “alternative press” for post-war America.<sup>3</sup> Nearly one half of a century before Stewart became a “fake news” anchor, Mort Sahl was doing Stewart's “most trusted” shtick between sets for the Dave Brubeck Quartet.

What is important here is not that Stewart owes his success to Sahl, because Sahl owes his success to Will Rogers, Bob Hope, Mark Twain, and the long tradition of American satire that preceded his own commentary. Instead, what we should see in these two comedians is an example of the vast lineage of political satire in America, a lineage that not only includes the above mentioned comics and writers, but also Lenny Bruce, Dick Gregory, George Carlin, Richard Pryor, and others. In this way, it should be clear that comedy, particularly political satire, is now and has been consistently significant to the American cultural experience. The question, as I see it, is at least twofold.

First, what does satire do for American political culture? Second, how does satire fulfill that role in ways that other manners of discourse cannot? What is it about satire that makes it uniquely appropriate to its function? In short, how does comedy enable or embolden democratic citizenship? This project attempts to address these questions by engaging with the rhetoric of stand-up satire and the relationship between that comedy and democracy. With these questions

as my guide, I now turn to previous scholarship regarding the rhetoric of political satire and the precious few studies that actually address stand-up comedy in concrete ways. The sections that follow this brief review of the rhetorical literature will address the relationships between rhetoric and comedy and rhetoric and democracy. After having established a shared relationship to rhetoric as a place of common ground, I then explore the relationship between comedy, and especially satire, and democracy.

Mine is not the first attempt at understanding comedy or discerning the relationship between satire and democratic politics. For example, in an essay on the relationship between parody and public culture, Robert Hariman contends, “Political humor and particularly its core modality of parody are essential for an engaged, sustainable, democratic public culture.”<sup>4</sup> This is not to say that political humor and parody represent some kind of democratic panacea because, as Hariman makes clear, no singular form of discourse is sufficient for such a task. He argues that political humor and parody are important because, “Neither civic republican eloquence nor rational deliberation will do” as a lone standard for democratic discourse.<sup>5</sup> Further, by “look[ing] at the wreckage”<sup>6</sup> of democratic dispute rather than looking over it, political humor helps “to ensure that public discourse is destabilized beyond the prevailing standoffs, that competing parties are equally accountable in their race to the bottom, and that a sense of discursive agency is distributed broadly.”<sup>7</sup> Essentially, political humor functions as a check on power that helps to maintain the democratic promise that would distribute power—or as Hariman would have it, agency—amongst the people without regard to their standing in the traditional, bureaucratic structure of power. Said another way, political humor attempts to level the relationship between those given power by the people and the people who give them power to ensure that it remains a democratic relationship oriented toward equality rather than domination.

Other scholars have weighed in on the relationship between comedy and democracy as well. For instance, Don Waisanen offers an analysis of Jon Stewart and his late night counterpart, Stephen Colbert, that renders the comedians as rhetorical critics who “deflate abstractions and mystifications” from their Comedy Central studios on a nightly basis. Waisanen argues that the pair works to “connect every day culture to the public sphere” and in so doing “mak[es] important political matters immediate, relevant, and engaging.”<sup>8</sup> By positioning the comedian as rhetorical critic, Waisanen taps the political potential of political satire as a means of preparing for and informing judgment. In another essay, Paul Achter argues, “comedy has a special role in helping societies manage crisis moments.”<sup>9</sup> His essay focuses on *The Onion*’s parodic news coverage of the 9/11/2001 terrorist attacks in the United States to show how comedy, and especially parody, functions to educate citizens, check power, and model new rules for public discourse during or following times of societal crisis. Each of these examples highlights the role of comedy in our contemporary democratic culture; however, their combined emphasis on parody and mediated comedy limits their capacity to speak to other forms of humor and laughter. In particular, these authors avoid what I argue is perhaps the most *traditionally rhetorical* form of humorous discourse: stand-up.

Molded by the Ciceronian tradition of speeches for entertainment, stand-up comedy typically involves one speaker—though stand-up duos like Mike Nichols and Elaine May, Carl Reiner and Mel Brooks, or Cheech Marin and Tommy Chong have risen to popularity from time to time—speaking before a comparatively large audience that has packed itself into a nightclub or a laugh-shack for the expressed purpose of laughing for a few hours. While traces of stand-up comedy can be uncovered in the comedic discourses addressed in the comedy and parody of the aforementioned essays—Jon Stewart, for example, was a stand-up comedian before he was fake

newscaster and Stephen Colbert was trained in improvisational comedy at the famed Second City Theatre in Chicago—the irony-laden news parody format often overshadows the quick little jokes and poignant monologues that remind viewers more of the night club scene than late-night television. This is not to suggest that scholars should not consider the role of comics like Stewart and Colbert, because they have done so productively and they will be required to continue to do so as these comics and their contemporaries imagine new ways of interrupting life as usual in the American political landscape. Rather, my aim in distinguishing between late-night comedy and stand-up comedy is to emphasize the generic and topical limitations of existing scholarship and open pathways that lead to a more complex understanding of the rhetorical relationship between satire and democracy.

Where studies of parody and late-night humor are fairly prevalent in the rhetorical and communication studies literature, scholarly treatments of stand-up comedy are not. There is one noteworthy exception to this oversight, former stand-up comedian Joanne Gilbert. In one essay, Gilbert offers a discussion of female stand-up comedy through an analysis of Phyllis Diller and Rosanne Barr. She argues that the self-deprecatory humor of female comedians serves the ends of social critique rather than hegemonic re-inscription because it offers critique packaged as hegemonic discourse by rhetorically constructing a space of marginalization for the comedienne and her comedy. In this way, the comic uses self-deprecation to discredit her own critique, which having taken the guise of hegemonic form therefore discredits and critiques that very hegemony.

While the object of her study is *female* stand-up, her theorization of stand-up comedy as a simultaneous performance of one's self and one's culture that offers "often acerbic social critique sanctioned as entertainment because it is articulated in a comedic context" is of

particular importance in understanding any stand-up comedy performance.<sup>10</sup> Further, her acknowledgement that stereotypes and objectification are not only necessary humor strategies for the comedian, but also double-coded critiques is useful in redeeming those aspects of humorous discourse that appear to be outwardly and unapologetically hegemonic. For example when Joan Rivers quips, “I was so ugly that they sent my picture to *Ripley’s Believe it or Not* and he sent it back and said ‘I don’t believe it,’” it is clear that she makes herself the butt of the joke thereby reinforcing traditional beauty standards. However, by marginalizing her own comic authority over the course of her act—and career—she in fact offers a critique of those very standards fostering laughs that like their exigent punch-line only appear to be hegemonic.

On the one hand, this argument suggests that *all* humor is in service of social critique even when it *appears* to the contrary making humor appear to be a magical elixir for social change. While appealing, such a claim is not easily defended in light of overtly harsh, insult comics such as Andrew Dice Clay, Don Rickles, or Lisa Lampanelli. On the other hand however, Gilbert does suggest that humor, as joking, requires a target or a butt and therefore the social critique levied by even those double-coded discourses she supports is not *necessarily* productive critique; instead, it is only critique. The distinction between productive and unproductive critique, then, is key to understanding the critical functions of joking humor. What makes comedic criticism potentially productive is identification of a victim separate from the butt of the joke. For self-deprecating comedy, where the butt is the comic herself, the victim should be some problematic aspect of culture. When this is true, the comic critique is productive, even though it marginalizes the comic. Conversely, where the butt and victim are one in the same—here, the comedienne herself—self-deprecating humor falls short of its critical potential. What is significant in this observation, is that these comediennes create criticism by

rhetorically constructing themselves as the *butts* of their own jokes while simultaneously constituting some aspect of hegemonic discourse as the *victim* of the humor thereby permitting the comics to maintain identification with their audiences while objectifying and externalizing specific aspects of the broader cultural milieu.

Susan Pelle also attempts to address stand-up comedy from a feminist perspective. In her essay on Margaret Cho—a queer, Korean American, stand-up comic and one-time sit-com star—Pelle argues that Cho “make[s] ‘real’ a form of national abjection that continues to violently and repetitively exclude, deny, and shape her” through her bodily expositions of “the performing vagina.”<sup>11</sup> Importantly, Pelle contends that “stand-up is interpreted as an assertive, if not aggressive, mode of performance,” a point that echoes Richard Pryor’s use of a boxing metaphor for stand-up comedy in his comedy and George Carlin’s discussion of the violent language such as, “I killed them tonight,” associated with stand-up performances. Referencing Gilbert’s discussion of female comics, Pelle points out that Cho “is castigated as threatening, unfeminine, and not a real woman at all” simply by entering public space as she walks on stage.<sup>12</sup> While Pelle’s essay is not concerned with the rhetoric of Cho’s comedy per se, her critique of the masculinist tendencies of stand-up comedy and argument on behalf of comedy’s ability to give shape to grotesque abjections is important in understanding the complexity of stand-up as a mode of discourse.

In another essay on Cho’s comedy, Kyra Pearson argues that Margaret Cho is a “symbolic assassin” who can “activate publics” and transform “captive audiences into rhetorical agents that contribute to the ongoing circulation of public discourse.”<sup>13</sup> She indicates that Cho’s position as symbolic assassin “functions to expand the space for dissent against disparate power relations” by interrogating the symbols that maintain those relations.<sup>14</sup> Here again, though



Pearson clearly seeks to valorize stand-up as a force for subversion and social change without regard to the potential pitfalls of comedy, her argument on behalf of the rhetorical force of stand-up comedy makes an important step toward legitimizing stand-up as a rhetorically consequential mode of discourse.

In their own way, each of these authors provides some insight into the rhetorical nature and function of stand-up comedy. While each essay primarily addresses female performers, the observations about the role of their comedy is useful to any discussion of stand-up comedy. On that point, it is worth noting that these essays *only* address a small selection of stand-up artists. Although Cho, Diller, and Barr are certainly worthy of scholarly attention, so too are comedienues such as Ellen DeGeneres, Whoopi Goldberg, Jackie “Moms” Mabley, Joan Rivers, Lily Tomlin, and Rusty Warren. Stand-up comedians do, however, appear in the literature in other ways—Stephen Olbrys Gencarella offers an analysis of Chris Farley’s Chipendale’s audition from *Saturday Night Live* and Jerry Seinfeld’s embodiment of the courtly fatalist political identity on his sit-com. Similarly, Brian Ott and Beth Bonnsetter address Mel Brooks’ penchant for genre parody and use of mockery to pay homage to the texts that inspire his films. In each case, however, the performers’ stand-up performances are overlooked in favor of their performances in television and film.<sup>15</sup> Surprisingly, the field of rhetoric has more or less overlooked a whole host of comedians who helped to shape American comedy by performing on stage rather than on a sit-com set. Curiously, comedians including Lenny Bruce, George Carlin, Bill Cosby, Dick Gregory, Steve Martin, Richard Pryor, Mort Sahl, Robin Williams, and the previously listed female comics seem to have eluded the attention of rhetorical scholars.

What is significant here is that by overlooking these comedians previous studies have been arguing for satire as a political and cultural force without actually looking at *political* satire.

Of course these comics are not all exclusively political comics, but aside from Margaret Cho, the rhetorical studies literature seems to have turned a blind eye to the politics of *political satire*. In this way, scholarship has more or less neglected the stand-up comedy that was actually focused on social change like Gregory's work for civil rights, Carlin's anti-Vietnam humor, and Lenny Bruce's crusade on all things taboo.

This dissertation will move toward correcting these oversights. While my overarching concern is the relationship between satire and democracy, the primary objects of my study will be stand-up comedy performances. These recorded performances, made available in albums, concert footage, television archives, and humor books, open windows into important historical moments and cultural expressions—as in Mort Sahl's interrogation of the Warren Report following the assassination of John F. Kennedy and George Carlin's transition from a straight-laced punster to the foul-mouthed, counterculture guru made famous by saying the “Seven Words You Can Never Say on Television” on television.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, as stand-up performances have been largely overlooked by rhetorical scholarship, this study lays a foundation for future considerations of the rhetoric of stand-up comedy and satire while exploring how comedy and satire have altered what it means to be a citizen in the American version of democracy.

Over the following sections, I trace the theoretical lineages that inform my own critiques and arguments. The foundation of my thinking is rhetorical. This is to say that I am concerned with public communication that has persuasive implications for an audience or a series of audiences. I favor the Burkean conception of rhetoric that suggests that rhetoric is “*the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols.*” For this reason, I will be particularly sensitive to the symbols used to create and maintain relationships of cooperation and antagonism between the comedian rhetors, their

audiences, and the culture within which they find themselves.<sup>17</sup> What is more, I am guided by Burke's claim that "art forms like 'tragedy' or 'comedy' or 'satire'" offer "*equipments for living*, that size up situations in various ways and in keeping with correspondingly various attitudes."<sup>18</sup> With these foundational ideas in mind, I will now address the various interconnections between humor and comedy in the rhetorical literature beyond what I have already mentioned. Next, I will offer a similar discussion regarding the connections between rhetoric and democracy. Over the course of this dissertation, I contend that the comedy and democracy can be connected by their shared relationship to rhetoric and that by approaching each from a rhetorical perspective leads to the conclusion that comedy, and especially satire, provides not "*equipments for living*," but "*equipments for citizenship*." In the close of this introduction, I outline the chapters that will comprise the bulk of this study of the relationship between satirical comedy and democracy.

### **Rhetoric and Comedy... and Humor and Laughter**

Before considering the rhetorical literature on humor and comedy, some definitional distinction between the terms humor and comedy used in this discussion is in order. Often, scholars use the terms synonymously, but their differentiation should prove useful for this and future analyses. In my writing and theorizing, I will use the term humor to mean a tactic used by a rhetor to elicit laughter from an audience. The role of laughter here is important because the laughter is a sign of consent to the discourse that, as Hariman suggests, "completes the rhetorical arc from speaker to audience."<sup>19</sup> However, this is not to suggest that all instances of laughter are instances of humor as there are non-humorous occasions of laughter. For example, I might laugh after I have defeated a friend in a game, but his defeat was not expressly used in order to elicit my laughter and my laughter is at his having lost rather than his attempt to make me laugh.

This should not be confused with the *sense of humor*. The sense of humor is not, itself, a rhetorical tactic. Instead, I understand it to be a frame of mind and a system of values and beliefs—a well from which laughter can be drawn. From a rhetorical perspective, the sense of humor is a set of commonplaces or *topoi* that can be activated to elicit laughter from an audience. I will contend over the course of this dissertation that the sense of humor is a uniquely rhetorical construction and that its constitution is consequential far beyond the chuckles and guffaws mined from its depths. What is more, I argue that where some conceptions of the sense of humor liken it to a personal possession, as a rhetorical construction it is better understood as a culturally shared, public good that defines the limits of what is and is not laughable—or even understood as a joking premise—and therefore what can or cannot be uttered in public spaces.

Finally, I use the term comedy in a most traditional sense. Comedy, as presented here, represents a genre of discourse or drama that is the opposite of seriousness. Comedy tends to favor humor over more direct rhetorical strategies, but it does not require humor to achieve its ends.<sup>20</sup> In the same breath, humor often appears in comedies, but it need not be so as it can arise even in the most serious discourses. Although the definition I offer seems simple enough, it is important in distinguishing between the theoretical intention and popular usage. Just as rhetoric has been popularized as empty or misleading speech, comedy has been reduced to uses of humor, and all usage of humor is uncritically identified as comedy. For example, most discussions of stand-up comedy will refer to a comedian's act, which is comprised of various fragments of humor, and her comic sensibility or sense of humor as her comedy. This conflation is theoretically problematic because it blurs the lines between rhetor, discourse, and attitude and therefore unproductively complicates rhetorical analyses of humor.

My definition draws plainly on Kenneth Burke's theorizing of comedy and the comic frame in *Attitudes Toward History*. Burke's notion of poetic framing provides an apt metaphor for understanding the drama of human relations and a means of criticizing and "comically correcting" dangerous symbol usage that dehumanizes opponents. Burke's argument is premised on the idea that people choose between attitudes as frames of acceptance or frames of rejection. Frames of acceptance promote a "yea-saying" tendency whereas frames of rejection traffic in "nay-saying." For Burke, both comedy and tragedy offer a means of saying yes to a given situation. Each frame, however, implies a different motive for the attitude of acceptance and therefore a different way of understanding the actors in a given situation and the actions that they take.

Tragedy, though it says, "yes," emphasizes ultimate and inherent characteristics of the actors and actions it interprets. Tragedy sees "crime" perpetrated by evil "villains." Comedy, on the other hand, prefers to interpret such crimes as mistakes and "stupidity" committed by "fools."<sup>21</sup> Importantly, for Burke both tragedy and comedy are ways of seeing the *same thing*. Tragedy understands the world in hyperbolic terms of heroes and villains and comedy understands it in terms of "necessarily mistaken" human actors.<sup>22</sup> In this way, tragically framed events require punishment whereas the same events framed in terms of comedy instead beg for correction. In this sense, I use the term comedy to refer to a way of being or a mode of discourse rather than as a rhetorical strategy or standard.

As Burke would surely note, humor has played some part in discussions of rhetoric since the earliest writings in Ancient Greece. In *Republic*, Plato suggests that humor, which he engages through the language of laughter, carries the potential to provoke violence, and in *Gorgias* he points out that laughter—and the evocation of laughter which I refer to as humor—

can be a means of refuting an argument without first disproving it.<sup>23</sup> Without doubt, Plato was suspicious of humor and laughter—just as he was also suspicious of rhetoric—but it is important to emphasize that he found each worthy of addressing in his writing, regardless of their dubiousness. Like Plato, Aristotle mentions humor and laughter in his writing. In *Rhetoric*, Aristotle recalls Gorgias’ notion that one should “confound the opponent’s earnest with jest and their jest with earnest” and indicates humor’s unique capacity to distract a hearer’s attention to the speaker’s advantage, not unlike Plato’s humor of refutation.<sup>24</sup> He also offers a brief tease of his work on humor in *Poetics* suggesting that irony or mockery is a more decorous strategy than is buffoonery.<sup>25</sup> These terms are left undefined but for their motive, the more appropriate device being for one’s own amusement while the less is for the amusement of others.

While Plato and Aristotle only mention humor in a few brief passages, Cicero offers a more detailed treatment in *De Oratore* where he notes that it is “pleasant and often tremendously useful to employ humor and witticisms” though such skill “cannot possibly be imparted through teaching.”<sup>26</sup> Of course, declaring humor unteachable would not stop Cicero from trying to teach it anyway. In his text, he offers an important distinction between two types of humor. First, there is humor that manifests through “continuous discourse” and one that is “marked by quick, sharp witted sayings.”<sup>27</sup> Further, either kind of humor can be subdivided into a series of strategies that fall either under the heading of humor of words or humor of content. For Cicero, humor of words emphasizes ambiguity and playfulness with language that marks an orator as clever, while humor that arises from content—such as hyperbole, anecdote, and making unexpected turns in logic or narrative—tends to be more enjoyable for the audience and more likely to provoke laughter. The former represents a self-centered form of humor, while the latter an other-centered approach. This distinction is important in considering the utility of each strategy. Word-play

and punning may be a sign of a facile intellect for the rhetor, but it is not likely to get the same laugh as a well-written satire or comic monologue from her or his audience.<sup>28</sup>

Before leaving Cicero's discussion of humor, I would like to emphasize one last point that I return to later in this dissertation. Cicero prefaces his entire discussion of comic strategies and devices by noting the importance of decorum. For Cicero, the humor must "take account of people and circumstances" prior to engaging in witticism or monologue.<sup>29</sup> Further, he indicates that humor is most appropriate when used against an adversary, particularly when he or she invites ridicule, or against a "stupid, greedy, or fickle witness, when people seem readily disposed to listen to him." In this way, humor is at its rhetorical best as a retort or rebuttal that marks "something dishonorable in a way that is not itself dishonorable."<sup>30</sup>

What I find significant about this argument is that it highlights two components of humor and comedy that arise again and again in the literature. First, the emphasis on decorum calls into question the *ethos* of the comedian and the role of the audience *and the situation* in fostering and maintaining that *ethos*. Second, by marking the most appropriate uses of humor as adversarial, Cicero indicates what may be among the most prominent features of humor. When used with maximum persuasive impact, humor stands against something and it does so on the ground of what is and is not honorable. That ground being itself a rhetorical construction, Cicero points us toward a significant function of humor in constituting the standard of what is honorable and enforcing that standard. In this way, Cicero indicates how humorous exchange operates as a constitutive rhetoric. In his essay on constitutive rhetoric, Maurice Charland contends that collective identifications and subject positions are rhetorically constituted prior to the act of persuasion.<sup>31</sup> In the context of Cicero's observations about humor, it seems likely that humor's constitutive function may be to establish the foundation, a system of values that determine what

is and is not laughable, upon which such identifications can be made. Thus, humor works to constitute a subjectivity regarding the audience's *sense of humor*.

Where classical rhetorical theory often approaches humor as only a strategy for persuasive intentions, contemporary scholarship tends to consider comedy more in terms of its generic qualities and subdivisions or in the manner of Kenneth Burke's notions of the comic frame as a humane perspective and perspective by incongruity as a means by which the comic frame might be realized. In terms of the generic qualities, the most common discussions of the rhetoric of comedy and humor emerge in analyses of irony, satire, parody, and the Bakhtinian notion of carnival or the carnivalesque. These terms are all useful in highlighting specific and unique aspects of humorous texts, but their specificity also limits their usefulness in terms of understanding humor in more general ways.

One common means of attempting to articulate a rhetorical theory of humor is through the lens of irony. According to Wayne Booth, irony, at its most basic, is "saying one thing and meaning another."<sup>32</sup> Thus, a theory of irony does little to explain the laughter brought about by the physical comedy in the masterworks of Charlie Chaplin or grotesque facial manipulations of cartoon caricature. What theories of irony do provide for the rhetorical scholar is a unique perspective on the relationship between the audience and the ironist and an important limitation for critical insight. Booth, for example, offers a perspective on irony that distinguishes between stable ironies—that are intended, covert, singular, and finite—as opposed to unstable or infinite ironies that allow the critic deep access to those stable ironies and the process by which readers and authors make ironic meanings together by scrutinizing an existing position, identifying an alternative or opposite position, and moving together as and conspiratorial duo of author and reader from the former position to the latter.



The implication that irony requires participation on behalf of the audience and the rhetor in achieving its ends is important for any discussion of humor because the relationship is much the same in all instances of humorous discourse. The joke teller needs her audience to “get” the joke and the slapstick comic needs his audience to realize that he will survive the ten-story drop onto the busy downtown boulevard with little more than a headshake and a smile. Further, if this conspiratorial relationship applies to all humor, then so too should Kaufer’s argument that the ironic audience is bifurcated into confederates who share the ironic meaning and victims who are left out of the ironic reconstruction.<sup>33</sup> With this additional complication of the connection between rhetor and her or his audience(s), Kaufer points to a fragmented audience that gives shape to the second and third personae in humorous discourse. Edwin Black argues that the second persona is the “implied auditor” of a discourse—the ironist’s projected confederates—that provides a window into the ideology of the rhetor because a rhetor would likely imply an audience that shares her or his ideological commitments.<sup>34</sup> The victims, then, find themselves marked as others to be left out of the discourse, an audience “rejected or negated through the speech and/or the speaking situation.”<sup>35</sup> Because both the second and third personae rely heavily on the ideological leanings of the rhetor and audience the linkage between the humorous audience and ideology is clearly at play in all instances of humorous discourse. As such, ideological rhetorical criticism emerges as a largely untapped and valuable resource for the study of humor.

Beyond the audience/rhetor relationship, Booth’s stable ironies underline the downfall of many a humor critic: intent. Stable ironies, for Booth, are intended, but an argument for intent is a weak argument indeed. In making his case, Booth uses examples of the most obvious ironies such as Jonathan Swift’s *A Modest Proposal* where the author’s persona indicates his intention or

a comment such as “nice day” during a downpour where the material conditions of the speaking situation similarly indicate the commenter’s intention beyond reasonable doubt.<sup>36</sup> Since Booth admits that unstable ironies constitute the vast majority of ironic discourses, the problem of intent looms large for the critic. Of course, this stumbling block points to another important consideration for all humor study. Humor is reliant on context, and careful consideration of contextual clues is among the only means by which a critic can avoid the snafu that is intent.<sup>37</sup>

Other discussions of humor in the rhetorical literature rely heavily on the oft-conflated notions of satire and parody. Neither term points directly to the humor used in a given text. Rather, each indicates generic restraints that are useful in explain specific texts. Satire, according to Lisa Gring-Pemle and Martha Solomon Watson, is a primary technique for deflating egos and providing social criticism” often arising in times of controversy.<sup>38</sup> In addition, Gray, Jones, and Thompson indicate that satire implies two key components: verbal aggression and judgment.<sup>39</sup> The inclusion of judgment here is significant because it speaks to the critical function of satire. Further, it is interesting to note that neither of these definitions includes anything about laughter or humor. Instead, where we might expect to find humor we find aggression and, likewise, judgment in laughter’s place. While some, following Freud, would contend that humor is *necessarily* aggressive, the connection between the judgment called forth by satire and the laughter it evokes is less clear. Perhaps the best explanation of that linkage relies on the Burkean notion of “perspective by incongruity” as a means of altering a given perspective or orientation. Gring-Pemle and Watson suggest that satire relies heavily on the perspective by incongruity as its modus operandi in urging judgment—and typically a negative judgment—of its subject.

For Burke, “‘Perspective by incongruity’ refers to the methodic merger of particles that had been considered mutually exclusive.”<sup>40</sup> It is a direct violation of an orientation’s piety, or “the sense of what goes with what.”<sup>41</sup> Such violations poke holes in orientations and create space for the emergence of new linkages and permit the creative reimagining of one’s current orientation, frame, or attitude. Perspectives by incongruity are offered when “we invent new terms” or when we “apply our old vocabulary in new ways” as we try to identify “new relationships as meaningful” or “interpret situations differently” so as to “invent new accounts of motive.”<sup>42</sup> By “violating the ‘properties’ of the word in its previous linkages” perspectives by incongruity work as a “rending and tearing” that reveals the potentials in the human drama through the very language that constitutes it in its current form.<sup>43</sup> Such perspectives, for Burke, provide the grounds for social transformation and even though he places satire squarely in a frame of rejection, its transformative potential through “nay-saying” is appealing for rhetorical scholars and critics.<sup>44</sup>

One of the more obvious means of offering a satiric perspective by incongruity is through the genre of parody. While parody is not necessarily satiric, it does carry an impulse for critique and provides a particularly effective vessel for satire. Hariman reminds us that “‘parody’ literally means ‘beside the song,’” and therefore operates as an imitative art. However, he adds that “‘para’ also can mean ‘beyond’ or ‘against,’ as in parable, paradox, paranoia, and paralysis, and these additional senses are never far away,” which implies the critical and transformative potentials of the genre.<sup>45</sup> For this reason, he contends, “Parody creates and sustains public culture... by exposing the limitations of dominant discourse: it counters idealization, mythic enchantment, and other forms of hegemony.”<sup>46</sup> As an ironic imitation, parody mocks the form of its target and its juxtaposition against the original provides new perspectives on the original.

In addition, Jonathan Gray argues, “good parody aims to teach and to correct.”<sup>47</sup> In his case, the educational energies of parody are directed toward television media literacy, whereas Hariman argues that parody “provides a rhetorical education.”<sup>48</sup> Regardless of whether education through parody leads to rhetorical literacy or media literacy, what is clear is that parody, through imitation, reveals conventions—rhetorical or otherwise—in ways that other modes of discourse may not. In this way, parody is useful to the rhetorical critic by revealing what a parodic teacher seeks to teach and why. Parody is a window into an ideological position through an imitation of an opposing ideological position. Recalling Burke’s notion that art forms provide “equipments for living,” it should be unsurprising that parody, as a comic art form, equips its audience to better understand the language of convention. This pedagogical aspect of parody, I argue, is also present in other genres of humorous discourse, though it is often less direct than it is for parody.

Analyses of parody and satire also occur under the headings of carnival or carnivalesque critique. Carnival, championed originally by Mikhail Bakhtin,<sup>49</sup> implies an inversion of the world as we know it. During carnival the sacred are profaned, the high are made low, and the transcendent is reduced to the bodily. Stephen Olbrys explains that the carnivalesque is a shared public experience that offers “offers a ‘second world’ that is neither ‘finished nor polished’ to stand in opposition to the official, the ecclesiastical, the political, and the serious.” Further, he indicates “this carnivalesque offers a temporary liberation from hierarchy, from fear, and from suffering, all experiences that derive their power from dogmatic, monolithic seriousness” and as such provides citizens “a way to get through to power by destroying it through laughter.”<sup>50</sup> Of course, it is important to remember that the comic inversion of carnivalesque is *only temporary* and that the dominant social order reconstitutes itself as carnival comes to a close.

As a rhetoric, Paul Achter explains that “A carnival, comic rhetoric posture submits that situations are up for grabs, which means they can be remedied or fixed, and that we can learn from the mistakes of those around us: in Bakhtin’s terms, the world is unfinalizable.”<sup>51</sup> Such a posture represents a kind of attitude that can be adopted both by rhetor and audience to tap the liberating potentials of carnival. In this manner, the expression or suppression of the carnivalesque attitude can be taken as a symptom of the culture’s current sense of humor and willingness to engage in self-reflexive play. Where carnival is suppressed, M. Lane Bruner argues, “political corruption leads state actors to lose their sense of humor,”<sup>52</sup> to turn away from laughter and turn toward violence. The societal loss of humor indicates the loss of that society’s humanity.

On the whole, the humor literature in rhetorical studies tends to focus on the above-mentioned terminologies. Only John Meyer’s work explicitly theorizes humor as its primary mechanism. As with Booth’s conception of irony, Meyer concludes that humor is paradoxical in that it simultaneously promotes unification and division, making humor a “double-edged sword.”<sup>53</sup> Even so, he provides a brief typology of humorous communication. He argues that humor is unifying when it seeks identification with others or clarification of social norms and that it is divisive when it seeks to enforce normative behavior or to differentiate between the audience and other groups. In another essay, he explores President Reagan’s use of humor as a “velvet weapon” that softens attacks against the opposition and allows the humorist to side-step criticisms while making an audience look “more objectively at an issue” and enhancing the credibility through identification.<sup>54</sup> While other scholars have turned to Meyer’s framework in their own analysis, those examples are few and far between.<sup>55</sup>

The task set forth here, as I see it, is to build a foundation for future work in rhetorical scholarship by drawing on the vast humor literature in other disciplines such as philosophy, anthropology, and media studies that explicitly theorizes humor and laughter in ways that the previously mentioned analyses of irony, satire, parody, and carnival only do indirectly.<sup>56</sup> In this way, this dissertation brings humor theory into rhetorical studies and simultaneously takes rhetorical theory into humor studies. Further, by addressing American stand-up satire as a distinct rhetorical form, this dissertation brings the role of humor—perhaps the only requirement of stand-up as a genre—into clearer focus for future study of both comic texts in general and in constituting democracy and equipping audiences for democratic citizenship.

### **Rhetoric and Democracy**

From my rhetorical vantage, I see democracy primarily as a symbol that represents an ideal and motivates action. In this way, I feel compelled, as a rhetorical critic, to interrogate any instance where the symbolic “trump card” of democracy is put in play—for we can do no better than to be critical of any instance where democracy is used as justification, opposition, defense, or praise for action.<sup>57</sup> As Burke would have it, any time democracy is invoked or affirmed we should look for how that invocation or affirmation is itself undemocratic.<sup>58</sup> Such criticism requires some version of an ideal on which to base critique, some *telos* that orients the critic, or at the very least a serviceable definition from which to begin. Thus, I begin this section in search of just such a definition.

In its most basic formulations, “democracy”—comprised of *demos* and *kratia*—refers to the rule of the *demos*—the people. Of course, in its origins the *demos* did not, and does not currently, refer to all people; instead it referred only to those Athenian male property owners that were worthy of citizenship. Such a definition of the *demos* significantly alters the definition of

democracy. Rather than rule of the people, it becomes more akin to rule *over* the people by *some* of the people. For this reason, the *demos*—who constitutes it, who is excluded from it, and how they are characterized or contained—is perpetually at stake in any invocation of democracy. What is more, the exclusive realities of political life also mean that democracy so conceived functions only as an ideal rather than as tangible political project. Thus, an overarching concern for my own theorizing is the nature of “the people,” as represented in and constituted by satirical stand-up comedy. Said another way, “the people” are always that which is “at stake.”

Both Jennifer Mercieca and Jeremy Engels offer accounts of the containment of the *demos* in the early republic.<sup>59</sup> Importantly, they indicate that “democracy” was used as a devil-term and that the very formation of the republic was driven by an attempt to prevent the tyranny of mobocracy that the people would surely bring about if they—the unwashed masses of the *distempered demos*—were given the reigns of self-rule.<sup>60</sup> Similarly, Hauser contends, “From its beginning, democracy has been in tension between the elite, who invoke their privilege to decide based on superior training to engage in rational deliberation (education), and the common citizens, who point to their numbers as expressions of public will.”<sup>61</sup> For Hauser the goal of “*deliberative inclusion*” is presented as a thoroughly democratic critical *telos* as it attempts to expand, rather than limit, the *demos* to extend the possibilities of democratic decision making.<sup>62</sup>

The other half of this most basic definition, however, should not be forgotten. Just as the people matter in democracy, so too does “the rule.” Technically speaking, *kratia* translates to power, so to state this case alternately would look something like this: while the people are at stake, so too is how the people utilize their power over themselves.<sup>63</sup> Often, the quest for the people’s power leads to the institutions of power that claim to work on the people’s behalf. This tendency ignores how those very institutions of democracy are themselves undemocratic because

they are the means by which the people are divided from their power. As Douglas Lummis argues, “the trouble starts with the ambiguity introduced when ‘power’ is replaced by ‘government.’”<sup>64</sup> Powerful “democratic” governments, as institutions, stand in for powerful people and shift the rule from the people over the people to the institutions over the people. Such a shift is detrimental to democracy. In fact, Benjamin Barber contends that “democracy thrives... *only when it creates competent citizens* who—governing themselves—follow their own lead.”<sup>65</sup> In this way, the *demos* are an active people—rulers not ruled—and “democracy is a performance art” that provides them a canvas on which to express their power.<sup>66</sup> For these reasons, I prefer, like Michael Butterworth, to emphasize democracy and citizenship in terms of “*practice over institutions*.”<sup>67</sup>

Of course, a focus on citizenship and practice is potentially dangerous because there exists a tendency to reduce democratic citizenship to the most obvious practice of citizenship: voting. For John Dryzek, “Democracy is about communication as well as voting, about social learning as well as decision-making.”<sup>68</sup> His argument seeks to extend democratic practice beyond mere decision-making and process into the realm of discourse, but in so doing he, perhaps inadvertently, stumbles into the realm of rhetoric. Rhetoric, being a pedagogical and communicative art that provides symbolic equipments for society, is thus the primary ground for alternative engagements in civic practice. In this way, Robert Asen indicates that citizenship should be considered as “as a mode of public engagement” and “as a performance, not a possession.”<sup>69</sup> These performances are rhetorical. For a rhetorical critic, these performances provide a text through which an understanding of an existing democracy can be ascertained thereby achieving one goal of rhetorical democratic scholarship: to identify and suggest practices of citizenship that aid in realizing the ideal of the rule of the people over themselves.



The active and perpetually contested nature of citizenship and the ever-changing role of *the demos* culminate in a final aspect of my working definition of democracy. As Nathan Crick argues, democracy comes into being through an “ontology of becoming.”<sup>70</sup> He explains, “the nature of our future selves, as individuals, cultures, and civilizations, is a product of the present choices we make and the future goals toward which we aspire as they have been inherited and altered from the past.”<sup>71</sup> Thus, democracy is never achieved, it always exists just beyond our current grasp, but its future is determined by the ways in which we strive to attain it in our present. For this reason, any definition of democracy is built on shifting sands; as scholars continue to define and theorize democracy we necessarily change the possibilities of its eventual realization. This is not altogether unlike Sheldon Wolin’s notion of “fugitive democracy.” Wolin argues that democracy comes into being in “political moment[s]” of revolution and transgression that “destroy the boundaries that bar access to political experience.”<sup>72</sup> In this way, democracy ebbs and flows. It is not static or “being,” but in a constant state of flux. Like Crick’s ontology of becoming and Wolin’s fugitive democracy, Connolly’s “politics of becoming” as “politics by which new and unforeseen things surge into being,” similarly reveals the possibility of democracy.<sup>73</sup> His concern, like Crick’s, is not with existing political structures, but with those structures that are *being* formed by our current democratic (and undemocratic) interactions. My concern here is with the unfinishedness of democracy, its incompleteness demands rhetorical intervention to advocate for a future wherein it might become something more democratic—empowering for the *demos*—in future articulations.

At this point it should be clear that rhetoric, in our contemporary moment, is a primary force at play in democracy. For Crick, “Rhetoric... is the art of public advocacy that functions in a timely relationship to shared problematic situations of moral conflict, cognitive uncertainty,

and practical urgency.”<sup>74</sup> More succinctly, rhetoric is the *art* of democracy. Rhetoric is the means by which the *vox populi*—the voice of the people—is called into being and can thereby exercise its power on behalf of and over the people. Rhetoric is the medium of realization for the public work of democracy. As Robert Danisch argues, rhetoric provides a bridge between political philosophy and the political *praxis* of democracy.<sup>75</sup> But this apparently easy marriage has not always been so clear.

From the very beginnings of democratic theory, rhetoric and democracy have been separated as mutually exclusive discourses. In referring to rhetoric as “cooking” or shadows on the cave wall, Plato relegated rhetoric to a position of marginality in favor the “true art” of philosophy.<sup>76</sup> At the same time, in his *Republic*, he spoke in favor of the “philosopher king,” an image that adequately allowed Plato to quell his own version of demophobia—the fear of the people.<sup>77</sup> Plato’s influence began a tradition of marginalizing both the democratic and rhetorical traditions and rendering them as distinct, unrelated projects. For this reason, the political theory that dominates discussions of democracy tends to condemn or disregard rhetoric.

In *Saving Persuasion*, Brian Garsten outlines the rise of a rhetoric against rhetoric in political theory. Therein, he explains that Thomas Hobbes, in *Leviathan*, rehashes Plato’s argument for the philosopher king by placing the faculty of judgment in the hands of a king. Hobbes thus separates rhetoric, as the art most adept at judgment, from the *demos* replacing their capacity for self-rule with the rule of the monarch. In a similar manner, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the great champion of the general will, places judgment in the hands of the people but denies rhetoric its place with the *demos*. He condemns rhetoric’s capacity to help the people reach their judgments, preferring Plato’s caricature of rhetoric as an art suited to deception and demagoguery—or “persuasion without convincing.”<sup>78</sup> The result of this characterization is that

as Rousseau advocates on behalf of democracy through the general will he empties democracy of its rhetorical payload and continues down a path of theorizing democracy without—even against—rhetoric. A cause later bolstered by the Kantian emphasis on rationality and reason over persuasion and deception. Kant’s rationalism not only expands the chasm between rhetoric and judgment but, at the same time, it lays the groundwork for the normative, deliberative democratic theories of more recent history that rely on the division between rhetoric and democracy.

Much of the development of democracy scholarship in political theory takes just this route. Drawing on the Habermasian notions of the “ideal speech situation,” “the public sphere,” and the more general conception of “civil society,” the branch of democratic theory under the heading “deliberative democracy” tends to operate on the assumptions that rhetoric and passions need to be “bracketed” off in order to facilitate rational public debate. Theorists of this kind of democracy, also sometimes referred to as normative or procedural democrats, presume that democracy comes as decisions are made on public matters by the force of the better argument.<sup>79</sup> This tradition robs the *demos* of its performative agency and runs the risk of reducing democracy to the procedures and institutional mechanisms of democracy that can potentially circumvent democracy as the rule of the people. While norms and procedures are indeed necessary for any civil society, they do not necessarily result in a democratic version of civil society. Further, they provide a distinctly anti-democratic means of rule because they exist outside of the people, in institutions and sacred texts, and thus they can be used to “bracket” not only those modes of communication that curb deliberation, but also the people themselves. In this way, the rules and norms of deliberation—in their darkest formulations—are endowed with the power to determine who can and cannot deliberate, superseding the power vested in the *demos* of a democracy.

In many ways, the language of deliberation provides a bridge back to rhetoric that can be useful in reuniting rhetoric with its rightful political *telos*—democracy. Many scholars in rhetoric have embraced the goals of deliberation and re-characterized the theory as one of rhetorical deliberation. Robert Danisch, for example, argues that among the functions of rhetoric is deliberation over matters of public importance and that persuasion “allow[s] for the participation of the public in the process of democratic decision making.”<sup>80</sup> His book uses pragmatism as a means of bridging the gap between rhetoric and democracy explaining that rhetoric ought not be “bracketed” but welcomed as a necessary component of any deliberation.

Alternately, Robert Ivie is interested in taking the bridge not from deliberation to rhetoric but from rhetoric to deliberative democracy. He contends, “A rhetorical conception of deliberation... promotes democratic practice immediately—in the here and now—rather than postponing [or bracketing] it indefinitely into a hypothetical future where the condition of diversity would no longer apply and where participatory democracy would be sufficiently disciplined by an illusion of universal reason and supposedly rational consensus.” Such a conception, for Ivie, would be “a rowdy affair,” not concerned with locating “the common good in universal truths approximated through simulations of pure reason” but rather with avoiding the “the constant temptation of pursuing singular versions of truth” by relying on the Burkean notion of the comic frame and a deep respect for pluralism.<sup>81</sup> Ivie’s understanding of rhetorical deliberation, rather than being a series procedures and norms, is an “expression of agonistic democracy”—a “necessary medium for articulating a needed measure of shared symbolic space.”<sup>82</sup> This expression of democracy, as an agonistic struggle of competing interests that share some symbolic space, provides a fusion of rhetoric and democratic theory, but by including the comic frame it also provides the foundation of a bridge between comedy and democracy.

### Comedy in Agony

Turning away from the idea of deliberation as the pinnacle of democratic theory, Andrew Schaap contends that the focus on procedure and normalization of discourse neglects “the moral and political significance of contest and struggle.”<sup>83</sup> For this reason, he, like Ivie and others, advocates “an agonistic approach” that “takes the rough ground of struggles over recognition as its starting point.”<sup>84</sup> Agonism provides a response to the failings of the deliberative tradition and the bracketing of pluralism that contradicts the liberal tendencies inherent in modern democracy. Often found under the headings of either “radical democracy” or “agonistic pluralism,” Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe see agonism as the most appropriate means of addressing pluralism and non-rational discourses for liberal democracy.<sup>85</sup> As a general statement of the agonistic perspective, Mouffe argues, “A well-functioning democracy calls for the vibrant clash of democratic political positions.”<sup>86</sup> Her contention echoes the radical democracy thesis found in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, which aimed at “the proliferation of antagonisms,” which represent the very points of clash between such legitimate political positions.<sup>87</sup>

Antagonisms, for Laclau and Mouffe, “are not *objective* relations, but relations which reveal the limits of all objectivity.”<sup>88</sup> They are discursive constructs that focus our attention on the limits of a given discourse. In this way, they “constitute the limits of society.”<sup>89</sup> Moreover, as a necessary component of politics—which Mouffe refers to as “the agonistic struggle from hegemony”—antagonisms reveal “the *limits* of rationality.”<sup>90</sup> Agonistic pluralism and radical democracy are not restrained by the all-consuming drive toward perfecting rationality because they recognize the necessary function of antagonism and passion in politics which culminates in the impossibility of rationality’s constitution.<sup>91</sup>

These antagonisms come in to being, or articulate, when any discourse enters into a relationship with a competing discourse and the two keep one another from being fully realized. While the fact of contestation is fundamental to an agonistic approach to democracy the form that such contestation takes is more fluid. This fluidity of contestation is required because any discourse can have multiple potential antagonizing discourses. Mouffe argues, “antagonism is irreducible to a simple process of dialectical reversal: the 'them' is not the constitutive opposite of a concrete 'us', but the symbol of what makes any 'us' impossible.”<sup>92</sup> In another sense, Mouffe indicates that it is possible for antagonisms to take on two distinct forms: antagonism or agonism. She explains “antagonism proper” as competition between enemies that lack common symbolic space, whereas “agonism” represents competition between “adversaries” who share a common space but “want to organize [it] in a different way.”<sup>93</sup> This distinction in form shades the goals of a radically agonistic democratic politics. As Mouffe contends, “envisaged from the perspective of ‘agonistic pluralism’ the aim of democratic politics is to transform *antagonism* into *agonism*... [to] not construct the opponent as an enemy but as an adversary.”<sup>94</sup>

A final component of the agonistic approach to democracy worthy of exploration is the role of political and social space in democratic practice. Just as radical democracy fosters a plurality of antagonisms, it promotes “The multiplication of political spaces” and the “preventing of the concentration of power in one point.”<sup>95</sup> In this way, the agonistic approach to democracy seeks to avoid the centralizing force of norms in deliberative democracy that discourage pluralism and shift power from the people to the norms and institutions created to contain them. That being the case, the goals of agonistic pluralism include maximizing the possibilities of antagonism by engaging in the spirit of deep pluralism, not only on behalf of those agonisms that have already been articulated, but also on behalf of those that are articulating in the present

moment and those that might articulate in democracy's constantly "becoming" future. For Laclau and Mouffe, "the democratic revolution begins to displace the line of demarcation between the public and the private and to *politicize* social relations."<sup>96</sup> This feature of the agonistic approach, I contend, is among the most useful and underused resource that agonistic democracy brings to rhetorical criticism and theory.<sup>97</sup>

What is more, the politicization of social spaces and the urge toward agonism also provides a unique connection between comedy and democracy through rhetoric. Ivie contends that the attitude of the comic frame found Burke's theorizing is a necessary condition for agonistic pluralism and democracy. He contends, "together, Kenneth Burke's dramatic agonism and Chantal Mouffe's agonistic pluralism constitute a rhetorically robust formulation of what Benjamin Barber might well consider strong democracy."<sup>98</sup> Thoroughly engaging with Mouffe's work and the above-mentioned tenants of agonism, Ivie asserts, "Speaking in the idiom of robust democracy is not a luxury to be reserved for addressing friends and allies but instead a necessity for keeping rivals from becoming sheer enemies."<sup>99</sup> Here the goal of converting enemy to adversary, not unlike the aim of transforming villains into fools, is paramount and comic rhetoric is the means by which it is or is not attainable. Importantly, Ivie asserts, "The problem here is in the kind of rhetoric practiced, not in the choice of rhetoric over reason."<sup>100</sup> The choice is not between rhetoric and no rhetoric, it is between good rhetoric and bad rhetoric—a humanizing, democratic rhetoric or a dehumanizing, anti-democratic rhetoric. This position recognizes the fundamentally rhetorical nature of politics and draws a clear connection between comedy and democracy along that rhetorical seam.

The anthropocentric tendency required of the comic frame makes it a necessary component for the agonistic goal of turning enemies into adversaries. Just as perspectives by

incongruity can provide comic correctives to an otherwise tragically framed discourse, so too can they facilitate this shift in perspective regarding “the other.” They do not, however, eliminate “the other” or the struggle implied by its presence. Instead, they recast the struggle in productive or agonistic terms. Rather, the comic frame encourages a way of seeing where “even antagonistic terms, confronting each other as parry and thrust, can be said to ‘cooperate’ in the building of an over-all form.”<sup>101</sup> Comedy, by engaging an audience through humor and perspective by incongruity, creates a space where such a transformation from antagonist to agonist can occur.

Additionally, the traditionally social space of comedy is capable of pointing to emerging and otherwise unnoticed antagonisms in already existing discourses. This is how incongruity based humor as theorized by Kant, Schopenhauer, and Kierkegaard among others functions.<sup>102</sup> A sudden clash of contexts or expectations alters previously held perceptions of the world resulting in a pleasant shift from perspective to another, much as Booth’s conception of irony moves a hearer from one logical platform to another. The humor of incongruity requires an audience to come to terms with the notion that hegemonic discourses are riddled with incongruities and thereby rife with potential antagonisms. Comedy legitimizes those antagonisms and requires the audience to address them as such. As a force for emerging antagonisms, comedy is thus a political discourse because it constantly works toward expanding the field of antagonism and contestation.

In his other work, Ivie elevates the practice of dissent—particularly dissent from war—as a necessary democratic practice. He contends, “an absence of dissenting voices in a democracy is the true sign of weakness and vulnerability, of a deep distrust of democracy and a failing faith in freedom, whereas speaking out is the patriotic duty of democratic citizenship.”<sup>103</sup> His



characterization of war as “fundamentally dehumanizing” implies that war takes on the antagonistic form of enmity.<sup>104</sup> By advocating for a dissent, which “*resist[s] dehumanizing anyone*” Ivie seeks to ensure that dissent, as realization of *agonistic* contestation, “is a mainstay of democratic citizenship, not a luxury, a nuisance, or a malfunction.”<sup>105</sup> The role of rhetoric here, as before, is to transform enemies into adversaries through metaphor and to elevate discourses of dissent to a level of legitimacy on par, or perhaps even beyond, discourses of war. In this way, Ivie seeks to tap the rhetorical potential of advocacy for dissent as a means of counter-advocacy. The role of rhetoric in agonistic democracy is thus not only to ensure the articulation of agonistic discourses, but to emphasize their antagonistic nature. That is, rhetoric makes the contestatory connections between discourses clear such that judgment can be rendered. It identifies agonistic discourses as discourses in conflict that require a choice or a judgment—an action—by the *demos*.

When Mort Sahl refers to himself and his role as comedian as “the loyal opposition,” he taps this very reserve of agonistic rhetorical potential. As Cicero contends, comedy is most effective as an antagonizing force, a discourse that stands against and responds to some other discourse. Thus, an additional connection between comedy and democracy is the role of dissent in maintaining a truly democratic society. Comedy provides a safe space for the formulation and expression of dissenting ideas and perspectives by transforming private, social spaces into public, political spaces. While the influence of an argument delivered on a nightclub stage is likely dwarfed by one in a more traditional political speech, the interaction between speaker and audience during the stand-up routine is uniquely suited to highlighting antagonisms and drawing the lines between “us” and “them.” In part, this is because comedy blurs the lines between what is public and what is private. Comedy, and stand-up in particular, draws on both overblown

public discourses and the most intimate and mundane happenings of private life to find humor. In any given routine, a comedian might transition from a discussion of a political scandal to a series of fart jokes without batting an eye. The fluidity between the public and the private, the transcendent and the bodily, afforded by comedy politicizes private spaces and makes the political personal just as an agonistic democracy would alter social and political spaces to encourage rich pluralism among antagonizing discourses.

Thus, I begin with the assertion that comedy and democracy are connected by their agonizingly comic rhetorical potential. In order to illustrate the potentials and pitfalls of such a rhetoric I will appeal to satirical stand-up comedy performances. While Lawrence Mintz contends that the genre we call “stand-up” should be broadened to include sit-coms, improv, film and sketch comedy, I prefer here to retain a more restrictive understanding of the genre.<sup>106</sup> By stand-up comedy I intend a form of *direct* humorous exchange between a comedian-rhetor and her or his comedy seeking audience. The exchange, on its face, appears monologic but the laughter of the audience completes its transaction and reveals its dialogic nature. Such performances become satirical when the humor used by the comedian is organized not only around the laughter which he or she seeks to wrest from an audience, but also around a critique of some targeted subject. I make these distinctions in order to address not only the lack of stand-up studies in the rhetorical literature and the habitual blending of comic genres that produces inexact criticism and theory, but also because this definition emphasizes the *rhetorical* nature of the performances as a kind of public address that is particularly suited to rhetorical critique.

While stand-up comedy, as described here, has been a part of American culture—and indeed the Western rhetorical tradition—since its earliest formations, a general survey of two hundred years of American stand-up comedy is probably too vague to be especially productive

and the availability of the earliest performances is scarce and unreliable. For these reasons, I will turn to the cultural moment referred to as the rise of “new comedians” or “sick comedians” and the generation of “counterculture comedians” that followed as exemplars of the agonizing comic rhetoric that reveals the democratic potentials of humorous rhetoric.

On August 15, 1960, *Time Magazine* drew a circle around this movement in comedy emphasizing how different the “new comedians”—performers including Mort Sahl, Lenny Bruce, Jonathan Winters, Nichols and May, and Shelly Berman—were from the traditional song-and-dance vaudevillians of the Catskill Mountain resorts known as the Borscht Belt. Against the post-war backdrop of McCarthyism and the Cold War, these new comedians found a public prepared to hear comedic commentary and social criticism. As American society began to scrutinize conventional cultural norms and political policies, satire took notice and altered the course of comedy. Where the “old” comedians relied on one-liners and mother-in-law jokes for their material, the “new” comedians rapped about politics, current events, social taboos and the mundanity of everyday life in their monologues to get laughs. For the Borscht Belters, such as Jack Benny and Harry Youngman, the audience needed an escape from the horrors of an extensive and costly World War, whereas the post-war audience of the “new comedians,” no longer crippled by the fear that consumed previous generations, yearned for more substantive comedy. Where the traditional comedians wanted you to laugh and have a good time, the “new comedians” wanted you to laugh and ask why. Unlike the vaudevillians, new comedy was smart, it was harsh, and *it was recorded*.

The first live stand-up comedy album was Mort Sahl’s renegade recording of *Live at Sunset* in 1953. Recorded without permission and released in 1955, the album featured extended discussions of Hi-Fi, the Eisenhower administration, college life, and journalistic standards,

peppered with biting asides about American culture drawn from the headlines found in the rolled up newspaper Sahl carried on stage as he filled time between sets for the Dave Brubeck Quartet. The success of Sahl's early recordings opened a new market for the recording industry, and live comedy records soon became a mainstay in record shops across the country thereby giving comedians access to an ever expanding audience and giving audiences privileged enough to own playback devices—which is to say mostly white men of economic means—greater access to the comedians and their comedy. The 1960 *Time* report on the new comedy movement credits Sahl as the unofficial leader and trailblazer of the movement because of his radically satirical monologues, but his recordings and his live performances in jazz clubs that carved out a previously nonexistent comedy club circuit were every bit as important, if not more important, than his formic and stylistic contributions to the art. Sahl's comedy found an audience in college-aged jazz-cats and as that audience grew it began turning to other sources for the humorous social and political commentary that it had grown to enjoy.

Over the following two decades, stand-up comedy enjoyed a rise in cultural significance and influence. Lenny Bruce played Carnegie Hall and made headlines with four-letter words; George Carlin sold out auditoriums touring with big-time rock-and-roll acts while making Bruce's linguistic taboos seem tame; and Richard Pryor and Dick Gregory sold millions of albums by taking the stage in white nightclubs and advocating for civil rights. What is significant about these feats is that they were accomplished by performers who were primarily *stand-up comedians*. These folks were not sit-com celebrities, late-show hosts, or film actors that did some stand-up on the side. They may have appeared in the occasional television cameo or film, but they were all, first and foremost, stand-ups who took the stage each night to work out their own satirical material without the safety net of a hired staff of writers or a plot to fall back

on. Their success and fame came by way of the stand-up stage, comedy records, and book length treatments of their material. These comedians, in their historical moment, calcified the change in comedy for the generations of merrymakers still to come.

For these reasons, I will draw on their work as exemplars of American comedy for this analysis. Their albums, books, and concert footage cobbled together create a web of texts well suited for bringing the critic into their world and the experience of satirical stand-up comedy performance. While it certainly would be appropriate to address any of these of performers individually for extended study, any choice would reveal an exclusion that would prevent a critic from speaking generally about stand-up satire. Further, any such choice is nearly impossible to make given the proliferation of stand-up comedy at that time and the unique influence of each comedian on contemporary comedy. Because my goal is not to speak to the rhetoric of any given performer, but to the rhetoric of American stand-up comedy as it relates to democracy, selecting only a few from among the giants of new comedy would frame this critique as a series of disconnected studies of individuals rather than a study of stand-up comedy.

Therefore, I will argue for a series of theoretical developments that move toward a rhetoric of American stand-up satire by drawing on important moments, performances, and material from the era that has had such a significant impact on contemporary American stand-up comedy, the American tradition of satire, and American democracy. My choices regarding comedians and their material is driven by their ability to provide examples of where stand-up comedy explicitly brings the democratic features of American public life to our attention. In this way, my selection of satirists is restricted to those comedians who chose issues of democratic culture as topics for their comedy rather than comics whose performances are political in less direct ways.<sup>107</sup> Thus, I am expressly concerned with the comedy of Mort Sahl, Dick Gregory,

Lenny Bruce, Richard Pryor and George Carlin as each performer either leaned heavily upon American politics for comic fodder or otherwise challenged the American political system in their comedy.

In essence, I contend that the stand-up satire proffered by these comics, and imitated by future generations, provides their audiences with “equipments for citizenship” premised upon radical and plural understandings of democracy. In supporting this claim, I build my argument as an analysis of the stand-up genre by considering what Aristotle refers to as the three fundamental features of any speech situation: “a speaker and a subject on which [she or] he speaks and someone addressed”—a rhetor, his or her rhetoric, and an audience.<sup>108</sup> Prior to engaging in each of these three components of the genre, however, I begin with a chapter outlining the historical trajectories of both stand-up comedy and satire in the context of American culture and by considering each comedian’s career in terms of those historical courses beginning with the first contemporary stand-up comedian, Mort Sahl and ending with the most prolific and longest tenured stand-up satirist, George Carlin.

In the second chapter of this dissertation, I treat the stand-up satirist as a rhetor and identify two prominent features of the genre and their democratic functions. First, I argue that the stand-up comedian is most rhetorically efficacious when she or he presents an “authentic” persona derived from personal experiences and perceived historical realities that cohere with their audience’s cultural imaginary. Such a perspective equips audiences for citizenship by locating the primary source of a rhetor’s *ethos* within the *demos*. Second, I suggest that stand-up satire requires a terministic opposition to its targets and therefore equips citizens for perpetual critique that maintains an attitude of *ironic agonism* while avoiding agency-limiting labels that preclude democratic discussion and contestation.

In the third chapter, I take up a discussion of satire as a rhetoric. I begin the chapter by laying a foundation for my own theorizing about comedy and rhetoric by discussing the struggle for legitimacy between the competing modalities of discourse organized by comedy and seriousness. This ontological perspective on the rhetorical nature of comedy and seriousness functions, I argue, to equip satirical audiences to be aware that democracy is a fundamentally *multimodal* discourse. Turning from the ontological to the ontic nature of satire, I contend that stand-up satire fulfills three important democratic functions for its audiences that equip them for a citizenship of dissent. First, it translates the complex mythological discourse of politics into the language of the *demos*. Second, it speaks to truth to power by drawing on examples of experiential realities to reveal the world “as it is.” And third, it takes ideals seriously and demands that the discourses of idealism that organize public life live up to the ideals for which they advocate. In the final section of this chapter, I explore a key limitation of satire as a discourse of dissent by drawing on examples from Mort Sahl’s, Lenny Bruce’s, and Dick Gregory’s failed attempts to engage in serious, rather than comic, forms of dissent.

The fourth chapter of this study addresses the rhetorical nature of the audience for stand-up satire. In this section, I suggest that the stand-up audience functions not only as a public constituted by the satirical text, but also as a comedic counterpublic that stands against the serious discourse that dominates the public sphere. In addition, I suggest that the audience, in collaboration with the performer, constitutes a standard for judging public forms of humor that I refer to as the “public sense of humor.” Such a standard marks the boundaries of what is and is not speakable and what can and cannot be laughed about and therefore simultaneously constrains the *demos* by restricting forms of public expression. In this way, I suggest the laughter cultivated by the satirical stand-up performances is actually an articulation of the *vox populi* that features

passions rather than rationale deliberation. Thus, by participating in comedic counterpublics, audience members equip themselves for citizenship by engaging in alternative expressions of public voice and dialogically constituting the standard by which public humor comes to be understood as such.

Drawing on the confluence of literature from rhetorical studies, humor studies, and democratic theory, this dissertation not only corrects an oversight—the general lack of scholarly attention paid to stand-up comedy—but also to find productive linkages between each tradition that can be mined for further insight into the complex relationships between comedy, democracy, and rhetoric. Although each chapter offers a series of interrelated theoretical claims, each serves to demonstrate that stand-up satire, in the context of American public culture, provides its audience with equipment for citizenship. In this way, the form is fraught with democratic potential and is worthy of further consideration.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This according to the results of 2009 Online Poll by *TIME* conducted after the death of Walter Cronkite. Stewart received 44 percent of the vote besting Brian Williams, Charlie Gibson and Katie Couric. The poll is longer available online, but several news sources confirm its results. See, Jason Linkins, "Online Poll: Jon Stewart Is America's Most Trusted Newsman," *Huffington Post*, August 22, 2009, accessed on June 10, 2014,

[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/07/22/time-magazine-poll-jon-st\\_n\\_242933.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/07/22/time-magazine-poll-jon-st_n_242933.html)

<sup>2</sup> Mort Sahl, *Mort Sahl at Sunset*. Fantasy 7005, 1958.

<sup>3</sup> Shelly Berman and Jane Coleman quoted in Gerald Nachman, *Seriously Funny* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2003): 69-70.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Hariman, "Political Parody and Public Culture," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 94 (August 2008): 248.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 248.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 265.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 260.

<sup>8</sup> Don Waisanen, "A Citizen's Guides to Democracy Inaction: Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert's Comic Rhetorical Criticism," *Southern Communication Journal* 74 (March 2009): 134-135.

<sup>9</sup> Paul Achter, "Comedy in Unfunny Times: News Parody and Carnival After 9/11," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 25 (August 2008): 276.

<sup>10</sup> Joanne Gilbert, "Performing Marginality: Comedy, Identity, and Cultural Critique" *Text & Performance Quarterly* 17 (October 1997): 317.

<sup>11</sup> Susan Pelle, “The ‘Grotesque’ Pussy: ‘Transformational Shame’ in Margaret Cho’s Stand-up Performances,” *Text and Performance Quarterly* 30 (January 2010): 34-35.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>13</sup> Kyra Pearson, “‘Words Should do the Work of Bombs’: Margaret Cho as Symbolic Assassin,” *Women & Language* 32 (Spring 2009): 41-42.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>15</sup> Stephen Gencarella Olbrys, “Disciplining the Carnavalesque: Chris Farley’s Exotic Dance,” *Communication & Critical/Cultural Studies* 3 (September 2006): 240-259; Stephen Gencarella Olbrys, “Seinfeld’s Democratic Vistas” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 22 (December 2005): 390-408; Brian L. Ott & Beth Bonnstetter, “‘We’re at Now, Now’: *Spaceballs* as Parodic Tourism,” *Southern Communication Journal* 72 (October-December 2007): 309-327.

<sup>16</sup> Although I address both routines later in the dissertation, a description of Sahl’s commentary on the Warren Commission Report can be found on the documentary “The Loyal Opposition” and George Carlin’s “Seven Words” routine appears on *Class Clown* (1972).

<sup>17</sup> Kenneth Burke, *Rhetoric of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969): 43, Italics original.

<sup>18</sup> Kenneth Burke, *Philosophy of Literary Form*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973): 304, Italics original.

<sup>19</sup> Hariman, “Parody and Public Culture,” 262.

<sup>20</sup> For instance, Burke suggests that Marx and Veblen are both “high comedy” in *Attitudes Toward History*

<sup>21</sup> Kenneth Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973): 41-42.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>23</sup> Plato, *Republic*, 1.3.388e, available at

[http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=urn:cts:greekLit:tlg0059.tlg030.perseus-](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=urn:cts:greekLit:tlg0059.tlg030.perseus-eng1:3.388e)

[eng1:3.388e](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=urn:cts:greekLit:tlg0059.tlg030.perseus-eng1:3.388e); Plato, *Gorgias*, 473e, available at

[http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=urn:cts:greekLit:tlg0059.tlg023.perseus-](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=urn:cts:greekLit:tlg0059.tlg023.perseus-eng1:473e)

[eng1:473e](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=urn:cts:greekLit:tlg0059.tlg023.perseus-eng1:473e).

<sup>24</sup> Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 3.18.7, available at

[http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=urn:cts:greekLit:tlg0086.tlg038.perseus-](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=urn:cts:greekLit:tlg0086.tlg038.perseus-eng1:3.18.7)

[eng1:3.18.7](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=urn:cts:greekLit:tlg0086.tlg038.perseus-eng1:3.18.7)., Ibid., 3.14.7, available at

[http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=urn:cts:greekLit:tlg0086.tlg038.perseus-](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=urn:cts:greekLit:tlg0086.tlg038.perseus-eng1:3.14.7)

[eng1:3.14.7](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=urn:cts:greekLit:tlg0086.tlg038.perseus-eng1:3.14.7).

<sup>25</sup> He indicates in the text that he lists a compendium of strategies for the rhetor in *Poetics*, but that section of *Poetics* is lost suggesting that Aristotle favored the cruel joke above all else.

<sup>26</sup> Cicero, *De Oratore*, 2.216B, 2.218.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 2.220.

<sup>28</sup> Interestingly, the two strategies often appear in concert as in George Carlin's famous bits about euphemisms and obscenity, which are monologues comprised of little more than wordplay.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 2.221.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 2.229, 2.236.

- <sup>31</sup> Maurice Charland, "Constitutive Rhetoric: The case of the Peuple Quebecois," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 73, (May 1987): 133-150.
- <sup>32</sup> Wayne Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974): 34.
- <sup>33</sup> David Kaufer, "Irony and Rhetorical Strategy" *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 10 (Spring 1977): 105.
- <sup>34</sup> Edwin Black, "The Second Persona," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 56 (April 1970): 111-113.
- <sup>35</sup> Wander, Phillip. "The Third Persona: An Ideological Turn in Rhetorical Theory." *Central States Speech Journal* 35.4 (1984): 209.
- <sup>36</sup> The Dublin born Swift was not likely to endorse greedy Londoners feasting on Irish babies having been, himself, such an infant in the not so distant past.
- <sup>37</sup> The problem of intent entails the critics inability to actually be able to concretely claim to know what is or is not intended by a rhetor's speech. In short, as a rhetorical critic, I am ill-equipped to speak to what a rhetor intended in her or his speech even though assumptions of intent are a necessary component of most criticisms.
- <sup>38</sup> Lisa Gring-Pemble & Martha Solomon Watson, "The Rhetorical Limits of Satire: An Analysis of James Finn Garner's Politically Correct Bedtime Stories," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 89 (May 2003): 136.
- <sup>39</sup> Jonathan Gray, Jeffrey Jones & Ethan Thompson, *Satire TV: Politics and Comedy in the Post-Network Era* (New York: New York University Press 2009): 12.
- <sup>40</sup> Kenneth Burke, *Permanence and Change*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Los Altos: Hermes Publications, 1984): lv.
- <sup>41</sup> Ibid., 76.
- <sup>42</sup> Ibid., 36.
- <sup>43</sup> Ibid., 90, 69.

<sup>44</sup> see Burke, *Permanence and Change*.

<sup>45</sup> Hariman, 249.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 253.

<sup>47</sup> Jonathan Gray, "Television Teaching: Parody, the Simpsons, and Media Literacy Education," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 22 (August 2005): 227. Ott and Bonnstetter make a similar claim about parody's capacity to teach generic conventions in film in their above cited essay on "parodic tourism."

<sup>48</sup> Hariman, "Parody and Public Culture," 264.

<sup>49</sup> See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).

<sup>50</sup> Olbrys, "Disciplining the Carnavalesque," 242; Achter, "Comedy in Unfunny Times," 282.

<sup>51</sup> Achter, 280.

<sup>52</sup> M. Lane Bruner, "Carnavalesque Protest and the Humorless State," *Text & Performance Quarterly* 25 (April 2005): 138.

<sup>53</sup> John C. Meyer, "Humor as a Double-Edged Sword: Four Functions of Humor in Communication," *Communication Theory* 10 (August 2000): 329.

<sup>54</sup> John C. Meyer, "Ronald Reagan and Humor: A Politician's Velvet Weapon," *Communication Studies* 41 (Spring 1990): 87.

<sup>55</sup> Gring-Pemble & Watson, for example, use Meyer in conversation with Burke

<sup>56</sup> For Philosophical treatments see: Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (Mineola: Dover 2005); John Morreall, *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987); John Morreall, *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor (New Directions in Aesthetics)* (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2003) and

Simon Critchley *On Humor (Thinking in Action)* (New York: Routledge, 2002). For Anthropological treatments see: Elliot Oring, *Engaging Humor* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003) and Joseph Boskin, *Rebellious Laughter* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1997). For Media Studies treatments see: See Arthur Berger, *An Anatomy of Humor* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1993); Ethan Thompson, *Parody and Taste in Postwar American Television Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2011); Jonathan Gray, Jeffrey Jones & Ethan Thompson eds., *Satire TV*.

<sup>57</sup> Jeremy Engels, “Democratic Alienation” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 11 (Fall 2008): 475.

<sup>58</sup> Burke indicates that where something affirms its lack of politics we should immediately look for its politics, *Rhetoric of Motives*, 28.

<sup>59</sup> See Jennifer R. Mercieca, *Founding Fictions* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2010) and Jeremy Engels, *Enemyship: Democracy and Counter-Revolution in the Early Republic* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2010).

<sup>60</sup> See Robert L. Ivie, *Democracy and America’s War on Terror* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005).

<sup>61</sup> Gerard Hauser, “A Rhetorical Democracy and Civic Engagement,” in Gerard Hauser and Amy Grim eds., *Rhetorical Democracy: Discursive Practices of Civic Engagement* (Mahwah: Erlbaum, 2004): 2.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>63</sup> C. Douglas Lummis, *Radical Democracy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997): 22.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>65</sup> Benjamin R. Barber, “Neither Leaders nor Followers: Citizenship under Strong Democracy,” in *A Passion for Democracy: American Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 110. Italics added for emphasis.

<sup>66</sup> Lummis, *Radical Democracy*, 159.

<sup>67</sup> Michael Butterworth, “The Politics of the Pitch: Claiming and Contesting Democracy Through the Iraqi National Soccer Team,” *Communication & Critical/Cultural Studies* 4 (June 2007): 186.

<sup>68</sup> John S. Dryzek, *Deliberative Global Politics: Discourse and Democracy in a Divided World* (Cambridge: Polity, 2006): 25.

<sup>69</sup> Robert Asen, “A Discourse Theory of Citizenship,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 90 (May 2004): 203.

<sup>70</sup> See Nathan Crick, *Democracy & Rhetoric: John Dewey on the Arts of Becoming* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2010).

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>72</sup> Sheldon S. Wolin, “Fugitive Democracy,” *Constellations* 1 (1994): 18.

<sup>73</sup> William Connolly, *Pluralism*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005): 121.

<sup>74</sup> Crick, *Democracy & Rhetoric* 14.

<sup>75</sup> See Robert Danisch, *Pragmatism, Democracy, and the Necessity of Rhetoric* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2007).

<sup>76</sup> See *Gorgias* and *The Republic* respectively.

<sup>77</sup> While, at the same time, positioning Plato himself as the best possible alternative in governance.

<sup>78</sup> Bryan Garsten, *Saving Persuasion: A Defense of Rhetoric and Judgment* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009): 56.

<sup>79</sup> Thomas Murphy, "Deliberative Democracy and the Public Sphere: Answer or Anachronism?" in *Talking Democracy: Historical Perspectives on Rhetoric and Democracy*, eds. Benedetto Fontana, Cary J. Nederman, and Gary Remer (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004): 214-215.

<sup>80</sup> Danisch, *Pragmatism, Democracy, and the Necessity of Rhetoric*, 60.

<sup>81</sup> Robert L. Ivie, "Rhetorical Deliberation and Democratic Politics in the Here and Now," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 5 (Summer 2002): 278; *War on Terror*, 28.

<sup>82</sup> Ivie, "Rhetorical Deliberation" 278.

<sup>83</sup> Andrew Schaap, "Political Theory and the Agony of Politics," *Political Studies Review* 5 (2007): 57.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>85</sup> See, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Verso, 2001) and Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (London: Verso, 2000).

<sup>86</sup> Mouffe, *Democratic Paradox*, 104.

<sup>87</sup> Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 163.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., xiii-xiv, emphasis original.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>90</sup> Chantal Mouffe, *On The Political* (London: Routledge, 2005): 62; Chantal Mouffe, *The Return of the Political* (London: Verso, 1993): 115.



<sup>91</sup> Any articulation of rationality is necessitated by an equal and opposite articulation of irrationality, which will necessarily prevent rationality from being fully realized. Such an argument is not unlike Burke's notion that identification is compensatory to division.

<sup>92</sup> Mouffe, *Democratic Paradox*, 12-13

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 183.

<sup>95</sup> *HSS*, 178.

<sup>96</sup> *HSS*, 181.

<sup>97</sup> A notable exception to this claim can be found in Butterworth's work that reveals the political nature of sport. See for example, "The Politics of the Pitch."

<sup>98</sup> Ivie, *War on Terror*, 168.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>101</sup> Burke, *Rhetoric of Motives*, 23.

<sup>102</sup> For more on the philosophy of humor see John Morreall, *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1987).

<sup>103</sup> Ivie, "Rhetorical Deliberation," 281.

<sup>104</sup> Robert L. Ivie, *Dissent from War* (Bloomfield: Kumarian, 2007): 48.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 50, 6.

<sup>106</sup> Lawrence E. Mintz, "Stand-up Comedy as Social and Cultural Mediation" *American Quarterly* 37 (Spring 1985): 71.

<sup>107</sup> For example, where Phyllis Diller is political by the very nature of her presence in a male dominated arena, her humor is not especially concerned with democracy or American political culture and therefore she has been excluded from this study.

<sup>108</sup> Burke, *Rhetoric of Motives*, 1.3.1.

## CHAPTER I. A BRIEF HISTORY OF STAND-UP COMEDY AND SATIRE IN AMERICA

By the late 1950s stand-up comedy had become a legitimate cultural and political force in the United States. This moment, which has been called the rise of the “new comedians,” represents an important intersection between stand-up comedy and political satire. Over the course of this chapter, I will provide context for that intersection before offering a series of somewhat chronological portraits of the careers of the three stand-up artists—Mort Sahl, Lenny Bruce, and Dick Gregory—who, collectively, best exemplify the political significance of “new comedy.” These three comics, however, only tell the first half of the story that I wish to relate in this dissertation. They were tremendously important in terms of carving out a space for stand-up comedy and political satire in the cultural landscape, but the counterculture heirs to their comedy legacy—Richard Pryor and George Carlin—had an even greater impact on the art form for the generations of American stand-up comics to come. For this reason, the latter half of this chapter is dedicated to sketching out the careers of Pryor and Carlin, comedians who would become voices of the counterculture and the standards by which all stand-up comedy, American or otherwise, would be judged.

Given my starting point, the history of stand-up comedy is surprisingly brief. Of course, as Stephanie Olson rightly indicates, “Predecessors to the standup [sic] comedian—clowns, jesters, tricksters, and fools” have appeared across cultures since ancient times.<sup>1</sup> But in America, even though humor and political satire flourished at the dawn of the new republic in the form of cartoons, pamphlets, essays, and newspapers the puritanical urges of the earliest settlers stunted the cultivation of stand-up comedy for the emerging nation. In fact, “in 1774 the Continental Congress closed by decree all places of public amusement.”<sup>2</sup> Divorced from its stage, early

American stand-up comedy took to the road and joined the circus, a place where its clowns and jesters found a haven for their acts. Of course, these earliest incarnations of what would become stand-up comedy scarcely resembled the contemporary form, but we should not understate their importance as an early cultural expression in cultivating an audience for humorous entertainment.

While it may seem like a stretch to think of a circus clown or ringmaster as an early stand-up artist, the development of lecture circuits featuring the likes of political humorist Mark Twain, among others, telling tall tales and satirizing life in nineteenth century America offers a much clearer resemblance to what the form would become. Just as the circus helped encourage the emergence of an audience for humorous spectacle, Twain and his contemporaries fostered a similar taste for political critique and satirical commentary packaged as humorous monologues that would persist into future expressions of stand-up comedy. By the turn of the twentieth century, stand-up comedy had settled down and taken up residence in vaudeville houses and variety show theaters across the country. Still in its infancy, stand-up comedy was only one among the many forms presented in those theaters. Often, shows included monologues and jokes, but also burlesque dancers, song-and-dance routines, skits, and acrobats. For this reason, the earliest stand-up comics were often performers capable of following a joke with a tap dance number or an *a cappella* medley. Among those early comics, vaudeville and variety theaters offered one of the most influential early twentieth century stand-up artists— Ziegfeld Follies’ and rodeo performer Will Rogers—a place to hone his craft and find an audience.

Famous for wisecracks such as, “I am not a member of any organized political party. I am a Democrat,” and his folksy Oklahoman persona, Will Rogers traded in his lariat for a microphone and became one of the most influential people, let alone comedians, of the early

twentieth century. In fact, in 1928 Rogers even ran for president under the banner of the *Life* magazine sponsored “Anti-Bunk Party.” His stand-up and radio material was decidedly political in nature and, as Alison Dagnes observes, “He was also a prolific writer who wrote often about American politics, and his critical observations conveyed his annoyances with parties and politics using humor.”<sup>3</sup> Rogers, perhaps, was the first comedian in the United States to explore the political and particularly democratic capacity of comedy in earnest. For that reason, comedy historian Arthur Dudden considers him “the last great American political humorist of familiar stripe” in a “line of highly successful professional wits, who, from the middle of the nineteenth century onward, had raised political humor to a national forum for skeptical and dissenting viewpoints.”<sup>4</sup>

By the end of Rogers’s career in the 1930s, the vaudeville houses in America had already begun the shift from live performances to filmed expositions, and stand-up comedy—not welcome in the cinema—was again left out on the street in search of a new home. This time, instead of hitting the road with the circus, stand-up took up residence in the resorts of the Catskill Mountains. These resorts, collectively known as the “Borscht Belt,” became the “training ground for such famous comedians as Jerry Lewis, Danny Kaye, Joey Adams, Red Buttons, Jan Marry, Buddy Hackett, Mel Brooks, and Sid Caesar.”<sup>5</sup> Like the comedians of vaudeville, these men—and they were mostly men—offered joke-book gags, such as Henry Youngman’s famous quip, “take my wife—please!” between songs and the kept the crowd of resort guests entertained while serving as emcee for the other acts. The difference, perhaps, was that these comics were no longer trying to break into radio with monologues and sketch performances like the vaudevillians. With the dawn of network television upon them and the movie business in full swing, these comedians had bigger plans. While a handful of these performers went on to

continue to do stand-up as their careers progressed, the vast majority of them made the transition from stage to screen, plying their knack for one-liners and physical comedy as writers, actors, and directors for comedy movies, television sit-coms, and variety shows.

Where the Borscht Belt offered stand-up comedy a home for a series of predominantly Jewish comedians and their audiences, the “Chitlin Circuit” offered the same for African American audiences.<sup>6</sup> Reclaiming old vaudeville houses mostly in large urban areas east of the Mississippi, the Chitlin Circuit did for black comedians such as Jackie “Moms” Mabley, Redd Foxx, and Dewey “Pigmeat” Markham what the Borscht Belt did for the mostly Jewish comedians it sheltered. Like the Borscht Belters, these versatile comics worked alongside musicians and filled time with comic stories, one-liners, and musical numbers for their audiences. Unlike the Borscht Belters, however, the Chitlin’ Circuit was not the fast track to television and movies. Segregation in America made such mainstream success a challenge for these comedians, though some did manage to reach “cross-over” audiences with “party” records and variety show appearances. In this way, the impact of their stand-up comedy was mostly confined to the clubs on the circuit and the African American audiences who frequented them.

Importantly, during the Borscht Belt and Chitlin’ Circuit eras of stand-up comedy, political satire had more or less gone by the wayside in large part because the audience, enduring World War II and the beginnings of the Cold War and the Korean War, had lost their taste for such criticism. Dagnes writes, “With the American audience distracted by other media and unreceptive to establishment-critiquing satire, the immediate run-up to World War II was not a particularly prolific time for satire. Neither was war-time itself.”<sup>7</sup> In fact, even “the time period immediately following World War II was not one that would be particularly fertile for comedy.”<sup>8</sup>

This is especially true for stand-up comedy as it retreated even from the gentle satire of Will Rogers into the escapism of resort and nightclub diversions.

All of that changed, however, as the Korean War drew to a close in the early 1950s. According to Gerald Nachman, the comics that emerged thereafter “were a totally different species from any that came before” because their comedy “didn’t just pulverize us with a volley of joke-book gags.” Instead, this “new post-Korean War comedy poked and prodded and observed,” as they found new means of “demolishing fond shibboleths left and right.”<sup>9</sup> A new comic sensibility was materializing and, as it did, the form of stand-up comedy that contemporary audiences find familiar reached its maturity. No longer a side-show or warm-up act, stand-up comedy took center stage and brought political satire with it into the spotlight. Whereas satire formerly closed shows on Saturday nights for already exhausted audiences, “come the mid-1950s and ‘60s, satire was playing to sold-out houses.”<sup>10</sup> American audiences grew more and more receptive to anti-establishment humor and as a result, argues historian Stephen Kercher, “political humor flourished to an extent unprecedented in the post war period.”<sup>11</sup>

In December of 1953, political satire and stand-up comedy became forever intertwined in the biting topical commentary hurled from the stage of a San Francisco folksinger nightspot known as the Hungry i. From the cramped stage in that smallish, cellar-level room, a young, unknown comedian dared to challenge his audience. “Have you seen the [Senator Joseph] McCarthy jacket?” he asked, “it’s like an [President Ike] Eisenhower jacket only it’s got an extra flap that fits over the mouth!”<sup>12</sup> As the audience roared their approval in a burst of laughter the comedic revolution that would give birth to “New Comedy” was only just beginning.

### **Mort Sahl: The Hungry Intellectual**

—*George Washington couldn't tell a lie, Nixon couldn't tell the truth, and Reagan couldn't tell the difference.*<sup>13</sup>

Mort Sahl debuted at the hungry i on December 25, 1953. For the first time, San Franciscans were introduced to what would become the “new” comedy in the United States. “Perched on a stool with his ever-present newspaper,” Sahl delivered his monologues as “an acerbic college professor, lecturing from afar”<sup>14</sup> about everything from politics and the press to jazz culture and psychoanalysis. His act so impressed hungry i owner Enrico Banducci that he was offered \$75 a week to fill time between musical acts. Sahl used the stage at the hungry i as a place to hone his craft, build his audience, and tap into the important issues of his day, just as Will Rogers learned how to be his “natchel self” and get laughs about politics working for rodeo and variety show crowds. The difference was that Sahl had no blueprint to follow because he had no show business experience and he was not working an established comedy circuit like the Borscht Belt. He was just a graduate school dropout on a stage in “a cave under San Francisco with eighty-three benches seating eighty-three” talking about whatever was on his mind.<sup>15</sup> Luckily for him, material was never in short supply and his audience responded favorably to his take on the world in which they lived; so much so that they began associating the hungry i with Mort Sahl.

In terms of style, Sahl was unlike anything that came before him, in part because he admits that he “didn’t have the equipment.”<sup>16</sup> Having lived for a time in a friend’s car in Berkeley, California as “the academic equivalent of a ski bum,” he lacked the tuxedo, joke-book gags, and stagecraft of the other comedians of his day.<sup>17</sup> When Sahl took to the stage, he resembled a graduate student more than a comedian in his “his trademark slacks and sweater”



and carried only “a rolled-up newspaper [that] furnished all the material he needed.”<sup>18</sup> He later admitted that the broadside, which would become the lynchpin of his act, actually began as a crutch for his lack of performance experience. “I couldn’t remember my material,” he writes in his autobiography, “so I stapled it inside a newspaper.”<sup>19</sup>

What Sahl lacked in experience and polish, however, he made up for with his clearly articulated sense of comic voice and attitude. Gerald Nachman explains that “other comedians labored to find a stage persona, a voice, but Sahl’s actual persona was eccentric enough, and his voice was loud and clear. He was a force of nature, a whirlwind whose ideas defined him; behind each joke lurked a sharply etched, cynical worldview.”<sup>20</sup> His persona reflected the jazz culture from which it emerged.<sup>21</sup> Not only did he frequently interject the slang of his generation into his monologues, but he also managed to foster a certain free-flowing, improvisational edge in his comedy. A writer in *Time* explains:

...he states his theme and takes off like a jazz musician on a flight of improvisation—or seeming improvisation. He does not tell jokes one by one, but carefully builds deceptively miscellaneous structures of jokes that are like verbal mobiles. He begins with the spine of a subject, then hooks thought onto thought, joke onto dangling joke; many of them totally unrelated to the main theme, [until] the whole structure spins but somehow balances. At the time he is building toward a final statement, which is too much part of the whole to be called a punch line, but puts that particular theme away forever.<sup>22</sup>

Of course Sahl’s routines were not entirely off-the-cuff as he kept his lead sheet hidden inside his newspaper. Even so, he says that his “modus operandi was not to rehearse” because practicing his act would have been “like rehearsing a conversation” rather than a monologue.<sup>23</sup> For this reason, he rarely wrote his material out verbatim—even claiming that he didn’t “know how to

write it on a typewriter”—but he was a voracious reader of the news and, as such, was “always preparing.”<sup>24</sup>

This preparation was, perhaps, one of the most significant components of his style because it expanded the material available to the stand-up comic. Sahl refused to lean on mother-in-law jokes and instead drew laughter from the well of everyday life. Nachman explains, “Hearing him now is like reading an old newspaper, edited with smart aleck footnotes.”<sup>25</sup> He quipped about the events of the day, the quality of news coverage, the contradictions in American values, and, importantly, politics. As one reviewer in *Time* described, “He runs on and on and on, a Beat-Generation Cotton Mather who gives half the names in the news a beating, cracking his whip up Pennsylvania Avenue one minute, down Madison Avenue the next.”<sup>26</sup> Sahl’s blend of topical comedy and political satire became his trademark and anti-hypocrisy his guide. He described his personal politics as being driven by “the of lack tolerance” which appeared on either side of the aisle in American political discourse.<sup>27</sup> Thus his “often mercilessly abusive” political material was described as being “sharply on target” for “both political left and right.”<sup>28</sup> He went after both President Eisenhower and President Kennedy with equal fervor and even took to being introduced as “The Next President of the United States” when he walked on stage.

It should be no surprise that Sahl garnered much comparison to his predecessor, Will Rogers. However, even though Sahl may have been “the first notable American political satirist since Will Rogers” the two were quite different in terms of their attitudes toward comedy and politics.<sup>29</sup> Where Rogers was folksy, Sahl was hip. Where Rogers liked to claim “I never met a man I didn’t like,” Sahl took joy in asking, “Are there any groups here I haven’t offended yet?”<sup>30</sup> Where Rogers’s “jokes weren’t meant to wound or to make anyone squirm; Sahl’s were, and

did.”<sup>31</sup> For these reasons he was more of a “Will Rogers with fangs.”<sup>32</sup> But the differences between the two went beyond aggressiveness. Sahl explains, “Rogers came on the stage and impersonated a yokel who was critical of the federal government. And when I come on the stage, I impersonate an intellectual who is critical of yokels who are running the federal government. Other than that, we’re similar in every respect.”<sup>33</sup> The intellectualism of Sahl’s material, combined with sharply honed political satire, helped to make his comedy revolutionary. Stand-up comic and comedy director Woody Allen once commented, “[Sahl] had genuine insights. He made the country receptive to a kind of comedy it wasn’t used to hearing. He made the country listen to jokes that required them to think.”<sup>34</sup> He took his graduate student appearance to heart and refused to believe that his audience was in any way “intellectually inferior” because he thought suggesting that “the audience was not intelligent... was the ultimate discrimination.”<sup>35</sup> Unlike the previous versions of stand-up comedy found on the Borscht Belt or Chitlin’ Circuit, Sahl’s comedy was political, poignant, and smart.

Understanding the revolutionary impact that Mort Sahl had on the stand-up comedy landscape, however, requires more than understanding how different his style was from the other comics of his time. Because he was working outside of the established comedy circuits, he had to blaze his own trail and thereby make a place for the form of stand-up comedy to reside beyond the resorts and former vaudeville houses that had previously contained it. His time as the emcee at the hungry i made it into a sort of pre-modern comedy club. As the new comedy came into fashion, the i became an important stage for emerging comedians trying to build a West coast audience, such as Dick Gregory and Lenny Bruce, among others. Moreover, as Sahl’s popularity grew he began touring with jazz artists Stan Kenton and Dave Brubeck, “forging a comedy circuit out of jazz clubs... long before there were ‘comedy clubs.’”<sup>36</sup> These jazz clubs, concert

halls, and college campuses were strange places to find stand-up comedy in Sahl's day, but they would become incredibly important as the form continued to work its way to prominence in American culture.

Performing with musicians, who made at least a portion of their livelihood as recording artists, also provided the opportunity to dabble in the new medium of long playing records. In 1955 Mort Sahl's appearance alongside the Dave Brubeck Quartet at the Sunset Auditorium in Carmel, California was recorded without his knowledge. The album, *At Sunset* features two different uninterrupted live sets of Sahl's performance, one for each side. Further, it holds a place in the Library of Congress as the first live stand-up comedy recording in American history, even though it was officially released sometime after Sahl's 1958 debut album, *The Future Lies Ahead*, which was produced by the jazz label Verve. Of course, comic recordings of songs, parodies, sketches, and monologues had been playing in living rooms around the country since nearly the dawn of recording.<sup>37</sup> The difference between those recordings and *At Sunset* was the audience. *At Sunset* was recorded live rather than inside a studio and it features complete stand-up comedy sets from the performer *and* his audience's laughter. The success of Sahl's recording spawned a series of similar LPs, including the first Grammy award-winning Spoken Word Comedy album, 1959's *Inside Shelley Berman*, which Sahl reportedly persuaded Berman, who was his friend, to record after cutting *The Future Lies Ahead*.<sup>38</sup> By working the jazz clubs and colleges, and by recording his material for popular consumption, Mort Sahl, in many ways, tore stand-up comedy out of its Borscht Belt confines and brought it to the people. No longer only the purview of the wealthy resort patron, Sahl's satire made clear that stand-up comedy was a popular, and therefore potentially democratic, art form.

By 1960 Mort Sahl was reaching the highest peaks of his success and considered by many to be the figurehead of the “New Comedy” movement, which was actively adding comics such as Jonathan Winters, Shelley Berman, Bob Newhart, Nichols and May, Dick Gregory, and Lenny Bruce to its ranks. In August of that year, *Time* featured Sahl on the cover in an issue dedicated to the rise of satire and stand-up comedy. Coming seven years after the close of the Korean War, at the tail end of the lackluster Eisenhower administration, and with a contentious presidential election between old guard Republican nominee Richard Nixon and up-and-coming East Coast Democrat John F. Kennedy in full swing, the *Time* article captured Sahl in a political satirist’s paradise. Material including, “Kennedy had to have Lyndon Johnson on the ticket with him because he can’t get into Washington without an adult,” and “Nixon picked Lodge because conservative Republicans approve of anyone getting out of the United Nations,” seemed to write itself and his audience and influence reached almost Will Rogers-esque proportions. All of that would change, however, after the first Tuesday in November. Kennedy’s election would be the beginning of Sahl’s end. Whereas Kercher indicates, “most of the satire celebrated throughout American popular culture during the 1950s and early 1960s dovetailed with the cold war liberalism of Adlai Stevenson and John F. Kennedy,” Sahl’s penchant for attacking authority regardless of partisan affiliation began to try his audience’s patience.<sup>39</sup>

After having written jokes for the Kennedy campaign, Sahl struggled to find work in the same clubs that he had once sold out in part because he had set his satirical sights on the new President. In his autobiography, Sahl recalls a conversation between himself and Kennedy administration insider Milton Ebbins, where Ebbins warned, “The ambassador [the President’s father, Joseph Kennedy] says if you don’t cooperate, you’ll never work in the United States again.” Undeterred, Sahl continued writing and performing material about the young President

and then, he writes, “the work began to dry up... nothing was available at any price.”<sup>40</sup> Even the comedy record industry, which owed a great debt to Sahl, turned its back. After releasing two albums in 1961 that were rife with quips about Camelot, *The New Frontier*, and *On Relationships*, he was unable to record another album until 1967. Sahl’s unofficial blacklisting changed the course of his ascension to stand-up fame, but still he persisted. According to one report, his income during that time dropped from nearly “\$1 million a year to \$13,000.”<sup>41</sup>

Then something even worse happened: Kennedy was assassinated and the Warren Commission issued its report. Following the publication of the Warren Report, working for a television station in Los Angeles, Sahl interviewed New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison about his criticism of the commission’s findings. Convinced by Garrison’s case, Sahl quit his job with the television station and moved himself from the West Coast to New Orleans to join Garrison on his mission to discredit the Warren Report. He became so engrossed in the conspiracy theory that his comedy began to reflect his new mission. Instead of reading from the newspaper and commenting on politics, as was his usual approach to stand-up, he read lengthy sections of the Warren Report on stage and joked about its inconsistencies. Sahl’s Kennedy bashing in the first half of the 1960s annoyed his audience, but his ranting about the Warren Report nearly dissolved it. From that point forward, even though he continued to perform and record until the late 1990s—his last album was released in 1997—it was clear that his better days as a political satirist and stand-up comic were behind him.

As the first of the new comedians, Mort Sahl opened doors for a whole host of artists that would help to mold the forms of stand-up comedy and political humor for generations to come. By shirking the suit and tie and staying away from the joke books, Mort Sahl made stand-up legitimate and political humor popular. As Nachman explains, “Nobody saw Mort Sahl

coming,” but following his unprecedented rise to fame it seems reasonable to assert that “Sahl *was* the revolution.”<sup>42</sup> Or, at least, he was the *first* revolution.

### **Lenny Bruce: Satirist, Moralist, and “Sicknik” Extraordinaire**

—*Believe it or not, I have a dread of being a martyr*<sup>43</sup>

Where Mort Sahl *was* the comic revolution that merged political satire and stand-up comedy, Lenny Bruce was the comedian of the post-war era who made the biggest impact on the form. As Nachman contends, “Bruce transformed stand-up comedy even more than Mort Sahl, whose intellect was too high-pitched for most comics’ ears to catch and whose political insights demanded hard specific knowledge.”<sup>44</sup> Bruce’s slang-laden monologues and drive to challenge the taboos of the everyday made his comedy substantially more accessible than Sahl’s. Thus, even though Sahl may have been “the original sicknik” pointing out society’s ills, as one *Time* critic notes, Bruce was “the most successful” sicknik by the end of the 1950s.<sup>45</sup> What is more, his openness about sexuality, obscenity, and drug culture had a serious impact on both the civil rights movement and another burgeoning cultural movement. As Eric Bogosian writes, “Lenny was one of the bridges existing between post-war African-American culture and the ‘counter culture’ of the ‘60s and ‘70s.”<sup>46</sup> Following his death in 1966, Bruce became a representative of counter cultural zeitgeist—a kind of romanticized idol of rebellion and dissent—and the legend of Lenny Bruce soon supplanted anything that he ever uttered on stage.

The timeline here is a bit muddled because Bruce, who was two years older than Sahl, actually began his career before Sahl’s debut at the hungry i. However, whereas Sahl hit the ground running as a bona fide stand-up comedian, Bruce took some time to find his voice. After being discharged from the Navy for cross-dressing, Bruce returned home and began working in burlesque clubs with his mother. His accidental debut as a last-minute replacement for an

absentee emcee was inauspicious to say the least. It did, however, open the door to a new addiction as he writes of his first experience with “the flash that I have heard morphine addicts describe, a warm sensual blanket that comes after a cold, sick, rejection”: the flash of an audience’s laughter.<sup>47</sup> By the end of the 1940s Bruce had developed enough bits and routines from his time in the burlesque clubs that he found an agent and landed a spot on the program *Arthur Godfrey’s Talent Scouts*.<sup>48</sup> In the performance, which was Bruce’s national debut, he played on his talent for mimicry by offering a series of impersonations of American actors as performed by a Bavarian impressionist. His victory on Godfrey’s program led to more and better gigs from the Borscht Belt to Broadway.<sup>49</sup> But his early success, “making \$450 a week and working everything ‘good’” was short lived.<sup>50</sup> After landing a job writing B-movies for 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, he returned to emceeing in the seedy nightclubs and burlesques of his early career in an attempt to find his voice.

His voice, it turned out, was not the voice of the impressionist who won Godfrey’s talent show. Rather, he was more of “an oral jazzman and a disciple of ‘abstraction.’”<sup>51</sup> As he worked the clubs in the early 1950s he began to drop the scripted routines and bits that had previously made him famous. He writes, “[A]fter a while, instead of getting material together, little by little it just started happening. I’d just go out with no bits.”<sup>52</sup> This is not to say that his sets were *entirely* off-the-cuff. Just as Sahl spent hours preparing by reading the dailies and magazines before his performances, Bruce argued that he had much of his material worked out before he went onstage. He writes, “I know a lot of things I want to say; I’m just not sure exactly when I will say them. This process of allowing one subject spontaneously to associate itself with another is equivalent to James Joyce’s stream of consciousness.”<sup>53</sup> At most, he writes, “If I work for an hour at a night club, out of that hour I will ad-lib perhaps four minutes; sometimes, if I’m



really fertile, ten minutes.”<sup>54</sup> In this way, British theater critic Kenneth Tynan explains, “He used words as a jazz musician uses notes, going off to fantastic private cadenzas and digressions, and returning to his theme just when you thought he had lost track of it forever.”<sup>55</sup> As with Sahl before him, Richard Zoglin argues that Bruce’s free-form style “broke down the old setup-punch line structure of stand-up comedy” and his associations knew no bounds.<sup>56</sup> For Nachman, Bruce’s comic style “was a radical head-on collision of old and new comedy, of Yiddish and bebop, of burlesque and bohemia.”<sup>57</sup>

Bruce’s style was defined by more than his finger-snapping, fast-paced, free-wheeling monologues. It was also molded by the topics he addressed and the irreverence with which he treated them. As Zoglin explains, “Everything got tossed into the performance Mixmaster: social criticism, political commentary, pop culture satire, snatches of autobiography, sexual confessions, personal gripes, public hectoring, today’s headlines, and yesterday’s trip to the laundry.”<sup>58</sup> Unlike Sahl, whose comedy was driven almost exclusively by politics and the day’s news, Bruce drew on *anything* he deemed to be false or deceptive—which is to say that he commented on politics, but also religion, social norms, and sexuality. His comic philosophy was driven by a fundamental belief that “There is only what *is*” and that his role as a comedian was “distinguishing between the *moral* differences of words and their connotations.”<sup>59</sup> For Kercher, “the foundation of Bruce’s satiric outlook rested on the bedrock of authenticity. When Bruce was interested in truth, he said, ‘it’s really a *truth* truth, one hundred percent. And that’s a terrible kind of truth to be interested in.’”<sup>60</sup> Bruce’s truth was an idealistic truth, a truth that remained forever consistent, a truth that probably never existed. Thus Bruce found deception and inconsistency—or material for his monologues—everywhere. He viewed politicians as “shameless opportunists who would do anything to get elected” and American religious leaders

as “no better than politicians.”<sup>61</sup> His satire was deeply cynical and yet, at the same time, it was profoundly honest because it seemed to be an extension of who he was.

Where Mort Sahl offered his commentary from the standpoint of an intellectual commenting on the world from a distance, Bruce’s comic persona was seemingly completely intertwined with his person. As Nachman explains, “His humor, his appeal, was really *who* he was—his attitudes, his eloquent body language, his in-your-face interaction with the audience.”<sup>62</sup> Mort Sahl’s *comments* were funny, but *Lenny Bruce* was funny. His humor was, and is now, almost impossible to distill into one-liners and jokes.<sup>63</sup> His monologues and ramblings were almost without recognizable punch lines. They were funny to be sure, but they were funny because Lenny Bruce was funny. In the hands of another comedian, his material would have been incoherent and obscure but “[w]ith his willingness to experiment off-the-cuff, coupled with his superb sense of comic timing, his innate feel for rhythm, and his skills in vocal mimicry and voice modulation, Bruce created performances of stunning virtuosity.”<sup>64</sup> He was the instrument and he was the music.

Another distinguishing feature of Bruce’s comedy was the force with which he admonished his satirical targets. If he was “a surgeon for false values” as he suggested, then he was surgeon who preferred the sledgehammer to the scalpel.<sup>65</sup> Where Sahl was precise in his satirical attacks, Bruce was brutish. Both were forceful, but Bruce seemed not to mind collecting casualties along the way. As Kenneth Tynan argues, “Others josh, snipe and rib; only Bruce demolishes. He breaks through the barrier of laughter to the horizon beyond, where the truth has its sanctuary.”<sup>66</sup> He got in close and unleashed haymakers while Sahl danced outside and jabbed from a safe distance. With Bruce, political satire became personal, but that intimacy came at a high price. As his comedy began to push the envelope more and more and jokes about four and

seven letter words became devastating monologues peppered with those very words, Bruce began to feel the sting of retaliation as his comedy—and therefore his person—came under fire.

By the time Bruce made his return to the national stage in 1958, he had already been branded with the unshakable label “Dirty Lenny.”<sup>67</sup> After setting up shop at Ann’s 440<sup>68</sup> in San Francisco, opening for Mort Sahl at Hollywood’s Crescendo Club, and releasing his first live comedy album, *Interviews of Our Times* for Fantasy, the comedy world of the late ‘50s opened its arms to his “sick comedy.” He quickly moved up the comedy ranks and made his way to “clubs such as the hungry i, the Cloisters and Mister Kelly’s in Chicago, and the Den in the Duane, Blue Angel, and Village Vanguard in New York.”<sup>69</sup> What is more, Kercher explains, “At the end of 1960, the three albums he had recorded for Fantasy Records had sold more than 190,000 copies, surpassing sales of Mort Sahl’s Verve label albums.”<sup>70</sup> Just after Mort Sahl reached his peak as a stand-up comic in 1960, Lenny Bruce surpassed him in “1961 when he played Carnegie Hall, packing the house for a midnight concert in the middle of a blizzard.”<sup>71</sup> That performance, later released as an LP, is considered by most to be among the best of his career. Arthur Goldman, his biographer, called it “the finest all-around performance of his career. Brilliant, vivid, spontaneous, variegated, moody, honest, fantastic, and incredibly candid.”<sup>72</sup> Bruce’s appearance at Carnegie Hall was not the first by a comic entertainer—Will Rogers and vaudevillian Jack Benny had also graced the hallowed stage—or even the first of the new stand-up comedians—Shelley Berman appeared in 1957.<sup>73</sup> It was, however, the first by a stand-up comedian whose act featured social and political satire. His performance, in many ways, legitimized the political significance of new comedy by bringing stand-up into what is considered by many to be among the most important—if not *the most important*—performance venues in America.

From there, it was all downhill for Lenny Bruce. Later that same year, in September, Bruce was arrested in Philadelphia for the possession of narcotics. While the Philadelphia charges were dropped, the arrest was the first pebble in the rockslide that would soon consume Bruce's comedy, his career, and his life. His next arrest, the first for using obscenity in his act, took place the next month in San Francisco. Even though he was acquitted in March of 1962 for uttering a particular ten-letter word in San Francisco,<sup>74</sup> his arrest made him something of a marked man. According to Kercher:

Between October 1962 and February 1963, Bruce was arrested three times in Hollywood for delivering "obscene" performances at the Troubadour and Unicorn theaters. The fact that the first of these arrests—all charges were eventually dropped—was made by a Jewish undercover agent who had been assigned to monitor Bruce's use of vulgar Yiddish vernacular contributed to the impression that Bruce's obscenity arrests had become a sad farce.<sup>75</sup>

Arguably, it was this time period, between 1962 and 1963, where Bruce's comedy made the obscene turn and his obsession with demystifying so-called dirty words moved to the forefront in his monologues. Things got worse for Bruce in March of 1963 in Chicago. After having been arrested while appearing at the Gate of Horn in December of 1962 he was "found guilty of obscenity—in *absentia*—and sentenced to the maximum penalty of one year in the county jail and a fine of \$1000."<sup>76</sup> Even though he would be vindicated after a series of appeals, the decision made it difficult for Bruce to find work.

As Nachman explains, "By 1964 the preacher in Bruce had overtaken the comedian." His comedy, as John D. Weaver points out, took on the obsessive qualities of Mort Sahl's crusade against the Warren Commission. Weaver writes, "While Mort split doctrinal hairs about

the grassy knoll and burned autopsy notes, Lenny was citing *Regina v. Hicklin* and the Roth formula.”<sup>77</sup> By this time, Bruce had made a transition from comic to moralist and his “metamorphosis from comedian to teacher-prophet-satirist was manifest not only in his preoccupation with Moses and Christ, but in his change in appearance, his performing style, and his own descriptions of his art.”<sup>78</sup> He even took to wearing a Nehru jacket—which he called his “Chinese rabbi suit”—instead of his typical suit and hipster skinny-tie.<sup>79</sup> Regardless of his transformation, he was arrested again on obscenity charges in Los Angeles in March of that year.

He avoided conviction in Los Angeles and, with his career on the ropes, Bruce returned to New York in April of 1964 in hopes of finding employment and sanctuary. He found employment, but not sanctuary. Appearing at Café au Go Go Bruce was arrested twice in one week.<sup>80</sup> These arrests would lead to “one of the most bitterly contested and highly politicized, not to mention most prolonged and expensive obscenity trials in American history.”<sup>81</sup> Bruce lost the case and was sentenced to one year at Riker’s Island Penitentiary and ordered to undergo a psychiatric examination. From that moment forward, Bruce spent the remainder of his days preparing his legal defense for an appeal of the conviction. His day in court, however, would never come. He died of an accidental morphine overdose on August 3, 1966.

Even though Mort Sahl’s break with the style and manner of old comedy prepared the way for his own, the impact of Lenny Bruce’s career on stand-up comedy and political satire in the United States is difficult to understate. Like Sahl, he turned away from the from the setup-punch line approach of the Borscht Belters. Like Sahl, he helped legitimize the emerging art form of stand-up comedy. Unlike Sahl’s treatment of the Warren Report, however, Bruce’s public crusade against obscenity seemed to make a difference. Zoglin contends, “His battles against the protectors of public decency, to be sure, helped knock down barriers to free speech

and led the way to a more open popular culture.”<sup>82</sup> And Kercher adds that *The People of the State of New York v. Lenny Bruce* “tested the parameters of free speech and artistic freedom in the United States and, equally important, defined the limits of American liberal satire” more than any other such trial of the 1960s.<sup>83</sup> Also unlike Sahl—and this is perhaps exacerbated by the romanticism surrounding his death and legend—Bruce became the primary influence for the next generation (and the next generation) of stand-up comedians in America. While Nachman indicates that “the landscape is cluttered with Lenny’s children,” he is, at least in part, to thank for inspiring two of the most successful and socially significant stand-up comedians of the generation that followed him: Richard Pryor and George Carlin.<sup>84</sup> If Mort Sahl *was* the revolution, Lenny Bruce was proof positive that there would be no turning back.

### **Dick Gregory: The “Negro Mort Sahl”**

*—Isn’t this the most fascinating country in the world? Where else would I have to ride on the back of the bus, have a choice of going to the worst schools, eating in the worst restaurants, living in the worst neighborhoods—and average \$5,000 a week just talking about it?*<sup>85</sup>

As the careers of Lenny Bruce and Mort Sahl were cresting at the start of the 1960s, another young comic, Dick Gregory, was preparing for what would be a meteoric rise into the national spotlight. Like Sahl and Bruce, his comedy was topical, socially conscious, and political. Unlike his predecessors, however, he was African American—and he was the first black comic who fit the moniker new comedian. In his comedy, Dick Gregory found a balance between the improvisational jazz stylings of Lenny Bruce’s stand-up comedy and the harsh political satire that made Mort Sahl a sort of alternative press for post-war America. In this way, his interpretation of new comedy represents, perhaps, the pinnacle of the marriage between the form of stand-up comedy and the tradition of American political satire. While his joke-teller

style, in some ways, harkened back to comics of the Catskills, his political edge was undeniable and he was, unlike Sahl and Bruce, able to move beyond comedy in the realm of actual political activism. That move toward activism, however, would be the undoing of his career as a comedian.

A child of Depression era St. Louis, Dick Gregory's path to show business success was difficult, to say the least. Growing up on relief in a poor neighborhood, Gregory describes turning to humor as a means of childhood self-preservation in his autobiography. His jokes and quips—which were often directed at himself—earned him a modicum of respect from his peers and a reputation as a “funny [hu]man.” On the premise, “Once you get a [hu]man to laugh with you, it’s hard for [her or] him to laugh at you,” Gregory used his wit as a defense mechanism and, eventually, as his ticket to stardom.<sup>86</sup> A prominent track star, Gregory was offered a scholarship to run for Southern Illinois University after high school. While admittedly he did more socializing than studying at SIU, he had his first brush with satire as an undergraduate. He writes, “I didn’t know it was satire. It was just standing on stage during the all-fraternity variety show and talking to a crowd of white people about school and athletics and the world situation.”<sup>87</sup> Before finishing his degree, Gregory was drafted by the Army in 1954. Unlike Lenny Bruce, who saw action in the Mediterranean as a sailor during World War II, Gregory spent his time in the service stateside cracking jokes and causing trouble. For example, after being caught sleeping in an oversized kitchen pot by an officer Gregory joked, “We ran out of chipped beef, sergeant... and I volunteered to be cooked for lunch.”<sup>88</sup> The officer then ordered him to perform in and win the service club talent show—which he did. In fact, by 1955 he had worked his satirical monologues up to the point of nearly winning the All-Army talent show at

Fort Dix, narrowly missing an opportunity to perform on the *Ed Sullivan Show*. By the time Gregory left the military his sights were set on a career in show business and satire.

In the late 1950s he moved to Chicago and spent his evenings in nightclubs trying to break in. He made his inauspicious debut at an African American nightclub after slipping the master of ceremonies his last five dollars.<sup>89</sup> The next week he worked the same angle to get onstage at the Esquire Show Lounge and his performance landed him a \$10-a-night gig as the house emcee on weekends. According to his autobiography, while Gregory spent his nights in the club, he spent his days preparing for the stage. He writes, “Morning, noon and night, twenty-four hours a day, trying to develop a mind like I once developed a body, watching, listening, talking. Hours and hours of television, the ‘Ed Sullivan Show,’ the ‘Jack Paar Show,’ every comedy show, even funny old movies, and then the news shows, the soap operas, the westerns the series.”<sup>90</sup> Sensing that Esquire had taken him as far as it could—he was fired for asking for a two-dollar raise—Gregory rented a small room in the Southwestern suburbs (Robbins, IL) and went into business for himself. His Apex Club went belly-up by the Summer of 1959 and Gregory went back to pestering nightclub owners for work. As Kercher explains, “He eventually landed a spot at Roberts Show Club, one of the largest African American nightclubs in the country,” and “by the fall and winter of 1960, Gregory had found work at the Fickle Pickle, a beatnik coffeehouse on Rush Street, and several all-white clubs in Indiana and Ohio.”<sup>91</sup> Even as the gigs kept coming, the closest Gregory got to success was Eddie Salem’s Supper Club in Akron, OH by the end of 1960.

On January 13, 1961, however, Gregory was hired to fill in for an absent performer at Hugh Hefner’s Playboy Club in Chicago. Like most of Gregory’s career his appearance that night almost never happened. Upon arriving at the club, Gregory was greeted by the apologetic



manager who was afraid to let him go onstage because “the audience that night was composed almost entirely of Southern frozen food executives who were there attending a convention.”<sup>92</sup> Refusing to back down, Gregory insisted that he be allowed to go onstage. He did, and he was heckled, but his quips and comebacks worked their charms and the audience was soon “eating out of his hand.”<sup>93</sup> As Gregory recalls, “The audience fought me with dirty, little, insulting statements, but I was faster, and I was funny, and when that room broke it was like the storm was over... What was supposed to be a fifty-minute show lasted for about an hour and forty minutes.”<sup>94</sup> Further, what was supposed to be a one-night appearance turned into a run of more than a month. After catching the second show that evening, Hefner signed Gregory up for a three-week stint at the Playboy Club and “the original three-week engagement was extended an additional three weeks, and then extended again.”<sup>95</sup> Within a matter of days it was clear that Dick Gregory had arrived and the comedy world seemed ready to greet him with open arms. Importantly, as Gerald Nachman explains, “by the end of the week, he had an offer from Jack Paar to appear on the *Tonight* show, a major turning point not only in his career but for all black entertainers.”<sup>96</sup> Between his big run at the Playboy Club and the exposure from his appearance on *Tonight*, Gregory was able to get into bigger and better clubs across the country such as “San Francisco's hungry i, Cincinnati's Surf Club, and Freddie's in Minneapolis,” and even “New York's Blue Angel.”<sup>97</sup> And, like Sahl and Bruce, he was the beneficiary of the emerging stand-up comedy album industry, signing a two-record deal with Colpix.<sup>98</sup> Almost overnight, “Gregory vaulted across [the comedy color-barrier] in a flash, leapfrogging over black comics who had spent decades in the trenches.”<sup>99</sup>

On the one hand, Dick Gregory was “saying the right thing at the right time,” as Hugh Hefner told *Ebony*.<sup>100</sup> As Stephen Kercher explains, “During the early 1960s, the courage of

black activists in the South and the eloquent oratory of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. had awakened white Americans to the urgency of the country's racial crisis," and, therefore, Gregory's satiric take on segregation had an audience that was at least in part already constituted.<sup>101</sup> Further, with the success of the other new comedians—and particularly Sahl and Bruce—"Early 1961 was also the apex of the vaunted 'satire boom.'"<sup>102</sup> Other satirists and stand-ups had already broken down the barriers to success for the form by finding venues for their material, pushing political and social boundaries (even to the point of addressing segregation and race relations), and building an audience for whom satire and stand-up were a necessity of life in American culture. In so doing, these comics—all of whom were white—prepared the way for Gregory to go to work on a different set of barriers from a new and unique perspective. What is more, as Kercher argues, "Gregory's big-stage debut took place one week before the inauguration of President John F. Kennedy, a politician who had successfully convinced white and black Americans that he would be more committed than his predecessor to tackling segregation and racial discrimination."<sup>103</sup> Without a question, Dick Gregory's timing was impeccable, but his knack for constituting an audience of people already sympathetic to the cause of civil rights and inviting those who lacked such sympathy to laugh along anyway prepared the way for his rise to satirical stardom.

Arguably, however, his success was due to more than just being in the right era and constituting an appropriate audience; his particular comic style was, I would argue, a significant reason why he could make the jokes he could for both black and white audiences. More than simply saying the right thing at the right time, he was the right person saying the right thing at the right time. His comedy was irreverent and pointed like many of his predecessors, but it was also tempered by his disarming nature and nonthreatening demeanor onstage. Gregory knew that he had "to go up there as an individual first, a Negro second," that he had to be "a colored funny

man, not a funny colored man,” and that, most of all, “comedy is friendly relations.”<sup>104</sup> With this perspective deeply rooted in his comedy, his comic criticism never became antagonism and his satire, even when it was at its sharpest, was never reduced to polemic. He prided himself on the idea that “you don’t see any bitterness in me,” as he told Gilbert Millstein of *The New York Times*, “Anyone catches my eye can tell. Nothing bitter, nothing mean or aggravated.”<sup>105</sup> His satire was ironic rather than angry and his approach was to catch his audience off-guard with indirect comments and asides rather than full-on confrontation. As Nachman offers, “He was so sweetly and serenely reasonable, so nonthreatening, so downright amiable, that you didn’t realize until you were walking out of a club that he had heightened your sense of civil rights”<sup>106</sup>

Where Sahl and Bruce found themselves breaking away from the conventions of the Borscht Belt, Gregory made his mark by embracing some of those very practices and turning away from the comedy stereotypes that were associated with African American comedians. He did not work blue like Redd Foxx—which is to say that, unlike Lenny Bruce, he avoided talking about sex and using obscenity—nor did he sing or dance like Moms Mabley. His satire was marked by “intelligence, sophistication, and none of the black-voice buffoonery of Amos ‘n’ Andy.”<sup>107</sup> What is more, unlike the whitewashed, apolitical, superstar-to-be Bill Cosby, his performances drew heavily enough on “the black vernacular” without “the sociological and psychoanalytic lexicon” typical of the other new comedians so that he could maintain his credibility for black audiences.<sup>108</sup> Gregory was smart, but not *too smart*; he was cool, but not *too cool*. He was not flashy and his smooth, buttoned-down, cigarette puffing onstage persona resembled white comics like Shelley Berman and Bob Newhart more than Nipsey Russell.<sup>109</sup> But unlike those comics, he told setup-punch-line jokes like the comics of the ‘40s and ‘50s instead of stories or scripted bits. For example, when comparing himself to Cosby, Gregory

suggested, “Bill Cosby is to storytelling what I was to one-liners. I could never hold an audience for five minutes with one joke, like Bill.”<sup>110</sup> Nevertheless, “Gregory’s material was black enough to regale black audiences and white enough to pass as mainstream comedy.”<sup>111</sup> He was a new kind of black comedian. He was a black comedian who could “laugh, in a sort of brotherhood of humor, with white men about their problems” and “joke successfully about the N.A.A.C.P. as well as the P.T.A.”<sup>112</sup> More importantly, he was a black comedian who could talk about racism, segregation, and the South in a way that “brings smiles instead of hurt, and insight, even to the insensitive.”<sup>113</sup> He was a black comedian who could make people listen because he “didn’t seem out to politicize us, just to get our ear for an hour.”<sup>114</sup>

Interestingly, unlike his new comedy cohort, Gregory also relied on writers to craft a large chunk of his material. According to Nachman, “Gregory usually had a couple of writers traveling with him at all times.” He enlisted folks like Ed Weinberg, James Sanders, and Robert Orben to “retool gags to fit fresh headlines with a black perspective.”<sup>115</sup> Arguably, one reason why Gregory was so successful in reaching out to white audiences was his use of white joke-writers—of his three chief writers, only Sanders was black. As such, Sanders helped supply the “wry, indirect comments [that] were characteristic of a long tradition of African American comic expression” and the other writers provided a slew of “very ‘jokey’ jokes.”<sup>116</sup> This is not to say that Gregory was not involved in preparing his topical material about “subjects such as the space race, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev, and Cuba,” but it does help to reconcile the criticism that his satire was, at times, “awkward and obvious” for jazz critic and Lenny Bruce disciple Nat Hentoff.<sup>117</sup> Like Mort Sahl, Gregory devoured the day’s news in order to keep his edge and would regularly work out material—including the jokes that he had purchased—moments before taking the stage. In describing his process to Gerald Nachman he offered, “Now here was *my*

genius: when they turned their stuff in, I never read it until thirty minutes before I was ready to go on. If it didn't stick enough in my head for me to memorize, I didn't use it, but the funny parts I would just build on. It was almost like I was improvisin' but I wasn't... I never wrote. I would *create*, I would *invent*.”<sup>118</sup>

Regardless of his writing ability, Gregory vaulted to success as the “first comic of his race to gain acceptance in the first-line nightclubs and supper clubs,” and in so doing, “he has paved the way for others to follow.”<sup>119</sup> Without Gregory, America may have never been introduced to Bill Cosby or Richard Pryor. Breaking barriers in stand-up comedy, however, was only one part of Gregory's contribution to American culture. Not long after ascending from \$10 a-night to \$5,000 a-week, Gregory set his sights on actually doing something about the civil rights injustices that he had been joking about. As Nachman relates, “Like Bruce and Sahl, however, he used his comic tools to build a playing field much larger than comedy. He voluntarily quit show business at the top.”<sup>120</sup> His satire grew harsher as “the preacher in him edged out the performer in a friendly takeover.”<sup>121</sup> He pushed audiences harder and by the end of 1962—just over a year and a half after his groundbreaking run at the Playboy Club—he found himself in Jackson, Mississippi addressing a crowd of activists at the behest of his friend, Medgar Evers. From that moment forward, according to his co-author and biographer Robert Lipsyte, “He began to see that comedy without purpose was just another way of black guys dancing for white people. Comedy used in the service of what he felt was righteousness—remember, this was a God-fearing man—and civil rights was a much higher order than just getting laughs.”<sup>122</sup>

After Jackson, Gregory went to Greenwood, Mississippi to protest with activists from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and then to Selma, Alabama a few months

later, all the while playing in clubs between protests. After beginning his work as an activist, his sharper-edged comedy received some cynical criticism. He recalls, “After Greenwood there had been hecklers who accused me of demonstrating for publicity.”<sup>123</sup> Such criticism subsided a few months later when he was jailed, along with Martin Luther King, for marching in Birmingham, Alabama without a permit. After his release, it was clear that he had once again earned the respect of his audience. He writes, “After Birmingham people came backstage to shake my hand and God Bless me and tell me to keep up the good work. White and Black.”<sup>124</sup> Nightclub owners, however, grew more and more weary of booking him in fear that he might leave midrun or wind up in jail between performances and so, like Sahl during his Warren Report crusade, Gregory turned to the college circuit by the latter half of the 1960s. His political activity, however, would not be deterred, and when he was shot in the leg in Los Angeles while attempting to quell an angry crowd even his most cynical critics fell silent. Over the remainder of the decade, Gregory’s civil rights activism slowly edged out his comedy. He ran for Mayor in Chicago—garnering some twenty-thousand write-in votes—he organized and performed at over one-hundred benefits for activist organizations, and began fasting in protest of racial injustice. He would continue performing and releasing albums into the next decade, but it was clear that his days as a nationally renowned comic were behind him.

Just as Sahl and Bruce before him, Gregory used his rapid ascent through the stand-up comedy ranks to test the limits of political satire and political activity. He was the first black comic to achieve crossover success and, with the notable exception of Richard Pryor, one of the only black comics with “seriously committed sociopolitical chops.”<sup>125</sup> He used his reputation as the “Negro Mort Sahl” to open the world of political satire to other black comedians pointing out along the way that, “In the Congo, Mort Sahl is known as the White Dick Gregory!”<sup>126</sup> What is

more, he was the last prominent comedian to forgo stand-up comedy in favor of a serious political cause—and unlike Bruce, his political turn was a choice. His comedy marks the end of the era when satirical stand-up comedy and the comedians who proffered it actually had something political at stake in their performance.

### **Interlude**

In the final two sections of this chapter, I will make a small leap forward in American history. It may seem curious to move from post-war, civil rights era comedy of the 1950s and 1960s that was replete with commentary on the Cold War, John Kennedy's New Frontier, and the fight for racial integration, into 1970s counterculture comedy, but this is by design. This shift is justifiable for at least three reasons.

First, it is justifiable because my aim is to illuminate the major developments in the forms of stand-up comedy and political satire and their relationship to democracy in American culture. My intention is not to account for the entire history of stand-up comedy in America or even the history of the "New Comedy" movement, which I have painted in only the broadest of strokes thus far. For this reason, I regard the three comics whose careers have been summarized above as representatives of the particular relationship between stand-up comedy and democracy that I wish to explore because their comedy was revolutionary for the form and dealt exclusively with political material. Other comics—especially Shelley Berman, Bob Newhart, Phyllis Diller and Bill Cosby—had significant impact on stand-up comedy during this same time period, but lacked the political resonance that accompanied this trio's comedy.

The second justification for this shift has to do with the ebb and flow of both political satire and stand-up comedy in popular culture. The end of 1960s, with Vietnam in full swing and the return of conservative and one-time McCarthyite Richard Nixon to the White House, was

not especially amenable to political satire because, as Alison Dagnes demonstrates, it typically only reigns during times of relative comfort and prosperity. What is more, the end of the decade saw a shift in the manner in which Americans sought out comic relief. Where comedy records and variety shows such as *Tonight* and *The Steve Allen Show* were at the forefront of the American consciousness in the early '60s, the sitcom, according to David Marc, was rapidly becoming the preferred method of comic entertainment.<sup>127</sup> For this reason, the political humor of the latter half of the decade was difficult to find in clubs and on the networks.<sup>128</sup> Of course, the lack of political satire in stand-up comedy was likely due in part to the negative perceptions surrounding Sahl, Bruce, and Gregory, as each comic planted his flag on a specific political issue and became hard to book. Regardless of cause, a careful examination of comedy, stand-up or otherwise, at the end of the '60s reveals a decided lack of obvious political satire.

The third reason why this shift is logical relates to the generational nature of the stand-up comedy form. If, as I have argued, the embryonic form of stand-up comedy reached its peak in the first part of the 1960s, then it truly came into its maturity in the first part of the following decade as the next generation of stand-up artists took the stage. In large part, this is because of the groundwork laid by the new comics: Sahl made stand-up comedy viable by finding an audience and a stage; Bruce took one on the chin in the fight for free speech; and Gregory broke the color barrier for black stand-up comics that wanted to talk about more than sex. Both comics that I will address in the remaining two sections of this chapter, Richard Pryor and George Carlin, cite some combination of Sahl, Bruce, and Gregory among their primary influences. Although Pryor and Carlin were just beginning their careers as the new comics were turning to their respective political activities, neither had found his comic voice *or* his political perspective by the end of the 1960s, and so their early comedy, which would overlap with Sahl, Bruce, and



Gregory, was somewhat forgettable. Nevertheless, each would find success in the 1970s and continue to mold the form of stand-up comedy for generations to come. The pair was so influential, in fact, that when the Comedy Central Network ran their five-part special on the top 100 stand-up comics in history it was little surprise when Pryor and Carlin edged out even Lenny Bruce as the top two comedians in the history of the form.<sup>129</sup>

### **Richard Pryor: The Best That There Ever Was**

*—My mother's Puerto Rican, and my father's a Negro, and we lived in a real big Jewish tenement building—in an Italian neighborhood. Every time I'd go outside, the kids would say, "Get him! He's all of them!"*<sup>130</sup>

The funny thing about Richard Pryor is that he was not always Richard Pryor. Sometimes, he was Bill Cosby. Sometimes, he was Dick Gregory or Lenny Bruce. But regardless of who he was, he was always funny. Pryor emerged from what he called the “Blackbelt Circuit” in the Midwest and began working as a comedian in Greenwich Village not long after Dick Gregory turned to politics.<sup>131</sup> He was green and lacked polish, like the early Mort Sahl, but he was likeable and had a seemingly natural gift for physical comedy. His early comedy, though, “was still safe, conventional, vanilla.”<sup>132</sup> His comedy had no bite, no politics to speak of. He was, essentially, a clone of Bill Cosby. He did bits about children's theatre where he played all of the young actors. He did bits about trying to pick up girls. And he did bits about growing up in Peoria, though without the autobiographical accents that would later emerge in his comedy. He did not kid about growing up in a brothel with his grandmother, being raped as a child, or any of his early brushes with racism.<sup>133</sup> Instead, he made fun of his being an outsider and did an incredible impression of Bill Cosby.

In his autobiography, Pryor makes it clear that “Bill Cosby was the guy who was most envied.”<sup>134</sup> He recalls making his way back to Café Wha? after having witnessed a Cosby performance that was “truly amazing” and deciding that Cosby “was how [he] was going to be from then on... Richard Cosby.”<sup>135</sup> From that point forward, he put serious effort into trying to mimic Cosby. As he explains, “If the material wasn’t exactly Bill’s, the delivery was. So much so that I should’ve informed people.”<sup>136</sup> In fact, Manny Roth, Pryor’s first manager and the owner of Café Wha?, told Richard Zoglin about Pryor’s attempt at being a Cosby clone. He remembered, “One time I walked downstairs because I thought I heard Cosby on the stage. It was Pryor, doing an imitation of Cosby.”<sup>137</sup> Even so, it is difficult to hold his Cosby-envy against him. After all, “Cosby became the first black star of a network TV drama series, CBS’s *I Spy*, and won Grammy Awards for best comedy album an unprecedented six years in a row from 1964 to 1969.”<sup>138</sup> For the young Pryor, Cosby was a proven commodity; one of the few success stories for African American performers in the early ‘60s. What is more, his apolitical, safe-for-white-audiences, Cosby-esque material worked. After coming up in the village in 1963, he landed a spot on Rudy Vallee’s television program, *On Broadway Tonight*, on August 31, 1964. The next year he would appear on both the *Merv Griffin Show* and the *Ed Sullivan Show*. His success continued in 1966 as he was booked for the *Kraft Summer Music Hall* variety program with another up-and-coming comedian—George Carlin.

The early Pryor was a big step backward from the politically sharp, intelligent comedy of the “new comedians.” He was more of clown than a commentator. He had no edge. His comedy was milquetoast and he had no sense of his own voice because even that was borrowed from Cosby. Between his increasing struggle to keep up the Cosby clone façade and his newfound appreciation for cocaine, Pryor was nearing a collapse by the mid-sixties. He was

booked to play the Aladdin Hotel in Las Vegas in 1967. On opening night, he walked onstage and exclaimed, “What the fuck am I doing here?” and walked off-stage.<sup>139</sup> His nervous breakdown that night set the stage for a massive transition in his comedy and his career. Realizing that he no longer connected with his Cosby imitation, Pryor recalls, “I saw myself as a victim of the system, an outsider for whom justice was out of reach, a dream, and then I saw how closely my situation mirrored the black man’s larger struggle for dignity and equality and justice in white society. That was me. I was that character. That was the person to whom I had to give voice.”<sup>140</sup> From that point forward, he knew that his “days of pretending to be as slick and colorless as Cosby were numbered. There was a world of junkies and winos, pool hustlers and prostitutes, women and family screaming inside [his] head, trying to be heard.”<sup>141</sup> In that new world Pryor found his voice, found his perspective. As he later wrote, “*I was Negro for twenty-three years. I gave that shit up. No room for advancement.*”<sup>142</sup>

After the Aladdin incident, Pryor began working in Redd Foxx’s Los Angeles nightclub—in part because, as Zoglin indicates, “mainstream clubs like Mr. Kelly’s in Chicago stopped booking him”—and fell in with improv comic and comedy-writer Paul Mooney.<sup>143</sup> Mooney regarded Pryor as an extension of the civil rights movement and an heir to the legacy of not only Dick Gregory, but also Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. Mooney “added kerosene to the fire” because he “used to tell [Pryor] all the time who he was, and he would say sometimes to me, ‘I’m not Martin Luther King; I can’t have that responsibility.’ But [Mooney would tell him] you have it whether you want it or not. You’ve been chosen.”<sup>144</sup> Working in front of a largely black audience, Pryor’s material began to change. “Instead of the rote gags and one-liners that typified his old act, Pryor’s new storytelling style relied on African-American folkloric material as well as his own recollections of Black neighborhood life in Peoria.”<sup>145</sup> He

talked about characters that his audience knew from their own neighborhoods and he talked about his own struggles as a black man, which had a similarly universal appeal.

After he had learned to stop emulating Cosby, he headed north to Berkeley, like Mort Sahl did before he debuted at the hungry i, to immerse himself in the vibrant community of political activists, thinkers, and artists. He used Berkeley as a workshop in which to reinvent himself entirely. Berkeley, unlike Los Angeles or New York, was a “scene of almost unrelieved turmoil—from the 1964 free speech movement, which kicked off the era of ‘60s student protests, through anti-Vietnam War demonstrations and the 1969 street battles of People’s Park.”<sup>146</sup> What is more, it was “the seat of the Black Power movement” and “the center of a circle of progressive black intellectuals and writers” such as Angela Davis, Ishmael Reed, Cecil Brown and Claude Brown.<sup>147</sup> When he reflects on his time in Berkeley, Pryor remembers, “It was the freest time of my life. Berkeley was a circus of exciting, extreme, colorful, militant ideas. Drugs. Hippies. Black Panthers. Antiwar protests. Experimentation. Music, theatre, poetry. I was like a lightning rod. I absorbed bits of everything while forging my own uncharted path.”<sup>148</sup> Berkeley was the right place at the right time for Pryor’s transition. He experimented with off-the-wall material in coffeehouses and clubs. He recalls, “Some nights at clubs such as Basin Street West, Mandrake’s, and the Showcase, I just made strange animal noises. Other nights I repeated a single word like ‘bitch’ or ‘motherfucker,’ but gave it fifty seven different inflections.”<sup>149</sup> Importantly, he also began to challenge “the most offensive, humiliating, disgraceful, distasteful, ugly, and nasty word ever used in the context of black people... Nigger.”<sup>150</sup> He embraced the word, made it his own, and it became a vital component of his revitalized comedy. When he finally returned to Redd Foxx’s club in Los Angeles his act was much closer to Lenny Bruce’s than it ever was to Bill Cosby’s.<sup>151</sup>

His second album, *Craps (After Hours)*, was recorded in the Redd Foxx club in 1971 and provides the clearest evidence of his transformation. The record was, as Zoglin notes, “an underground success” that “primarily reached black audiences.”<sup>152</sup> Similarly, his first live concert film, *Live and Smokin’* which was filmed at New York’s Improv in 1971, did not speak to crossover audiences. Regardless, his comedy had nearly reached its maturity. Gone were the bits about his experience in children’s theatre and trying to pick up girls in Peoria. Such tame material did not suit the new Richard Pryor. Instead, that colorless, safe comedy was replaced by obscenity peppered quips about being arrested by white police officers as a teenager, drug culture, and the Black Panthers. His formerly detached comedy became profoundly personal. He was telling the truth, and the truth was funny.

Although *Craps* was less successful than his previous self-titled effort, mainstream success for the new Richard Pryor was close at hand. With the release of his third album, *That Nigger’s Crazy*, in 1974, Pryor’s audience began to change, as his comedy moved from the margins of American culture back to the center. The album was edgy and it fetched a Grammy award for best comedy album after topping the *Billboard* chart and earning an Recording Industry Association of America gold label. Although Pryor had once again reached the crossover audience, his comedy could no longer be classified as safe. After releasing *TNC*, he recalls, “I wish I had a dollar for every person who’s [sic] told me how they hid that album from their parents and laughed all night when they finally dared to play it. But that’s cool. That’s how it was supposed to be. This was new stuff. It was like listening to Lenny.”<sup>153</sup> Granted, hundreds of secret rendezvous with a record players is not the same as an appearance on *Ed Sullivan*, but that was the cost of being more like Lenny Bruce—who only appeared on television only a handful of time times—than Bill Cosby—who was a television fixture for decades.

Over the next two years, however, Pryor managed to work his way back onto the small screen. He made appearances on Flip Wilson's program, *The Mike Douglass Show*, and a new series that was only beginning to push the envelope on NBC—*Saturday Night Live*. Pryor's appearance on the seventh episode of *SNL* was a huge success for both Pryor and the show. And because the new Richard Pryor would not alter his comedy for the television censors it was also the first time in television history that a "white man called a black man a 'nigger' on a nationally televised comedy sketch."<sup>154</sup> Pryor's television successes during that period parlayed into film appearances including his first performance alongside Gene Wilder in 1976's *Silver Streak*. Even with his success in visual media, however, Pryor continued performing and releasing stand-up comedy albums. Of note, the mid-70s saw the first incarnation of Mudbone—a streetwise-wino-philosopher that became one of Pryor's most beloved characters—on *...Is It Something I Said* and his most outwardly political stand-up on *Bi-Centennial Nigger*.<sup>155</sup>

Pryor's career peaked at the end of the 1970s. He was in demand in Hollywood, he was releasing a new album or two every year, and even had a contract for his own television sketch comedy show. Stand-up, however, continued to be the primary means by which he found success. In 1978, Pryor regularly performed at Mitzi Shore's Comedy Store in Los Angeles as he prepared for an unprecedented stand-up milestone—an all stand-up feature film. At the Comedy Store he work-shopped routines that he considered "the best comedy of [his] career"<sup>156</sup> and when *Richard Pryor Live in Concert* debuted in theatres, few would argue to the contrary. The film was every bit the blockbuster for studio executives and audiences alike because, as Zoglin indicates, "*Richard Pryor: Live in Concert* cost almost nothing to make and grossed fifteen million dollars at the box office."<sup>157</sup> The film, arguably, marks the apex of the form of stand-up comedy history in the United States. Its success underscored the importance of the

form to American culture and opened yet another medium—feature film—up for generations of stand-up performers to come.<sup>158</sup>

Pryor's success, however, would soon be tempered by his offstage demons. Having always been fond of a variety of substances, particularly cocaine, Pryor began freebasing after filming *Live in Concert*. The habit soon became all-consuming. In his memoir he recounts, "In less than a year, I'd gone from my artistic peak to personal pits. I didn't even give a fuck. Didn't even notice."<sup>159</sup> His situation got worse on June 9, 1980 when "he poured cognac all over himself and lit a Bic lighter" in what he later admitted was a suicide attempt.<sup>160</sup> His self-immolation would, like all of his previous personal trials, become fodder for his comedy, but it also cemented the impression that Pryor was too volatile to hire and thereby altered the course of his career. After a lengthy hospital stay, Pryor would return to the stage again to film a second concert: 1982's *Live on the Sunset Strip*. The film was cobbled together from a series of performances—including one that began with an Aladdin Hotel-esque walkout—and, as Pryor admits, the final product "wasn't as great an overall performance as the first concert picture."<sup>161</sup> Further, while it was no flop, it was not as successful as *Live in Concert*. Pryor would release another concert film in 1983, *Richard Pryor: Here and Now*, but by then it was clear that his comedy had lost much of its edge. A few years later Pryor was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis and his career in stand-up, hampered by his inability to actually stand, faded away.<sup>162</sup> Pryor died of a heart attack nearly twenty years after his diagnosis on December 10, 2005.

Although Pryor lacked the focused political material that drove Mort Sahl or Dick Gregory, he was able to influence the form of stand-up comedy by relying instead on culturally specific material that spoke, like Lenny Bruce's comedy, to his audience's everyday experiences. His was the black vernacular, not Yiddish slang, but the result was the same. He spoke to people

about their lives and he spoke on their level. His comedy was political, but it was personal. It was not as detached and satirical as his predecessors. His was, as Cooper explains, a “culturally intimate” humor that targeted “the denizens and foibles of their own culture” rather than satirizing “the hypocrisies of the larger culture.”<sup>163</sup> Where Gregory was interested in making audiences see similarity, “Pryor rubbed our noses in the differences—and yet made us feel their universality.”<sup>164</sup> Pryor’s comedy was a celebration of the irreducibility of difference; its appeal rested not in our being a part of this culture or that culture, but in our capacity to see one another in all of our humanity. In summing up the politics of his comedy, he writes, “...I wasn’t Malcolm [X], Martin [Luther King, Jr.], or anybody else. I was a drug-addicted, paranoid, frightened, lonely, sad, and frustrated comedian who had gotten too big for his britches. I wanted laughs, not racial struggles.”<sup>165</sup> His politics were personal and the personal frame of his comedy moved the form of stand-up away from political satire and specific critique of the 1960s. In so doing, it made stand-up as important as it had ever been in American culture.

### **George Carlin: The Class Clown and His Conscience**

*—The owners of this country know the truth: It’s called the American dream because you have to be asleep to believe it.*<sup>166</sup>

George Carlin and Richard Pryor were contemporaries in almost every way imaginable. In the early-1960s, the pair could be found delighting audiences onstage—and getting high backstage—as a double bill of up-and-comers at New York’s Café Au Go Go. By the mid-1960s, each comic had achieved bona fide show business success. They appeared a combined eighteen times on the *Merv Griffin Show* in 1965.<sup>167</sup> They also made eighteen appearances on the *Ed Sullivan Show* between 1965-1968.<sup>168</sup> They shared the summer of 1966 on *The Kraft Summer Music Hall*. And they both recorded their first stand-up comedy album in 1967 and 1968.<sup>169</sup>



Then, in the late-1960s, each would reject the success that he had achieved in order reinvent himself in the image of the counterculture. The parallels continued until the end of Pryor's career. Carlin liked to joke that Pryor almost always beat him to the punch in terms of career milestones, but, by the early 1980s, he definitively led Pryor in "heart attacks, two to one" even though Pryor maintained his "one to nothing" lead "on burning yourself up."<sup>170</sup>

Before he, along with Pryor, became a counterculture comedy icon, Carlin was a sixteen year-old high school dropout from Manhattan's upper West side who enlisted in the Air Force at seventeen in order to avoid being drafted. He did, however, have a clear path in mind for how the Air Force could set his life on the right track. In an interview with *Playboy*'s Sam Merrill, he explained, "I was engaged at that time, so I figured I'd join up, marry my girl, live off base, then use my GI Bill to go to disc-jockey school."<sup>171</sup> His plan did not pan out exactly as he imagined it, but he did manage to get a foot in the door at a Shreveport, Louisiana radio station, KJOE, where he worked his way up from news reader to host of his very own afternoon drive-time show, "*Carlin's Corner*."<sup>172</sup> In fact, he was even relieved of his duties on the flight line and given an off-base work permit by his squadron commander who thought that having a personality on KJOE would be good public relations for the Air Force. A pair of court-martials<sup>173</sup> later and Carlin was out of the Air Force on a 3916, which he thought of as a "no fault divorce" because "it had become fairly obvious to both me and the Pentagon that, as they say in a marriage, it just wasn't working out."<sup>174</sup>

Carlin picked up and moved to Boston where, fresh out of the Air Force, he landed a job at another radio station: WEZE. His time there was short-lived because he had a knack for getting in trouble,<sup>175</sup> but it was significant. In Boston, he met his soon-to-be comedy partner, Jack Burns, who was a morning-side newscaster at WEZE. After being let go, Carlin headed to

Fort Worth, Texas where he recalls, “KXOL, the number one station in Fort Worth, took me in and gave me a great spot: the seven to midnight segment doing Top 40.”<sup>176</sup> A few months into his tenure as a Top 40 DJ outside of Dallas, Jack Burns came back into his life. Carlin got Burns work at the station and the pair began laying groundwork for their comedy act. They played their first coffeehouse, The Cellar, and while “riffing on the bits [that they had] played around with at home” managed to get a few laughs. Carlin wrote about their early performances later recalling, “The Cellar was our gymnasium, our laboratory.”<sup>177</sup> It became a home for the characters they created, based on the working-class Irish people from New York and Boston, and gave them an opportunity to hone their craft in front of an audience.

Fort Worth, Texas, however, soon became too small to contain their ambition. As Zoglin writes, “they decided to throw all their belongings into Carlin’s new Dodge Dart and drive to L.A. to see if they could make it.”<sup>178</sup> They arrived in Hollywood and, as if by fate, “The first place [they] went—a daytime station called KDAY—was looking for a morning comedy team.”<sup>179</sup> At KDAY, Murray Becker, who was a “road manager with Rowan and Martin,” according to Carlin biographer James Sullivan, discovered Burns and Carlin while they were rehearsing their comedy sketches.<sup>180</sup> Their connection with Becker would quickly bear fruit as he lined the duo up with a record deal through Era Records<sup>181</sup> and put in a good word with an “old Navy buddy,” Lenny Bruce.<sup>182</sup> Modeling themselves “after the new-wave comedians like Bruce and Mort Sahl and Nichols and May,” they began playing a coffee house in Los Angeles called Cosmo Alley.<sup>183</sup> Their shtick was build around “skits and two-man situations about race and religion” and impressions including John F. Kennedy, Lenny Bruce, and Mort Sahl.<sup>184</sup> Soon enough, Becker’s urging and the buzz created by their performances captured the attention of both Bruce and Sahl. Sahl, intrigued by their cerebral comedy, recommended them to Enrico

Banducci, owner of the hungry i, and to Hugh Hefner, who soon booked the pair into his Playboy Clubs. More importantly, Bruce urged General Artists Corporation (GAC), the booking agency that represented him, to take on the up-and-coming comedy pair. 1960 was banner year for Burns and Carlin; as Carlin explains, “We’d been in the business five months. We had an album, a manager and a big agency. And Lenny Bruce liked us!”<sup>185</sup>

Their first big time club appearance, at Chicago’s The Cloister Inn, was soon to follow. They were a hit. They got booked in Hefner’s Playboy Clubs. They got the *Jack Paar Show*. “For the next two years [between 1960-1962],” writes Carlin, “Jack and I played first line nightclubs.”<sup>186</sup> Then, in March of 1962, they split up. Carlin wanted to go solo and Burns wanted to do sketch comedy.<sup>187</sup> As Carlin recalls, the split was more his fault than Burns’. “I didn’t want to expend my best ideas on the team. I was selfish about my creativity. I refused to put out my best effort for, and with, Jack.”<sup>188</sup> Their short-lived success allowed Carlin to start his solo career as an already proven commodity, with one foot already in the door at the best clubs and with one of the biggest talent agencies in the country. However, Carlin’s time with Burns was perhaps most valuable because it was Burns who helped Carlin find his politics. Prior to his work with Burns, Carlin described himself as a “very pro-Joe [McCarthy]” Republican. Burns, however, offered him “a very different slant than the one [that he had] grown up with. That the Right was interested in things but the Left was interested in people. That the Right defends property and property rights, while the Left fights for civil and human rights.”<sup>189</sup> While not immediately apparent in Carlin’s solo comedy, the political education he received from Burns would soon emerge as an important part Carlin’s comic perspective.

Carlin’s description of his work with Burns as “pretty harmless” with only “a veneer of hipness” that focused more on portraying “lower-class Irish” characters than “making a

statement,” more or less tells the tale of his comedy throughout the 1960s.<sup>190</sup> Even though he had gone solo, he was still performing sketches, impersonations, and character-based routines. This is not to say that his material was not funny, because it got more than a few laughs. Rather, it is to say that, like Burns and Carlin, it was safe. It was mainstream. He was, by his own admission, trying “to develop a TV act.” More than anything, he wanted to create “that one five- or six-minute piece that would open the doors to TV.”<sup>191</sup> Like Pryor, he was playing the clubs in Greenwich Village, including Café Wha?, The Bitter End, and Café Au Go Go, and trying to break in to the *Merv Griffin* and *Ed Sullivan* shows. In 1965, with the help of his “Indian Sergeant” character, he made his first appearance on the *Merv Griffin Show*. As Zoglin indicates, “The bit scored, and Griffin asked Carlin back for three more shows.”<sup>192</sup> Carlin, even though he had been performing full sets in the nightclubs, did not have enough television quality material for three more shows. So when he appeared again on *Griffin*, he did an encore performance of his “Indian Sergeant” routine. Even though it was a repeat performance of sorts, it went over well enough that he was offered a thirteen show cycle.

As Carlin recalls, “*The Merv Griffin Show* was my big breakthrough, that odd little syndicated talk show whose host everyone discounted or made fun of. All that happened afterward flowed from that one appearance.”<sup>193</sup> His television successes would continue over the next two years as he held down a job as the house comic on *The Kraft Summer Music Hall* program in 1966 and made the first of his many *Ed Sullivan Show* appearances in early 1967. In his memoir, Carlin writes:

Objectively 1967 was full of success. In February my first album, *Take-Off and Put-Ons*, came out and went gold. It was nominated for a Grammy and lost by a squeaker to Bill Cosby, a very worthy opponent. I was playing the biggest nightclubs in the country. I

was starting to play Vegas. That summer, I did another replacement [television] series called *Away We Go*.”<sup>194</sup>

However, it was becoming clear that the show business success of his straight-laced stand-up persona was traveling along a trajectory that was in stark contrast to “the backstage Carlin who smoked dope and felt a bond with the [Vietnam War] protesters.”<sup>195</sup>

His early comedy—comprised of “parodies of commercials, game shows, and soap operas,” as well as character bits such the Indian Sergeant and his full-scale newscast parody that introduced Al Sleet, the hippy-dippy weatherman, to the world—was as superficial as it was successful.<sup>196</sup> In his autobiography, he writes that by the late 1960s, “everything about my comedy seemed rote.” Even on the *Smothers Brothers*, which he described as “the only comedy show that was actually taking a stand against the war,” he donned his feathered headdress as the “Indian Sergeant.”<sup>197</sup> He had become a polished performer but he had long neglected his creativity. By that time, he was well on his way toward a Pryor-esque mid-career identity crisis. Looking back on that pivotal time period, he told Richard Zoglin, “I started to see people singing protest songs. I hear that people are using their talent to express their point of view, and their point of view is political. And I have all these feelings too. And I’m doing all these superficial things, about the media and disc jockeys and ladies on quiz shows. And I’m doing them for the enemy.”<sup>198</sup> Similarly, in his autobiography, Carlin suggests, “I looked at what my friends were doing, the music they were making, the doors they were opening, the stands they were taking, the changes they were acknowledging and instigating... I felt like a traitor to my generation.”<sup>199</sup>

According to Richard Zoglin, “Starting in 1968, Carlin began to change his looks and his comedy. He let his hair grow. In February 1970 (Carlin noted it in his logbook) he started a beard... In clubs he began doing more provocative material—about drugs, Vietnam, corporate

America.”<sup>200</sup> He also started taking more powerful drugs. In his memoir he writes about a “profound turning point” and “seminal experience” after taking acid while playing Mister Kelley’s in Chicago in October 1969.<sup>201</sup> Carlin’s comedy grew more and more confrontational and he collected a series of pink slips from high-end nightclubs across the country. He was fired from New York’s Copacabana after spending much of his run reading from the *Yellow Pages* and the manufacturers label beneath the piano while begging to be fired from the stage. He was twice relieved of his duties from extended engagements at the Frontier Hotel in Las Vegas for offending customers with his language, once for a bit about his lacking backside and once for a brief discussion of comedians who use obscenity onstage.<sup>202</sup> And he was also cancelled mid-run at the Lake Geneva Playboy Club for berating the audience with “shtick about materialism in American society, press censorship, poverty, Nixon-Agnew and the Vietnam War.”<sup>203</sup>

By 1970, it was clear that the straight-laced, clean-cut comic that had achieved so much success in the mid-1960s was gone. The new Carlin spoke “directly to the audience” in the first person “rather than performing for them in character.”<sup>204</sup> His comedy, like Pryor’s, became more political and more *personal*. He labored “to tell the truth about where [he] came from” and to be authentic by tapping into “the underdog attitudes” and “the Us-versus-Them dynamic from [his] old neighborhood.”<sup>205</sup> As he told *Playboy*, “The rebellious mood of the country during those years allowed me to plug right back into my old hatreds... against religion, government, big business—all those assholes and their values. That hatred was very real.”<sup>206</sup>

His transition from safe-for-television, late-show guest to counterculture icon, however, was an incredible gamble. Just as they did when Mort Sahl and Dick Gregory turned from comedy to politics, people assumed that Carlin had lost his mind. He abandoned the audience that he had built and started over from scratch. He cast aside bona fide show-business success on

what seemed like a personal whim. What is more, his superficially juvenile personal transformation came at an enormous financial risk. He opted to perform in coffeehouses and folk clubs instead of Las Vegas resorts. His manager from that transitional time period, Jeff Wald, likes to recount, “I took George Carlin from two hundred and fifty thousand dollars a year down to about twelve thousand dollars and improved his career.”<sup>207</sup> According to Richard Zoglin, “On May 3, 1971, Carlin collected an unemployment check. A month later he was a last-minute fill-in for Mort Sahl at Santa Monica College.”<sup>208</sup> It was there, as Carlin wrote in his journal, that he received his first standing ovation; his first affirmation that his new style and perspective could reach an audience—even if it was the audience that Mort Sahl had cultivated.

In 1971, Carlin was offered a record deal with Flip Wilson’s Little David label. His first album, *FM & AM*, which was released in early 1972, was intended to be an example of his transition from the comedy of his early career (AM) to the edgy comedy of his burgeoning socially conscious perspective (FM). The album went gold and, according to Zoglin, spent “thirty-five weeks on the *Billboard* pop chart.”<sup>209</sup> It also netted Carlin his first Grammy Award for Best Comedy Album. The AM side of the album features the newscast and game show parodies that made *Take-offs and Put-ons* a hit in the late ‘60s while the FM side’s bits about drugs, sex in commercials, and an extended riff on the word shoot felt more like Carlin’s impersonations of Lenny Bruce and Mort Sahl from his Burns and Carlin days—only these routines were not impersonations.<sup>210</sup> He worked the same themes as the new comics of the previous generation, but as Zoglin suggests, he did so with “more precision and punch.”<sup>211</sup> Just four months after releasing *FM & AM*, Carlin began recording the *Class Clown* sessions. This album put Carlin’s new persona front and center by drawing heavily on autobiographical material. *Class Clown*’s greatest success, however, came from its last cut: “Seven Words You

Can Never Say on Television.” That bit, which revolved around “the ways we use, misuse, and abuse words,” became a new standard by which stand-up comedy would be judged for generations.<sup>212</sup> It also spawned a series of language-based monologues that would appear in Carlin’s comedy for the next thirty years. Almost as quickly as *FM & AM, Class Clown* went gold and the new George Carlin had returned to stand-up prominence.

The summer of 1972 was a time of monumental highs—in terms of Carlin’s career—and lows—in regards to his ever-worsening addiction to cocaine. In July, Carlin made his debut at Carnegie Hall. As he wrote in memoir, playing Carnegie “not only meant validation but arrival at a certain level”—he was, after all, a New Yorker—but also “Lenny worked Carnegie Hall,” and Carlin idolized the late comic.<sup>213</sup> As with Bruce before him, his appearance on that fabled stage offered a sense of legitimacy to the work he was doing, but it also served as a reminder of the cultural significance of stand-up comedy. Just two weeks later, however, Carlin faced the first serious consequence of carrying Lenny’s torch. On July 21, 1972, while playing Summerfest in Milwaukee, Carlin was arrested on disorderly conduct charges for performing his “Seven Words” routine. According to Carlin, “Five months later, one Judge Gieringer threw out the complaint.”<sup>214</sup> Nevertheless, Carlin’s envelope pushing comedy was now a matter of public discussion. Following his arrest in Milwaukee, Carlin set about building on the “Seven Words” routine for his next record: *Occupation: Foole*. The album, released in 1973, ends with a lengthy diatribe of eleven and a half minutes titled, “Filthy Words.”

Later that same year, the New York radio station WBAI aired the cut during a midday program about language and societal double standards. A complaint was lodged by a so-called concerned parent; the Federal Communications Commission reprimanded the station, and so began a court battle that again placed stand-up comedy at the center of the discussion of societal



standards regarding decency and obscenity.<sup>215</sup> Unlike Bruce's earlier legal troubles, however, Carlin was never personally on trial. Instead, the Pacifica Foundation, who owned WBAI, was the champion of free speech in the courtroom; Carlin's "Filthy Words" were merely the rallying cry. The case dragged on over the next five years. In 1975, the FCC issued "a declaratory order concerning the broadcast of 'indecent' language, defining 'indecent' as words that describe 'in terms patently offensive as measured by contemporary community standards sexual or excretory activities and organs at times of the day when there is a reasonable risk that children may be in the audience.'"<sup>216</sup> WBAI fought the order in the U.S. Court of Appeals and won, but the FCC emerged victorious when their own appeal, to reinstate the order, was presented before the U.S. Supreme Court in 1978.<sup>217</sup>

Amidst the court battle, Carlin's career continued. By the mid-1970s Carlin had become seriously addicted to cocaine and his substance abuse was affecting his work. He told *Playboy* that the cocaine had affected "the creative side" of his career and that "If you want to see a cokehead just look at the pictures on the *Occupation: Foole* album." The next two albums of his Little David record deal, 1974's *Toledo Window Box* and 1975's *An Evening with Wally Lando*, were not among his greatest comic achievements. In fact, he refers to that time period as his "Second Visitation of the Straights."<sup>218</sup> Even though his comedy had lost much of its edge, he was still invited to host the very first *Saturday Night Live* episode and made his return to *The Tonight Show* in 1975.<sup>219</sup> After having released five albums at one-per-year rate in the first half of the decade, Carlin's output was reduced to a single album—1977's *On the Road*—until the beginning of the next decade.<sup>220</sup>

As the record boom that began in 1960s was coming to its end, Carlin turned to a new medium—subscription television—to revive his floundering career. He was approached by the

Home Box Office network (HBO) and offered a contract to appear in their *On Location* series in 1977. Even though he mostly rehashed material that he had used earlier in the decade, Carlin's first special, *On Location with George Carlin*, was a hit for the up-and-coming network. Importantly, the program broke new ground for comedy and television because it was uncensored and was the first televised performance of "Seven Words You Can Never Say on Television."<sup>221</sup> As a result the program's success, he was offered a second show, *George Carlin Again!*, the following year which was similarly successful. As with his previous special, *Carlin Again!* offered little in the way of new material, but its ratings success led to a working relationship between the comic and the network that would produce fourteen hour-long programs over the next thirty years. Carlin, more than any other performer, found stand-up comedy a home on television. The uncensored HBO programs reflected the material performed in the coffeehouses, concert halls, and on the campuses rather than the five or six minutes of safe-for-television material that stand-ups would perform on late-night programs. What is more, his relationship with HBO—and the heart attack in 1978 that convinced him stop using cocaine—gave his creativity the boost needed to get his career back on track by the start of the 1980s.

Carlin would go on to become the most prolific American stand-up comedian in the history of the form. Along with his fourteen HBO specials, many of which that were accompanied by album-versions, Carlin wrote three *New York Times* best-sellers and won a mantle full of awards—including a posthumous Mark Twain prize for achievement in American Humor and five Grammy awards. His career and comic perspective would ebb-and-flow over the next thirty years, but his impact on the generations that followed should not be understated. Carlin, more than any other comedian, proved that a career in stand-up comedy could be an end in itself amidst a host of comics, including Richard Pryor, who saw stand-up as little more than a

stop along the path to television and film fame.<sup>222</sup> Before his death on June 22, 2008, George Carlin took up the gauntlet thrown down by the new comedians of the 1950s and 1960s and carried it into the next millennium.

### **Conclusion**

By the time that Richard Pryor and George Carlin ascended to stand-up stardom, the new comedy movement had already completed its entire lifecycle. Their audience was no longer comprised of the comfortable with critique post-war crowd of the late 1950s and early 1960s. Instead, they spoke to a public already frustrated and exhausted by Vietnam protests and civil rights demonstrations. By 1970, the liberals of the New Frontier had been replaced by Richard Nixon's "silent" and Jerry Falwell's "moral" majorities and the rock and roll counterculture had moved into the lot vacated by the hipsters and beatniks of the previous generation. The context for their counterculture comedy stood in stark contrast against that of the previous generation's new comedy. Whereas the new comedy movement marked a fusion of the traditions of political satire and stand-up comedy, the counterculture comedy of Pryor and Carlin lacked the outward directed, concrete critique of political commentary. Instead, their comedy turned away from political topicality in favor of inward focused, personal anecdotes. Even the outwardly political material in Pryor's and Carlin's body of work seemed to be an outgrowth of their autobiographical reflections.

The "new comedians" developed their material from the outside-in, but the opposite was true for the counterculture comics. This reversal in orientation to the political had two significant results: first, it affirmed the importance of politics and political satire to the form of stand-up comedy by drawing politics from the quotidian and the personal rather than mining comedy from the political and public; and second, it divorced the form of stand-up comedy from

the tradition of topical or political satire such that it could continue to evolve and develop on its merit. This is not to say that the stand-up comedy of the 1970s *lacked* politics or political impact, rather it is to suggest that it drew its political significance from within rather than from without. In fact, Carlin and Pryor arguably had more at stake in their comedy than Sahl, Bruce, or Gregory because of their personal engagement with—rather than detached commentary about—their subject matter. Regardless of these distinctions, however, it is clear that each generation made its mark on the form and, as I contend in the chapters that follow, on American democracy.

Moving forward, I treat all five comics as representatives of the satirical stand-up form that was popular between 1953, when Sahl debuted, through the late 1970s. Rather than addressing them one at a time, I offer a synthetic treatment that places their work in conversation to demonstrate not only the development of the form, but also how the form impacted public life over time. Over the course of following chapters, I argue that these comedians and the form that they cultivated provide unique equipments for citizenship. More than simply acting as political commentators—which provides equipment to citizens in its own right—these comedians, together, offered equipment to encourage radically democratic attitudes and alternative avenues for expressing political voice and learning how to be members of pluralist *demos*.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Stephanie Koziski Olson, “Stand-up Comedy” in *Humor in America*, Lawrence Mintz ed., (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988): 111.

<sup>2</sup> Olson, “Stand-up Comedy.” 112

<sup>3</sup> Alison Dagnes, *A Conservative Walks into a Bar: The Politics of Political Humor* (New York: Palgrave/MacMillan, 2012): 93.

<sup>4</sup> Arthur Dudden, “The Record of Political Humor,” *American Quarterly* 37 (Spring 1985): 57

<sup>5</sup> Olson, 115. The name, “Borscht Belt,” is derivative of a beet soup common in Russia and Ukraine that was popular among Jewish immigrants to the United States. The name, in this way, reflects the typically Jewish patrons of the resorts.

<sup>6</sup> Chitlins, also known as chitterlings, refer to livestock intestines that sometimes appear in African American culinary tradition. Historically, chitlins were used as cheap food for slaves. In contemporary terms, though, chitlins are considered “soul food.” In this way, just as the Borscht Belt was named for its Jewish patrons, the “Chitlin Circuit” got its name from its African American patrons.

<sup>7</sup> Dagnes, *A Conservative Walks into a Bar*, 95.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>9</sup> Gerald Nachman, *Seriously Funny* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2003): 3-4

<sup>10</sup> Nachman, *Seriously Funny*, 7.

<sup>11</sup> Stephen Kercher, *Revel With a Cause: Liberal Satire in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006): 239.

<sup>12</sup> “The Third Campaign,” *Time*, August 15, 1960.

<sup>13</sup> *American Masters*, season 4, episode 6, “Mort Sahl: The Loyal Opposition,” directed by Robert Weide, aired September 18, 1989 (Whyaduck Productions). This episode of *American Masters* is not currently in distribution. I owe special thanks to Robert Weide of Whyaduck Productions for lending me a copy to screen as I wrote this dissertation.

<sup>14</sup> Richard Zoglin, *Comedy at the Edge: How Stand-up In the 1970s Changed America* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2008): 13

<sup>15</sup> Mort Sahl, *Heartland* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Jovanovich, 1976): 13

<sup>16</sup> Sahl, *Heartland*, 12

<sup>17</sup> “The Third Campaign,” *Time*, August 15, 1960, 44.

<sup>18</sup> Stefan Kanfer, “The Evolution of Political Humor,” *The New Leader* 91 (March/April 2008): 17-18.

<sup>19</sup> Sahl, *Heartland*, 13.

<sup>20</sup> Nachman, *Seriously Funny*, 50

<sup>21</sup> Both Sahl and Lenny Bruce were clearly influenced by the improvisational nature of jazz music and their emergence, in some ways, reflected a cultural moment when what Daniel Belgrad calls a “culture of spontaneity” was burgeoning in Post-war America. In music, this new jazz culture was reflected by the shift away from Big Band Swing in favor of BeBop (on the East Coast) and Cool (on the West Coast)—genres which were much more complex than Swing and required much more of their listener. Of course, the main consumers of this culture were white, middle-class men, but its emergence in its moment is significant as a means of preparing the way for stand-up and satire to coalesce and alter the course of American comedy. See Daniel

Belgrad, *The Culture of Spontaneity: Improvisation and the Arts in Postwar America* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

<sup>22</sup> “The Third Campaign”

<sup>23</sup> Sahl, *Heartland*, 37.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>25</sup> Nachman, *Seriously Funny*, 65.

<sup>26</sup> “The Tiger & the Lady,” *Time*, April 21, 1958, 78.

<sup>27</sup> Sahl, *Heartland*, 21.

<sup>28</sup> “The Tiger and the Lady”

<sup>29</sup> “The Third Campaign”

<sup>30</sup> Kercher, *Revel with a Cause*, 242.

<sup>31</sup> Nachman, *Seriously Funny*, 51.

<sup>32</sup> “Will Rogers with Fangs,” *Time*, July 25, 1960, 44.

<sup>33</sup> Sahl, *Heartland*, 87.

<sup>34</sup> Quoted in Nachman, *Seriously Funny*, 68.

<sup>35</sup> Sahl, *Heartland*, 33.

<sup>36</sup> Nachman, *Seriously Funny*, 69.

<sup>37</sup> According to Laurence Maslon and Michael Kantor Cal Stewart, as his character “Uncle Josh,” recorded a series of jokes as early as 1897. Laurence Maslon & Michael Kantor, *Make ‘Em Laugh: The Funny Business in America* (New York: Twelve, 2008): 228.

<sup>38</sup> Laurence and Kantor, *Make ‘Em Laugh*, 228. Sahl also mentions this in his autobiography in one of his fits of ego stroking.

<sup>39</sup> Kercher, *Revel With a Cause*, 240.

<sup>40</sup> Sahl, *Heartland*, 93.

<sup>41</sup> Susan Cheever Cowley & Sandra Gray, “Newsmakers,” *Newsweek* August 9, 1976, 45.

<sup>42</sup> Nachman, 50. Italics original.

<sup>43</sup> Lenny Bruce, *How to Talk Dirty and Influence People* (New York: Fireside, 1992): 164.

<sup>44</sup> Nachman, 402.

<sup>45</sup> “The Sickniks,” *Time* July 13, 1959, 44.; This article was published before the Mort Sahl cover issue and the labels “sicknik” and “sick humor” predate the label “new comedy.” However, given the significance of the cover story and the comedians’ own criticism of the “sick” label (which I address in Chapter 4), I feel the “new comedy” label a more appropriate moniker for the group of comedians that I describe here.

<sup>46</sup> Bruce, *How to Talk Dirty and Influence People*, vii.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>48</sup> As evidence of the mystery surrounding the legend of Bruce’s career Zoglin reports that this performance occurred in 1948, Nachman 1949, and Kercher 1950

<sup>49</sup> Kercher, *Revel with a Cause*, 398.

<sup>50</sup> Bruce, *How to Talk Dirty and Influence People*, 32.

<sup>51</sup> Kercher, *Revel With a Cause*, 402.

<sup>52</sup> Bruce, *How to Talk Dirty and Influence People*, 93.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 156

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., xii-xiii



<sup>56</sup> Zoglin, *Comedy at the Edge*, 12

<sup>57</sup> Nachman, *Seriously Funny*, 391.

<sup>58</sup> Zoglin, *Comedy at the Edge*, 12-13

<sup>59</sup> Bruce, *How to Talk Dirty and Influence People*, 187, 12.

<sup>60</sup> Kercher, *Revel with a Cause*, 411.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 402, 406.

<sup>62</sup> Nachman, *Seriously Funny*, 394.

<sup>63</sup> For this reason this section, unlike the other four in this chapter, does not begin with an excerpt from his comedy.

<sup>64</sup> Kercher, *Revel with a Cause*, 402.

<sup>65</sup> Qtd. in Zoglin, *Comedy at the Edge*, 10.

<sup>66</sup> Bruce, *How to Talk Dirty and Influence People*, xii.

<sup>67</sup> Nachman, *Seriously Funny*, 402.

<sup>68</sup> Which was originally called Mona's 440 and was one of the first lesbian clubs in America.

<sup>69</sup> Kercher, *Revel with a Cause*, 402-403.

<sup>70</sup> Kercher, *Revel with a Cause*, 403.

<sup>71</sup> Zoglin, *Comedy at the Edge*, 10.

<sup>72</sup> Qtd. in Zoglin, *Comedy at the Edge*, 12.

<sup>73</sup> As I have indicated earlier, Rogers was not a stand-up comedian as conceived of here.

Berman was, but his material was not especially political or satirical.

<sup>74</sup> the word was "cocksucker."

<sup>75</sup> Kercher, *Revel with a Cause*, 417.

<sup>76</sup> Bruce, *How to Talk Dirty and Influence People*, 148. Interestingly, his conviction rested on his critiques of the Catholic Church and sexual characterizations of Jacklyn Kennedy and Eleanor Roosevelt.

<sup>77</sup> John Weaver, “The Canonization of Lenny Bruce” *Holiday*, November 1968. Qtd. in Nachman, *Seriously Funny*, 427. Although *Holiday* is not in distribution, the article is available at <http://holidaymag.wordpress.com/2012/06/13/the-canonization-of-lenny-bruce-by-john-weaver-november-1968/>.

<sup>78</sup> Kercher, *Revel with a Cause*, 408.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 408.

<sup>80</sup> Fun fact: up-and-coming comedian George Carlin was in the audience for the second show and was also arrested for not providing identification. In the paddy wagon afterward, Bruce called him a “schmuck.”

<sup>81</sup> Kercher, *Revel with a Cause*, 420.

<sup>82</sup> Zoglin, *Comedy at the Edge*, 9.

<sup>83</sup> Kercher, *Revel with a Cause*, 420.

<sup>84</sup> Nachman, *Seriously Funny*, 390.

<sup>85</sup> Dick Gregory, *From the Back of the Bus* (New York: Avon, 1962): 21

<sup>86</sup> Dick Gregory with Robert Lipsyte, *Nigger* (New York: Pocketbooks, 1965): 41.

<sup>87</sup> Gregory, *Nigger*, 88.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

<sup>91</sup> Kercher, *Revel with a Cause*, 287.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 287-288.

<sup>93</sup> Nachman, *Seriously Funny*, 491.

<sup>94</sup> Gregory, *Nigger*, 144.

<sup>95</sup> Hugh Hefner, "Introduction" in *From the Back of the Bus*, Dick Gregory (New York: Avon, 1962): 14.

<sup>96</sup> Nachman, *Seriously Funny*, 491.

<sup>97</sup> "Humor, Integrated," *Time*, February 17, 1961, 69.

<sup>98</sup> The records would released under Colpix were *Dick Gregory in Living Black and White* and *East & West*. Both were released in 1961.

<sup>99</sup> Nachman, *Seriously Funny*, 483.

<sup>100</sup> Qtd. in Kercher, *Revel with a Cause*, 290

<sup>101</sup> Kercher, *Revel with a Cause*, 289.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 290.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 290.

<sup>104</sup> Gregory, *Nigger*, 132.

<sup>105</sup> Gilbert Millstein, "A Negro Says it with Jokes," *New York Times*, April 30, 1961, SM34.

<sup>106</sup> Nachman, *Seriously Funny*, 481.

<sup>107</sup> "Humor, Integrated"

<sup>108</sup> Kercher, *Revel with a Cause*, 293.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 292-293.

<sup>110</sup> Nachman, *Seriously Funny*, 495.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 483.

<sup>112</sup> “Humor, Integrated”

<sup>113</sup> Hefner, *From the Back of the Bus*, 11.

<sup>114</sup> Nachman, *Seriously Funny*, 487.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 492-493.

<sup>116</sup> Kercher, *Revel with a Cause*, 294; Nachman *Seriously Funny*, 492.

<sup>117</sup> Kercher, *Revel with a Cause*, 291; Hentoff qtd. in Kercher, *Revel with a Cause*, 291.

<sup>118</sup> Nachman, *Seriously Funny*, 493.

<sup>119</sup> Hefner, *From the Back of the Bus*, 18.

<sup>120</sup> Nachman *Seriously Funny*, 481-482.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 482.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 502.

<sup>123</sup> Gregory, *Nigger*, 181.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 181.

<sup>125</sup> Nachman, *Seriously Funny*, 503.

<sup>126</sup> Hefner, *From the Back of the Bus*, 18.

<sup>127</sup> See David Marc, *Comic Visions: Television Comedy and American Culture*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Malden: Blackwell, 1997): 62, 104.

<sup>128</sup> There were, of course, exceptions such as 1964’s satire news program, *That Was the Week that Was*, and *The Smothers Brothers’ Comedy Hour*—a variety show program that regularly featured anti-war comedy and protest music—which aired for one full season between September 1967 and September 1969.

<sup>129</sup> *Comedy Central Presents*, “The 100 Greatest Stand-Up of All Time,” aired April 12, 2004 on Comedy Central. (Comedy Central Productions). The comics under examination here all made the cut: Dick Gregory at 81, Mort Sahl at 40, Lenny Bruce at 3, George Carlin at 2, and Richard Pryor at 1.

<sup>130</sup> *Kraft Summer Music Hall*, aired April 25, 1966 on NBC (Bob Banner Associates).

<sup>131</sup> Richard Pryor with Todd Gold, *Pryor Convictions and Other Life Sentences* (New York: Pantheon, 1995): 64.

<sup>132</sup> Maslon and Kantor, *Make ‘Em Laugh*, 350.

<sup>133</sup> The opening chapters of his autobiography paint a particularly frightening picture of Pryor’s youth.

<sup>134</sup> Pryor, *Pryor Convictions*, 72.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>137</sup> Qtd. in Zoglin, *Comedy at the Edge*, 45.

<sup>138</sup> Zoglin, *Comedy at the Edge*, 43.

<sup>139</sup> Pryor, *Pryor Convictions*, 94.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

<sup>143</sup> Zoglin, *Comedy at the Edge*, 48.

<sup>144</sup> Zoglin, *Comedy at the Edge*, 49 and Maslon and Kantor, *Make ‘Em Laugh*, 351.

<sup>145</sup> Evan Cooper, “Is it Something He Said: Mass Consumption of Richard Pryor’s Culturally Intimate Humor,” *The Communication Review* 10 (2007): 228.

<sup>146</sup> Zoglin, *Comedy at the Edge*, 49.

<sup>147</sup> Malson and Kantor, *Make ‘Em Laugh*, 351 and Zoglin, *Comedy at the Edge*, 49.

<sup>148</sup> Pryor, *Pryor Convictions*, 115.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, 115-116.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

<sup>151</sup> Pryor cites Bruce as a primary influence noting that “Nobody, to this day, has made an album as brilliantly funny as Lenny Bruce’s *Lima, Ohio*.” Pryor, *Pryor Convictions*, 112

<sup>152</sup> Zoglin, *Comedy at the Edge*, 51.

<sup>153</sup> Pryor, *Pryor Convictions*, 137.

<sup>154</sup> Maslon and Kantor, *Make ‘Em Laugh*, 352. The sketch involves Chevy Chase and Pryor doing a word association exercise at a job interview that devolves into racist name-calling. It is indescribably funny.

<sup>155</sup> Richard Pryor, ...*Is It Something I Said?* Warner Brothers, 1975; Richard Pryor, *Bi-Centennial Nigger*, Warner Brothers, 1976.

<sup>156</sup> Qtd. in Zoglin, *Comedy at the Edge*, 59.

<sup>157</sup> Zoglin, *Comedy at the Edge*, 60.

<sup>158</sup> Even though feature length stand-up performances are rare, they are not unheard of. The Blue Collar Comedy troupe, for example, has made three such films.

<sup>159</sup> Pryor, *Pryor Convictions*, 180.

<sup>160</sup> Zoglin, *Comedy at the Edge*, 61.

<sup>161</sup> Pryor, *Pryor Convictions*, 202.

<sup>162</sup> In his autobiography, he recounts a story of an attempted comeback in the early 1990s where he could no longer physically stand on stage and instead performed from an easy chair. For a performer as gifted at physical comedy as Pryor one could only imagine the negative effect this had on his stand-up performance.

<sup>163</sup> Cooper, "Is it Something He Said," 224.

<sup>164</sup> Zoglin, *Comedy at the Edge*, 63.

<sup>165</sup> Pryor, *Pryor Convictions*, 177.

<sup>166</sup> "George Carlin: Life is Worth Losing" aired November 5, 2005 on HBO (Cable Stuff Productions).

<sup>167</sup> Pryor in May of 1965 and Carlin in July of that same year. Pryor would appear eleven times in 1965 and Carlin seven times.

<sup>168</sup> Pryor appeared in May of 1965, but Carlin did not appear until January of 1967. Pryor appeared eleven times between 1965-68. Carlin would appear six times between 1967-68.

<sup>169</sup> George Carlin, *Take offs and Put Ons*, RCA Victor, 1967; Richard Pryor, *Richard Pryor*, Dove/Reprise, 1968.

<sup>170</sup> This joke appears in several places, but the quoted material above is from his HBO special *Carlin at Carnegie. On Location*, "Carlin at Carnegie," aired 1983 on HBO, (Cable Stuff Productions).

<sup>171</sup> George Carlin, Interviewed by Sam Merrill, *Playboy*, January 1982.

<sup>172</sup> Zoglin, *Comedy at the Edge*, 21.

<sup>173</sup> One for celebrating the Dodgers 1955 World Series victory a little too voraciously and the other for smoking a joint before taking a nap in the crawlway of a B-47.

<sup>174</sup> George Carlin with Tony Hendra, *Last Words* (New York, Free Press: 2009): 65; George Carlin, *Playboy*

<sup>175</sup> In his memoir, he recalls running an ad for Alka-Seltzer during a weekly saying of the rosary by Cardinal Cushing and using the mobile-news-unit to drive down to New York to buy drugs. The latter stunt got him fired.

<sup>176</sup> Carlin, *Last Words*, 71.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid., 74

<sup>178</sup> Zoglin, *Comedy at the Edge*, 22-23.

<sup>179</sup> Carlin, *Last Words*, 78.

<sup>180</sup> James Sullivan, *Seven Dirty Words: The Life and Crimes of George Carlin* (Cambridge: Da Capo, 2010): 44.

<sup>181</sup> The pair released only one album, *At the Playboy Club Tonight: Burns and Carlin*, which was actually recorded at Cosmo Alley in L.A. in 1960 and released in 1963—after they had already parted ways. Jack Burns & George Carlin, *At the Playboy Club Tonight: Burns and Carlin*, ERA Records, 1960.

<sup>182</sup> Zoglin, *Comedy at the Edge*, 23.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>184</sup> George Carlin, *Playboy*.

<sup>185</sup> Carlin, *Last Words*, 80.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid., 82.



<sup>187</sup> Which he would go on to do at Second City where he met a new comedy partner, Avery Schreiber. However, Burns had his greatest success as a writer (*Hee Haw*, *The Muppet Show*) and producer (*The Muppet Show*, *The Flip Wilson Special*).

<sup>188</sup> Carlin, *Last Words*, 84.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>192</sup> Zoglin, *Comedy at the Edge*, 25

<sup>193</sup> Carlin, *Last Words*, 112

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

<sup>195</sup> Zoglin, *Comedy at the Edge*, 28.

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>197</sup> Carlin, *Last Words*, 138.

<sup>198</sup> Qtd. in Zoglin, *Comedy at the Edge*, 28.

<sup>199</sup> Carlin, *Last Words*, 140.

<sup>200</sup> Zoglin, *Comedy at the Edge*, 29.

<sup>201</sup> Carlin, *Last Words*, 142.

<sup>202</sup> “I don’t say shit. Down the street Buddy Hackett says shit, Redd Foxx says shit. I don’t say shit. I smoke a little of it, but I don’t say it.” Carlin, *Last Words*, 146.

<sup>203</sup> Carlin, *Last Words*, 149.

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*, 145-146

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*, 152

<sup>206</sup> George Carlin, *Playboy*.

<sup>207</sup> Qtd. in Zoglin, *Comedy at the Edge*, 31.

<sup>208</sup> Zoglin, *Comedy at the Edge*, 32.

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>210</sup> “*Shoot* is just *shit* with two O’s.” This bit inspired his famous “Seven Words You Can Never Say on Television” routine. George Carlin, *FM & AM*, Little David, 1972.

<sup>211</sup> Zoglin, *Comedy at the Edge*, 33.

<sup>212</sup> Carlin, *Last Words*, 157.

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.

<sup>214</sup> *Ibid.*, 168. As was the case with Bruce any question of obscenity revolved around the term’s legal definition—language used to arouse a hearers prurient interests.

<sup>215</sup> In his interview with *Playboy*, Carlin identifies the man as a member of the activist group, *Morals in Media*, which he describes as a “forerunner of the Moral Majority.”

<sup>216</sup> Carlin, *Last Words*, 171.

<sup>217</sup> The FCC won 5-4, with Justice John Paul Stevens writing the majority decision and Justice William Brennan penning the dissent.

<sup>218</sup> *Ibid.*, 200.

<sup>219</sup> His appearance on *SNL* was a minor disaster and in his autobiography he admits that much of the problem, beyond his inability to *act*, was due to the fact that he was on an extended cocaine run. His return to the *Tonight Show*, however, bore much fruit as he would go on to become a recurring guest host and log well over 100 appearances on the program.

<sup>220</sup> His next record was 1981's *A Place for My Stuff*. George Carlin, *A Place for My Stuff*, Atlantic, 1981.

<sup>221</sup> Interestingly, the program begins with a warning to viewers about the language used in the performance and just before Carlin gets into his famous routine the show is interrupted for a *second* warning.

<sup>222</sup> Admittedly, Carlin did have a short-lived sitcom on FOX, made few cameos in films—for example, the *Bill and Ted* franchise and a handful of Kevin Smith films—and was the diminutive Mr. Conductor on Shining Time Station.

## CHAPTER II. COMIC AS RHETOR: AUTHENTICITY & OPPOSITION AS EQUIPMENT FOR CITIZENSHIP

As I have indicated in the introduction, stand-up comedy is arguably the most traditionally rhetorical form of comedy present in American culture. This is not to say that the television sit-com or the ironic Internet meme are not rhetorical—because they most certainly are. Rather, it is to suggest that, unlike these comic genres, stand-up uniquely draws on the rhetorical tradition of oratory. The rhetorical nature of an activity whereby a single speaker presents a monologue before an audience gathered for the expressed purpose of being entertained by that speaker is undeniable. In this manner, the stand-up comedy routine is for comic rhetorics what the stump speech is for political rhetorics. It is, quite obviously, public speech. It may be a speech to entertain rather than a speech to advocate cause, but it is no less public speech. What is more, as I demonstrated in the previous chapter, the rhetorical nature of stand-up comedy extends beyond the discrete utterance in the comedy club. Each comic's comedy, and indeed the form itself, finds itself in dialogue with various discourses of American culture.<sup>1</sup>

Over the course of these middle chapters, I provide what I believe to be the foundation of a rhetoric of American stand-up satire. In so doing, I address three specific aspects of this rhetoric: the comic, the comedy, and the audience. Importantly, I argue that the rhetoric of stand-up satire is composed of a constellation of these *necessarily interdependent* aspects and cannot be otherwise conceived. For example, if one were to consider a rhetoric of stand-up satire that divorced the comedy—the routines or the material itself—from the satirist (i.e., if a non-comedian were to perform a bit made famous by a stand-up) then the result would not be a rhetoric of *stand-up satire*.<sup>2</sup> The resulting rhetoric may still be a comic one, but divorced from the stand-up situation, it can no longer be accurately identified as a rhetoric of *stand-up satire*.

In this chapter, I focus on the rhetorical nature of the stand-up satirist. Further, I argue that two features—one oriented toward the audience and one toward the comedy—are uniquely important to the success and failure of the form and to the democratic potentials of the equipment it provides. First, the comic must develop and maintain a *comic persona* in order to manage the expectations of the audience according to his or her comic intentions. What is more, this comic persona best functions when it is understood to be an authentic or organic representation of the comic herself or himself. That is, a comic's persona is most persuasive when the comic is "true" to himself or herself. Importantly, this authenticity is a rhetorical construction and its maintenance occupies a significant amount of the comedian's rhetorical interactions. In this manner, the *comic persona*—even though it is in conversation with the comic's identity—is a rhetorical construction built on the audience's perception of authenticity; the audience must believe that comic is who they believe the comic to be in order for the comedy to be persuasive. Hence, the comic persona is an expression of the comic as rhetor that is oriented toward the audience.<sup>3</sup>

Second, the stand-up artist, especially when he or she enjoys the title satirist, must develop a *comic perspective*. Such a perspective is made obvious by the nature of the material included in his or her routines—that is, it is as much a part of the comedy as it is a part of the comic. Whereas the comedy is comprised of topoi and narratives, the comic perspective provides the means by which the comic will filter his or her understanding of the world through laughter to build a new comic understanding. In this way, the *comic perspective* acts as what rhetorical scholar Kenneth Burke would call a "terministic screen" through which the comic filters the events and discourses of the external world in order to find comic meaning in otherwise non-comic, or serious, material.<sup>4</sup> Through each performance, the comic attempts to

share his or her terministic screen with an audience and thereby equip them to make similar comic interpretations about their world. For this reason, I argue that the comic perspective is an articulation of the comedian in relation to his or her comedy. Importantly, the equipment provided by the comic is not the comedy itself, but rather the perspective used by the comic—and the logic contained therein—to arrive at the comic meaning. The comic perspective does not equip the audience to judge any specific discourse or text in one way or another, it equips them to judge *any* discourse or text through the lens of a terministic screen based upon laughter.

### **The Comic Persona**

According to B.L. Ware and Wil A. Linkugel, “Persona, in its strictest sense, is a Latin word referring to the masks worn in Greek and Roman theater;” it is “a ‘mask’ or ‘false face’” that is chosen in order to present a variety of characters.<sup>5</sup> From a rhetorical standpoint, this mask or persona is the rhetorical construction of an implied speaker. Importantly, as Paul Campbell indicates, the persona adopted by a rhetor carries “no necessary resemblance to the author” because it is the product of rhetorical construction.<sup>6</sup> For this reason, Ware and Linkugel emphasize, “*persona* does not refer to the personality of the actor *qua* person but to the character assumed by the actor when [she or] he dons the mythical mask.”<sup>7</sup> In this sense, persona is understood to be something that is more or less distinct from the rhetor. What is more, for Ware and Linkugel, persona also necessarily exists prior to the rhetor’s decision to assume any given mask. They argue, “rhetorical *personae* reflect the aspirations and cultural visions of audiences from which stems the symbolic construction of archetypal figures.”<sup>8</sup> Thus, the *personae* available to the rhetor are limited to only those archetypes that exist within the symbolic understanding of his or her audience.

This perspective on the nature of rhetorical personae is useful for the current study because it draws attention to the role of the audience and their culture in limiting the rhetor's capacity to construct her or his persona. Although the rhetor, through his or her discourse, is responsible for donning an archetypal mask, the audience acts as a sort of co-creator of that mask. The audience assigns personae legitimacy based on their relationship to and coherence with extant cultural discourses. Simply put, the personae available to the rhetor must emerge *from within* the symbolic culture of the audience otherwise it carries little persuasive potential. For this reason, I contend that the persona of *satirist*, which had been articulated already in the American context by Mark Twain and Will Rogers among others, was uniquely available to the stand-up comedians during the rise of "New Comedy." While stand-up as an art form had yet to find its home within the American cultural experience when Mort Sahl emerged from the basement of San Francisco's hungry i, political humor and satire had already become embedded in the American cultural experience. Thus, by tapping into the adversarial and political nature of previous satirists, Sahl, who referred to himself as the nation's "loyal opposition," was able to don the already familiar mask of the satirist as he moved the form of stand-up comedy to a place of prominence in American culture.

Ware and Linkugel's emphasis on the importance of the audience to personae is key to understanding the rhetorical potential of their use in stand-up satire. However, by restricting the definition of persona in this way, Ware and Linkugel are able to maintain a seemingly clean break between the rhetor's personal *ethos*—a speaker's character as exemplified in *The Rhetoric*—and her or his persona. This distinction, as I indicated earlier, between a speaker's chosen persona and her or his personal *ethos* is not without fault. Arguably, the speaker's *personal ethos* is, in essence, a rhetorical construction in much the same way as the persona he or

she adopts. If *ethos* is, as Aristotle describes in his *Rhetoric*, an artistic proof used by a rhetor to appeal to her or his character, then that character must exist somewhere within the rhetorical imaginary of the audience.<sup>9</sup> Following Campbell's assertion that "every discursive form that is based on rhetoric, or that is itself rhetorical... involves *personae*," it seems logical then to situate character, and therefore *ethos*, under the heading of *persona*.<sup>10</sup> In fact, as I argue in the coming pages, the personal *ethos* of the stand-up comedian is best understood as a *persona* and the *persona* assumed by the comic is most effective when it authentically represents her or his personal *ethos*.

This approach to character foregrounds the rhetorical nature of *ethos* as an appeal to a rhetorical construction, a *persona*, rather than as an appeal to a nonrhetorical quality of the speaker.<sup>11</sup> By grounding *ethos* in *persona*, this approach emphasizes "the aesthetic or dramatic presentation of selves—selves chosen from the cluster of more, or less, habitually performed roles called 'the self' and enacted for poetic-rhetorical purposes," which Campbell considers the very core of any rhetorical discourse.<sup>12</sup> This presentation of self through the construction and maintenance of *persona* is at the very foundation of stand-up comedy because the comic's self provides a means of orienting the audience's expectations about her or his comedy. In so far as the persuasive potential of any rhetorical act rests upon the rhetor's ability identify with her or his audience as Kenneth Burke argues in his *Rhetoric of Motives*, then the *persona* is at the very center of the rhetorical potential of stand-up comedy. The comic's *persona* is the means by which she or he establishes *ethos* and a relationship of identification with the audience. Thus the stand-up comic's *self* is that which is *stood up* during the performance; the comic *persona* is the comedian's stake in the game.



In this way, I argue that stand-up comedy presents the unique challenge of blurring the lines between persona and identity. The mask worn by the stand-up onstage is cast from the comic's own face. With only a few exceptions, stand-up comedians tend to perform under their own name, use the first person, and rely heavily on autobiographical or experiential material to wrest laughs from their audiences.<sup>13</sup> This material depends, almost entirely, on the comic presenting a persona with whom the audience will identify and assign a high degree of authenticity. That is to say, the comedian must present himself or herself in such a way that the audience easily sees coherence between the material and the comic. The comic persona adopted by the performer must fit into the world created by the narratives and jokes of the comedy itself. As Walter Fisher would argue, this means that the comic's persona must present a high degree of narrative fidelity with his or her comedy—that is, the stories that he or she tells must “ring true with the stories [that the audience members] know to be true in their lives.”<sup>14</sup> This is not to say that a comic cannot use character-based humor in his or her monologues. However, even the characters utilized in performance must emerge from a place of authenticity in relation to the performer's history and experience because they must remain consistent with the persona that frames and thereby gives them meaning in relation to the performance as a whole. Over the course of this section, I elaborate on the humor studies and rhetorical literature on persona and discuss the career transitions of Richard Pryor and George Carlin in terms of their shift from moderately successful safe-for-TV personae to wildly successful radically authentic persona as exemplars of the significance of constructing authenticity in stand-up performance.

*Persona: Briefly and By the Numbers*

The concept of persona has a rich history in rhetorical scholarship. Several rhetoricians have theorized that any rhetorical transaction is comprised of at least four possible personae. The first persona, often considered the “I” in a discourse, is the implied author—or what Wayne Booth calls the author’s “second self”—of that discourse.<sup>15</sup> The second persona, as Edwin Black contends, is the “implied auditor” of a discourse that suggests who the rhetor would have her or his actual audience become.<sup>16</sup> This second persona may be represented as the “you” or the “thou” of a discourse. By implying an audience as “you” that may or may not accurately represent the actual audience of a discourse a speaker also identifies a “they” or an “it” for whom the discourse is not intended. This “rejected or negated” group, as Phillip Wander suggests, “forms the silhouette of a Third Persona—the ‘it’ that is not present, that is objectified in a way that ‘you’ and ‘I’ are not.”<sup>17</sup> In some instances, particularly those involving secrecy or passing, a fourth persona composed of a knowing audience who act as confederates on behalf of the rhetor may come into being. This fourth persona, according to Charles Morris, is constituted alongside the other personae of a discourse, but is comprised instead of a “a silent, savvy but discreet audience constituted as collaborator in making duplicitous utterances appear legitimate.”<sup>18</sup>

Although the latter three personae theorized in the rhetorical literature are concerned with the audiences that participate in the rhetorical transaction rather than the rhetor, much of the theoretical development of persona has paid special attention to the first persona. For example, Dana Cloud argues that rhetors may be forced to rely upon a “null persona” in situations of extreme material inequality. The null persona arises through a systematic “self-silencing” or “self-negation of the speaker and the creation in the text of an oblique silhouette indicating what is not utterable.”<sup>19</sup> In another example, a group of scholars contends that rhetors can mobilize a

“transcendent persona” following the completion of “a boundary-breaking accomplishment.”<sup>20</sup>

In such cases, the rhetor can draw upon “the symbolic capital from the feat” to gain “perspective and credibility by drawing from an experience that proves wrong (or appears to prove wrong) basic assumptions about the world and relationships within it.”<sup>21</sup> Said another way, in the aftermath of some great accomplishment, a rhetor is particularly equipped to utilize Kenneth Burke’s strategy of “perspective by incongruity.”<sup>22</sup> In another essay concerning the first persona, Meagan Parker Brooks uses the figure of civil and voting rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer as an example of what she calls the “vernacular persona.” She argues that by appealing to her complete lack of institutional power and using a folksy, home-grown rhetorical style that Hamer successfully established “the authority to speak as a representative of the nation’s most oppressed people, prompting this oppressed audience to see themselves as agents of change, and redefining core American mythology in such a manner that encouraged social transformation.”<sup>23</sup> In their own way, each of these essays contributes to our understanding of the personae available to the rhetor.<sup>24</sup>

Similarly, scholarship of stand-up comedy has been especially cognizant of the importance of the first persona to the stand-up comedy performance. In her analysis of the comic culture of nightclub comedians in Florida, Andrea Greenbaum argues, “the comedian must create a comic authority, a persona, which invites the audience to respond to the conversation by laughing. If the audience dislikes the comic, the jokes, no matter how well written or delivered, will not produce the desired result—laughter.”<sup>25</sup> Simply, the comic’s success—which Greenbaum and others tie exclusively to laughter—is entirely dependent upon her or his development of a persona with whom the audience can identify.<sup>26</sup> Thus from her rhetorical vantage Greenbaum argues, “The means by which comedians develop their *ethos* is by

establishing a comic ‘voice’<sup>27</sup>—which is to say that the stand-up comic’s ethos is inextricably interwoven with her or his persona.

Humor scholar Tracy Wuster’s observations of stand-up comedy echo a similar thesis. He contends that analyzing “the ‘character’ of the comic” reveals to the critic “exactly how the comic establishes tone, personality, and audience within specific performance contexts.”<sup>28</sup> Importantly, Wuster underscores the notion that the comic’s persona is a rhetorical construction that stands in for the comic. He argues that the stand-up comic’s persona “is not a direct reflection of the comedian’s true self, but a character that is shaped and developed in order to create a comedic dynamic in which individual jokes work.”<sup>29</sup> The distinction between the “true self” and the persona is important not only because it reveals the rhetorical nature of persona construction, but also because, I argue, the stand-up comic’s persona *is a representation* of her or his “true self.” For example, Dick Gregory’s comic persona is “Dick Gregory.” He may be a black comic; he may be a satirist; he may be an activist; but he *must be Dick Gregory*. What is more, his audience must believe that the persona presented onstage is an authentic representation of Dick Gregory otherwise his comic authority—that is, his ability to hold attention and make his audience laugh—would be in serious peril.<sup>30</sup> This last point, I argue, is fundamental to understanding the rhetorical potential of stand-up satire and its democratic potential equipment for citizenship because, as Stephanie Koziski argues, the comedian is a representative or spokesperson of the group from which he or she emerges.<sup>31</sup> In democratic terms, the comedian rises from within the *demos* and therefore can use his or her comedy as a means of representing the citizenry and, thereby, equipping them to act in kind. Over next two sections, I trace the career trajectories of both Richard Pryor and George Carlin demonstrating how the authentic

representation of self relates to the success or failure of satirical stand-up performance and the capacity of the comic to model citizenship for his or her audience.<sup>32</sup>

### *Six Good Minutes*

In the mid-1960s, Richard Pryor and George Carlin were moderately valuable show business commodities. The pair collected appearances on variety and late-night television shows at an incredible rate and filled their schedules with gigs at bigger and better venues beyond the boundaries of their Greenwich Village enclave. Their comedy, however, was reserved; it was safe; and, for the most part, it was clean. They did not venture into political material and they did little to develop the democratic potentials of their comedy as equipment for citizenship. They had learned the show business model: figure out what people find funny, work variations on that theme ad nauseam, and—whatever you do—be sure not to offend. However, like Lenny Bruce before them, they would soon realize the limits of their show business handcuffs.

In an appearance on 1966's *Kraft Summer Music Hall*,<sup>33</sup> Richard Pryor performed one of his earliest renditions of the vaunted six-minute television routine. The television routine was the comedian's ticket out of the clubs and into the "good rooms." His set wrenched a handful laughs from the studio audience, but much of the comedy was premised upon Pryor's clownish rubbery face, vocal characterizations, and impeccable physical comedy. What he said was secondary to what he did while he said it.

The set opens and Pryor prepares the audience for an apparently autobiographical routine by saying, "I'm going to tell you a few things about myself because a lot you probably don't know me." From there he begins reminiscing about his childhood in Peoria, Illinois. "I'm from an average-type family—eleven kids," he says, "no father and mother, just kids." The joke gets a laugh, but it depends on hyperbole more than his actual experience. It is certainly possible for

the audience to believe that Pryor is one of eleven children—though he was not—but the laughter is found in his ironic categorization of that experience as “average” rather than in his apparent autobiographical revelation. What is more, in order to remove any possible doubt from the mind of his audience regarding the truth of the statement he adds a punch-line about his parents—or rather his lack thereof—that assures them that he is kidding, not confessing. As the bit continues he offers, “When I was young, I used to think my people didn’t like me because they used to send me to the store for bread. And then they’d move.” The comic onstage and the surreal past he references are decidedly out of joint with what the audience would reasonably expect. The jokes are funny, but they do very little to establish a point of reference for the audience regarding the comic with whom they should identify. In fact, other than revealing his hometown, Pryor’s opening material only serves to mark him as a non-New Yorker—which limits his persona, but only in so far as he cannot be identified with roughly four percent of the entire United States population in the 1960s.

As the routine continues, Pryor makes the only reference to his race in the entire routine. He offers, “I had a wild neighborhood, I got to tell you because my mother’s Puerto Rican, and my father’s Negro, and we lived in a real big Jewish tenement building—in an Italian neighborhood. Every time I’d go outside the kids would say, ‘Get him, he’s all of ‘em!’” As a black comic, the racial aspect of his persona is one of the few things that the audience is more or less free to assume without explanation. However, his joke obscures his own racial identity by permitting him to stake a claim to a series of racial subjectivities. Pryor identifies himself with the Puerto Rican, Black, Jewish, and Italian experiences in a way that marks his comic persona as generically other rather than as a racialized other. In so doing, he pulls the punch on the racist kids from his neighborhood and the culture of racism that they represent as the butt of his joke.

This joke gets a laugh, but because the victim—that is, Pryor—is obfuscated by his generic persona, the impact of the racism requires no further reflection on the part of the audience. The rhetorical potential of his only quip about race in entire routine is dissolved in laughter because he opts not to place himself at the center of the narrative.

Pryor shifts the focus of the routine from his past to his present by turning to a handful of descriptions of his contemporary bachelor lifestyle. He mimes cutting his fingers while trying to make coffee and stabbing himself in the leg with a butcher's knife in an attempt to open a can. He complains about annoying tourists, having trouble getting a cab, and the struggle to avoid drunks and pickpockets in the subway. He ends the routine with a short bit about his favorite television commercials. Each vignette includes vocal and physical depictions of the characters interacting in some way with the comic himself, but they only establish Pryor's persona for the audience in so far as he is *not like* the characters that he creates. In fact, other than their reliance on his considerable gifts for physical comedy and vocal modulation the jokes in this routine would probably go over just as well in the hands of any other comedian because they are tethered to a persona that is best described as “the generic joke-teller.”<sup>34</sup> Pryor is not performing through his own identity as a persona, but through a generic persona based upon what he hopes his audience will recognize as a stand-up comedian.

Because the jokes only reference a surreal past for the performer and the mundane experiences of any New York bachelor, the audience is left to rely on other clues to piece together a persona with whom they can identify. His appearance smacks of show business standards from a bygone era. He dresses in the Borscht Belt era black suit and tie and wears his hair in a clean-cut, conservative style. He appears, aside from being an African-American, thoroughly unassuming. Sadly, in this performance the audience is left with an image of a

completely replaceable joke-teller who may have laugh-getting material and considerable performance chops, but who lacks an authenticity, indeed a humanity, with which they can identify. The comic persona projected throughout the routine has very little to do with Pryor himself and so the audience must settle for identifying with an image of a stand-up comedian rather than the actual person onstage.

George Carlin's early television appearances tell a similar story. In fact, in his first two major television appearances on the *Merv Griffin Show* he presented the exact same material—his popular “Indian Sergeant” routine. He did the same routine the second time because, as he recalls, he simply “didn’t have anything else prepared.”<sup>35</sup> He had focused his entire career, at least to that point, on getting six good minutes together so that he could make a television appearance. A second booking was less than an afterthought until it became a reality. Nevertheless, the “Indian Sergeant” routine was Carlin’s calling card. It was a hit in live performances and an obvious choice to be included on his first album, *Take-Offs and Put-Ons*, where it appears as the final cut.

In one of his *Griffin* performances,<sup>36</sup> Carlin strolls onto camera after his introduction looking, much like Pryor, every bit the generic show-business comedian. Like Pryor, he is clean-shaven and wears his hair in a conservative style. Unlike Pryor who even in his conservative attire carried himself with confidence, however, Carlin appears genuinely uncomfortable in his ill-fitting, mismatched suit and tie. He even stumbles over a line in his most popular routine.

The bit begins with Carlin reflecting on the “endless stream” of Western films that had inundated American culture by the mid-1960s. Explaining that “the big scene always seems to be when the Indians finally attack the cowboys” and that many of the films document “exactly how the cowboys prepare for this attack,” Carlin wonders aloud why the viewers “never see how



the Indians prepare.” Assuming that “there had to be intermediate authority” the routine that follows is a character-based interpretation of “a tough, veteran, battle-hardened sergeant” preparing his “braves” for a massacre. The introduction provides some reference for the audience in regards to Carlin’s persona. For instance, aside from assuming Carlin to be a stock stand-up comedian by his appearance, the audience also gains some insight into his fascination with media. He does not, however, offer any sort of elaboration of that preoccupation. He simply acknowledges having shared in the common experience of watching Western films and claims to have been struck by the one-sided story-telling they tend to feature. He offers no indication why it gives him pause, only that it does. In revealing so little of himself at the start of the routine, he ensures that his persona remains more or less obscured as his caricature begins.

After a brief moment to get into character, he adjusts his posture starts shouting orders, “Alright, all the tall guys over by the trees. Fat guys down behind the rocks. You with the beads, outta line.” Almost immediately, his audience responds with their approval. Their laughter, however, is not so much a response to the line but to the East Coast tough-guy character Carlin chooses to have deliver it. The character Carlin performs starkly contrasts the silent savage image of Native Americans familiarized by the genre he mocks. On the other hand, Carlin’s vocal and physical characterization calls to mind any number of war film sergeants with much greater accuracy. The reversal, emphasizing the “sergeant” of the “Indian Sergeant” plays to great comic effect over the course of the routine. Even though Carlin chooses to utilize a character, his portrayal reveals a glimpse into his persona. The East Coast working-class Irish character was character with whom Carlin was uniquely familiar being from a family and Morningside Heights neighborhood full of such characters. However, he offers no discussion of these personal connections and instead presents the character as stereotypical character of the

war film genre. Importantly, he also passes on the opportunity to connect his own experience in the military to his “Indian Sergeant” and thereby declines the chance to contextualize the routine in terms of his own experience. In so doing, he emphasizes his media-enthusiast persona and keeps himself at a safe distance from his comedy.

After calling everyone to order, Carlin’s sergeant begins his briefing. He instructs his imaginary troops to fill out a “birch bark” enlistment form by writing their names in the upper right-hand corner adding, “that’s your arrow hand” for clarification. He also has them include their equipment, “one each, cloth, loin-type,” on their forms for inventory purposes. Each of these jokes refers to commonplaces—bows and arrows, loin cloths, and rain dances—drawn from stereotypical depictions of Native Americans, but the laughter they produce emerges from the juxtaposition of those commonplaces with the war film sergeant and the oscillation between two genres. This strategy is made all the more clear as he discusses the upcoming tests toward promotion. He explains:

Alright. A lot of yous have been asking me about the promotion list; you’d like to make brave second class—like to get another scar up on your arm. I’m happy to say the results of your early tests have come in. Yous are doing beautifully. Burning settlers homes—everybody passed. Imitating a coyote—everybody passed. Sneaking quietly through the woods—everybody passed except Limping Ox. However, Limping Ox is being fitted with a pair of corrective moccasins.

The points of juxtaposition in this example—the promotion from first to second class, the rank insignia, and the corrective footwear—emphasize instead the commonplaces of American military life in the Native American context. This kind of humor of juxtaposition or incongruity is typical of Carlin’s comedy, but it reveals little to his audience regarding his persona or his

politics because he opts not to extend his routine into a critique of the military or Vietnam—a opportunity that he would be less likely to pass on after further developing his persona. Like Pryor, the routine would probably go over just as well in the hands of another comic. The comedy, in these examples, is almost completely detached from the comic and his persona in the performance.<sup>37</sup>

The word-play and genre-blending continues with quips including, “there will be a rain dance Friday night—weather permitting,” and his description of the regimen’s formal uniform, “the class-A summer loincloth, two green stripes over the eye, no feather, arms are blue, legs are red, chest is optional—might put a little yellow on the bellies.” Here again, Carlin’s talent for stretching language and juxtaposing stereotypes is put on display, but his audience’s laughter lacks a point of reference that extends beyond the comic’s skill and playfulness. The same is true for his closing jest. Returning to the premise outlined in his introduction, Carlin’s sergeant barks out the order that the audience was primed to expect. “There’ll be a massacre tonight at nine o’clock,” he says, “this is the fourth straight night we’ve attacked the fort. However, tonight it will not be as easy. Tonight, there *will be soldiers in the fort!*” The comic payoff is a hearty burst of laughter, but the audience is still left with no means of identifying with Carlin other than acknowledging his gift for word-based comedy and vocal modulation. The comedian, however, is nothing more than a mouthpiece for the material, albeit a mouthpiece with a knack for vocal characterizations and timing. For the most part, the performer of the “Indian Sergeant” is generic, replaceable, and, perhaps more importantly, forgettable.

If the goal of the routine is laughter, then the comedy here certainly achieves its end. However, because the laughter occurs in spite of a clearly defined persona, the rhetorical potency of the routine is left unexplored. In this case, as was true for Pryor’s *Kraft Summer Music Hall*

performance, the comic is presented as merely a generic, stereotypical comedian and therefore the audience lacks a specific point of reference and identification that would contextualize their laughter and add an additional layer of meaning to the performance. Simply, because these two performances are not presented through the lens of a persona with whom the audience can identify, their comic and rhetorical force addresses only the most superficial levels of the audience's consciousness. Without a clearly defined, authentic persona the audience lacks the context required to think about the jokes beyond their face value.

In terms of providing equipment for citizenship, both early incarnations of Pryor and Carlin offer generic templates as models of citizen spokespersons. Their comedy, rather than being situated in the experiences or historical realities of the *demos* from which they emerge, speaks only to convention and generalizable assumptions. In this way, these generic representations of the citizenry failed to provide means of deepening or radicalizing democracy; instead, they passively accepted the norms of democratic culture and ignored real difference in favor of the illusions of consensus.

*Comics in Transition—Becoming Richard Pryor and George Carlin*

In the late-sixties, Pryor and Carlin each had a change of heart while performing in Las Vegas. Pryor's meltdown at the Aladdin Hotel in 1967 and Carlin's firings from the Frontier Hotel for saying "ass" in 1969 and "shit" in 1970 marked milestones for the changes in the duo's comedy that would take them from moderately successful show-business commodities to Grammy Award-winning stand-up comedy icons. Their comedy became decidedly more "blue" and edgy as Pryor removed his self-imposed embargo on the word "nigger" and Carlin began rapping on a short-list of words that were considered too harsh for television. Importantly, the changes extended beyond the language they employed in their routines. They began to perform

autobiographical material, the characters they created became extensions of themselves and their experiences, and they shed the clean-cut, suit-and-tie appearance for a look that reflected the audiences to whom they spoke. In short, they embraced their authentic personae. They stopped performing in masks of generic comedians cast from the handful of professional comics they had observed in clubs and on television and began performing as Richard Pryor and George Carlin.

Nowhere is this change more evident than in the pair's albums of the early 1970s which not only feature their new personae, but also garnered each his first Grammy Award. Having recently emerged from his exile in Berkeley, California, Richard Pryor released *Craps! (After Hours)* in 1971. Although the album was not a crossover success, it clearly underscores the changes that had occurred between his incident at the Aladdin Hotel and his re-emergence. What is more, because the album played almost exclusively to black audiences—it was recorded at iconic African American comedian Redd Foxx's nightclub—it reinforced Pryor's attempt to embrace his race as a source of authenticity for his persona. Arguably, given his formerly white-washed, joke-teller persona this album was not only important for Pryor's reinvention of himself, but also a necessary step in reaching out to an audience that he had once alienated in his quest for success—the same audience from which he would soon emerge as a spokesperson. The mainstream success and confirmation of his new persona, however, would come with the release of his Grammy Award-winning album, *That Nigger's Crazy*, in 1974. Having earned legitimacy for his now more authentic persona with *Craps!*, Pryor reached wider audiences with confidence and his revamped act could better explore the social significance of his comedy.

*Craps!* begins with Pryor, introduced as “the crown prince of comedy,” jesting briefly about having paranoid episodes caused by his having enjoyed more than his share of marijuana and cocaine. He continues by moving into an extended discussion about his marriage. He says,

“we was in love, man, like a bitch until we got married,” adding, “we fuck from *memory* now.”

Within the first two minutes of the album, the differences between the Pryor of 1960s television appearances and the performer of *Craps* are quite apparent. For example, the new Pryor has removed the filter on his language and his choice of comic subject. Taking full advantage of what Bakhtin refers to as “billingsgate” speech and the “grotesque,”<sup>38</sup> Pryor’s punchlines are now riddled with harsh language and references to sexual intercourse and the body. More to the point, Pryor’s jokes no longer feature the generic usage of the first person. The performer himself is one half of the married couple referenced in the bit. As he moves between jokes about their sex life, the way they argue, and tales of his infidelity, his place in the comic universe created during the performance becomes evident. The jokes get laughs at least in part because they have a tangible point of reference: Richard Pryor. In this way, the performer inextricably ties himself, or rather his persona, to his comedy.

On the one hand, jesting about married life was an all too common comic trope that was popularized by the Borscht Belters and their predecessors. On the other hand, Pryor’s emphasis on his marriage is particularly revelatory regarding the rhetorical construction of authenticity. What is interesting about the inclusion of his marriage as comic fodder and a source of identification is that when he recorded *Craps!* Pryor was not actually married. He was twice divorced and the father of two children, but in 1972 he was in the middle of a rare seven-year stretch in which he was *not* married.<sup>39</sup> For his audience, however, the relative truth or falsity of his narratives seems not to matter. They do, after all, roar their approval of his stories. His audience can certainly understand, if not directly relate to, his quips about marriage snuffing out the flame of young love. In this way, the image of “Richard Pryor” that he presents speaks from a position comfortably located within his audience’s rhetorical imaginary. Thus, by joking about

a marriage that is consistent with Pryor's own manic married life as well as symbolic associations about the institution available to his audience, the comedian's persona appears to emerge from a place of authenticity for both the comic and his audience.

By featuring himself so centrally in his comedy, Pryor and his persona become that which is at stake in his performance. While any number of factors can determine whether a comic rhetoric can be successful or not, I contend—following Andrea Greenbaum—that the most significant factor is the degree to which the comic achieves identification with her or his audience. As Kenneth Burke argues in his *Rhetoric of Motives*, identification—that is, being able to see oneself as “consubstantial” or “substantially one” with another—is the foundation of all persuasion.<sup>40</sup> It is in the process of identifying A with B that rhetorical potential is gained or lost. Pryor's self-revelations provide an image of the comic with which his audience can identify. More importantly, that image is unmistakably “Richard Pryor” rather than a generic joke-teller. The jokes may achieve some effect in the hands of another performer, but unlike his earlier material they are at their most powerful when wielded by Pryor himself. This is so, I argue, because the laughter invoked in this routine is tied to *both the performer and his performance* whereas the laughter emerging from his television appearances was dependent almost entirely upon the *performance alone*.

As his routine on *Craps!* progresses, Pryor's material takes on a distinctively autobiographical character. After regaling his audience with more tales of his sexual exploits, he offers an extended treatment of his encounters with the law in Peoria. He recalls being caught by white police officers while running home in an attempt to beat his eleven o'clock curfew and their particularly forceful approach to law enforcement. He performs the exchange as follows:

[Angry Cop voice] “Get your hands up, black boy!”

“I didn’t do nothing!”

[Angry Cop voice]“Shut up, punk. Put your hands against the wall!”

“There ain’t no wall”

[Angry Cop voice]“Find one!”

He then describes the process of being handcuffed saying, “I was really skinny and [the handcuffs would] just slip off” and so “They’d handcuff your thighs and hop you to the car.” Unlike the tales of his sexual escapades, this bit moves closer to the social criticism that gave Pryor’s comedy its bite. As before, this bit involves Pryor intimately as the central character of the joke. *He* is the person being arrested, handcuffed, and hopped to the car. As with his marital status, it does not matter whether or not these events actually happened to *him*. All that is important for this joke—and the critique of race-based police brutality—to be effective is that the audience *believes* that these things *could have happened* to the performer. That is, the narrative created by and about the comedian must “ring true” because of its high degree of fidelity as Fisher indicates. In this case, Pryor’s allusion to his race—an all too tangible point of reference for his mostly African American audience—as well as his physical characteristics and his first person account of the narrative lend credibility and authenticity to his comic persona.

More importantly, however, this bit does not appear in isolation. Pryor provides a plethora of examples of his interactions with the police to provide additional credence to his persona. He makes a joke about being taken “downtown” and being glad that he “wasn’t in Alabama” before explaining, “I hated for my father to come get me out of jail because I knew he was going to beat my ass, right. I’d be praying for something to happen to him on the way down there. But he always showed up.” By moving from a fairly generic experience of an African American male dealing with racist police to a much more specific narrative involving *his* father,



Pryor intensifies his personal connection with the persona in each joke. His tales of the Peoria police, however, do not end there. Later in the routine, he explains, “In my neighborhood, cops was dangerous, you know. Because we had like *I Spy* cops, a white cop and a black cop worked together. And the black cop had to do more shit to keep his job. He had to whoop more niggers than the white cop.” To drive the point home, he then performed as one such black cop saying, “I ain’t going to lose my pension, nigger!” while pretending to beat a suspect. On the one hand, his reference to the popular late-1960s television program is a subtle dig at his former idol, Bill Cosby. But on the other, it also provides a specific point of reference that already existed in his audience’s rhetorical imaginary thus rendering his experience, and thereby his persona, authentic to the culture from which he emerges.

He follows this vignette with an anecdote about that same police officer accosting him and his friends who were singing together on a street corner. “We’d be singing and shit,” he says, “[and] the cops would come and break that up.” Performing again as the police officer, he offers, ““Uh, what’s going on here? What’s this supposed to be some kind of community sing? Well goddamn niggers, let’s break it up. And Weasel, you’re on parole. I don’t want to get in your ass. Now, we’re going around the block. When I come back, I want everybody gone.” The police harassment of otherwise innocent black men strikes a chord with his audience and speaks to common experience for the community from which he emerges. When taken together, these examples provide a coherent set of experiences that help to construct Pryor’s persona as an authentic representative of his actual experiences regardless of their truthfulness. In this way, he speaks to cultural experiences that are already available in his audience’s symbolic resources and becomes an authentic representative and, as Koziski suggests, spokesperson for that experience.<sup>41</sup>

On his follow-up album, *That Nigger's Crazy*, Pryor's commentary on police brutality continues along the same lines. Importantly, this album went mainstream and his characters and stories began to reflect the diversity of his ever-expanding audience. For example, in his bit titled, "Niggers vs. the Police," Pryor begins by addressing the white segment of his audience. He says, "Cops put a hurtin' on your ass. They really degrade you. [But] White folks don't believe that shit, don't believe that cops degrade you." He then slips into his stereotypical uptight white-guy character offering, "Aw, come on. Those beatings? Those people were resisting arrest. I'm tired of this harassment of police officers." Putting the words of the bystander in the mouth of the victim, Pryor's obvious caricature carries unique rhetorical potential because of his audience's understanding of his persona. Even if his audience had yet to hear *Craps!* or see him perform previously, Pryor goes to great lengths throughout the performance to establish his persona as an authentic representation of African American cultural experiences by regularly referencing specific experience from his past in bits like "Have Your Ass Home by 11:00" and "Black & White Life Styles." Thus the impersonation juxtaposes a generic representation of a conventional rebuttal to cries of police brutality with a specific persona built upon seemingly authentic experiences that highlights the obvious incongruity therein. Importantly, I argue that the success of the caricature and the joke itself depends almost entirely upon the audience's acceptance of the performer's persona because only from the unique point of reference provided by their understanding "Richard Pryor" can the audience recognize the incongruity as such and thereby unearth the critique embedded in the caricature.

As the bit continues, Pryor explains why the white portion of his audience would fall in line with the caricature. He suggests, "That's because the police live in your neighborhood see and you be knowing them as, 'Officer Timpson.'" Returning to his caricature he demonstrates

what such a relationship might look like. He says, “Hello Officer Timpson, going bowling tonight? Yes. That’s a nice Pinto you have,” adding in his own voice, “niggers don’t know them like that.” The joke concludes by contrasting the ways in which whites and blacks interact with police during traffic stops. White people, Pryor suggests, pull over say things such as, “Hey officer. Yes. Glad to be of help. Here you go.” Where as a black driver has to say, “I AM REACHING INTO MY POCKET FOR MY LISCENSE,” adding, “because I don’t want to be no motherfucking accident!” Again, the success of the joke depends largely on a comparison between a generic, if not stereotypical, representation of the traffic stop with an overtly specific representation from the perspective an alternative subjectivity.

What is significant here is not the construction of difference between blacks and whites, but instead that Pryor’s persona is uniquely able to represent the black subjectivity in a specific and tangible manner. The portrayal of the white person here relies heavily on stereotype and convention, but the depiction of the black driver requires a highly specific experience—that is, the possibility of being shot during a traffic stop—and the comic himself. Obviously, Pryor’s race makes this maneuver possible, but his ability to render specific experiences as *common* experiences by filtering them through his persona—which, as Ware and Linkugel indicate, rests upon available cultural archetypes—makes the joke powerful. Importantly, this strategy requires the audience to ascribe authenticity to his persona. That is, they must permit his specific articulation of black subjectivity to authentically represent the collective experiences that comprise their cultural archetype of that subjectivity. By performing as “Richard Pryor” with his unique history and cultural experiences rather than as a run of the mill joke-teller, Pryor used appeals to authenticity to spurn the generic persona of his early work and discovered a voice—or better many voices—with which his audience could identify. In so doing, he opened up a world

racist cops, oblivious white folk, winos, and junkies for satirical reflection and thereby spoke to the historical realities of the portion of the *demos* from which he emerged. No longer a generic spokesperson, Pryor's appeals to his experiences gave voice to a series of otherwise unspoken antagonisms and thereby helped to legitimize the struggles unique to African American members of the *demos* for his audience.

The emergence of an authentic persona was much more methodical and systematic for Carlin. Having spent the five years after releasing his 1967 debut album, *Take-Offs and Put-Ons*, working the in the middle class nightclubs and Las Vegas hotels booked for him by his agents at GAC, he took his time to push his material further and slowly changed his appearance to reflect his new outlook. He eschewed the suit and tie in favor of flower-patched denim bell-bottoms and Henley shirts.<sup>42</sup> He let his hair grow out and he began sporting a beard. By the time his second record, 1972's *FM & AM*, earned him a Grammy Award, the detached, generic character-comedian who performed as the "Indian Sergeant" had already been replaced by a new version of George Carlin. The album, as Carlin explains in his autobiography, was intended to be a concept album. On the FM side he presents material about his transformation that foreshadows the direction in which he saw his comedy moving. The AM side recalled many of the character bits of his early television work and his first album with tracks such as, "The 11 O'clock News" and "Son Of WINO,"<sup>43</sup> albeit with some modifications to make them more appropriate for his updated persona. The success of *FM & AM* led to a second 1972 effort titled, *Class Clown*. This album marked a complete shift away from the parodies and character bits that characterized Carlin's early comedy. Importantly, it features, as its final cut, his vaunted routine, "Seven Words You Can Never Say On Television." If *FM & AM* was intended to be a transitional piece that pointed the way from the generic comedian of the 1960s toward an

authentic version of George Carlin, then *Class Clown* was the fullest possible expression of that destination.

The first cut on *FM & AM*, “Shoot,” offers a clear introduction to Carlin’s new comedy and persona. The track opens and he offers, “I got fired last year in Las Vegas from the Frontier Hotel for saying ‘shit.’ In a town where the big game is called *crap*!” As with the Indian Sergeant routine, Carlin’s penchant for wordplay is readily on display. Unlike the earlier routine, however, his wordplay on “Shoot” serves a greater purpose than proving his cleverness. The word play makes a point; it creates as well as reveals incongruities. He continues, “That’s some kind of a double standard, you know?” adding, “[they] fired me—shit.” As he moves from talking about “shit” as an abstraction to actually saying it in context, he subtly reminds the audience that the narrative underlying the joke is in fact a story about the actual George Carlin. After all, he was fired from the Frontier for saying “shit.” The autobiographical nature of the bit, as is the case for many of the above mentioned examples of Pryor’s comedy, functions to reveal important information about the persona “George Carlin” that the performer chooses to portray in his act. What is more, his understated act of defiance—thumbing his nose at his employer by actually saying “shit”—allows him to ease his audience into the rebellious nature of his new persona all while simultaneously placing himself at the center of the routine. Like Pryor, Carlin makes himself that which is at stake in the routine from the very beginning by deliberately pushing the boundaries of obscenity and daring his employer to take action against him.

This first joke of the track ends with a final revelation about Carlin’s new persona. He exclaims, “you can get in as much trouble saying shit as you can smoking it there!” In hindsight, Carlin’s nod toward his personal drug habit seems tame, but it is difficult to imagine the persona he presented in the 1960s making the same kind of comment about his own drug use.<sup>44</sup> This

Carlin is a new comedian working in front of a new audience and in only the first forty-five seconds the difference between the performer of *Take-Offs and Put-Ons* and that of *FM & AM* is quite apparent. The *FM* George Carlin is rebellious, profane, and he maybe even a little bit high.

As the routine progresses, he explores what he refers to as the middle-class's discomfort with the word "shit." After a brief impersonation of an ostensibly middle-class housewife cursing after dropping a casserole, he observes, "Sometimes they say shoot. They can't kid me, man. 'Shoot' is 'shit' with two o's." The impersonations continue as he rattles off the various ways in which people use the word "shit" figuratively rather than literally in a fast-past, nasally, pseudo-tough guy voice: "Hey, get that shit out of here will ya? Just move that shit away. I don't want to hear that shit. Don't give me that shit, I don't have to take that shit. I'm not full of— You're full of shit! Are you some kind of shithead or something? Don't need that shit." These moments are reminiscent of the character comic of Carlin's past, but these vocal modulations are merely examples that are given meaning by their context within the routine. These are not mini-versions of the "Indian Sergeant" offering self-contained jokes; they are simply interruptions or asides in Carlin's otherwise first person monologue. As with the examples of Pryor's comedy, the meaning in this bit comes more from *the performer* than the performance. Carlin explains and contextualizes his in-character examples in such a way that they become secondary to his own musings.

As the track draws toward its close, Carlin weaves together his critique of taboo language with a further revelation of his drug-use. "To the drug community," he suggests, "to the dooper, shit means something very special. Shit means, '*shit*.' Yeah, whatever you smoke, drop, shoot, snort, rub into your belly or whatever is your shit. Especially grass—more often referred to as shit." While his turn toward drug culture is likely at least in part a reflection of his new

audience, it is also revealing of his newly constructed persona. In fact, even though he does not specifically mention *doing* drugs, his comfort with the vernacular affords him a sense of authenticity. Similar to Maegan Parker Brooks's explanation of Fannie Lou Hamer, Carlin's use of the vernacular becomes a source of authority to which he has unique access through the creation of his persona. Importantly, this vernacular authority doubles as a source of authenticity because it taps the language of his audience in order to identify the new Carlin with their subject position.<sup>45</sup> In this way, by performing as "George Carlin" and making use of the drug-based vernacular of the counterculture Carlin is able to become more than the conventional character comic of his past. Like Pryor, Carlin's appeal to his own authenticity permits him to adopt the role of representative and spokesperson for the audience from which he emerges.

This autobiographical character of his new comedy was the driving force of his third album. Coming on the heels of the success of *FM & AM*, Carlin's *Class Clown* offered an extended reflection about becoming a professional comedian. The album begins with Carlin demonstrating the various ways in which he and his classmates would attract attention to themselves during the school day. He begins the routine by indicating, "class clown is where you really do get to work out," before illustrating a variety of methods for making mock fart noises including his personal favorite, the "bi-labial fricative." He demonstrates a cornucopia of additional means of using the body to make sounds by humming through his nose, knocking on his head, flicking his throat, and even he convinces the entire audience to pop their cheeks with their forefingers in unison just for the record. Although these may seem to be little more than ways of getting cheap laughs, the performance allows Carlin to embody the class clown and thereby legitimize his adoption of a persona with which his audience can easily identify. Each sound is met with laughter and applause, but the story that frames his corporeal concerto is just

as important in revealing to his audience the persona he seeks to embody. In describing the class clown as someone who “learned things first” and “passed them on to the other guys,” Carlin offers some insight into how he understands his role and his persona as a stand-up comedian. Importantly, the album’s opening salvo reminds the audience that the comic “George Carlin” onstage has a history in comedy because George Carlin was, and still is, a class clown. Thus he was, in a sense, always already a stand-up comedian and his proof is in his ability to authentically recreate the class clown behaviors familiar to his listener.

The second side of the album begins with a cut, “I Used to Be Irish Catholic.” This track features Carlin regaling his audience with stories of his time at the Corpus Christi Parish School and the Morningside Heights neighborhood of his youth. He tells specifically about “progressive education” he received. He says, “there was a lot of classroom freedom. For instance, there were no grades or marks, no report cards to sweat out or any of that. There were no uniforms. There was no sexual segregation, boys and girls together. And the desks weren’t all nailed down in a row.” To be sure, this was not the image of the typical Catholic Parish school “of corporal punishment and Sister Mary discipline with a steel ruler” of the late 1940s and early 1950s. Instead, he explains, “there was so much freedom that by eighth grade many of us had lost the faith because they made questioners out of us.” His unique education provides some context for his current preoccupations, but what is important about the narrative is that *he* is the main character. Carlin’s reference here is to his actual past and his personal history. Arguably, the bit’s main purpose is to familiarize the audience with an authentic version of George Carlin, to let them peak behind the curtain and see into his world. The story itself is not humorous, the sporadic laughter of the bit erupts only when Carlin offers asides—such as his list of possible church names including “Our Lady of Great Agony, Saint Rita Moreno” and “Our Lady of



Perpetual Motion” and his impersonations of the nuns and priests at the school. In this way, the humor is ancillary to the revelation of the performer’s past provided by the narrative.

As the routine continues, Carlin makes an explicit connection between the performative skills of the stand-up comedian and his past as a class clown. He says, “part of class-clown was being an imitator, as you probably noticed.” This clear link between his performance and his persona makes apparent the unstated claim underlying his exposition of bodily sound from the album’s first side. Carlin reminds the audience that his comic skills have a specific and unique history—a history that is necessarily his own. Regarding his talent for mimicry, Carlin explains, “I used to imitate the priests which was right on the verge of blasphemy.” His comment reminds his audience that *he* was at stake in his performances because the blasphemy was his alone, but it also allows him to transition into a discussion of his experiences with Catholicism.

For instance, recounting sermons from the children’s masses that he had attended, he performs as a priest teaching a parable about “Dusty and Buddy.” Putting on his priest voice, he offers, “Dusty was a Catholic and Buddy—was not,” adding, “and Buddy was always trying to talk Dusty into having a hot dog on Friday.” The references to the overly contrived characters in children’s sermons, the tension between Catholicism and Protestantism (or, better, non-Catholicism), and the restriction from eating meat on Fridays all serve to situate Carlin’s persona within an authentic expression of Catholicism with which his audience, Catholic or not, can recognize and identify. This move is important, because it affords the critique of the Church that follows a sense of legitimacy.

Carlin moves into his criticism by bridging between the rituals and dogma of his church and his gifts for imitation by noting that he “always wanted to do [Father Burn] in confession... to get into [his] confessional on Saturday maybe a half-hour before he showed up and hear a few

confessions.” As before, his reference to another common ritual in Catholic life, weekly confession, reinforces the authenticity of the experience Carlin uses to define his comic persona. Continuing his monologue, he extends a brief lesson in the Catholic ways of sin and confession for the uninitiated. “It’s what’s in your mind that counts,” he says. “Mortal sin had to be a grievous offence, sufficient reflection and full consent of the will.” Importantly, this introduction to the nature of sin is surprisingly in step with the Catechism of the Church.<sup>46</sup> This accuracy allows the comic redefinition he provides, “Thou shalt not WANNA,” added rhetorical force because his reinterpretation emerges from within an authentic expression of the subjectivity in question. What is more, he gains his authority to offer any interpretation from the authenticity of his persona which is also enhanced by his obvious familiarity with the identity he espouses. His experience with Catholicism makes his observation all the more meaningful. It also adds additional comic impact to the joke.

Arguably his ability to appear consistent with his audience’s understanding of the Catholic identity, which comprised at least one part of his persona, also provided him license to highlight and criticize the inconsistencies of that identity. As the routine draws toward its end, Carlin offers, “I was troubled too, at the time, by the fact that my church would keep changing rules. I mean they’d change a rule any time they wanted.” Elaborating, he gives the following example: “Eating meat on Friday was definitely a sin. ‘Except for the people in Philadelphia, they were number one in the scrap iron drive, yeah!’” Underscoring the contradiction in any notion of eternal truth that maintains room for exception, Carlin’s critique draws on both his knowledge of Catholicism and the “progressive education” that led him to question such inconsistencies. Thus by highlighting the incongruity of *his own* identity by drawing on *his own*

history, Carlin presents *himself* to his audience and his criticism carries weight because unfolds as though it were a personal revelation of the comic's actual self.

This presentation of self is, I argue, the source of any stand-up satirist's rhetorical authority. What is more, by presenting a persona that is consistent with—or at least appears to be consistent with—the actual performer's experience, the comic realizes the maximum rhetorical potential for his or her comedy. From the standpoint of equipment for citizenship, appealing to an authentic persona prepares audiences for a citizenship committed to pluralism because it recognizes a multiplicity of subjectivities as legitimate actors within the *demos*. By appearing as spokespersons for their identity groups and speaking through experiences and historical realities, Carlin and Pryor equip citizens for the task of being members of the *demos* and recognizing that membership means embracing heterogeneity. As the examples of Pryor and Carlin abandoning generic personae in favor of more authentic presentations of themselves suggest, the significance of the authenticity of the comic's persona cannot be understated. Not only did they achieve far greater financial and critical success as their personae shifted, but the critique their comedy carried also became more effective for the audiences who found in their new personae a subjectivity with which they could identify.

### **The Comic Perspective**

As I transition from this discussion of the comic persona into my argument regarding the comic perspective, I should take a moment to remind the reader that I have chosen these two terms because they point to the comic's relationship to his or her audience on the one hand and to his or her comedy on the other. Importantly, this is not to say that one has no bearing over the other or that one is more or less important than the other because each is necessarily constitutive of comic as rhetor. Rather, my aim is to attempt to understand each relationship on its own

terms. Arguably, both terms have been explored in the literature on stand-up and other kinds of comedy, but all too often they are included together under one heading or another. For example, in his discussion of Dennis Miller's "ranting persona," rhetorical critic Don Waisanen argues, "comedic communicators ask their audiences to ingest certain structures of thinking and choices of interpretation."<sup>47</sup> Waisanen's broader argument here, I believe, is on the money. His locating the structures of thinking under the heading of the comic's persona, however, misses the mark. Those structures of thinking, I argue, relate to Miller's comic perspective in his material rather than to the persona he creates in order to achieve identification with his audience.

In this section, I explore the relationship between the stand-up satirist and his or her material vis-à-vis Kenneth Burke's "terministic screen." I argue that whereas the comedian's persona must appear to be an authentic articulation of the comedian's "true self," his or her perspective must remain an oppositional and yet ever moving target. That is to say, stand-up satirists must "stand-up" against something in their comedy, but they cannot let that opposition define their comedy. For this reason, I contend, stand-ups actively seek to avoid and disavow any attempts to label their comedy because such labels undermine their ability to actively manage their audience's expectations, which is essential to their success as rhetors.<sup>48</sup> Using examples from the first stand-up comedian, Mort Sahl, I illustrate how stand-up satirists maintain their oppositional nature and deflect labels in order to articulate a comic perspective which can provide their audiences with "equipment for living" in their everyday lives.

### *Standing-Up a Terministic Screen*

Burke contends that we understand our world "through a fog of symbols."<sup>49</sup> In order to navigate the fog, we rely on filters that simultaneously reflect, select, and deflect the symbolic realities that comprise that world. These filters, are what Burke calls "terministic screens."<sup>50</sup> He

explains the concept by offering an analogy to photography. In his example, a single object is photographed twice and each time the photographer uses a different filter, which produces a *different* picture of the *same* object. In this way, terministic screens direct the attention of the symbol-user toward some choices and away from others. Just as the “fog of symbols” is inherent to the human condition, so too are the terministic screens we use to find our way through it.

Burke argues:

We *must* use terministic screens, since we can’t say anything without the use of terms; whatever terms we use, they necessarily constitute a corresponding kind of screen; and any such screen necessarily directs the attention to one field rather than another. Within that field there can be different screens, each with its ways of directing the attention and shaping the range of observations implicit in the given terminology. All terminologies must implicitly or explicitly embody choices between the principle of continuity and the principle of discontinuity.<sup>51</sup>

The two principles of continuity and discontinuity mentioned here might be better called principles of identification and division. This is to say that any terministic screen creates a sense of what goes with what—that which is continuous—and also what does not or cannot go with what—that which is discontinuous. The screens, therefore, act as guides for their users that lead them to particularized identifications and divisions.

For a stand-up satirist, the terministic screen comprises those “structures of thinking” and “choices of interpretation” that Waisanen suggests are shared with an audience in comedic performance. The terministic screen thus offers not only a sense of what goes (or does not go) with what, but also what is (or is not) funny. I place this notion under the heading comic perspective because whereas the comic persona is uniquely concerned with bridging the distance

between the audience and the rhetor by way of identification, the terministic screen provides the rhetor equipment for making sense of the symbolic fog surrounding each performance. That equipment, then, can be shared with and used by the audience in their attempts to navigate their daily lives. Importantly, the screen functions as a means of selecting targets and grounding incongruities. The comedian's terministic screen is, in this way, a communicable manifestation of his or her personal sense of humor. It reveals the comic logic underlying the rhetoric of each performance and as such is an articulation of the comedian's relationship to his or her comedy and the context from which it emerges.

Admittedly, in the arena of stand-up performance this comic perspective is under constant scrutiny and negotiation. For example, any seasoned comic will add or drop material based upon whether or not a joke achieves laughter. Arguably, then, the comic perspective cannot be considered a pure expression of the comic's relationship to the world from which her or his comedy arises because the audience, at least in part, mediates that perspective with their laughter. What is more, the comic's perspective is necessarily related to the comic's persona. Just as the comic persona is most effective when it represents an "authentic" manifestation of the performer, the comic perspective is most powerful when it appears to be an extension of that persona. More to the point, if the comic's perspective and persona seem to contradict one another then each loses its potential for rhetorical impact. In this way, the onus falls to *the comedian* to manage his or her perspective according to the audience's response while maintaining its consistency with his or her persona. Thus, even though the audience has some impact on the comic's perspective, I argue that it primarily reflects the relationship between the comic and her or his comedy.

Using the following examples, I identify two key features of the comic perspective. First, the stand-up comic's perspective is, I argue, a terministic screen of opposition. The stand-up satirist must have an opponent that represents the constitutive outside of her or his comedy. In this way, the comic perspective elaborates on the identification work done by the comic persona. Whereas the persona constitutes the subjectivity with which an audience should identify, the perspective contrasts that identification by marking those subjectivities that the audience should ridicule and reject. Second, the comic perspective requires enough ambiguity that it cannot be tethered to any singular antagonism.<sup>52</sup> The comedian must be able to jest a diversity of targets in order to prevent any one antagonism from defining the totality of his or her perspective. For this reason, comedians tend to avoid labeling their comedy and actively disavow the application of labels from their audiences and critics. A comic perspective that fits a label is too predictable and therefore hardly comic at all. Thus the comic perspective must remain a moving target in order to facilitate the possibility getting laughs by violating the audience's expectations.

### *The Loyal Opposition*

If the comic persona is, as I have suggested, that which is "stood up" during performance, then the comic perspective indicates who or what that persona stands up against. Following Lawrence Mintz, who argues that stand-up comedy "provides the opportunity for *staged antagonism*" which leads to "valuable social commentary," I argue that stand-up comedy *necessarily* stands up against someone or something because of its antagonistic nature.<sup>53</sup> However, I am troubled by Mintz's qualification that these antagonisms are "staged." On the one hand, stand-up comedy is a monologic form that is performed *from a stage* and so only one half of any antagonism can actually be present during any performance. On the other hand, however, to describe the antagonism as "staged" would seem to suggest that it and the actors

involved are of little or no consequence. From a rhetorical standpoint this is simply not the case. By granting overlooked subjectivities access to the public square, distilling information and attitude into comic memes, and equipping audience with the terministic resources necessary to make judgments, the so-called staged antagonism of stand-up comedy carries very real consequences. That is, the staged antagonisms of stand-up comedy equip audiences for democratic citizenship. Thus, it is of particular concern for the critic of satirical stand-up comedy to attend to who or what the comic opposes and what form that opposition takes.

In his autobiography, Mort Sahl suggests that his function as a performer “is to raise questions and not to answer them.”<sup>54</sup> Although raising questions is perhaps only a subtle form of opposition, it is nonetheless an important resource for democratic culture because it indicates a refusal to accept discourses at face-value. Perhaps this is why, later in his memoir, Sahl argues, “America doesn’t need a social critic; it *demands* one.”<sup>55</sup> Importantly, neither of these comments addresses comedy except insofar as Sahl considers himself a comedian—a point, which is not entirely clear in much of the book itself.<sup>56</sup> He does eventually make the link between stand-up comedy and political opposition apparent as he argues, “Without political humor there isn’t any real opposition.”<sup>57</sup> While Sahl’s emphasis on political opposition and political humor underscores what I believe to be the oppositional nature of satirical stand-up comedy, it limits the terms that opposition to only those matters of politics and current events. A closer look at Sahl’s comedy, however, reveals that his oppositional perspective knows no such limit. Nearly every topic in his monologue that provides comic fodder does so as only inasmuch as it stood-up for critique. In order to demonstrate the oppositional nature of even the most mundane topics in Sahl’s satire and therefore stand-up comedy, I turn to his first two albums *The Future Lies Ahead* and *At Sunset*.<sup>58</sup> Importantly, these recordings were the first full-length stand-up comedy albums



released in the United States and as such offer a singular window into the very formation of contemporary stand-up comedy and can be considered the de facto standard for the form, satirical or otherwise.

Even though it was recorded several years after *At Sunset*, *The Future Lies Ahead*, or *Mort Sahl: Iconoclast* as it is sometimes known, was Mort Sahl's debut album and the first full-length album to feature live stand-up comedy. Each side of the record includes the entirety of one of Sahl's performances at San Francisco's Hungry i nightclub. Unlike the stand-up comedy records of later comics, the performances are unedited and uncut. This is significant because Sahl's meandering, stream-of-consciousness comedy does not lend itself to being divided into tracks or bits in the same way that, for example, George Carlin's comedy on *FM & AM* or *Class Clown* did. Sahl works by rapidly introducing topic after topic and dancing between narratives, digressions, and punch-lines all while gesturing toward an over-arching theme that adds enough connective tissue to give each performance its own discrete meaning. Regardless of topic, Sahl's approach to his comedy is static. He brings things up only to bring them down again. The tenor of the album is best summed up by his comment, "It's too bad I don't have a cause; I have a lot of enthusiasm." His comedy does not advocate, it opposes.

Among his more favored targets on *The Future Lies Ahead* is then President Eisenhower and his staff, a group that he refers to as the "egg-heads" in government. He begins by jesting a televised speech by the President that only scored a seven on NBC. The low ratings score is bad enough for a sitting president, but to add insult to injury Sahl notes, "*Zorro* got an eighteen!" Moments later, Sahl mentions that a reporter had recently referred to him in a headline as "the iconoclast in the nightclub." To clarify he adds, "I-K-E-O..." much to his audience's delight. The barbs keep coming as he takes on President Eisenhower's philosophy of "modern"

Republicanism. Sahl suggests, “Conservative Republicans don’t think that anything should be done for the first time—and the modern Republicans said it should be, but not now.” The joke receives an impressive laugh and leads into what is arguably the strongest critique of the album’s first side. Referencing a recent news story about attempts to integrate schools in the South, Sahl recounts then Democratic Senator Hubert Humphrey saying, “if there was really a man in that White House, he’d take a colored girl [*sic*] by the hand and lead her through that line of bigots into the high school.” He then turns to what such a decision would mean for the President and his staff offering, “if you’re in the administration you’ve got a lot of problems of policy—like whether or not to use an overlapping grip.” Emphasizing the President’s love of the links and his administration’s hands-off approach to enforcing the *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision, Sahl’s commentary makes clear his position regarding the administration’s (in)actions.

Although the first three jokes included here are less outwardly critical than Sahl’s quip about Eisenhower’s approach to integration, they are still significant in terms of revealing Sahl’s terministic opposition to the President. In each instance the butt of the joke is Eisenhower. In the first joke, it is Eisenhower who is made to appear less popular than a fictional masked swordsman. In the second, Sahl reinforces his oppositional perspective through a clever bit of wordplay—substituting Ike for icon—and renders the president not only the butt of this joke, but of the entire routine. And in the third, it is Eisenhower’s personal political philosophy that is taken to task for its backwardness in such a way as to mark him equally backward.

Each joke serves an important purpose. The first, because it is *the first joke* on the album,<sup>59</sup> orients the audience to the primary target of Sahl’s comic criticism and undermines the sacred symbolic authority granted to the Presidency which grants further criticism a sense of legitimacy. Additionally, it allows Sahl to frame the rest of the monologue in terms of his

opposition to the President. The second joke, in likening Ike to an icon about to be destroyed, serves primarily to remind the audience of Sahl's perspective. Not only does this joke provide the clearest articulation of the Sahl versus Eisenhower antagonism, but it also demonstrates the comic's ability to filter anything through his oppositional perspective—even news stories and headlines about himself. As with the first joke, this joke reinforces the oppositional screen without which much of Sahl's criticism loses its bite. For example, the third joke is only marginally effective when stripped of the context provided by Sahl's oppositional perspective. That is, without associating Eisenhower's foolishness with the backward "modern Republican" philosophy the joke packs little punch. The context provided by Sahl's opposition to the President particularizes the joke in such a way that its humor can extend beyond the linguistic trope of revealing the similarity of apparent differences and thereby participate in a larger discourse of critique. In this way, the joke's rhetorical potential can be realized *only* when an oppositional party—a target—is identified. What is more, by emphasizing intrinsic characteristics of his target, Sahl's humor assigns motivational characteristics to his opposition. That is, not only does Eisenhower do foolish things—like scheduling a speech against a popular television program and fail to act on behalf of the marginalized and oppressed—but also he *is a fool* because even his motivation is foolish.

Throughout the routine Sahl filters nearly all of his political material through his opposition to Eisenhower and his administration. He jests then Vice-President Nixon for appearing on "almost every magazine with the exception of *True*—which has a hidden significance." He pokes fun at Air Force General Curtis LeMay, who was, at that time, head of Strategic Air Command in Omaha, Nebraska, for his attempts to intimidate the Russians by flying over Argentina. Referring to Lemay, he offers, "they wouldn't be in Washington if they

didn't know what they were doing," before adding "and they're not there." He jabs the administration because "every time the Russians would put an American in jail [the House Un-American Activities Committee] would put an American in jail."<sup>60</sup> Framed by his outward opposition to Eisenhower, this constellation of joking antagonisms helps to define Sahl's comic perspective. Importantly, even though each joke is oppositional in its own right and the President may not always be the obvious target, the totality of the monologue gains rhetorical potential because of Sahl's terministic opposition to Eisenhower. His routine asks his audience to see each of them as one half of the antagonism of American political culture—Eisenhower as the *de facto* advocate on behalf of and Sahl the opposition to the status quo.

Unlike *The Future Lies Ahead*, Sahl's 1955 recording *At Sunset* takes a far less heavy-handed approach to politics in favor of social satire.<sup>61</sup> In fact, the album contains only a handful of jokes that mention specific political actors or controversies. Recorded while Sahl was touring up and down the California coast with the Dave Brubeck Quartet, *At Sunset* offers listeners a unique glimpse into the early development of the form of stand-up comedy because it is an unauthorized recording of a yet unseasoned Sahl at the very beginning of his career.<sup>62</sup> Still trying to find his comic perspective, the Sahl on the recording lacks the clearly defined opposition that contextualizes his performance on *The Future Lies Ahead*. Instead, he jabs at everything within striking distance. His targets range from hi-fidelity "bugs" that move their families into the garage in order to use their house as a speaker, to "modern" poetry about grass so moving that it causes Truman Capote to collapse in the middle of his own reading. Over the course of his somewhat schizophrenic performance, however, one thing remains consistent regardless of the topic that grabs his ever fleeting attention—he is against it. Every theme Sahl addresses is raised only to be brought down soon thereafter. Interestingly, even subjects that

Sahl favors—he was, for example, both a Hi-fi and sports car enthusiast—are subject to his opposition. Although Sahl had yet to discover a foil as fruitful as the President, early in his career he realized that the comic's perspective had to be one of opposition.

Sahl begins by poking fun at the emerging do-it-yourself (DIY) culture that encourages activities like using a reclaimed door and four bricks to make a “modern coffee table.” Making a coffee table is one thing, but to be sure that people “don’t go too far” with the DIY mentality he explains the American Medical Association (AMA)—one of many “organizations that don’t like you to do things for yourself”—has set up a “shocker booth” on artificial insemination. Marking the DIY coffee table as ridiculous and then juxtaposing the apparent silliness of DIY culture with AMA overreach allows Sahl to ridicule a pair of targets with a single joke. Importantly, the two subjects, DIY culture and the AMA, could not be more distinct. Their juxtaposition is held together by the oppositional filter Sahl employs to mark each topic as ridiculous rather than any inherent thematic quality, and, judging by his audience's laughing approval, that triangle of opposition is enough to keep things moving. His distaste for coffee tables made from doors—even in the “French provincial” style that requires “eight bricks” instead of four—and the American Medical Association provide the album's opening gambit its coherence.

Jumping from subject to subject, Sahl lands briefly on the culture of jazz musicians. Prodding the act with those whom he shares the stage, the Dave Brubeck Quartet, he says that there is a new jazz album that keeps to “Dave's standard” because “every time you play it you'll notice that the solos are different.” He returns to “Dave's standard” later in the routine noting that the opening act, comprised of two men who use their voices as instruments, caused a problem because “Dave said they had to ride in the instrument truck.” Given Brubeck's propensity to favor complex meter and unusual harmonic arrangements along with the

stereotypical snobbery of a jazz hipster, Sahl positions “Dave’s standard” as the butt of his jokes thereby placing himself in opposition to the evening’s headliner. His jest is playful, but it is nonetheless oppositional because it comes at Brubeck’s expense.

In one of the more pointed critiques of the album’s first side, Sahl explains that the *San Francisco Chronicle* had become famous “for exposing the San Francisco Police Department.” Soon thereafter, the *San Francisco Examiner* “noticed that the *Chronicle* was selling a lot of papers for exposing the police” so they “started to expose the Oakland Police.” After the *Examiner* had success then the *San Francisco News* looked into the San Bruno Police. “Pretty soon,” he quips, “the *Shopping News*—which is a quiet paper ordinarily—did this terrific exposé of crossing guards in front of schools.” This extended and near digression-free bit, which is truly rare for this album, places Sahl in opposition to the news media and their profit motive. Importantly, by including the entire hierarchy of his regional newspapers, Sahl’s critique speaks to the institutional malfunctions rather than to the mistakes of any specific actor involved. The problem is not that the *Chronicle* investigated the police department or that the *Examiner* followed suit. Instead, Sahl’s opposition is with the very motive of the subsequent investigations and its potential effects on the institution upon which his audience relies information and he for punch-lines.

This point, I contend, is especially significant. The oppositional perspective of the stand-up satire is most powerful when it is *not* idiosyncratic. Rather, it prefers to understand ridiculous idiosyncrasies as symptoms of systematic and institutional malady. Even his obvious antagonism against President Eisenhower on *The Future Lies Ahead* is, in fact, more appropriately understood to be in opposition to the institution of the President rather than an objection to Ike himself. In this way, the terministic screen that guides the comic’s perspective

makes specific examples comic by taking them not out of context, but by presenting them in a more expansive and oppositional context. As an equipment for citizenship, this ability to see political struggles in what Burke would call differing “circumferences,” while recognizing the irreducibility of antagonism promotes a civic perspective capable of searching for the common ground or shared symbolic space necessary in converting relationships of enmity into relationships of productive agonism.<sup>63</sup> Although this perspective requires an unrelenting opposition, which would seem to suggest an *antagonistic* posture toward the satirist’s opponent, I contend that the expanded perspective required for such comedy implies, instead, an attitude of *ironic agonism*. That is, even though the satirist appears to be outwardly antagonistic, she or he struggles against the political position rather than the person while recognizing their shared symbolic space and, therefore, employing an *agonistic* posture. In this way, the stand-up satirist provides equipment for translating antagonism into agonism and therefore enriching political culture in the direction of plural and radical democracy.

Throughout the performance on *At Sunset*, Sahl scatters bits and pieces of political critique over his digressions. Unlike *The Future Lies Ahead*, however, he seems weary to introduce the subject. For example, early in the show he offers this aside: “the U.N. has met in San Francisco. Sixty member nations got together and now we have fifty-eight more enemies!” When the laughter dies down, he immediately returns to riffing on jazz and hi-fi. Interestingly, this joke is one of the only self-contained set-up, punch-line style bits in Sahl’s act which typically takes on a narrative-with-digressions form. What is more, it appears out of context and does not mark a clear opposition. The line is funny, but without the benefit of having pulled the government into the orbit of Sahl’s oppositional perspective it appears to lack rhetorical significance.<sup>64</sup> He abandons this potential political critique almost as soon as he introduces it.

Later in the performance, Sahl turns to making jokes at the expense of American anti-Communist hysteria. Unlike his U.N. one-liner, these jokes provide a more defined oppositional context for his audience. He begins the second act of his performance by kidding FBI agents stationed at the University of California attempting to quell radicals. He says, “They have a kit in two suitcases.” In one suitcase “they have white Bucks so that they can pose as students and mock coffee cups so that they can lean against corners and so forth,” but in the event they need to make an arrest “they have this other suitcase with witnesses in it.” Unlike the United Nations joke, this quip makes clear the oppositional relationship between Sahl and the FBI’s underhanded tactics. Simply, even though the bit stereotypes university students, the punch-line of the joke comes at the FBI’s expense.

Keeping to his theme, he introduces a contest run by communist-hunting newsman Walter Winchell to demonstrate support for anti-communist sentiments on college campuses. He suggests that Winchell had proposed giving a Corvette to the winner of a contest wherein “you’d write to him in 25 words or less and tell him why you were never in the communist party.” The joke turns on Winchell when the winner winds up being a Cal political science major who wrote, “Mr. Winchell, I was never in the communist party because I’ve been at Cal five years now and no one has asked me!” Unlike many of his bits on the album, Sahl lingers on Winchell’s contest. Pointing out that the contest falls short of helping to uncover actual subversion on campus, Sahl muses about a follow-up contest wherein members of the communist party would write an apology to Winchell and be absolved of their wrongdoing. “After you’d said you’re sorry,” he notes, “you had to include a list of at least two-hundred people whom you had known at these meetings and their telephone numbers—and then they’d be sorry!” Identifying each contest—and by extension Winchell and the communist witch-hunters he represents—as ridiculous, Sahl



provides a humorous critique that conditions his audience to not only agree with his opposition in laughing but also to make similar judgments on their own. As before, Sahl's antagonism with Winchell allows him to particularize and therefore oppose a much broader attitude and discourse. By making Winchell look ridiculous Sahl makes anti-communist hysteria appear in kind.

Sahl's routine also includes a series of jests at the expense of the military or what he refers to as "a form of therapy used by the United States employment service." Referencing his own service to the Thirty-Second infantry division—a group organized under the slogan "It's a Living"—as military government of a small island of four tree-dwelling, leaf-eating inhabitants in the Pacific during the Korean War (or "world war two point four"), Sahl lambasts his assignment to "save them from communism."<sup>65</sup> He jokes that, upon returning from the island, "we made our report to the Pentagon in which we had shown that in twelve short months we had shown these people how to live off each other instead of the land." Coupled with his anti-communist barbs, this joke, which closes the performance, calcifies Sahl's terministic screen of opposition for his listener. Though the album's second side presents a much more coherent antagonism than the first, the oppositional perspective through which all of Sahl's material is filtered is apparent from start to finish.

Regardless of his subject, the comic finds something to oppose and uses that point of opposition to render the subject laughable. This oppositional comic perspective is, arguably, the only consistent feature of his satirical stand-up comedy. It permits connecting otherwise unrelated topics and is the pervading logical structure through which all of his satire is filtered. As an equipment for citizenship, Sahl's oppositional perspective reminds his audience that democratic politics is the realm of contestation and therefore *requires* opposition. In this way, it

seems especially fitting that Sahl ended many of his performances with the question, “Are there any groups here I have not offended?”<sup>66</sup>

*Time For a New Target*

Because opposition is so fundamental to the form, it is also among the rhetor’s greatest weaknesses. For this reason, comics go to great lengths to protect the “authenticity” of their oppositional perspective against appearances of bias. In her book, *A Conservative Walks into a Bar*, Alison Dagnes argues that even though satire has long been charged with maintaining a left-leaning bias that it more accurately reflects a bias toward the largest possible audience rather than any particular political ideology.<sup>67</sup> Nevertheless, the charge of one-sidedness is often invoked in order to undermine the authority of comic critique. Insofar as a comic’s perspective can be limited to one side or the other of a single antagonism—such as the political left versus the political right—it becomes less effective in providing the equipment of opposition and generating laughter. If a comic’s perspective can be labeled as “left,” then his or her critiques that resemble those coming from other sources on the left can be discounted as hedonistic self-gratification. More importantly, at least for the comic, if the comic perspective can be labeled, then it is also predictable and therefore less capable of wresting laughter from an audience by violating their expectations. If the audience already knows how the joke ends then no amount of comic skill—vocalization, wordplay, gesture—can restore its rhetorical potential. The predictability of a label robs the comedy of the advantage of surprise, which is an advantage that John Morreall contends is of special importance to the humorist because it “clear[s] the cognitive channels for new input.”<sup>68</sup> Perhaps unsurprisingly, Mort Sahl was often accused by his critics of being nothing more than an anti-Eisenhower crony of the left even though his disgust for “the liberals” and “radicalism” often appeared alongside his Ike-oriented jests.

Sahl's oppositional perspective was put to the test during the open presidential election of 1960 between Republican candidate Richard Nixon and Democratic candidate John F. Kennedy. Although Sahl wrote a few one-liners for Kennedy at the behest of the candidate's father, he did not advocate for either candidate in his comedy. Instead he favored jokes such as, "my considered opinion of Nixon versus Kennedy is that neither can win,"<sup>69</sup> and "the choice is between the lesser of two evils. Nixon is trying to sell the country, and Kennedy is trying to buy it."<sup>70</sup> Both quips keep the candidates at arm's length and, more to the point, make clear that Sahl stands *in opposition to* each of them. These jokes remind the audience that Sahl opposes not any one person, party, or credo, but the very institution of the Presidency. What is more, such a position allows him to occupy the political center or even transcend the tired right-versus-left political antagonism altogether. This strategy helped Sahl keep his comedy afloat during the election and was the foundation of his 1960 album, *The Next President*.<sup>71</sup>

Recorded before the end of the year's general election, this album features, excepting a few parting shots at an "out to lunch" President Eisenhower, Sahl's opposition to *both* Nixon and Kennedy.<sup>72</sup> Among his favorite targets is then Senator Kennedy's age—or his lack thereof. For instance, he quips, "Nixon was on *Meet the Press* yesterday, Governor Rockefeller was on *Face the Nation*, and Senator Kennedy was on *College News Conference* because they like to talk their problems over with someone their own age!" Although the joke includes a cadre of candidates—including Norman Rockefeller who had lost the Republican nomination to Richard Nixon—the joke is clearly at Kennedy's expense. Later in the performance, Sahl continues the theme of kidding Kennedy's age by recalling the invocation from the Democratic Nominating Convention wherein the phrase "a little child shall lead them" struck him as "weird." Increasing

his hyperbolic treatment of Kennedy's age and inexperience Sahl clearly demonstrates his opposition to the Democratic nominee.

Of course, Sahl's critique of Kennedy's youth was an all too common charge against the candidate. For example, Sahl explains that the "Republican Papers" argue, "Kennedy is an inexperienced boyish forty-three. Whereas in only three years, Nixon will be fifty—if we're here." Hinging on the incongruity presented by the comparison in the argument—four years does not a vast difference in experience make—this joke opposes the Republican critique without undermining Sahl's own barbs against Kennedy. In this way, Sahl's jest works a kind of marker of territory. In the context of his own critiques regarding Kennedy's inexperience, Sahl's joke at the Republicans' expense functions as if to say, "I'm the opposition here, not you." What is more, his joke calls the legitimacy of their critique into question because of its not so subtle endorsement for the then Vice-President which, in turn, lends authority to his "pure" opposition that advocates on behalf of neither candidate. Sahl reinforces the purity, or transcendence, of his opposition later in the performance when he describes writing a column for the ultra-conservative Hearst papers during the conventions. He claims that people confused by his choice of venue would say, "why are you with the Hearst papers, why aren't you with your own people?" To which he responds, "Because I don't know who they are, that's why!" This joke carves out a space for Sahl wherein he can oppose both the political left and right without needing to advocate for either side. Sahl's lack of his "own people" allows him to avoid being labeled and thereby marks his opposition as unbiased and pure. Because he does not advocate, his opposition transcends all other oppositions—such as the Republican critiques of Kennedy's youth—and stands in as "authentic" opposition.

Nixon, too, finds his way into Sahl's crosshairs as the performance progresses. In fact, though more of the record seems to be dedicated to jesting Kennedy,<sup>73</sup> the first jokes directed exclusively at either candidate comes at Nixon's expense. Referencing an interview the Vice-President had done on the *Jack Paar Show*, Sahl reminds the audience that Nixon claimed, "the President makes his own decisions." Strategically, Nixon's comments allow him to "start out clean" and distance himself from the errors of the previous administration. "On the other hand," Sahl interjects, "if he wasn't involved in the Eisenhower years then there isn't any reason for him... I mean, he has no previous record of employment." Much of Sahl's opposition to Nixon finds this theme of blatant political strategizing and the candidate's lack of substance as its core. For instance, he jokingly compares the candidates' educational backgrounds noting that "Kennedy is a Harvard man"—a credential that appears to carry serious weight—whereas, "Nixon is a graduate of the Caroline Leonetti Charm School"—a school for professional models in Los Angeles.

Pushing the critique to its fullest expression, Sahl mocks the manner in which Nixon responds to questions in order to present himself in the most politically advantageous manner possible without actually answering to anything of substance. As he quips that the candidate relies upon comments such as, "Well, as a matter of fact, I'm very glad you brought that up," in order to flatter the candidate's interviewers, or "I was discussing that with my wife recently [while] we were spending a quiet evening at home" to earn the favor of women voters, Sahl makes Nixon out to be a shrewd, calculating, agent of ambition. The joke concludes with a barrage of overtly (ridiculously) patriotic images including, "Pat was knitting a flag in the corner... and I was studying the Constitution... prior to leading our children in the Oath of Allegiance before bed."<sup>74</sup> Sahl's characterization of Nixon makes clear their relationship to one

another. Even though Sahl stands against Kennedy's inexperience and purchase power, he is no champion of the Nixon's empty political pandering as an alternative.

Like his previous records, Sahl's performance on *The Next President* filters the events of his day through his terministic opposition to find comic meaning in everyday life. However, unlike his Eisenhower bashing of the later 1950s, this album underscores the importance of being not only oppositional, but also being fluid in that opposition in order to legitimize any form of comic critique. Although the context of an election makes appearing to be an equal-opportunity antagonist an easily accessible subjectivity, Kennedy's victory over Nixon reduced Sahl's available targets. In his memoir he recalls being pressured by the new administration to present the President in a more favorable light than he had his predecessor. Ever the opposition, Sahl's comic critique of Camelot took shape not long after Kennedy's inauguration and soon earned him the moniker "that bastard" from the administration.<sup>75</sup> As his barbs grew more frequent—and more potent—he suggests the administration, or at least the Kennedy family, began to take action against him. He says that Kennedy intimate and Hollywood agent Milton Ebbins "would tell them he could get me to stop doing it. And every time he brought it up, I would react by doing three times as much material."<sup>76</sup> Eventually, says Sahl, Ebbins made him an ultimatum on behalf of Joseph Kennedy.<sup>77</sup> "If you don't cooperate, you'll never work in the United States again," Ebbins told him and "then the work began to dry up."<sup>78</sup> Nevertheless, Sahl argued fervently that "the country needed a defined political opposition that was at least as sophisticated as the New Frontiersmen" and his album 1961 *The New Frontier* represents an especially clear articulation of that oppositional sentiment.<sup>79</sup>

The album begins with Sahl welcoming his audience to "The New Frontier—Cuba." This joke sets the tone for the performance, but it takes almost five minutes before he returns to

politics on the albums' first side. Upon returning, he spends some time reminding his audience of his oppositional perspective. He explains, "the Democrats, as a matter of fact, feel completely misled by me because I used to criticize President Eisenhower and Richard Nixon and now I'm saying a few words about President Kennedy and his administration. And the Democrats feel that they were misled or that I misled them—I could say the same thing, but I won't tonight." Using the jest to distance himself from the leftist establishment, Sahl slips the critique of one-sidedness by reinforcing his oppositional perspective and making light of his inability to advocate on behalf of one side over the other. He extends the joke a short while later by noting that those same Democrats would make comments such as, "We're appalled! We thought this was what you wanted," and he would retort, "You didn't have to do it for me!" As before, his opposition to the Democrats in question, or at least to his characterization of Democrats, permits him the critical distance needed to levy critique and maintain his oppositional stance against the President and the institution of the Presidency.

As he trains his sights on the Kennedy Administration Sahl pokes the President for his overly full schedule of televised press conferences and events (at least "you'll have the weekend to yourself!") that are costing the networks sponsorship money (perhaps a sponsorship from "Crest Toothpaste" is in order). His harshest critiques, however, are reserved for the President's father, Joseph Kennedy, and his brother, Robert Kennedy, whom he appointed Attorney General.<sup>80</sup> Kidding Joseph Kennedy's vast wealth he suggests that if Nixon had won the election that that the elder Kennedy would have come out "the next day in disenchantment and [said], 'what has happened to our values—does money mean nothing?'" The jest here clearly targets Joseph Kennedy, but it also subtly swipes at the President for his inability to earn his seat of power without his father's wealth. A little later in the performance Sahl employs a similar

strategy to attack the President by targeting his father. In comparing NBC executive Bob Sarnoff to President Kennedy, he suggests, “Sarnoff is a Republican. He has a lot of money and he goes into his father’s business, it’s just expected. Kennedy is a Democrat with a lot of money and he goes into government—and then you hope that his father is not in his business!” Recalling again the elder Kennedy’s pivotal role during the campaign, Sahl’s critique helps him to assume an oppositional relationship to the Presidency by indirectly implicating President Kennedy while targeting his father. What is more, the constant reference to the President’s father works to bolster critiques of his youth and inexperience. This is especially the case when it is contextualized by bits such as Sahl’s mock conversation between the President and the First Lady wherein she says, “‘you’re home early today,’ and the President says, ‘Everyday, child labor laws.’”

Turning to the issue of Presidential appointees, Sahl quips, “He was appointing people from Harvard as you recall—no Yale people. It’s only people from Harvard. ‘The new Commissioner of Indian Affairs is my former home room teacher.’” Given the administration’s novelty—it was still in its first year—Sahl’s choice of target reveals, I think, his willingness to oppose *any* action—even the most pedestrian presidential appointments. Of course, if Sahl was willing to kid the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, then the appointment of the president’s brother, Robert, to Attorney General made an easy target. Robert Kennedy became an almost instant one-liner that could call back Sahl’s opposition to the president’s nepotistic approach to administrative appointments. Throughout his monologue he quips, “promise them anything but give them your brother,” and “Little Brother is watching you.” Extending the critique of the President’s youth and inexperience to his appointment for Attorney General—who was only thirty-five at the time of his appointment—gives these lines their comic impact, but their



opposition is not to the appointed so much as the appointer. As with the jokes targeting Joseph Kennedy, Sahl's rhetorical maneuver in these examples is to target Robert Kennedy in order to get laughs at the expense of the nepotistic tendencies of a new President.

Just as Eisenhower was the primary antagonist for Sahl on his debut album, so too is Kennedy for *The New Frontier*. All of the critiques on the album are filtered through and therefore contextualized by Sahl's oppositional perspective regarding the President. Importantly, this opposition, like his previous opposition to Eisenhower, is not against Kennedy on a personal level. Rather it is against the President of the United States at the institutional and symbolic level. This consistent fixation on the seat of executive authority permits the comic to avoid claims of bias and thereby validate his antagonism as an "authentic" expression of opposition. By focusing on the larger context of government and political institutions, Sahl protects himself from critiques of one-sidedness and simultaneously keeps his audience on their toes because his punch-lines could come from political position at any time.

Unlike his earlier albums, however, *The New Frontier*, includes a few quips that offer some insight for his audience regarding the nature of his opposition. For example, he says, "Now Kennedy's elected and people are coming up to me and saying, 'You're a bright young guy, it's amazing that you're not in the government.' I won't be connected with a government that would have me in it!" Kennedy is involved, to be sure, but the joke reveals more about Sahl's wide-ranging oppositional perspective than it does his critique of the President. Sahl's anti-government opposition was certainly commonplace in his comedy—for instance, he liked to quip, "We don't have time for jokes. We have to overthrow our government"<sup>81</sup>—but his emphasis on reinforcing that position throughout the album is significant as a means of responding to his critics. Near the end of the album in an aside from a narrative about folk singer

Pete Seeger and General Electric executives sharing a prison yard, Sahl says, “That’s one reason I could never be happy. Everything bothers me.” Arguably, that sentiment is at the very core of stand-up satire. *Everything bothers* the satirist. If only *some* things bother the comic then critiques of one-sidedness stand to undermine their rhetorical authority. Thus as Sahl demonstrates over his first four albums, the comic must consistently oppose without opposing anything consistently.

Comic opposition, especially when that opposition is political, recognizes the contingency of political contexts and adapts accordingly. Arguably, this is among the most vital lessons in citizenship stand-up comedians offer to democratic societies. These comics model an opposition that does not advocate and therefore does not cease upon apparent acquiescence or victory. Their comic perspective recognizes the importance of opposition and struggle to the very foundation of democratic life. What is more, they demonstrate the significance of maintaining the authenticity of their own positions and equipment—such as expanding the context of one’s opposition beyond the idiosyncratic and a willingness to critique all sides of tired political antagonisms—useful in defending that authenticity. When Mort Sahl—or any one of the host of comedians who followed in his wake—asks, “Is there anyone here that I haven’t offended?” The answer, if he has done his part in defining himself as the opposition, ought to be: no.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have argued that two key features uniquely impact the ways in which the stand-up comic functions as rhetor: the comic’s persona and his or her comic perspective. In exploring the comic persona through the examples of radical transitions made by Richard Pryor and George Carlin, I demonstrated that the rhetorical potential of stand-up satire and the comic’s

capacity for social and cultural critique is related to the comic's ability to present an "authentic" version of himself or herself to the audience. While the presentation of persona is necessary for any kind of identification between rhetor and audience, the "authentic" persona required of satirical stand-up comedy functions as both a means of identification and a source of rhetorical authority. As Pryor and Carlin revealed themselves to their audience through autobiographical material featuring their personal history and actual experiences they uncovered a means of legitimizing their comic critiques. Their ability to "speak truth to power" is tied to their ability to identify "truth" as an experiential subjectivity to which they have unique access. Their autobiography, their history, their experience, grounds their conception of truth. In creating an "authentic" persona, each comic provided his audience with a way to not only come to terms with that truth, but also to identify with it.

Whereas I argue that the comic persona is primarily concerned with the relationship between the comic and her or his audience, the comic perspective pertains to the manner in which the comic filters her or his experiences into comedic material. This filter, or terministic screen, is characterized by its oppositional nature. That is, the comic perspective is a perspective of perpetual opposition regardless of subject. This opposition undergirds every quip and joke in the comic's monologue and provides the contextual adhesive that connects the typically disparate subjects addressed over the course of a comedian's set. Arguably, the "authenticity" or purity of the comic's opposition is the only thing that comedian considers sacred. For this reason, as the example of Mort Sahl's consistent opposition to both political parties indicates, the comedian is especially vulnerable to charges of one-sidedness that stand to undermine her or his authority to critique. Sahl's earliest records illustrate his attempts to maintain and reinforce the "authenticity" of his opposition as he moved between targets on the right and targets on the left.

This terministic opposition regardless of subject provides, I argue, unique equipment for citizenship that recognizes the importance of opposition and struggle to the very essence of democracy and the difference between idiosyncratic antagonisms and the persistent struggle between citizens and the institutions of the political structure. In addition, by promoting an attitude of *ironic agonism*, Sahl's perpetual opposition provides equipment required for democracy to be truly *democratic*.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> For example, Mort Sahl and Lenny Bruce were in dialogue both the political discourses of the culture as well as the emerging jazz culture.

<sup>2</sup> In fact, Lenny Bruce makes this claim quite apparent in his later performances when discussing his legal troubles. In one of his last performance, he references again and again an agent of the court reading his material as “Lenny Bruce, in substance.” *The Lenny Bruce Performance Film*, (Columbia Productions, 1966), DVD (Koch Entertainment Company, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> The *perceived* quality of authenticity is uppermost for this argument. A comic can present a persona that is not in line with his or her offstage persona, but the audience must believe that the onstage persona fits into the world created by the comedy.

<sup>4</sup> The notion of the terministic screen and the filter metaphor appear in Burke’s chapter called “Terministic Screens” in *Language as Symbolic Action*. See Kenneth Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966): 44-62.

<sup>5</sup> B.L. Ware & Wil A. Linkugel, “The Rhetorical *Persona*: Marcus Garvey as Black Moses,” *Communication Monographs* 49 (March 1982): 50.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Newell Campbell, “The *Personae* of Scientific Discourse” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 61 (December 1975): 394.

<sup>7</sup> Ware & Linkugel, “The Rhetorical *Persona*,” 50.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>9</sup> Aristotle, *On Rhetoric*, 1.2.4. Available at

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=urn:cts:greekLit:tlg0086.tlg038.perseus-eng1:1.2.4>.

<sup>10</sup> Campbell, "The *Personae* of Scientific Discourse," 391.

<sup>11</sup> Of course, a speaker may benefit from nonrhetorical qualities such as physical appearance, but I argue that the extent to which those qualities can be persuasive is determined by their rhetorical constitution in the audience's cultural imaginary. Just as the cultural standards for valuing certain aspects of physical appearance change so to does the rhetorical significance of those characteristics.

<sup>12</sup> Campbell, "The *Personae* of Scientific Discourse," 405. Additionally, Campbell indicates that "such selves are *personae*."

<sup>13</sup> A handful of comics including Steve Martin and Larry the Cable Guy rely instead on the creation of a persona who is decidedly *not* a representation of their identity.

<sup>14</sup> Walter Fisher, "Narration as Human Communication Paradigm: The Case of Public Moral Argument," *Communication Monographs* 51 (March 1984): 8

<sup>15</sup> Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983): 71

<sup>16</sup> Edwin Black, "The Second Persona," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 56 (April 1970): 111.

<sup>17</sup> Wander, Phillip. "The Third Persona: An Ideological Turn in Rhetorical Theory." *Central States Speech Journal* 35.4 (1984): 209.

<sup>18</sup> Charles Morris III, "Pink Herring & The Fourth Persona: J. Edgar Hoover's Sex Crime Panic," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 88 (May 2002): 241.

<sup>19</sup> Dana Cloud, "Null Persona: Race and the Rhetoric of Silence in the Uprising of '34," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 2 (1999): 200

<sup>20</sup> Robin E. Jensen, Erin F. Doss, Claudia I. Janssen, and Sherrema A. Bower "Theorizing the Transcendent Persona: Amelia Earhart's Vision in *The Fun of It*," *Communication Theory* 20 (2010): 2.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 2. Ibid., 16.

<sup>22</sup> See Burke, *Permanence & Change*.

<sup>23</sup> Maegan Parker Brooks, "Oppositional Ethos: Fannie Lou Hamer and the Vernacular Persona," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 14 (2001): 537.

<sup>24</sup> In many ways, each of these is uniquely applicable to the stand-up comic. The comic nullifies her own identity in order to emphasize her persona; she operates from a position of extraordinary accomplishment—that is, she can make people laugh for an hour—and uses perspective by incongruity; and she relies almost exclusively on authority arising from vernacular rather than official sources.

<sup>25</sup> Andrea Greenbaum, "Stand-up Comedy as Rhetorical Argument: An Investigation of Comic Culture," *Humor* 12 (1999): 35.

<sup>26</sup> See John Limon *Stand-Up Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>28</sup> Tracy Wuster, "Comedy Jokes: Steve Martin and the Limits of Stand-up Comedy," *Studies in American Humor* 3 (December 2006): 42.

<sup>29</sup> Wuster, "Comedy Jokes," 25-26.

<sup>30</sup> Importantly, Wuster's argument emerges from an analysis of Steve Martin who embodied the "Wild and Crazy Guy" persona on stage. Martin, who would be better classified as a "quiet and thoughtful guy" offstage, provides an important counterpoint to my argument. However, his comic persona is arguably a parody of the stand-up comic rather than an actual stand-up comic. His performances are more Stephen Colbert than Jon Stewart. They are funny, to be sure, but they are probably more accurately described as parodies than stand-up comedy.

<sup>31</sup> Stephanie Koziski, "The Standup Comedian as Anthropologist: Intentional Culture Critic," in *The Humor Prism in 20<sup>th</sup> Century American*, ed. Joseph Boskin (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997): 86-116.

<sup>32</sup> Arguably, the requirement for a consistent presentation of self is a requirement for all stand-up comedy, not just satire.

<sup>33</sup> *Kraft Summer Music Hall*, aired April 25, 1966 on NBC (Bob Banner Associates). available via YouTube at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aDMH3SuXzsE>. Accessed on October 24, 2013.

<sup>34</sup> See, for example, Jay Leno.

<sup>35</sup> George Carlin with Tony Hendra, *Last Words* (New York, Free Press: 2009): 112.

<sup>36</sup> *The Merv Griffin Show*, aired August 31, 1965 on NBC (Merv Griffin Entertainment); Video of Carlin's routine is available on YouTube via [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fyzBO\\_etwko](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fyzBO_etwko). Accessed on October 24, 2013.

<sup>37</sup> Importantly, because both Pryor and Carlin write their own material traces of their personae exist in each performance, but even so they are written in such a way that any comedian could perform them and have success.



<sup>38</sup> See, Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).

<sup>39</sup> He married *seven* times between 1960 and his death in 2005. The longest he went without a spouse was a ten-year period between 1991 and 2001.

<sup>40</sup> Kenneth Burke, *Rhetoric of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969): 21.

<sup>41</sup> See Koziski “The Standup Comedian as Anthropologist.”

<sup>42</sup> This is outfit he wear on the cover of *FM & AM*.

<sup>43</sup> Which reference “The Newscast” and “Wonderful WINO” from *Take-Offs and Put-Ons*.

<sup>44</sup> His character, Al Sleet the Hippy Dippy Weather man, occasionally used drug-related quips such as, “tonight’s low, 35. Tomorrow’s high, whenever I get up.” However, in the mouth of what is obviously intended to be a character they are easily externalized from the comedian himself. Knowing as we do now that Carlin was smoking marijuana backstage with Pryor at the Café Au Go Go, perhaps “Al Sleet” was actually the most authentic expression George Carlin in his early work.

<sup>45</sup> This is also true of Pryor’s usage of the word “nigger.”

<sup>46</sup> “For a *sin* to be *mortal*, three conditions must together be met: ‘Mortal sin is sin whose object is grave matter and which is also committed with full knowledge and deliberate consent.’” From *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2000): paragraph 1857. eBook available at <http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe/catechism/catechism-of-the-catholic-church/>

<sup>47</sup> Don Waisanen, “Satirical Visions with Public Consequence?: Dennis Miller’s Ranting Rhetorical Persona,” *American Communication Journal* 13 (Spring 2011): 25.

<sup>48</sup> Comedy that is predictable is arguably not comedy at all. This is the reason why an audience laughs with less intensity when it can reasonably anticipate the punch-line

<sup>49</sup> Burke, *Rhetoric of Motives*, 136.

<sup>50</sup> Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action*, 45.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>52</sup> There is something interesting about the rigidity required to make a target funny and the fluidity necessary to maintain comic distance (see, Henri Bergson's *Essay on the Comic*). Also, the persona requires a certain sense of predictability in its reliance upon the cultural/rhetorical imaginaries of the audience that the perspective necessarily rejects. Simply, this whole business is a both/and.

<sup>53</sup> Lawrence E. Mintz, "Stand-up Comedy as Social and Cultural Mediation" *American Quarterly* 37 (Spring 1985): 77. Italics added.

<sup>54</sup> Mort Sahl, *Heartland* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Jovanovich, 1976): 5.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. 36.

<sup>56</sup> His memoir is written as an heroic tale of a lone ranger like figure battling corruption and conspiracy. What is more, on the PBS documentary *Make 'Em Laugh* Sahl indicates that he sees himself as more of a savior-figure than a jester. And on his record *The Future lies Ahead* he references making an entirely unironic analogy between himself and Jesus.

<sup>57</sup> Sahl, *Heartland*, 103.

<sup>58</sup> Mort Sahl, *The Future Lies Ahead*, Verve, 1958; Mort Sahl, *Mort Sahl At Sunset*, Fantasy 7005, 1958.

<sup>59</sup> Sahl does begin with a few asides and name drops about the fact that he is recording the album, but this joke is the first with any recognizable joke structure. That is, he sets this one up.

<sup>60</sup> Even though HUAC's activities reached their peak in the late 1940s and early 1950s, when understood through the oppositional screen Sahl's jest carries an additional critique of Eisenhower's unwillingness to question or oppose the committee.

<sup>61</sup> Sahl, *At Sunset*.

<sup>62</sup> The 1955 bootleg recording was eventually released by Fantasy in 1958, but its quality makes a fitting pair with Sahl's inexperience. For example, the album's second side was pressed at an audibly faster playback rate than the original recording in order to squeeze Sahl's routine onto a single side. Sahl's jittery comedy is hard to follow on the best recordings, but some sections of *At Sunset*'s latter half are nearly indecipherable.

<sup>63</sup> For more on "circumference," see Kenneth Burke, *Grammar of Motives*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969): 77.

<sup>64</sup> The problem is that even though the joke is structured as an opposition, it is unclear whether the fault implied therein lies with the United Nations or with the United States Government. Because Sahl abandons the topic, he provides no context to frame the joke's opposition.

<sup>65</sup> This was *not* Sahl's actual military experience. He was drafted into the Ninety-Third Air Depot Group in Alaska according to Gerald Nachman's *Seriously Funny*.

<sup>66</sup> For instance, both performances on *At the Hungry i* end in this manner. Mort Sahl, *At the Hungry i*, Verve, 1960.

<sup>67</sup> Alison Dagnes, *A Conservative Walks into a Bar: The Politics of Political Humor* (New York: Palgrave/MacMillan, 2012).

<sup>68</sup> John Morreall, “Funny Ha-ha, Funny Strange, and Other Reactions to Incongruity” in Morreall, John (editor), *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor* (Albany: State University of New York Press): 194.

<sup>69</sup> Qtd. in “The Third Campaign,” *Time*, August 15, 1960.

<sup>70</sup> Qtd. in Stephen Kanfer, “Culture Watching: The Evolution of American Political Humor,” *The New Leader* 91 (March/April 2008): 19.

<sup>71</sup> Mort Sahl, *The Next President*, Verve, 1960.

<sup>72</sup> Sahl, *Heartland*, 68.

<sup>73</sup> This could be the case because Sahl had made much of his career to that point beating on the Eisenhower administration, which included more than a handful of jokes at Nixon’s expense.

<sup>74</sup> Sahl interjects “to find a loophole” after mentioning the candidates study of the Constitution.

<sup>75</sup> Sahl, *Heartland*, 89.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

<sup>77</sup> President Kennedy’s father and former United States Ambassador to the United Kingdom under President Roosevelt.

<sup>78</sup> Sahl, *Heartland*, 93.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 94. Mort Sahl, *The New Frontier*, Verve, 1961.

<sup>80</sup> I suspect this is because the administration was still, at that time, new and had yet to do much beyond appointments worth criticizing.

<sup>81</sup> “Will Rogers with Fangs,” *Time*, July 25, 1960, 44.

### CHAPTER III. COMEDY AS RHETORIC: SATIRE & EQUIPMENT FOR DISSENT

In the previous chapter, I argued for the uniquely rhetorical aspects of the stand-up comic—the creation of an authentic persona and a terministically oppositional perspective. What is more, I demonstrated how stand-up comedians offer “equipment for citizenship” in a democratic society by performing authenticity and opposition. Although I have associated each of these theoretical insights primarily with the comic, they are also related to the comic’s rhetoric and audience. In this chapter, I turn from the comic as rhetor to the comedy as rhetoric to illustrate how satirical stand-up comedy can be understood as “equipment for dissent.”

This chapter progresses three stages. First I argue, following Kenneth Burke and Mikhail Bakhtin, that *comedy* is a unique mode of rhetorical expression that is conceptually distinct from *seriousness*. Second, I address the potential for satirical rhetorics to act as a means of democratic dissent and provide equipments for a citizenship of dissent. Third, I contend that satire’s primary limitation is its willingness to sacrifice its comic responsibility in its desire to be taken seriously.

#### A Tale of Two Modalities

In *The Rhetoric*, Aristotle recalls Gorgias’ assertion that we should “spoil opponents’ seriousness with laughter, and their laughter with seriousness.”<sup>1</sup> Similarly, in his attempt to shed light on the rhetorical working of humor, Cicero contends, “there is no category of jokes that is not also a source for earnest and serious thoughts.”<sup>2</sup> These claims are revealing of what I believe to be a fundamental tension between comedy and seriousness as competing modalities of discourse. Essentially, I argue that each represents a rhetoric that stands in opposition to the other. It is for this reason, I contend, that we often consider comedy in terms of its relation to tragedy.<sup>3</sup> While such a claim is perhaps unsurprising, it provides an important starting place from which to consider the ways in which the disparate modalities of comedy and seriousness

operate as an antagonistic pair struggling for legitimacy in any discursive arena. This struggle, if it can be called that, is almost always dominated by seriousness because it is the normative discourse of most situations and therefore carries an assumed sense of legitimacy. That imbalance results in a marginalization of comic discourse that, I argue, is necessary to the comic modality and yet undermines its authority. Over the course of this section, I discuss two key theoretical developments that are germane to this claim. First, I address Kenneth Burke's notion of poetic framing and the distinctions he draws between the comic and tragic frames. And second, I offer a similar discussion of Bakhtin's notion of carnival and the carnivalesque as alternatives to the "one-sided rhetorical seriousness" of officialdom.<sup>4</sup>

### *Comedy, Tragedy, and Kenneth Burke*

In his *Attitudes Toward History*, Kenneth Burke asserts that humans understand their world through frames of acceptance or rejection. Frames of acceptance promote a "yea-saying" tendency whereas frames of rejection opt for "nay-saying." Because "nay-saying" is less productive than "yea-saying," Burke favors frames of acceptance and offers three key examples: epic, tragedy, and comedy. The epic frame receives precious little attention in Burke's writing and elsewhere, but the distinction between tragedy and comedy has proven particularly fruitful.

Burke argues that while both the tragic and comic frames warn against the danger of pride, each offers a fundamentally different way of relating to the world and assigning motivations to the actions of others. Tragedy offers the perspective of "the cosmic [hu]man," which emphasizes punishment for "crimes" committed by "villains." Comedy, on the other hand, concerns "[humans] in society" and correcting the "stupidity" or mistakenness of "fools."<sup>5</sup> Tragedy distorts through magnification, making the hero *more than* human and villain *less than* human, whereas "comedy is essentially *humane*, leading in periods of comparative stability to

the comedy of manners, the dramatization of quirks and foibles.”<sup>6</sup> Hence, Burke argues, “The progress of humane enlightenment can go no further than in picturing people not as *vicious*, but as *mistaken*,” and “*necessarily mistaken*” at that.<sup>7</sup> In order to achieve this ultimate goal, criticism “requires maximum awareness of the complex forensic material accumulated in sophisticated social structures” and an unwillingness to accept reductions of part for whole or symptom for cause at face value.<sup>8</sup> In this way, the ultimate concern for the comic frame “would not be *passiveness*, but *maximum consciousness*,” providing “a realistic sense of one’s limitations” that would “enable people *to be observers of themselves, while acting*.”<sup>9</sup>

Importantly, for Burke the comic frame operates as a kind of “corrective” for our otherwise tragic-by-default discourse. It brings heroes down to earth and emphasizes the mistakenness of villains who are otherwise considered evil. It corrects the dehumanizing tendencies of overly tragic rhetorics. “It provides the *charitable* attitude towards people that is required for purposes of persuasion and co-operation.”<sup>10</sup> That is, the comic frame prepares the way for identification and persuasion because “it considers human life as a project in ‘composition,’ where the poet works with the materials of social relationships.” Importantly, Burke’s comic compositions work upon the materials of tragedy. The comic frame provides an important attitudinal shift and the occasional trope, but the stuff of comedy is already provided by the tragedy it seeks to correct. Burke’s comedy is not concerned with invention. Instead, the comic frame’s composition necessarily includes “translation” and “revision.”<sup>11</sup> For this reason, Burke maintains that the comic frame is the most appropriate attitude for criticism suggesting that “whatever poetry may be, criticism had best be comic.”<sup>12</sup>

Burke’s conceptions of the comic and tragic frames have been especially useful theoretical tools for rhetorical scholars in regards to social movements and rhetorics of protest.

For instance, Cheree Carlson, in her analysis of Gandhi's rhetoric, offers a series of commitments to which comic social movements adhere. She explains that comic social movements require "deep spiritual identification," assume that people "in the social order are inherently moral beings," and maintain some manner of "identification with the enemy" in order to move toward social change.<sup>13</sup> Importantly, the social change she has in mind is one that maintains the "system as *the* system"—that is, it is change without the tragic elimination of a scapegoated other or the complete destruction of a given social order.<sup>14</sup> Following this logic, Kimberly Powell asserts that comically framed social change permits members of a social group to come to change on their own terms rather than having social change forced upon them.<sup>15</sup> Adrienne Christiansen and Jeremy Hanson echo this sentiment, adding that there may be "*recurring social situations*" where the comic frame is the "only sensible response."<sup>16</sup> They argue that such situations arise when social actors are scapegoated or otherwise not allowed access to public discussion. In their case study of ACT-UP, they identify AIDS patients as "scapegoated victims" that turned to the comic frame as the only means available to protest the conditions of their social situation.<sup>17</sup>

Essentially, the scholars who advocate for the comic frame indicate how the comic frame is more suited than the tragic frame as a strategy for correcting the errors of a given social order. This dichotomy is telling of the field's general conception of the comic frame. It is *always an alternative* to the tragic frame. It does not appear of its own volition, but only in response to the shortcomings of tragic discourses.<sup>18</sup> The tragic frame, however, need never be defined in opposition to the comic frame. Instead, it is the default manner of understanding of our public discourses. It is rhetoric to be taken *seriously*. It encompasses *serious* matters of political



speech. It wields with exclusive authority the language and legitimacy of myth. And, for Burke, it “is the device *par excellence* for *recommending* a cause”—the default means to persuasion.<sup>19</sup>

This tendency to understand all serious public discourse as a manifestation of the tragic ritual—in terms of sin, guilt, scapegoat, and redemption—presents a profoundly tragic understanding of the comic frame. From this position, tragedy, with its necessary shortcomings, becomes the frame of “evil” and comedy the frame of “good.” Comedy becomes a kind of *ultimate corrective* to the ills of tragedy. It is thus elevated as a seemingly perfected discourse, an unattainable ideal. This inflated understanding of comedy makes it an easy target for critique because if it always falls victim to the very trappings of tragic magnification that it stands to correct. Comedy so conceived can never be as tragic as tragedy and therefore it is destined to fall short of its corrective aims. Arguably, this critique stems from an uncharitable reading of Burke’s comic frame—because he qualifies it by noting the need for a sense of humility, which implies a recognition of one’s limitations—but it nonetheless is a fairly common treatment of the concept by rhetorical scholars

For these reasons, the corrective capacity of Burke’s comic frame has not been regarded as the panacea it appears to be in some rhetorical circles. For example, in another of her essays, Carlson indicates that when the comic frame fails it has a tendency to be reduced to satire and burlesque—both of which Burke regards as unproductive frames of rejection—after being confronted with the “realities of social order.” Additionally, because a comic social movement “requires careful creation of identification among all actors required to alter a social order,” she contends that it “cannot function when there is no group within the social order to be moved.”<sup>20</sup> Steven Schwarze, who champions melodrama in cases of material and social injustice, levies a similar argument against the comic frame. For Schwarze, the comic frame’s focus on a unifying

*telos* is unfit for situations of deep inequality. He argues, “Unification can be a desirable goal, but a desire for unification in all situations may be misplaced. Promoting division and drawing sharp moral distinctions can be a fitting response to situations in which identification and consensus have obscured recognition of damaging material conditions and social injustices.”<sup>21</sup>

In each of these cases, the comic frame is critiqued because the situation is simply perceived to be *too serious* for comedy. For Carlson and Schwarze, the “realities of the social order” and “material conditions and social injustices” present too great a hurdle for a comic interpretation. Their oversight, I argue, is that they undervalue the capacity of comedy to address, as Cicero indicates, *any situation* that would be appropriately addressed by *seriousness*. Moreover, their critiques also mischaracterize the comic frame. Each claim rests upon the notion that the comic frame *requires* unification or universal identification and is therefore unfit to address division *as division*. This is simply not the case. The comic frame, as Burke imagines it, is more than capable of recognizing and maintaining divisions. Its charge is not unification or the destruction of hierarchical division. Rather, it is to recognize that even in division there is common ground and shared humanity.

In this way, the comic frame operates with an attitude that Burke calls “humble irony.” Such a perspective, he suggests, “is based upon a sense of fundamental kinship with the enemy, as one *needs* him [or her], is *indebted* to him [or her], is not merely outside him [or her] as an observer but contains him [or her] *within*, being consubstantial with him [or her].”<sup>22</sup> Importantly, this kinship with the enemy does not change the relationship to something other than a relationship between enemies. These exaggerations of the comic frame, therefore, miss the mark because they neglect comedy’s capacity to deal with imperfections and divisions as mistakenness without eliminating the ability to simultaneously render them distinctions. To see

divisions as mistakes rather than sins does not eliminate the *cause* or even the *divisions* themselves; instead it changes the way that cause and divisions are understood and, therefore, alters the *solutions* that can be mobilized as remedies.<sup>23</sup>

My intention, however, is not to advocate for the comic frame *per se*. Rather, my concern is with comedy—that is, with a rhetoric that is intended to be humorous. Although it is easy to conflate comedy and the comic frame, Burke’s notion of comedy is not to be confused with a rhetoric having humorous qualities. In fact, he argues, “the best of Bentham, Marx, and Veblen is high comedy.”<sup>24</sup> Marx occasionally turns a phrase, but he is no Lenny Bruce.<sup>25</sup> Burke takes care to differentiate his conception of comedy from humor. He writes:

We might, however, note an important distinction between comedy and humor, that is disclosed when we approach art forms as ‘frames of acceptance’ as ‘strategies’ for living. Humor is the opposite of the heroic. The heroic promotes acceptance by *magnification*, make the hero’s character as great as the situation he confronts, and fortifying the non-heroic individual vicariously, by identification with the hero; but humor reverses the process: it takes up the slack between the momentousness of the situation and the feebleness of those in the situation by *dwarfing the situation*. It converts downwards, as the heroic converts upwards. Hence it does not make for so completely well-rounded a frame of acceptance as comedy, since it tends to gauge the situation falsely.<sup>26</sup>

In this way, Burke suggests that humor, as a possible yea-saying strategy, is tragedy turned on its head. Unlike the tragic frame, which prefers an exaggeration of self in a given situation, the humorous frame distorts the situation without magnifying the self. The comic frame, on the other hand, requires a humble and realistic understanding of self and situation. Essentially, for Burke, being humorous does not mean the same thing as being comic. This is not to say that

comically framed rhetoric cannot be funny, only that it *does not have to be funny* and that being funny does not *necessarily* make a discourse comic in the Burkean sense of the term.

Burke is among the only rhetorical theorists to take seriously the task of understanding comedy and humor as rhetorical phenomena. Emphasizing the tension between comedy and tragedy as competing frames of interpretation, his work and the scholarship that it has spawned underscores the comedy/serious dialectic insofar as the comic frame is legitimized based upon its capacity for *serious* intervention, whereas tragedy, as the default discourse of seriousness, operates from a position of assumed legitimacy. Constituted in opposition to the otherwise hegemonic tragic frame, Burke's notion of comedy is a marginal rhetoric. For example, because the comic frame functions as a corrective to tragically framed discourse, tragedy is necessarily prior to comedy. In this way, the tragic frame offers a rhetoric of the way things *usually* are. The comic frame, on the other hand, presents a rhetoric of exception—and perhaps the way things *really* are. This marginalized quality of comic rhetoric, I argue, is necessary to understanding the comedy/serious dialectic. Burke's comic corrective makes it abundantly clear that comedy exists at the margins of seriousness.

### *Carnival, Officialdom, and Mikhail Bakhtin*

In combination with Kenneth Burke's comic frame, literary theorist and folk culture scholar Mikhail Bakhtin's work on carnival has been especially useful as a tool for analyzing comic rhetorics. What is more, because his writing so clearly distinguishes between the worlds of official seriousness and carnival comedy, his theorizing is helpful in illustrating the distinction between seriousness and comedy as modalities of discourse. Bakhtin's theory of carnival and the carnivalesque draws on the writings and folk culture surrounding the medieval festivals of

Europe that offered alternatives to the official hierarchies of the political and religious world. In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin explains that carnival:

offered a completely different—nonofficial, extraecclesiastical and extrapolitical aspect of the world, of [humanity], and of human relations; they built a second world and a second life outside officialdom, a world in which all medieval people participated more or less, in which they lived during a given time of the year.<sup>27</sup>

Historically, carnival was a special time when the official hierarchy of life was suspended in favor of an egalitarian system of human relations. Rather than the seriousness of official life, carnival emerged as a “parody of extracarnival life, a ‘world inside out.’”<sup>28</sup> Carnival became the “people’s second life,” that was “organized on the basis of laughter” and featured prominently some combination of three distinct forms of folk culture:

1. *Ritual spectacles*: carnival pageants, comic shows of the marketplace.
2. *Comic verbal compositions*: parodies both oral and written, in Latin and in the vernacular.
3. *Various genres of billingsgate*: curses, oaths, popular blazons.<sup>29</sup>

Importantly, this secondary life was not a double life lived alongside a person’s official life. Rather, Bakhtin suggests that people *lived* carnival because “carnival does not know footlights... it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators.”<sup>30</sup> For this reason, “everyone is an active participant, everyone communes in the carnival act.”<sup>31</sup> This was made possible because the second world of carnival *replaced* the first world of officialdom in its time. As Bakhtin explains, “During carnival time, life is subject only to its laws... it is a special condition of the entire world, of the world’s revival and renewal.”<sup>32</sup> The suspension of official life was complete during carnival and its reconstitution at the close of the festival was subject to

and dependent upon the renewing energies of the carnival itself. Much as Burke's comic frame acts as a corrective for the tragedy of everyday discourse, Bakhtin's notion of carnival offers both reprieve and renewal to "all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions" of the world of officialdom. For Bakhtin, "Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed."<sup>33</sup> In similar ways to the comic corrective, the carnival feast pushed and pulled at the rigid structures of the official world by turning them on their head to reveal the impermanence and relativity, the fluidity and becoming, and the possibilities and potentials contained therein.

For Bakhtin, officialdom was the realm of the serious, "infused with elements of fear, weakness, humility, submission, falsehood, [and] hypocrisy."<sup>34</sup> Official seriousness was "a spokes[person] of power" which "terrorized, demanded and forbade."<sup>35</sup> This underlying logic made officialdom "monolithically serious and gloomy, subjugated to a strict hierarchical order, full of terror, dogmatism, reverence, and piety."<sup>36</sup> His conception of the serious life is as dismal as his carnival is hopeful. Importantly however, Bakhtin's carnival was neither an opponent of nor a servant to the official hierarchy of seriousness. Instead, they were two sides of the same coin, an apparent contradiction that facilitated each side's very existence. As Bakhtin explains, "It was precisely the one-sided character of official seriousness which led to the necessity of creating a vent for the second nature of [humanity], for laughter."<sup>37</sup> In this way, laughter, through carnival, emanates from the rigors of official life and offers a "second" or "unofficial truth" as a source of life and renewal for the people. Not unlike Burke's comic corrective, Bakhtin's laughter "does not deny seriousness but purifies and completes it."<sup>38</sup> It does not challenge seriousness, rather it eliminates "false seriousness" and "dogmatism" from the dialectal whole.<sup>39</sup> In this way, the comedy of carnival laughter *reveals* the gravity of official

discourse. It distills official seriousness down to its very foundation, discarding the hyperbolic ornamentation and embellishment disguised as seriousness. The laughter of carnival reminds the folk *and the state* what is *actually at stake* in their contests and exchanges.

This relationship between the seriousness of official life and the laughter of carnival life is fundamental in understanding the value of carnival and, I argue, any notion of comedy. Comedy, in Bakhtin's terms, would be a discourse organized by laughter but comprised of the same materials as the discourse of seriousness. That is, the cornerstone of comedy is provided by seriousness in the same way that the second world of carnival finds its foundation in officialdom. Its ability to be a "second truth," and therefore its rhetorical potential, is fundamentally connected to its ability to render the seriousness of "official truth" through the comic filter of laughter. What is more, because the laughter of carnival is, for Bakhtin, the laughter of the folk, its comedy carries a powerfully democratic impulse as it emerges as a collective expression of the people—even if it is limited by its by its temporal boundaries.<sup>40</sup>

No sooner than Bakhtin brings carnival into focus for his reader in *Rabelais and His World*, he begins lamenting its destruction. He indicates, "The Renaissance is the high point of carnival life. Thereafter begins its decline."<sup>41</sup> As officialdom grew in seriousness over the following era, the laughter of carnival was squelched and contained until it was reduced to mere sparks of the carnival fires that blazed in generations past. For Bakhtin, however, the death of the historical carnival does not coincide with the loss of carnival as a way of being. In his *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics*, for instance, Bakhtin makes the case that even though the historical carnival may have been vanquished from the official realm its symbolic structure remains as a genre-altering force. He explains, "Carnival has worked out an entire language of symbolic concretely sensuous forms," and that those forms present a new type of speech that can

be adopted by other speech genres through a process of transposition he calls “carnivalization.”<sup>42</sup> In this way, the carnival pathos of change and renewal lives on in the carnivalesque symbolic forms that once characterized the performance of the historical carnival. These forms include, of course, the ritual spectacles, comic verbal compositions, and billingsgate typical of carnival folk culture, but also the combining of “the sacred with the profane, the lofty with the low, the great with the insignificant, [and] the wise with the stupid.”<sup>43</sup> Carnivalization requires discourse to deal with its second world, to embrace multiple meanings. What is more, these carnivalesque symbols, “always include within themselves a perspective of negation (death) or vice versa. Birth is fraught with death, and death with new birth.”<sup>44</sup> The death/life duality fosters both a realistic sense of limitations and, importantly, recognition of the unavoidable temporal constraints on any discourse, carnivalesque or serious.

Through carnivalization, the carnivalesque symbol provides unique insight into the comedy/serious dialectic. For Bakhtin, comedy and seriousness are equal in their universalism. Each exists alongside and because of the other. For this reason, the process of carnivalization reveals the places where seriousness has overreached its boundaries. The carnivalesque symbol of comedy reminds serious discourse of its impending death, its temporality and, therefore, its contingency. Further, even though historical carnival’s capacity to upend officialdom was time-bound to the length of a given festival, the carnivalization of discourse presents a more accurate sense of how *comedy* functions. Comedy is fleeting. It erupts from within the discourse of seriousness and passes away in bursts of laughter, but not before leaving some of itself behind. Comedy carnivalizes seriousness by imprinting itself upon the very language of seriousness, by changing the angles to renew perspectives, and correcting the hyperbolic self-aggrandizing tendencies of officialdom.



Bakhtin's theorizing on carnival and the carnivalesque has been useful for rhetorical critics dealing with both comedic and serious texts. For example, Paul Achter argues that the *Onion*'s parodic, carnivalesque coverage of 9/11 both helps to educate citizens about the visceral nature of the event and models "new rules and standards for public discourse."<sup>45</sup> Because the *Onion* employs carnivalesque strategies including parody, obscenity, and the grotesque, he contends that carnival is "an important textual mode ordinary citizens use to confront and critique power—a way to get through to power by destroying it through laughter."<sup>46</sup> Thus, he concludes that carnival is a resource for citizenship and a necessity for democratic culture.<sup>47</sup>

In another essay, Priscilla Meddaugh sees carnivalesque utility in Stephen Colbert's parodic punditry on his Comedy Central program *The Colbert Report*. She indicates that "*Colbert* as carnival challenges the authoritative claims to the 'center' of discourse" in order to reveal the "shortcomings of the political realm."<sup>48</sup> By donning the fool's cap, Colbert's parody reveals the contradictions of official discourse and the possibilities of comic alternatives. Similarly, Paul Martin and Valerie Renegar identify carnivalesque emancipation in the Coen Brothers' film *The Big Lebowski*. They contend that the film's "carnivalesque humor helps liberate audiences from social norms and encourages them to reflect on and ultimately reject their fears of power, law, and the sacred."<sup>49</sup> In this way, their understanding of carnival, even in its mediated Hollywood package, reveals the potential not only for the rhetor to encourage carnivalistic reinterpretation of otherwise serious discourse, but for the audience to imagine the possibility for such change through self-reflection and participation with the carnivalesque elements of the texts that they consume.

Contrary to these examples, Stephen Olbrys argues that "more attention must be focused on practices that *discipline* humor and its embodied forms, because their means often serve as

very subtle but powerful rhetorical maneuvers that invite audiences to tame themselves through laughter.”<sup>50</sup> Essentially, he argues that the disciplining of humor also entails the disciplining of the vent created by carnival laughter, which undermines its renewing capacities. His understanding of the carnivalesque, emerging from his critique of Chris Farley’s Chippendales-style dance on *Saturday Night Live*, emphasizes the temporality of carnival as an important limitation to its capacity to intervene in serious discourse. He contends that the carnivalesque is only “a *temporary* festive overturning of the world” and “one that ultimately restores the balance in favor of dominant loci of power and its bodies.”<sup>51</sup> His view of carnival is more pessimistic than those cited previously, but his critique is important in considering any *contemporary* rather than *historical* example of the carnivalesque because it recognizes that the world of officialdom is no longer subject to suspension during carnival and therefore retains its capacity for domination in the face of renewal.

In another critique, James Janack turns his attention to a non-humorous example of the carnivalesque: former Minnesota Governor Jesse “The Body” Ventura. He contends that Ventura used the carnivalesque as a persuasive strategy to attack his opponent on the campaign trail to such effect that he undermined his efforts to serve as the Governor of Minnesota before he was even elected. Janack indicates, “Though popular manifestations of carnival can play an emancipatory role, scholars should be aware that drawing on the carnival to attain office invites inconsistency. It is an effort to gain access to a system of elites while attacking and delegitimizing that system.”<sup>52</sup> This inconsistency is significant when it comes to considering the impact that the carnival second world can have on the official first world of that contextualizes it. What is more, Janack’s critique makes clear that the democratic impacts of carnival—or perhaps any comedic discourse—are limited to alternative, rather than formal or institutional, modes of

political action because the structures of political institutions are bound by the exaggerated seriousness of officialdom.

On the one hand, scholars contend that carnival provides a distinct perspective for the possibilities of change while challenging *things as they are* with the democratizing power of laughter. On the other hand, contemporary carnival is *temporary* and even carnivalesque rhetorics are restricted by the official seriousness that contextualizes their utterance. What is more, because the audience does not *live* carnival as the folk of historical carnival lived it, they are given only temporary carnivalesque escapes from their official lives through carnival rhetoric, which provides little more than temporary catharsis. Further, it is clear from both Olbry's and Janack's essays that contemporary officialdom is no longer beholden to carnival. Without its connection to the official seriousness of the first world, the laughter of carnival is of little consequence because it is disconnected from its most fundamental source of power: the people.<sup>53</sup> Ever subject to the official hierarchy, the audiences of carnivalesque performances cannot fully participate in the carnival they observe and therefore the performances lose much of their capacity for change and become little more than spectacles for popular consumption.

In many ways, Bakhtin's carnivalesque operates like the Burkean comic corrective. In offering an alternative to the serious discourse of officialdom, carnival simultaneously reveals the shortcomings of official life and prepares for its renewal. The comic corrective similarly finds humanizing potential in the exaggerations of tragedy in order to offer a more appropriate version of human relations. The key addition provided in Bakhtin's treatment of the comedy/serious dialect, however, is his argument that comedy *completes* seriousness as it corrects it. Instead of considering comedy as an alternative to seriousness, Bakhtin's carnival underscores the similarity in their composition. The same raw materials comprise both comedy

and seriousness. Carnival presents a second world based upon the first, official world, but the reconstitution of officialdom after carnival is, in many ways, little more than a parody of the carnival second world. This give and take between the two modes of discourse is possible precisely because they share the same foundation. Because each builds with the same materials, the discourses *exist simultaneously* rather than in a relationship in which one precludes the other even though they tend to be *articulated* as an oppositional pair. Arguably, this also true of Burke's comic and tragic frames, but in considering comedy and seriousness as two parts of an ambivalent whole, Bakhtin brings their fundamental similarity into focus.

### *Correction, Completion, and Serious Comedy*

My intention in this section is not to advocate on behalf of either Burke's comic frame or Bakhtin's carnivalesque. Instead, it is to demonstrate how these two distinct theorists of comedy underscore the fundamental tension between the competing modalities of comedy and seriousness as two ways of understanding the same thing. Of course, as I have indicated over the course of this section, seriousness is the default mode of discourse and exercises a powerful advantage over comedy because of its assumed legitimacy. Seriousness is discourse to be taken seriously and, from that standpoint, comedy is quite the opposite. As Burke and Bakhtin demonstrate, however, comedy should not be so easily dismissed because it expertly reveals the contingency and exaggerations of seriousness. By reveling in its having been contrived from the materials of seriousness, comedy uncovers the fabricated nature of serious discourse. Comedy's utter lack of legitimacy becomes its primary source of corrective capacity because in undermining itself it reveals how seriousness overvalues itself. What is more, in its self-defeating manner comedy lays itself bare while simultaneously stripping seriousness of its

legitimacy in order to reveal that neither seriousness nor comedy *demand*s legitimacy because even though they don different rhetorical disguises they are composed of the same stuff.

For rhetorical scholars, understanding comedy as a corrective or as a renewing force for serious discourse is useful for justifying the study of comic texts, but the fundamental relationship between the modalities of seriousness and comedy presents a unique and largely untapped resource for criticism. Such a perspective recognizes that all rhetorics are Janus-faced. A comic interlude reveals an imperfection in seriousness and, at the same time, a serious analysis of any rhetorical transaction reveals just how comic human self-importance can be. This is not to say that rhetorical scholars should not take criticism seriously, just that they should also take it comically in order to understand any rhetorical subject as an ambivalent whole. That is, we should jest our seriousness and take seriously our jesting in order to see the world *as it is* and therefore begin to conceptualize the world *as it should be*.

### **Standing-Up Satire as Dissent**

The tension between comedy and seriousness provides a foundation for thinking about comedy as a rhetoric, which is to say, as a resource for persuasion. As I have indicated in the previous section, comedy is, by necessity, always an alternative means to persuasion. This is not to say that it is less effective than seriousness, only that seriousness is the default means to persuasion and that comedy *as comedy* emerges from the margins of seriousness as an alternative discourse. The question, for this section specifically and the dissertation more generally, is how does this marginal rhetoric of comedy, especially when it is stood-up, equip for us citizenship? As a rhetoric, it is clear that comedy operates as a critical corrective to seriousness. It strips away rhetorical ornamentation to reveal a clearer image of the world “as it is” and in so doing creates a space wherein we are free to consider the world as it could, or even as it should, be. As

a rhetoric that offers equipment for citizenship, however, I argue that this critical corrective operates as a discourse of democratic dissent. In this way, even though democracy prefers the modality of seriousness for its everyday comings and goings, as historian Peter Robinson suggests, “political comedy has often been where the serious work of democracy is done.”<sup>54</sup>

In her writings on democracy, Chantal Mouffe argues that *the political* is “the dimension of antagonism” which is “constitutive of human society,” and that *politics* are a “set of practices and institutions through which an order is created, organizing human coexistence in the context of conflictuality provided by the political.”<sup>55</sup> I contend that the tension between comedy and seriousness reflects the *ontological* struggle of the political and that specific instances of satire and comedy are a kind of politics in practice. Importantly, for Mouffe, the ineradicability of antagonism at the level of the political helps to shape the conventional practices of politics. Similarly, I argue that the ontological struggle between comedy and seriousness contextualizes all satire in the same way the inherency of political antagonism inflects itself upon all politics. For this reason, every joke is, in some way, a particularization of this ontological struggle between competing modalities. Although I contend that this claim is likely true of all humor, it is most apparent in satire, which, as literary theorist Gilbert Highet indicates, employs the “combination of jest and earnest” as its “central *method*.”<sup>56</sup>

Consider, as an example, one of Lenny Bruce’s many onstage critiques of the legal system. In one bit, he describes his first time being tried for performing obscene material in San Francisco on October 4, 1961. He was arrested on obscenity charges for saying the word “cocksucker” onstage and was eventually acquitted.<sup>57</sup> The bit that emerged after the trial became as regular as anything in Bruce’s act could be. It appears on the 1971 release of *Live at the Curran Theatre*—which was recorded only a month after the incident in November 1961—and

on the 2004 boxed set *Let the Buyer Beware*. The cut from the boxed set was likely recorded after his acquittal given his abundant usage of the offending word, which is noticeably absent in the earlier recording.<sup>58</sup> Interestingly, the bit also took center stage in Dustin Hoffman's 1974 film portrayal in *Lenny*.<sup>59</sup> In the bit, Bruce retells the story of his trial and makes of light of the comical inconsistencies of obscenity law and the legal structure that enforces it. In so doing, he juxtaposes his decidedly comic perspective with the overly serious nature of his day in court.

On the *Curran Theater* recording, he begins by offering, "I thought a judge is, 'I listen. I am wise. The scales. I listen all, then I weigh what I hear.'"<sup>60</sup> This attempted set up is important for the comic twist that is to come because it underscores the assumed honorable and serious nature of the judge's seat of authority. Further, by drawing on the commonplace metaphor of the scales, it idealizes the very process by which the power of the legal structure is exercised. This idealistic image of the legal institution gets inverted at the end of the bit when Bruce explains that the judge, who "has just heard the testimony of two [arresting] officers," declares, "As far as I'm concerned he's guilty!" Having testimony on only one side of his scale, Bruce's judge falls well short of the legal ideal presented at the beginning of the bit and therefore undermines the seriousness of that ideal.

In the space between set up and punch-line, however, Bruce engages in one of his trademark digressions that makes it clear that the judge not only falls short of the juridical ideal, but that he—and everyone else in the courtroom—is guilty of the same crimes for which Bruce is being tried. In the middle section of the bit, Bruce recalls the testimony of his arresting officer saying, "*he* said the word, [and] then the word became a little looser. He just rapped it out and then everybody dug with the word.... And then everybody said it and everybody loved to say it... He said it, the judge said it, and everybody had a good time saying it." Building up comedic

momentum as he points his finger around the imaginary courtroom he finally lands on the bailiff, “that dopey Mountie,” who, for the benefit of those in the courtroom with hearing difficulties, forcefully said, “dada-dada.” The juxtaposition between Bruce daring to utter a potentially offensive word onstage in a nightclub and the comfort with which it was volleyed around the court by the entire cast of juridical actors offers a clear example of what Kenneth Burke would call, “perspective by incongruity.”<sup>61</sup> Importantly, however, that incongruity is grounded in the notion that the word that was considered to be *too vulgar* to be uttered in a comedic context—which is, by definition, conversant in billingsgate—was spoken freely in a serious context. In this way, the satire in the bit emerges because it draws upon the foundational tension between comedy and seriousness. The critique that the satire espouses is directed at the legal system and the cultural value on justice, albeit by way of a series of synecdochic particularizations, but it is given form by the struggle between seriousness and comedy because the actors involved and the point of contention find meaning in being a part of one world or the other. Thus, the critique of the judge, police, and the attorneys could be reduced to a simple of case of the agents of seriousness trying to take comedy *too* seriously.

Bruce’s routine exemplifies, I contend, the best of satire as a discourse of dissent. According to Robert Ivie, “dissent is critical to holding ambitious governments and misguided policies accountable to public scrutiny and democratic standards” and is therefore “a mainstay of democratic citizenship, not a luxury, a nuisance, or a malfunction.”<sup>62</sup> Given the oppositional perspective of stand-up satire, dissent is also a mainstay of the form. Although, Bruce’s courtroom comedy only gestures toward the task of checking ambitious governments and misguided policies, it does challenge the very political seriousness that permits their emergence and, at least in the character of Judge Axelrod, the actors who (mis)represent democratic



institutions. His satire functions by throwing the imperfections of political and cultural abstractions into relief by filtering them through the experience of an actual citizen—and one who, because of his authentic persona, can stand up and speak out on behalf of the *demos*.

In her analysis of contemporary satire as dissent, Amber Day indicates that comic interruptions to officialdom “aim not just to dissent but to shift the topics and terms of the debate, often attempting to undermine the power of the dominant narrative.”<sup>63</sup> Bruce’s routine attempts to shift the topic of debate from whether or not he was guilty of saying obscene things from the stage to whether or not he was given a fair trial. Beyond altering the topics of the debate, his critique moves to challenge the term at the very center of his trial—obscenity—and therefore modify the terms of the debate as Day suggests. What is more, because Bruce’s satire offers a particularized instance of the struggle between comedy and seriousness, he also attempts to undermine the very seriousness of the dominant narrative and those who seek to perpetuate it.

In accordance with both Ivie and Day, Bruce’s short bit on his first obscenity trial makes clear that satire is capable of being stood-up as a means of democratic dissent. The question, for the remainder of this section, is how does that dissent prepare an audience for the civic responsibility of dissent? I argue that satire, especially in the stand-up context, provides unique equipment for preparing audiences for a citizenship of dissent. In the paragraphs that follow, therefore, I offer a description of satire as a rhetorical form and then identify how that form has been and can be used to contribute to and sustain the discourse of dissent.

### *Satire in Translation*

Colloquially, satire often refers to humor that is critical or biting in some way. The word “satire,” however, most likely comes from the Latin word *satura*, which translates to “full dish” or “medley.”<sup>64</sup> The term’s connection to humor came only after the Roman poet Ennius began

referring to his poetry as *Saturae*. The poems, according to Highet, “were a mixed dish of simple coarse ingredients, but that they grew out of an improvised jollification which was (although devoid of plot) dramatic, since it mimicked and made fun of people and their ways, and contained dialogue sung or spoken.”<sup>65</sup> His poems did not, however, carry the biting social or political critique often associated with satirical writing and performance. That characteristic of the form, as is the case with “stand-up comedy,” likely predates the usage of the term.

Greek poets including Aristophanes and Menippus, who was called “the Cynic,” made regular use of a form of critical satirical discourse as they reduced figures and philosophies from Socrates to Stoicism to laughable rubble in their verse.<sup>66</sup> In the Roman Republic, first century poet Horace and second century poets Juvenal and Lucilius also penned satirical verse.

Although Horace and Juvenal are considered to be exemplars of Roman satire, it is Lucilius who is credited with ensuring that social criticism would become a cornerstone of the form otherwise built upon “variety, down-to-earth unsophistication, coarseness, an improvisatory tone, humor, mimicry, echoes of the speaking voice, abuse giving, and a general feeling, real or assumed, of devil-may-care nonchalance.”<sup>67</sup>

The etymological origins of the term “satire” and its stylistic markers make it especially fitting as a discourse of *democracy*. A *satura*, for instance, was a meal appropriate for the masses that was comprised of a variety of whichever ingredients were easily available. It was a hearty, but not especially elegant, meal. It was sustenance, not decadence. Satire, in this way, is a discourse of the common folk. It prefers the easily available ingredients of coarse, improvisational, everyday language—what Bakhtin calls “billingsgate” or “the speech of the marketplace”—to the flourish of grandiose oratory. In particularizing the struggle between comedy and seriousness, it trims lofty discourse of its ornamentation and renders it digestible for

a mass audience. It provides the *demos* with sustenance by translating the discourses of political and cultural mythos into their everyday language and, because of its tendency toward critique, simultaneously offers alternative perspectives on the presumed seriousness and significance of those discourses. Satire renders the unapproachable, and therefore unquestionable, ordinary thereby clearing the way for popular dissent.<sup>68</sup> If democracy is a politics of the *demos* then satire is one of its many languages.

This de-mystifying function of satire is especially apparent in routines and bits that present otherwise abstract social and political dilemmas in terms of everyday experiences. This conversion from an overly serious discourse of politics and cultural myth to the quotidian comedy of everyday experiences prepares an audience not only judge the problem in question, but also to begin to form responses that speak to their situation.

Dick Gregory's commentary on racism in the South from his early albums and his joke book, *From the Back of the Bus*, function in this way. In one joke, he introduces a commentary on American exceptionalism quipping, "Isn't this the most fascinating country in the world? Where else would I have to ride in the back of the bus, have a choice of going to the worst schools, eating in the worst restaurants, living in the worst neighborhoods—and average \$5,000 a week just for talking about it." To drive home his punch-line, he adds a note of clarification saying, "\$5,000 a week—for saying the same things out loud I used to say under my breath."<sup>69</sup> Gregory's satire, in these examples juxtaposes a powerful myth of American culture and politics, that the United States is "better than" or "more special than" other places, with the realities of life for an African American in the early 1960s. His joke reminds his audience of the real social inequalities of his everyday experiences, like riding in the back of the bus or living in fear of

speaking out against oppression, that contradict or outline the limits of the mythology of exceptionalism that defines the cultural assumptions about the American experience.

Not unlike Bruce's courtroom satire, Gregory's quips bring issues of serious debate—segregated busses, schools, restaurants, and housing—into the carnivalesque world of his comedy in order to question the systematic problems of structural racism through his specific, though not unique, experience. In this way, the incongruity between his paycheck and his power over his mostly white audience as a performer and his offstage social standing and lack of power reveals the comedy inherent in the those apparently serious points of debate by making the defense of those issues of segregation seem laughable. His charge, however, is also leveled at the people in his audience who are not only willing bystanders in, but also eager spectators (perhaps, voyeurs) of the conflicts of racial integration. Thus, his quip throws the contradiction of the myth of American exceptionalism and the middle-class desire to witness or vicariously experience racial oppression into relief.

Importantly, Gregory's critique employs only ordinary language to describe the transgressions of racial segregation and the incongruities it perpetuates and, in so doing, permits his audience an easily accessible avenue to identify with him in his struggle and assume his perspective thereby challenging, however indirectly, the discourses and structures that support segregation. By making this shift in perspective available and accessible to a mass audience, Gregory's satire prepares them for dissent by revealing obvious points of incongruity that make the structures and discourses of segregation appear to be laughable and therefore questionable. He provides both an attitude that encourages a negative judgment of his targets *and* points of departure for the discourse of dissent.

In another joke of his more prominent jokes, Gregory recalls for his audience a time when he visited a lunch counter in Mississippi. He says, “I sit down [and] a blonde waitress walked over to me. I said, ‘I’d like two cheeseburgers.’ She said, ‘we don’t serve colored people down here.’ I said, ‘I don’t eat colored people *nowhere*.’”<sup>70</sup> As before, Gregory particularizes the otherwise abstract notion of segregation by placing himself at the center of an experience. In so doing, he provides his audience with a perspective with which to identify—his own—and therefore to judge the waitress and the structural racism in which she participates. Importantly, the joke work of the quip is accomplished by simple word play rather than complex argument. His aim, arguably, is to reveal as ridiculous the notion that a restaurant would deny a customer service based upon their skin color—and, therefore, segregation in general—but his method is to turn a phrase on the rhetoric used to support the policy. In having his waitress say, “we don’t serve colored people,” Gregory draws upon the everyday, serious speech practices of segregation that carry an air of legitimacy that allows the system to perpetuate itself. By making the phrase itself ridiculous in his comic reinterpretation, therefore, Gregory’s quip asks the audience to question the very seriousness of that speech practice and, by extension, the system of structural racism that it supports. In this way, these examples demonstrate the how satire works with the language of the *demos* in order to draw attention to the inconsistencies and problems of their political and social milieu. Satire, as a discourse of and for the *demos*, therefore fulfills an important translation function that prepares the way for judgment and dissent.

### *Telling the Truth, the Whole Truth*

Just as important as the translating function of satire is its *truth telling* capacity. In his *Sermones* (which are also sometimes called *Satires*), early Roman satirist Horace suggests that his intention is to “tell the truth, laughing.”<sup>71</sup> In the verses that follow, the poet offers a serious,

but witty, monologue on the shortcomings of both the quest for wealth and the path of self-denial built upon anecdotes and examples of the ridiculous rich men and asinine asceticism. The poem's power comes not from its argumentative logic, but from its apparent truthfulness. For Horace, the use of anecdotal characters who act like ordinary Romans allows for a satirical critique that appears to present the world "as it is." In this manner, the satire tells the truth simply by presenting the ridiculous alongside the serious. That is, in order to present the world "as it is" the satirist treats both the conventional version of that world and the unofficial, comical realities of that world in the same breath. The world "as it is" is not altogether unlike Bakhtin's notion of the official and carnival worlds, but it is not divided into a temporally exclusive dichotomy. Instead, it is a world fraught with *both* seriousness and comedy, with the ridiculous and the profound, with significance and triviality. The world "as it is," therefore, is fundamentally multimodal—which is to say, it is more akin to carnival than officialdom or comedy than tragedy. Arguably, this willingness to see the world in terms of both seriousness and comedy at the same time permits the satirist to *tell the truth* through comedy. That is, because the satirist embraces both modalities she or he can reveal the ridiculousness of seriousness simply by speaking it.

Richard Pryor had a remarkable gift for telling the truth while laughing in all of his comedy, but this was especially the case for his character-based satires. On his 1975 album, *...Is It Something I Said?*, Pryor introduces his audience to a soon-to-be famous barfly-philosopher-preacher he calls Mudbone. The character would recur in his comedy until his final performance before his death. In fact, even his autobiography begins with a chapter written in the voice of Mudbone. In the chapter, Mudbone recalls meeting Pryor and, as is his custom, giving him advice on his chosen profession. He writes, "I told him comedy—real comedy—wasn't only

tellin' jokes. It was about telling the truth. Talking about life. Makin' light of the hard times... The truth is gonna be funny, but it's gonna scare the shit outta folks."<sup>72</sup> Fittingly, although Mudbone's reflections tended to be more ridiculous tall tales than complex satirical monologues, almost all of them contain a morsel of truth that cuts, often unexpectedly, to the core of the shortcomings of society and the human condition.<sup>73</sup>

In the origin story of the character, for instance, Pryor relates Mudbone's tale of running an errand for his love-struck boss, Cockeyed Junior. The character explains:

He fell in love with this girl from Pittsburgh; I went to the depot to pick her up. I had a horse named Ginger. I hooked her up and went down there, picked her up at the depot. She got off the train. Big woman, weighed about four hundred and sixty pounds. She got off the train sideways, they was pushin' her ass off there. Well, I saw her. I said, "Shit, it's fine for him. He's cockeyed, it don't mean nothing to him." And I walked over to her, introduced myself. I said, "Ma'am, my name Mudbone" and I tipped my hat. Bitch slapped me across my head and said, "Nigger pick up the bag." I said, "Goddamn! What kinda shit? I ain't never... Goddamn! What kinda shit?" You know—said this to myself.<sup>74</sup>

The story's exposition clearly describes characters that fit best into the carnival world of comedy. The physical abnormalities of both Cockeyed Junior—who Mudbone suggests, "was hard to work for because his eyes went every which way. He'd say, 'Nigger, pick that up' and four or five niggers bend down"—and his obese lover present the world through a funhouse mirror by drawing on carnival comedy's comfort with grotesque imagery. However, the action in the narrative more or less resembles everyday activity. In this way, the world created by Mudbone is world of blended modalities. It employs the comic and the serious simultaneously.

Thus, Mudbone's tale appears to present the world "as it is" because it embraces both the comic grotesque, albeit with some hyperbolic flourish, and mundane seriousness.

This apparent realism contextualizes the truth telling that concludes the excerpt. The concise joke, "said this to myself," humorously and unexpectedly turns the reasonable response to being slapped in the head without reason into a means of telling a powerful truth about the African American experience and the utter lack of agency that silenced justifiable responses to abuse. As if to underline his intentions, Mudbone goes on to explain, "Cause in them days, that's all a nigger could do was get mad, see." This line and the joke that leads into it speak a truth that is immediately verified by the audience's laughter. More importantly, perhaps, is the fact that the truth he proffers through the satire is an ugly, and therefore often unspoken, truth. This is significant because, as Highet argues, "by compelling [their audience] to look at a sight they had missed or shunned, [satirists] first [make] them realize the truth, and then [move] them to feelings of protest."<sup>75</sup> Everyday practices of oppression are no laughing matter, but by engaging the comic realities of the conventional, Pryor's Mudbone forces his audience to look upon the ridiculousness of those very serious practices and judge them accordingly.

In another character bit, Pryor offers what is perhaps his most trenchant political satire, titled, "Bicentennial Nigger."<sup>76</sup> Appearing as the final track of his 1976 release of the same name, the routine begins with Pryor explaining the origins of "black humor." He says, "It started on slave ships. Cat was out there rowing and some dude say, 'What you laughin' about?' He said, 'Yesterday, I was a king.'" This joke introduces the bit, but it also provides a kind of meta-commentary on the truth-telling-while-laughing characteristic of satire because the king-turned-slave in the joke models as explicitly as possible the satirist's urge to find laughter in even the darkest of truths. From that brief introduction, Pryor goes on to introduce his character by



explaining that he expects to see “some nigger—two hundred years old in black face, stars and stripes on his forehead” during a celebration of the United States’ bicentennial. Gradually, the hyper-patriotic “Battle Hymn of the Republic”—an anthem of the Union troops during the Civil War—gently fades in to underscore his transformation into the character he describes. Assuming his black-faced, awe-shucks, Stepin-Fetchit caricature, Pryor offers, “I’m just so thrilled to be here—o’er here in America. I’m so glad you all took me outta Dahomey. I used to could live to be a hundred and fifty, now I dies of high blood pressure by the time I’m fifty-two. Yuk yuk yuk. That thrills me to death. I’m just so pleased America is going to last.” Juxtaposing the extreme displays of patriotism that characterize official celebrations of the nation’s bicentennial with the harsh realities of the African American experience, Pryor’s absurd character literally tells the bleak truth about his own life expectancy while yucking-it up.

As the bit continues, he focuses his satirical lens on America’s problematic past. Although his character mentions being taken from Dahomey—a former West African kingdom that was central to the Dutch slave trade—alongside a more contemporary problem for the African American community, the rest of the short satire focuses exclusively on slavery. Laughing all the while, he explains:

They brought me over here in a boat. There was four hundred of us come over here. Yuk yuk yuk. Three hundred and sixty of us died on the way over hear. Yuk yuk yuk. I love that. Yuk yuk yuk. That just thrills me so. I don’t know why you white folks is just so good to us. Yuk yuk yuk. Got over here, another twenty of us died from disease. Yuk yuk yuk. Ah, but you didn’t have no doctors to take care of us. I’m so sorry you didn’t. Upset you all some, too, didn’t it.

His ironic interjections of “I love that” and “that just thrills me so” provide incongruities that find laughter in the brutal transgressions that comprise the dismal side of American history and the stark realities of the African American experience. Although this satire is much darker than his Mudbone stories, each features the performer speaking truths about the world “as it is.” In this case, his caricature usurps the serious, even mythic, discourse of nostalgia promoted by celebrations of the nation’s anniversary and places it alongside the appalling historical realities expunged by that patriotic sentimentality. His ironic nostalgia for the slave trade speaks harsh truths: people were delivered to this country in slave ships, many of them died making the journey, even more died upon arrival, and, if they survived, their reward was enslavement. Contextualized by hyperbolic patriotism the truths he speaks peel away the layers of seriousness that protect the bicentennial celebrations and reveal the comic ridiculousness that they conceal.

As the bit concludes, Pryor’s character continues his ironic reminiscence emphasizing the treatment of African families upon their arrival. He says:

Then they split us all up. Yes, siree. Took my mom over that way. Took my wife that way. Took my kids over yonder. Yuk yuk yuk yuk. I’m 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. Yuk yuk yuk. Lord have mercy. Yes, siree. I don’t know where my own momma is now, she up yonder in that big white porch in the sky. Yuk yuk yuk. Y’all probably done forgot about her. Yuk yuk yuk.

As before, Pryor uses his character to speak to historical experiences that would be otherwise obscured by a celebratory history of the United States. This rhetorical move is made all the more palpable by his charge that *we probably forgot* about the deaths and atrocities that he recalls in his brief monologue. He punctuates his conclusion with, “But I ain’t goin’ never forget.” Pryor

himself delivers this last line, rather than his character. What is more, even though it concludes the piece, it is not a laugh line. It is a reminder that his satire is intended to be as serious as it is comic and that, as Highet contends, “the satirist, though he laughs, tells the truth.”<sup>77</sup>

As equipment for a citizenship of democratic dissent, satire’s truth telling operates as a means for ordinary citizens not only to translate the monolithic seriousness of official discourse into their language, but to see past the one-sidedness it proffers. It asks the *demos*, much as Burke’s comic frame, to be aware “of *ambivalence* and *irony*,” and it “promotes the ability to see double, to use and recognize metaphor, to see around corners, to take multiple approaches.”<sup>78</sup> Satire reminds the *demos* that if comedy is a discourse of the people and seriousness a discourse of power, then *democracy* must be multimodal. Democracy is, as Burke would have it, a both/and. It requires both the seriousness of power and the comedy of the people. What is more, satire’s truth telling calls attention to the ugly and unspoken realities of the world “as it is.” It reminds the *demos* that any articulation of *democracy* is flawed because the contest between the seriousness of official discourse and the comedy of their lived experience is almost always a one-sided affair. Revealing the world “as it is,” then, offers a powerful resource in understanding the situational, contingent, and *rhetorical* nature of any expression of citizenship.

### *Satirical Idealism and Democratic Potential*

In addition to translating the language of the political into everyday struggles and speaking the truth about the world “as it is,” satirists also give voice to idealism. Highet asserts that satirists “give positive advice,” provide “an exemplar to copy,” and “state an ideal.” Moreover, he suggests that “they are protreptic”—that is, they instruct, advise, and persuade—and even though they may not “give voice to their positive beliefs, all satirists are at heart idealists.”<sup>79</sup> It is through their idealism that they are able to understand the world as *necessarily*

*mistaken* in the Burkean sense because they are surrounded by experiences and conditions that fail to live up to the standards of those ideals. For this reason, even though I have argued that stand-up satirists cannot directly advocate in their opposition, it is still possible to contend that they offer up a model that affirms the ideal that drives their satire.

In Burke's discussion of the comic frame, he indicates that satire is a frame of rejection or nay-saying. Such a conception of the form appears to run decidedly counter to my claim that satire affirms through its dissent. For Burke, forms of rejection stress a "[*shift*] in the allegiance to symbols of authority."<sup>80</sup> Rejection is, from the perspective of a given orthodoxy of acceptance, a heretical challenge to the way things are. Unlike the comic frame, however which dramatically refigures the motivational nexus of a given perspective, any frame of rejection "has much in common with the 'frame of acceptance' that it rejects."<sup>81</sup> That is, it is limited in its capacity to change orthodoxy because it gathers its symbolic materials from whichever frame it rejects. This is, of course, exactly how satire works. It uses seriousness against itself by taking it seriously. Satire works within limits of the ideal it critiques in order to renew it, but it does not replace it altogether. For this reason, the ideals—or as Burke would have it, frames of acceptance—that satire engages are incredibly important in determining its value as a productive discourse of dissent. Thus, I argue that when satire engages democratic ideals—equality, justice, contestation, etc.—that its dissent serves a renewing function for the ideal of democracy itself.

Further, satire, in Burkean parlance, is capable of working on any idealistic acceptance—*comic or tragic*. In this way, whereas the comic frame primarily functions as a corrective to tragedy, satire can operate as an affirming renewal even for the ideals of the comic frame by highlighting the ways historical experiences fall short of those comic, humanizing ideals. Thus, even though satire promotes an attitude of "*defiance*" that "*gratifies*" as it "*punishes*," it is still

capable of serving the comic corrective.<sup>82</sup> To that end, Burke argues that satire's rejection "need not, of course, encompass the whole issue." Satire's rejection can serve democratic ideals by correcting those ideals that claim to support democracy without undermining the comic acceptance necessary to any conception of democracy in its (radically) idealized form as the rule of the *demos* over itself. It is for this reason, I argue, that satire is especially useful as a discourse of dissent against not only the symbols of authority, as Burke would have it, but the very structures and institutions of democratic authority that circumvent the power of the *demos* to exercise authority over themselves.

With that in mind, satire that challenges the structural aspects of our democratic society is also rarely obvious. In fact, humor scholar Joseph Boskin contends, "The *modus operandi* [for political humor] has been to separate the *structure* from its *leaders*, the *process* from its *decision-makers*, and to obscure the existence of *power* as such."<sup>83</sup> Boskin's critique of political humor is important, but a rhetorical consideration of stand-up satire tells a different story. For instance, Mort Sahl's equally harsh satirical treatments of both Eisenhower and Kennedy, which I discussed in the previous chapter, suggest that his target was neither individual but the very seat of power which each occupied in his time. Each president was evaluated and critiqued based upon the idealistic standard of the office that Sahl affirmed in his satire. Importantly, this affirmation of the ideal—and in some cases, the ideal itself—was rarely, if ever, made plain. This move from the individual level to the structural level is almost always *enthymematic*—that is, it is left out of the satire itself.<sup>84</sup>

Satirical reliance on the enthymeme is key to understanding its capacity as dissent toward the structural and institutional shortcomings of democratic societies. On the surface, Boskin's critique of political humor's apparent inability to address the structural adequately seems

reasonable because it would be awkward for a satirist such as Sahl to phrase his satire of the presidency in terms of the abstract notion of the presidency. But, when understood as an enthymeme that asks the audience to extend and complete the critique, it is clear that the satire of an individual extrapolates outward toward the abstraction or the ideal that the individual example represents. Satirists rely on enthymeme because, in explaining the social and political significance of their material, they risk defeating the laughter that they require to keep their audiences “in” on the joke and maintain their comic authority.

Satire of structural power, however, is fairly common outside of the political arena. For example, Lenny Bruce was famous for his critiques of organized religions and his primary disciple, George Carlin, would carry that tradition forward for decades after his death. Their subjects are not politics or democracy, *per se*, but their treatment nevertheless offers an example of using satire to pull back the curtain on power. For this reason, though they prefer critiquing religion to politics, each still offers equipment for dissenting to the social structures of power.

In one of his most famous routines, “Religions, Inc.,” Bruce compares the leadership of several major American religious organizations to a cabal of Madison Avenue executives divvying up the public—and their pocketbooks—into flocks in order to make sure that their collective coffers stay full. Near the start of the bit the CEO figure makes two important announcements.<sup>85</sup> The first is a summary of the current attendance figures, “For the first time in twelve years Catholicism is up nine points. Judaism is up fifteen. The big P, the Pentecostals are starting to move finally,” and the second is that the religious novelty store in Chicago is now carrying “the genuine Jewish star, lucky cross, and cigarette lighter combined!”<sup>86</sup> For the remainder of the bit, Bruce impersonates African American evangelist Oral Roberts who offers his “two Lincoln Continentals” as proof that he knows where the “heavenly land” is. A series of

other key figures from the American religious landscape also make cameo appearances. Rabbi Wiers, for example, offers his advice on what do to with the heavenly land saying, “I think we should subdivide.” Pope John XXIII calls in to the meeting—collect—and works out an arrangement with Roberts to get a layout in *Viceroy*—declaring, “The New Pope is a thinking man!”—and an appearance the *Ed Sullivan Show*. After asking for “a deal on one of them Dago Sports cars” for his friend Billy Graham, Roberts also assures the recently elected Pope that “nobody knows you’re Jewish.” Unlike many satires of key individuals, this bit places many figures in conversation, which provides the context necessary to move beyond a particularized critique to a critique of the collective ideal or abstraction—such as religion—that they represent.

This small bit of added context is fundamental to this move from specific to abstract because of the enthymematic nature of satire. Satire—and, I argue, all comedy—operates by peeling away layers of context and logic until the raw materials of its subject are laid bare. It is an art of brevity.<sup>87</sup> It depends upon the unspoken. Had Bruce’s satire included only one of these figures, it would have been easily dismissed as an overly harsh treatment of an individual. However, because he places those individuals in the context of nefarious collusion, he can move beyond merely debunking one leader or the other and provide a structural critique of the abstract notion of organized religion based upon an unspoken ideal about what religion should be and how it should operate. Nowhere is this more apparent in the bit than when Bruce as Roberts complains to the Pope about the pressure put on him and his colleagues over the issue of integration. He exclaims, “Nah, they don’t want no more quotations from the Bible. They want us to come out and say things!” The incongruity between the ideals invoked by the Bible and their hollow expression in practice levels a powerful critique, though one not directed at any

specific individual. In this way, it is by appealing to the disjuncture between idealism and practice that satire offers its enthymematic critique of structural and procedural abstraction.

Bruce works a similar strategy in another routine, “Christ and Moses,” during his Carnegie Hall concert.<sup>88</sup> Bruce begins the bit by explaining that Christianity and Judaism are the two religions in America that “really cook the most,” and that true believers—*ideal* believers—should “relate to everyone the way that Christ and Moses that I have read of.” As the bit continues, Bruce tells of Christ and Moses coming down from heaven to check in on earth because “the [Bible] is bombing down there—Gideons are shoving it in motel drawers. Through usage, it’s lost impact.” The heavenly duo make their first earthly stop at a reformed synagogue on the West coast where they hear sermons from “reformed rabbis—so reformed they’re ashamed they’re Jewish.” Bruce characterizes one such sermon by preaching briefly with unaccented nonchalance before switching into a stereotypical New York Jew imitation immediately following the conclusion of the sermon. The next day, Sunday, Bruce’s tandem flies to New York to catch the “good double bill” that’s “playin’ at Saint Pat’s”—Cardinal Spellman and Bishop Sheen. He explains the scene as he imagines it. “Cardinal Spellman would be relating love and giving and forgiveness to the people and Christ would be confused because their route took them through Spanish Harlem. And they would wonder what forty Puerto Ricans were doing living in one room and this guy had a ring on that was worth eight grand.” As in “Religions, Inc.,” Bruce jabs at the hypocrisy and incongruity between the idealized versions of Christianity and Judaism mentioned early on in the bit and the perversion of that ideal represented by the apologetic Rabbi and the extravagant Cardinal. What is more, by rendering his satire in terms of both Judaism and Christianity, Bruce uses his particularizations to critique the structures and shortcomings of the institutions of power that each symbolizes. In this



way, his satire moves beyond simply destroying a singular target and speaks, instead, to the abstracted version of the societal problem in his sights.

In one among the collection of his satires of the Catholic Church, George Carlin offers a similar critique to those made by Bruce nearly a decade prior. In a track titled, “Special Dispensation,” Carlin explains:

I think I was troubled to at the time by the fact that my church would keep changing rules. I mean they’d change a rule any time they wanted. “This law is eternal... Except for this weekend!” “SPECIAL DISPENSATION.” Magic words. Like eating meat on Friday was definitely a sin, “except for the people in Philadelphia, *they were number one in the scrap iron drive!*” Yeah! They would give it away as a prize, you know. If your parish gave the most money to the Bishop’s relief fund, hamburgers on Friday! Yeah! And of course, I’ve been gone a long time now, it’s not even a sin anymore to eat meat on Friday, but I’ll bet you there are still some guys in hell doing time on a meat rap.<sup>89</sup>

Carlin’s satire hinges upon the ideal of the “rule”—an ever-unchanging constant that governs behavior—which is mentioned, but not explained in the first sentence of the excerpt. Carlin’s explanation of what rules *are*, or what rules should be, is presented enthymematically by riffing on what rules are *not* or, rather, when rules are *not rules*.<sup>90</sup> At the end of the bit, he poses, “How would you like to do eternity for a beef jerky? Because hell wasn’t no five to ten, you know. Hell was, ‘Later!’” In this way, his satire takes the serious symbolic system of rules that, when broken, result in sin and, eventually, eternity in hell *seriously* and, in so doing, reveals the ridiculousness that underscores the everyday manifestations of that system. Unlike Bruce’s satires, which rely on specificity and personification of the failed ideal, however, Carlin speaks

directly to the abstraction and, in so doing, targets the church itself for falling short of its own purported standards and thereby victimizing the people who it claims to help.

This last point, I argue, is key to understanding the capacity of satire, even satire against apparently apolitical subjects such as religion, to equip audiences for democratic citizenship. In Carlin's routine, as in each of Bruce's, the institutionalized power represented by the church is scrutinized for its failure to live up to the ideals it proffers and serve the people it claims to serve. This kind of critique is essentially *democratic*. It is a critique of power on behalf of "the people" that lives up to Douglas Lummis' standard of radical democracy as "the state of affairs in which the people have the power."<sup>91</sup> What is more, it is an essential mode of dissent for preventing "power [*kratia*]" from being "replaced by 'government'" or "the political institutions existing in a society" and thereby reminding the people of those structures and processes that attempt to exercise power on their behalf.<sup>92</sup> As Carlin explains in his memoir, "my affection for people as individuals and the fact that I identify with them doesn't extend to the structures they've built, the terrible job they've done organizing themselves, the fake values that supposedly hold society together. Bullshit is the glue of our society."<sup>93</sup> Satirists—like Carlin, Bruce, and Sahl—equip their audiences for citizenship by drawing attention to, denouncing, and warning them, however indirectly, against the structural and systematic transgressions of their society—by helping them identify the power hungry institutions and other "bullshit" that holds society together.

Importantly, the satirist "must describe, decry, denounce the here and now."<sup>94</sup> For this reason, satire is a rhetoric that praises and blames in the present moment. It is an *epideictic* rhetoric because, as Aristotle intimates, "all speakers praise or blame in regard to existing qualities."<sup>95</sup> And yet even as satire is time bound to the present moment, it has, nevertheless, deliberative qualities that carry its effect into the future. It is praise and blame of the here and

now with an eye toward hereafter. This pseudo-deliberative characteristic of satire is due to its idealism. As Burke explains, “an ideal may serve as a standard, guide, incentive—hence may lead to new real conditions... And so an *idea* of justice may make possible some measure of its *embodiment* in material situations.”<sup>96</sup> Although the satirist is an idealist, the effect of his or her idealism is still limited to already existing ideals. Thus, the satirist’s task is not one of invention; it is the task of perfection. That is to say that satire does not create a novel way of being. Instead, it works to correct—indeed to perfect—the ways of being that already exist in the ideals of serious discourse.<sup>97</sup> Thus, satire functions as what Ivie would identify as a kind of rhetorical deliberation that “promotes democratic practice immediately—in the here and now—rather than postponing it indefinitely into a hypothetical future where the condition of diversity would no longer apply and where participatory democracy would be sufficiently disciplined by an illusion of universal reason to yield a reliable and supposedly rational consensus.”<sup>98</sup> In this way, satirists dissent by stating an ideal and highlighting the incongruous relationship that it has with actual experiences. In so doing, satirists reveal themselves to be idealists forever consumed by the untapped potentials of the ideals expressed in their moment.

### **When Comedy Gets Serious**

Although I contend that stand-up satire is a powerful means of equipping citizens for democratic dissent, it is not without its limitations. In their essay on James Finn Garner’s *Politically Incorrect Fairy Tales*, Lisa Gring-Pemble and Martha Solomon Watson argue that satire may permit the audience to maintain their “initial attitudes” of the satirical subject and become “more dismissive of alternate views,” that it can discourage “audience rebuttal,” and, in some cases, circumvent the possibility of transcendence in favor of division.<sup>99</sup> What is more, because satire is “inescapably polyvalent,” it requires a great deal of interpretive effort on the

part of the audience in order to achieve its persuasive ends and is thus an inherently risky endeavor.<sup>100</sup> In another essay on the limits of satire, Roderick Hart and Johanna Hartelius compare contemporary satirist Jon Stewart to the ancient Cynics.<sup>101</sup> Stewart's satire, they contend, represents "a type of display more than a type of argument," and that his "performances become ends in themselves rather than ways of changing social or political realities."<sup>102</sup> Importantly, they suggest that unlike political satire, "real politics is hard, frustrating work."<sup>103</sup>

This last point is typical of critiques of satire as a discourse of social change. In differentiating between "real politics" and the politics of satire, Hart and Hartelius find themselves falling into predictable patterns of argumentation based upon the ontological struggle between seriousness and comedy. Their argument against satire could be reduced to the notion that satire is not serious enough to work toward political change because politics is *serious* business. This, of course, neglects the fact that even though politics may prefer the modality of seriousness, it belongs *equally* to the comic mode because it exists in the world "as it is." This notion also underscores Gring-Pemble and Watson's argument that satire's polyvalence makes it a dubious enterprise for social change. Their uneasiness with satire is based upon the notion that social change is singular rather than polyvalent and, therefore, serious. This assumption does a disservice to the modality of comedy and to satire as a rhetorical strategy because it assumes a one-to-one ratio between rhetoric and change. It assumes that because change did not follow immediately after the laughter dissipated that it did not, indeed, *could not* occur. It fails to account for the potential of satirical rhetoric to *participate in*—and perhaps even perfect—a rhetoric of social change by drawing on the incongruities between social experiences the ideals—either of the problem or the proposed change—that organize their meanings. It is impossible to say whether Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" or Dick Gregory's *Running*

*for President* was singularly responsible for any of the changes regarding civil rights, but it should be apparent that each had a part to play and any part played in furthering democracy is significant and worthy of consideration.<sup>104</sup>

My intention, however, is not to refute these authors for having dared to question satire's rhetorical efficacy. Instead, I hope to demonstrate that the limitations they find in satirical discourse are the result of the hegemonic domination by the serious mode of the struggle between seriousness and comedy. In fact, the shortcomings identified in both essays arise because the authors attempt to treat satire as something other than comic discourse. They weigh its potential as though it were any other serious mode of persuasion. This confusion, I argue, outlines the foundational limitation of satire. Because it is a rhetoric that combines jest with earnest, it must remain in the comic modality even as it engages the topics of seriousness, because it is woefully inept as a discourse of seriousness. Said another way, the primary limitation for the rhetoric of satire is that even in its seriousness it has to be, as Bakhtin suggests, organized by laughter—that is, it has to be *funny*.

This feature of the form is especially evident when the discourse of seriousness encroaches on satirical performance as in Lenny Bruce's onstage refutations of his New York obscenity trial and Dick Gregory's transition from satirist to protestor. In Bruce's case, his second-to-last performance provides ample evidence of his comedy falling victim to the seriousness of his situation. The 1965 San Francisco performance, captured in *The Lenny Bruce Performance Film*, is organized almost entirely around the transcriptions of *The People of The State of New York V. Lenny Bruce*. Early in the performance he provides context for his conviction explaining:

I do my act at perhaps eleven o'clock at night, little do I know that at eleven A.M. the next morning, before the grand jury somewhere, there's another guy doing my act who's introduced as, Lenny Bruce *in substance*. "Here he is, Lenny Bruce! *In substance*."

...The grand jury watches him work and they go, 'That stinks.' But, *I get busted* and the irony is that I have to go to court and defend his act.<sup>105</sup>

Over the course of the act, Bruce reads from and references a copy of the transcript and attempts to correct the misconceptions it contains. He works through bits from his infamous routine and explains, somewhat painstakingly, to his audience how they were misrepresented to the court. For instance, he paraphrases one routine from his *Carnegie Hall Concert*, "Las Vegas Tits and Ass," in an attempt to contextualize and therefore defend a passing transitional comment that appears in the transcript as "Eleanor Roosevelt and her display of tits." The performance goes on for nearly sixty minutes and, but for the occasional humorous digression, continues in this manner of recitation and refutation. By the end of the film, his audience's laughter is meager and uncomfortable. The problem for Bruce's performance in the film is that the bits he reenacts have been divorced from their original subjects and reoriented around his trial. By emphasizing his arrest and conviction for making light of the First Lady's breasts, for instance, rather than the contradiction underlying the euphemistic treatment of the language used to describe the human body, Bruce's performance asks the audience to understand his satire from a different, and far more serious, context than that from which it emerged. In this way, the bits lost their connection to their seriousness and therefore to the laughter that emerged from within that seriousness. The bits themselves had not changed, but in moving them to a more serious context, they lost their impact as comedy and Bruce his comic authority.

A similar failure met Dick Gregory a short time after he began protesting and marching around the country on behalf of civil rights. On the back cover of his 1964 album, *My Brother's Keeper*, for example he writes, "As the record begins, I have just finished my regular performance and have now opened the floor to questions. For the time, *the comedy is over*."<sup>106</sup> The recording offers a somber take on a series of issues suggested by the audience. There are occasional bursts of laughter, but it is clear from the comic's tone of voice and the sincerity of his answers that he has shed the comic modality in favor of somber seriousness. In fact, when one of his audience members asks him about the difference between Northern and Southern Liberals—which is a set-up for one of his more popular jokes—he offers, "The Northern Liberal and the Southern Liberal, to me, represents the third man in a fist fight,"<sup>107</sup> rather than his typical laugh line, "the Southern Liberal don't care how close you get so long as you don't get too big, and the Northern Liberal don't care how big you get so long as you don't get too close."<sup>108</sup> As with Bruce's performance film, Gregory eschews his comic authority and attempts to temporarily don the cloak of seriousness in order to address appropriately the serious topics of his audience's questions. In so doing, he betrays his ability to address those topics satirically because his serious treatment reaffirms the assumption that serious matters should be taken seriously. By the end of the decade, Gregory's comedy albums began to resemble the sincere rhetoric of a civil rights protestor instead of the satire that made him famous. In fact, his 1969 album *The Light Side: The Dark Side*, which takes the same town hall-esque form as *My Brother's Keeper*, contains almost no scripted satire and instead features lectures about racist institutions, assassinations, American history, and the responsibility of college students to change the world for the better with only the occasional laughter invoking quip.<sup>109</sup> The comedy, as he

had suggested a half-decade prior, was over and it was replaced by a tone of seriousness that undermined the efforts of his satirical commentary.

The problem of crossing the line between seriousness and comedy also emerges when the satirist attempts to use the resources of seriousness even when they are not on stage. This was certainly true of Mort Sahl's crusade against the Warren Commission Report on the death of President John F. Kennedy. Unlike Bruce and Gregory who gave in to the siren song of seriousness, Sahl was a careful performer who brought his serious cause onstage, but only when it was funny. In fact, his only recorded joke about the Warren Commission Report from the decade following the president's assassination appears midway through the first side of his 1967 album *Anyway... Onward*. In the joke he describes a conversation had with then-White House Press Secretary Bill Moyers about the report. Having been asked "Did you like it [the Warren Commission Report]?" Sahl offers a brief aside "Well now we're talking about, you know—as one would discuss any other work of fiction! So I said, *sure!*" before replying, "No, I didn't like it," because "I didn't believe it."<sup>110</sup> In an interview appearing on the PBS *American Masters* documentary "Mort Sahl The Loyal Opposition," Sahl recalls also using a picture of Jack Ruby shooting and killing Lee Harvey Oswald after his arrest as comic fodder. He says,

I held up a picture of Oswald being shot by Ruby. What do you say to the audience that's funny? How did Ruby get in to shoot him? No. You say, 'Here's a photo of Oswald being shot while he was being guarded by 123 members of the Dallas police force... or 124 if we count Ruby!' That's the way you do it.<sup>111</sup>

For Sahl, the problem of seriousness seeping into his comedy was a result of his fervent effort to support Louisiana District Attorney Jim Garrison in any way possible in his quest to debunk the Warren Commission Report. According to one of Garrison's assistants, Andrew Sciambra, Sahl



was given assignments, interviewed witnesses, evaluated evidence, and even used his personal funds to further the investigation.<sup>112</sup> Sahl got caught up in the quest to disprove the “magic bullet” theory and so was dismissed as another crazed conspiracy theorist who was not to be taken seriously. Although his rhetoric preferred to be treated comically, his primary mode—satire—required that he take his subjects seriously before treating them comically. Once he earned the conspiracy theorist label, he lost the ability to be taken seriously enough to have his satire be taken comically.

In each of these examples, the rhetorical force of satire fell prey to laughter destroying seriousness of the subjects or the satirists themselves. For Bruce, the disjuncture created between the satirical routines in his performance and their serious origins were confused when he re-contextualized them in terms of his legal trouble. The move robbed the routines of their humor and, therefore, the satire of its potential impact. For Gregory, his serious treatment of the issues that he once satirized undermined his ability to rely on satirical argument as a means of addressing the comic incongruities that catapulted him to the national stage. He stopped making jokes and, therefore, lost a great deal of his credibility as public figure *and* his comic authority as a satirist. For Sahl, the crusade against the Warren Report did most of its damage to his onstage persona while he was offstage. His reputation was so stained by his public acceptance of a conspiracy theory that his satire could no long be taken seriously enough to be funny. In all three cases, the satirists found themselves at the very edge of comedy and seriousness and all three cases, they suffered greatly for trying to take themselves *too seriously*.

### **Conclusion**

Over the course of this chapter, I have addressed satirical comedy as rhetoric that equips citizens for democratic dissent. By outlining the ontological struggle between comedy and

seriousness, I have attempted to prepare an important foundation for understanding the rhetorical potential of any comic discourse. Drawing on Kenneth Burke's theorizing about the comic frame and Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque, I have argued that comedy and seriousness are inherently intertwined modalities of discourse and that rhetorical critics should take care to consider the earnestness of humor and humor of earnestness in order to glean an accurate picture of the world "as it is."

In addressing satire as a discourse of democratic dissent, I have argued through a variety of examples from stand-up comedy that satire functions to translate the language of political seriousness into the language of the *demos*. I have suggested that satire reveals truths about the world "as it is" by giving voice to the incongruities between the official discourse of power and the actual experiences of those involved. In treating satire's tendency toward and reliance on idealism, I indicated how it might be used as a means of enthymematically affirming democratic ideals by critiquing them in order that they might be perfected. And finally, I argued that the ontological struggle between seriousness and comedy outlines the boundaries of a satire of social change because satire must remain under the umbrella of comedy otherwise it stands to lose its authority as comedy and therefore its capacity to be taken seriously as a rhetoric of change.

Having addressed both the rhetor and the rhetoric that comprise the generic aspects of stand-up satire, I turn my attention to the nature of the stand-up audience in the following chapter. For the purposes of organization, I have divided these chapters along generic lines, but I recognize that any discussion of a rhetorical genre is never so cut and dry. Just as the previous chapter overlaps with the present discussion in some ways—for instance, the oppositional perspective of the comic and the attitude of democratic dissent promoted by satirical rhetoric go hand in hand—so to will the following chapter. Turning to the audience, I explore how satire

and stand-up performance uniquely constitutes a public as counterpublic and, in so doing, provides equipment for citizenship.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Aristotle, *On Rhetoric*, 3.18.7. The translation used here is from Aristotle, *On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse*, George Kennedy trans. (Oxford: Oxford University Press): 280. I have also seen this translated by Edward Corbett as “kill your opponents seriousness with ridicule” and by J.H. Freese as “to confound the opponents' earnest with jest and their jest with earnest.” Edward P. J. Corbett, *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990): 326; Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 3.18.7, available at <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=urn:cts:greekLit:tlg0086.tlg038.perseus-eng1:3.18.7>.

<sup>2</sup> Cicero, *De Oratore*, 2.250

<sup>3</sup> Given the Burkean vocabulary that I employ here, it would also make sense to think of comedy and seriousness in terms of “the Negative” because comedy is *not* serious and vice versa. Another way of potentially characterizing the distinction that I am trying to make would be to use the Derridian language of the “constitutive outside,” which Mouffe prefers in describing nature of the “us” versus “them” antagonisms she describes in her theorizing. Regardless of which terminology is used to describe the relationship to comedy, my contention is that the two modalities *necessarily* stand in opposition to one another.

<sup>4</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984): 122.

<sup>5</sup> Kenneth Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973): 41-42.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 171, 107, 171,

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 166.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 173.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>13</sup> Cheree Carlson, "Gandhi and the Comic Frame: 'Ad bellum Purificandum,'" *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 72 (1986): 450-452.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 446.

<sup>15</sup> Kimberly Powell, "The Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching: Strategies of a Movement in the Comic Frame," *Communication Quarterly* 43 (Winter 1995): 86-99.

<sup>16</sup> Adrienne Christiansen and Jeremy Hanson, "Comedy as Cure for Tragedy: Act Up and the Rhetoric of AIDS," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 82 (May 1996): 168.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 161.

<sup>18</sup> And even if the comic frame appears on its own, it is inconsequential.

<sup>19</sup> Burke, *Permanence & Change*, 196.

<sup>20</sup> Cheree Carlson, "Limitations on the Comic Frame: Some Witty American Women of the Nineteenth Century," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 74 (August 1988): 318-319.

<sup>21</sup> Steven Schwarze, "Environmental Melodrama," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 92 (August 2006): 242.

<sup>22</sup> Kenneth Burke, "Four Master Tropes," *Grammar of Motives* (Berkeley: University of

California Press, 1969): 514.

<sup>23</sup> Although I have not framed my argument about the comic frame in terms of the problem of evil, there has been some debate in the rhetorical studies literature about whether or not a comic approach is appropriate in all situations. Simons, for instance, suggests that the comic frame is actually ill-equipped to address justifiable rage—which would emerge through the tragic frame. Diselet and Appel respond by indicating that the comic frame, instead of ignoring such affects, filters rage into “warrantable outrage.” The shift is slight, but significant in terms of framing motive and suggesting action. Their conclusion, which is not unlike mine here, is that comic frame is capable of addressing *any* situation. See Herbert Simons, “Burke’s Comic Frame and the Problem of Warrantable Outrage,” *KB Journal* 6 (Fall 2009): 3-10; Gregory Desilet & Edward Appel, “Choosing a Rhetoric of the Enemy: Kenneth Burke’s Comic Frame, Warrantable Outrage, and the Problem of Scapegoating,” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 41 (2011): 340-362.

<sup>24</sup> Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, 42.

<sup>25</sup> The opposite is also true. Bruce’s comic philosophizing occasionally hits the mark, but you’re much more likely to come across *Capital* or *The German Ideology* in a graduate seminar than *To is a Preposition, Come is a Verb*.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 43

<sup>27</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington, IN, Indiana University Press, 1984): 5-6.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 8, 5.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>31</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1984): 122.

<sup>32</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 7.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>36</sup> Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics*, 129.

<sup>37</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, 75

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 84, 90, 122.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 141

<sup>40</sup> In this way, comedy is not unlike Sheldon Wolin's notion of "fugitive democracy," which comes into being under exigent circumstances and dissolves soon after their resolution. I expand on this connection between the eruptive force of laughter and fugitive democracy in Chapter 4. See Sheldon S. Wolin, "Fugitive Democracy," *Constellations* 1 (1994): 11-25.

<sup>41</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, 130.

<sup>42</sup> Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics*, 122.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>45</sup> Paul Achter, "Comedy in Unfunny Times: News Parody and Carnival After 9/11," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 25 (August 2008): 299

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 282.

<sup>47</sup> A claim that Robert Hariman supports in his essay “Political Parody and Public Culture.” See Robert Hariman, “Political Parody and Public Culture,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 94 (August 2008): 247-272.

<sup>48</sup> Priscilla Meddaugh, “Bakhtin, Colbert, and the Center of Discourse: Is There no ‘Truthiness’ in Humor?” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 27 (October 2010): 379.

<sup>49</sup> Paul Martin & Valerie Renegar, “‘The Man for His Time’ The Big Lebowski as Carnavalesque Social Critique,” *Communication Studies* 58 (September 2007): 302. The Dude is the main character in film, *The Big Lebowski*.

<sup>50</sup> Stephen Gencarella Olbrys, “Disciplining the Carnavalesque: Chris Farley’s Exotic Dance,” *Communication & Critical/Cultural Studies* 3 (September 2006): 241. Italics original.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 256.

<sup>52</sup> James Janack, “The Rhetoric of ‘The Body:’ Jesse Ventura and Bakhtin’s Carnival,” *Communication Studies* 57 (June 2006): 211.

<sup>53</sup> On occasion comedy has to remind seriousness of comedy’s seriousness. Otherwise seriousness, with the benefit of discursive hegemony, can simply ignore comedy. The trouble for comedy is that in appealing to its seriousness it undermines its capacity as comedy. In this way, *comedy* provides an important connection between the people/folk and the *seriousness* of official political life.

<sup>54</sup> Peter Robinson, *The Dance of the Comedians* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013): 7.

<sup>55</sup> Chantal Mouffe, *On The Political* (London: Routledge, 2005): 9.

<sup>56</sup> Gilbert Highet, *The Anatomy of Satire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962): 233.



<sup>57</sup> To my knowledge, no recording of this performance exists. In later routines he references the offending performance and refers to his usage of the term as “transitional.” In this way, the arrest was for the utterance of *the word* rather than for an extended routine about the word and its connotation.

<sup>58</sup> The track “San Francisco Bust/Judge Entrapment” is listed as a previously unreleased recording on *Buyer Beware*. Lenny Bruce, *Buyer Beware*, Shout! Factory, 2004.

<sup>59</sup> *Lenny*, directed by Bob Fosse, (Marvin Worth Productions, 1974).

<sup>60</sup> Lenny Bruce, *Live at the Curran Theater*, Fantasy, 1971.

<sup>61</sup> See the chapter on “Perspectives as Metaphor” in Kenneth Burke, *Permanence and Change*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Los Altos: Hermes Publications, 1984); of the entry for “Perspective by Incongruity” in the Dictionary of Pivotal Terms in Kenneth Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973).

<sup>62</sup> Robert L. Ivie, *Dissent from War* (Bloomfield: Kumarian, 2007): 5-6

<sup>63</sup> Amber Day, *Satire & Dissent: Interventions in Contemporary Political Debate* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011): 187.

<sup>64</sup> “Satire, n.” Oxford English Dictionary Online (Oxford University Press, 2014). Accessed on June 10, 2014.

<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/171207?rskey=0gKmKN&result=1&isAdvanced=false-eid>;

the definition “full dish” references *lanx satura*, which was one of the common uses of the term.

<sup>65</sup> Highet, *Anatomy of Satire*, 233.

<sup>66</sup> According to Highet, Menippus was also called “the man who jokes about serious things,” a label which I argue applies broadly across the genre to any true satirist; Highet, *Anatomy of Satire*, 233.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 233.

<sup>68</sup> Importantly, the dissent that satire proffers is as ordinary as the reduction it creates. This is why satire is often dismissed as significant dissent. There is no vehicle that translates the discourse of comedy into the language of seriousness in the same way that satire renders seriousness comical.

<sup>69</sup> Dick Gregory, *From the Back of the Bus* (New York: Avon, 1962): 21.

<sup>70</sup> Dick Gregory, *In Living Black and White*, Colpix Records, 1961.

<sup>71</sup> Horace, *Sermones* 1.1.24; qtd. in Highet, *Anatomy of Satire*, 234. Sometimes this is translated as “tell the truth with a laugh” or “tell the truth, smiling.” In one translation, the extended passage reads: “Then again, not to pass over the matter with a smile/Like some wit—though what stops one from telling the truth/ While smiling, as teachers often give children biscuits to try to tempt them to learn their alphabet?” Horace, *The Satires Book 1: Satire 1*, Poetry in Translation, A. S. Kline trans. 2005, Accessed June 10, 2014, <http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Latin/HoraceSatiresBk1SatI.htm>

<sup>72</sup> Richard Pryor with Todd Gold, *Pryor Convictions and Other Life Sentences* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1995): 6.

<sup>73</sup> In the track titled “Little Feets,” Mudbone recalls a manhood measuring contest from the Golden Gate Bridge (“One nigger say, ‘Goddamn, this water’s cold!’ Other nigger say, ‘Yeah,

and it's deep, too!") and visiting a witch doctor to cure his friend, Toodlum, from a hex that had caused his feet to swell and his hands to shrivel.

<sup>74</sup> Richard Pryor, ...*Is It Something I Said?* Warner Brothers, 1975.

<sup>75</sup> Highet, *Anatomy of Satire*, 20.

<sup>76</sup> Richard Pryor, *Bi-Centennial Nigger*, Warner Brothers, 1976.

<sup>77</sup> Highet, *Anatomy of Satire*, 234.

<sup>78</sup> William Rueckert, *Encounters with Kenneth Burke*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994): 119.

<sup>79</sup> Highet *Anatomy of Satire*, 243.

<sup>80</sup> Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, 21. Italics original

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 49-51. Italics original.

<sup>83</sup> Joseph Boskin, "American Political Humor: Touchables and Taboos," in *The Humor Prism in 20<sup>th</sup> Century American*, Joseph Boskin ed. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997): 74.

<sup>84</sup> Enthymemes, for Aristotle, are rhetorical syllogisms that omit logical steps between the introduction of an argument and its conclusion that are left to be assumed by the audience or seem mostly true for the audience. See *On Rhetoric* 2.22.

<sup>85</sup> This person is mentioned by name, but it is nearly unrecognizable on the recording. It sounds like H.A.

<sup>86</sup> Lenny Bruce, *The Sick Humor of Lenny Bruce*, Fantasy, 1958.

<sup>87</sup> In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare offers the line "Brevity is the soul of wit." In rhetorical terms, I might translate his axiom to "enthymeme is the soul of wit."

<sup>88</sup> Lenny Bruce, *Carnegie Hall Concert*, United Artists Records, 1961.

<sup>89</sup> George Carlin, *Class Clown*, Little David, 1972.

<sup>90</sup> This strategy of satire speaks to the reason that Burke characterizes it as a frame of rejection. Burke's take does not, however, make room for the enthymematic kind of argument that I contend is fundamental to the form.

<sup>91</sup> C. Douglas Lummis, *Radical Democracy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997): 35.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>93</sup> George Carlin with Tony Hendra, *Last Words* (New York, Free Press: 2009): 284

<sup>94</sup> Highet., *Anatomy of Satire*, 17.

<sup>95</sup> Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1.3; The translation used here is from Aristotle, *On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse*, George Kennedy trans. (Oxford: Oxford University Press): 48.

<sup>96</sup> Burke, *Grammar of Motives*, 174.

<sup>97</sup> In this way, it is possible to imagine a kind of counter-productive satire that works to perfect ways of being oppressive. In fact, this is probably true of most satirical work that deals with women or feminism.

<sup>98</sup> Robert L. Ivie, "Rhetorical Deliberation and Democratic Politics in the Here and Now," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 5 (Summer 2002): 278.

<sup>99</sup> Lisa Gring-Pemble & Martha Solomon Watson, "The Rhetorical Limits of Satire: An Analysis of James Finn Garner's Politically Correct Bedtime Stories," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 89 (May 2003): 149-150.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.

<sup>101</sup> Roderick P. Hart & E. Johanna Hartelius. "The Political Sins of Jon Stewart." *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 24 (August 2007): 263-272. They are, of course, exactly right to make such a comparison, but not to dismiss his function out of hand on a count of his resemblance to Menippus.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 266.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 270.

<sup>104</sup> This is not, of course, to deny the incredible impact of Dr. King's speech which has been well documented. Rather, my intention is to illustrate the diffuse and fragmented nature of discourses of social change.

<sup>105</sup> *The Lenny Bruce Performance Film*, (Columbia Productions, 1966), DVD (Koch Entertainment Company, 2005).

<sup>106</sup> Dick Gregory, *My Brother's Keeper*, Gateway Records, 1963. Italics added for emphasis.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Dick Gregory, *East & West*, Colpix Records, 1961.

<sup>109</sup> Dick Gregory, *Dick Gregory: The Light Side: The Dark Side*, Poppy, 1969.

<sup>110</sup> Mort Sahl, *Anyway... Onward*, Mercury, 1967.

<sup>111</sup> *American Masters*, season 4, episode 6, "Mort Sahl: The Loyal Opposition," directed by Robert Weide, aired September 18, 1989 on PBS (Whyaduck Productions).

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

## CHAPTER IV. AUDIENCE AS PUBLIC: LAUGHTER & THE PUBLIC SENSE OF HUMOR

In the previous chapter, I argued that comedy and seriousness define competing ontological modalities of rhetorical practice and that the generic features of satire make it especially useful in engaging the comic modality as a means of dissent. Further, I have suggested that satire, especially in its stand-up form, plays an important role in equipping citizens for dissent by translating the serious language of political myth, telling truths about actual experiences, and holding officialdom to its ideals in order to attempt to realize them more perfectly. In these ways, I have argued that the satire that propelled the early genre of stand-up comedy can be understood as a *rhetoric*—and a rhetoric that is particularly democratic in nature.

Over the previous two chapters, I have addressed the unique manners in which the stand-up comedian is a *rhetor* and satire is a *rhetoric*. In this chapter, I turn to the audience and its participation in the rhetorical transaction of stand-up comedy. In so doing, I consider the audience as a kind of public, or perhaps counterpublic, that is constituted by the stand-up comedy experience. Drawing on Maurice Charland's notion of constitutive rhetoric, therefore, I suggest that one key feature of the rhetoric of stand-up comedy is its role in constituting and shepherding a public sense of humor. In this section of the chapter, I extend Charland's theory of constitutive rhetoric by examining how the audience participates in the invention of satire and therefore the constitution of its sense of humor. Given the uniquely intimate relationship between the stand-up satirist and the audience, I argue that the stand-up audience acts as a dialogic co-conspirator with the stand-up comic by validating the satirical enthymematic leaps with its laughter. I conclude this chapter by suggesting that the laughter of the public, as it emerges from within the stand-up comedy experience, is form of the *vox populi* that provides a

kind of shorthand public opinion and equips citizens by providing an alternative means of political expression.

### **The Stand-up Audience as Comedic (Counter?)Public**

Rhetoric is a public art. Its significance is drawn, at least in part, from the fact that it is consequential to the public. This is not to say that it must be addressed to the entire public, but that rhetoric's outcomes have the potential to produce effects that resonate to the public because it speaks to issues of *public concern*. In many ways, the public nature of rhetoric is among the primary reasons for its precarious relationship with comedy. Public concerns, as noted in chapter three, tend to be *serious* matters and therefore appear to be unfit for comic treatment. Conversely, the modality of comedy comfortably addresses the trivial, mundane, and most private of concerns even though its most fundamental organizing principle—laughter—is profoundly public in nature.<sup>1</sup>

Stand-up comedy, because it is a *comedic* mode of address, speaks to the most private aspects of the human condition. George Carlin, for instance, included a track on farts and other bodily functions on nearly all of his albums during the 1970s.<sup>2</sup> Richard Pryor made *everything* about sex and refused to avert his gaze away from the most intimate details. And, of course, Lenny Bruce famously kidded anything that society deemed “dirty”—especially sex, the body, and toilets. At the same time, however, stand-up satire stands these personal preoccupations up for public scrutiny because it is a decidedly *public* form of address with a concrete audience. In this way, the interactions between the audience and the comic, as Joanne Gilbert contends, “establish a perverse symbiosis—the audience (many of whom are members of society’s power “center”) literally pays for abuse.”<sup>3</sup> The audience gathers in order that the personal might be made public and vice versa. Thus, stand-up is a unique form of comedy that blends the public

nature of rhetoric with the topoi of the personal thereby, treating the trivial with profound seriousness and the official as equally ridiculous.

Although the claim that stand-up comedy is a public form of address may seem obvious, it is more complicated than it may first appear when considered as a rhetorical phenomenon. Michael Warner suggests that the word “public” can be understood in at least three unique senses. First, *the* public can be taken to mean a “social totality” that refers to “the people in general.” Second, it can be used to refer to *a* public which is “a concrete audience... bounded by [an] event or by [a] shared physical space.” And third, the term “public” can indicate “the kind of public that comes into being only in relation to texts and their circulation.” This public is by nature a diffuse public rather than a concrete audience because circulation and mediation can attract the attention of audience members across time and space to the text (or texts) that constitutes the public. From the rhetorical perspective, this third sense is significant because it recognizes the power of a text—such as a performance or a recording—to speak simultaneously to a diffuse audience and to *the* public by merely making itself available for apparently universal consumption. What is more, this allows such a text or collection of texts to *constitute* its scattered audience as *a* definable public with its own “sense of totality” that permits it to “understand itself not just as *a* public but as *the* public.”<sup>4</sup>

Interestingly, only the third sense of the concept “public” describes the manner in which a public comes into being. For Warner, publics are constituted by their having been addressed by a text in circulation that has been given the attention of an audience of nonspecific strangers that “organizes itself independently of state institutions, law, formal frameworks of citizenship, or preexisting institutions such as the church.”<sup>5</sup> These criteria are sufficient for both *a* public and the public created by a text, which, although diffuse, is comprised of a concrete audience that is



still capable of acting in accordance with their membership to the text's public. These criteria are less helpful, however, in determining how *the* public comes to be constituted. This process, of translating a public "into an image of *the* public"<sup>6</sup> is achieved by the indefinite nature of the address—its "promise to address anyone."<sup>7</sup> What is more, such translation is restricted to those texts that adhere to the conventions of both articulation and attention as defined by other texts that successfully claim *the* public as their audience. As Warner explains:

The unity of *the* public depends on the stylization of the reading act as transparent and replicable; it depends on an arbitrary social closure (through language, idiolect, genre, medium, and address) to contain its potentially infinite extension; it depends on institutionalized forms of power to realize the agency attributed to the public; and it depends on a hierarchy of faculties that allows some activities to count as public or general, while others are thought to be merely personal, private, or particular. Some publics, for these reasons, are more likely than others to stand in for *the* public, to frame their address as the universal discussion of the people.<sup>8</sup>

This argument, I contend, is particularly germane to a rhetorical understanding of stand-up satire—and arguably all comedy—because it is a form that can move among the rungs of what Warner refers to as the "hierarchy of faculties" by speaking in the language of public seriousness and its more informal counterpart of comedy. In this way, stand-up comedy is free to address its audience as nothing more than *a* public and it may also address it as a representative of *the* public. That is, the audience members of the concrete public created during the performance and its circulation are both protected from the ridicule of satire by their having come together for the sake of the satire and empowered to extend the boundaries of the text through their actions because of their belonging to *the* public in general. They are, in the same moment, a collection

of individual strangers laughing together at a performer and members of the society that the performer ridicules. It is for this reason that I contend that stand-up comedy is as *public* in nature as it is *comedic*.

I should be clear that it is not my intention to argue that *the* public actually exists or that the kind of “social totality” that Warner gestures toward can be realized in any tangible or definitive manner. Rather, I prefer to think of *the* public in much the same way as Michael Calvin McGee treats the idea of “the people.” McGee holds that “‘the people’ even though they are made real by their belief and behavior are still *essentially* a mass illusion.”<sup>9</sup> The term used to call them into existence is merely shorthand for “an essential rhetorical fiction with both a ‘social’ and an ‘objective’ reality.”<sup>10</sup> There are people and there may even be ways of creating boundaries such that they could be defined as a concrete public, but any meaning attributed to “the people” exists only in political myth and convention. These are, I contend, the same “people” that comprise *the* public and even though they are a fiction, they may still be addressed, or referred to as *a* public.

For the stand-up, the abstract notion of *the* public provides an important point of reference for the praise and blame that underscores the satire in the same way as the ideals of political mythologies and social values. Indeed, much of the impact of social satire treats *the* public as an ideal to be perfected. By ridiculing specific external publics, satirists reveal to their audience the image of *the* public that they seek to affirm. Consider, for example, Lenny Bruce’s “How to Relax Your Colored Friends at Parties” routine. In the bit, Bruce performs as stereotypical white bigot attempting to connect with an African American party guest, played by jazz guitarist Eric Miller. As the character, Bruce offers up a handful of awkwardly racist conversations starters such as: “That Joe Lewis was a helluva fighter!” and “That Bojangles,

Christ, could he tap dance!’”<sup>11</sup> With each line the audience convulses with laughter *at* Bruce’s character. By directing his audience’s laughter at a generic representative of a given public—in this case obviously racist white folk—Bruce asks his audience to *laugh at* that public and therefore differentiate itself from the ridiculed public.<sup>12</sup> The joke is *on* the misguided public, but it works enthymematically to cast a silhouette of what the ideal public should be by removing the ridiculed public from *the* public. In this way, satire almost always addresses at least two publics: the public that is comprised of the comic’s immediate and mediated audiences and some public from whom they should be differentiated because they fall short of the rhetorical fiction that is the comic’s *ideal* public.

This dualistic address is due, in part, to the ironic nature of much satire. In his essay on the strategic usage of irony, David Kaufer explains, “the ironist implies two audiences or bifurcates his [or her] audience into *confederates* and *victims*.”<sup>13</sup> The confederates of an ironic discourse are those members of the audience who read the non-literal meaning of a given ironic utterance and the victims are those who take the irony at face value. Simply, the confederates get the joke and the victims do not. Although satire and irony are not synonymous, Kaufer’s terminology is useful for delineating between the publics addressed by the stand-up satirist.

There are, however, a few important distinctions between Kaufer’s ironic audiences and the satirical publics. The victims of satire are not members of the audience who fail to get the joke. Instead, the victims for satirical discourse are the members of those publics who are being exposed to ridicule. The victims absorb the brunt of the laughter and therefore the corrective capacity of the satire. This presents a serious limitation for the productive potential of the satirist because this victimized public, even though it is *addressed* in the satire, remain external to the

immediate public and are therefore rarely present for the laughter that completes the rhetorical renewal of the misguided victims.<sup>14</sup>

The confederate public of stand-up satire also differs from Kaufer's description because of the presence of laughter. Kaufer's ironic confederates gain access to their public by their cleverness in reading past the literal meaning of the ironist's claims. In the stand-up context satirical confederates have a distinct advantage over ironic confederates in their reading—laughter. The laughter of the audience hails everyone present—even when that presence is mediated by a turntable or .mp3 player—into the confederate public. In this way, the laughter of the stand-up public serves an important role in not only ridiculing and correcting the victimized public, but also in constituting the confederate public itself by helping to circulate and re-circulate the text that calls it into being.<sup>15</sup> This is one unique advantage of stand-up comedy as a rhetorical form. The audience's laughter helps its members to interpret the comedy appropriately and, thereby, makes the process of reading stand-up satire more universal than other, non-stand-up forms of comedy.

Stand-up satire's bifurcated public, however, has a somewhat complicated relationship to *the* public. Generally speaking, the confederate public includes anyone who participates in the stand-up experience. Participation in this public, as Warner suggests, requires only "mere attention" to the text or performance that calls it into being.<sup>16</sup> In this way, it is possible for anyone in *the* public to gain access to the confederate public by turning her or his gaze to the satirical text. The victimized public, on the other hand, does not necessarily attend to the text because it may not actually exist. It is a public created by the world of the satire and called into being by the satirist as a collection of foolish straw persons who can be corrected and ridiculed for the betterment of *the* public. This is true even when the satirist refers to his or her target

specifically because satire prefers to treat its targets as *types* rather than individuals. In this way, the victimized public is, like *the* public, a rhetorical fiction. It is an image of the group that serves as a warning to the stand-up audience about the problems of *the* public. The victimized public, however, is also contextualized by that image of *the* public. It is *a* fiction inside of *the* fiction. It is a synecdochal, part for whole, representation of the ills of *the* public that can be externalized and excoriated. In this way, it is a kind of *anti*-public, one that seeks not identification, but dis-identification. It is projected as an image of *the* public in order that it may never be realized in such a generalized manner. Thus, stand-up satire hails a confederate public by apparently inviting all comers to take part in the revelry of laughter, but, at the same time, it attempts to purify and protect *the* public by constituting an *anti*-public as the victim of its ridicule. In this way, stand-up treats *the* public as both an audience and an ideal—even though it can never concretely realize either case.

Another way of thinking about the bifurcated stand-up public is as a relationship of struggle between a victimized anti-public—which represents, or at least appears to represent, the undesirable features of *the* public—and a laughing *counterpublic* of confederates. The concept of the counterpublic emerges from a series of critiques of Jürgen Habermas’ argument on behalf of the bourgeois public sphere as an ideal for democratic civil society. In his *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, he suggests that the public sphere is “a forum in which private people, come together to form a public, readied themselves to compel public authority to legitimate itself before public opinion.”<sup>17</sup> As an historical example of this ideal, Habermas offers the bourgeois public sphere, which arose in seventeenth century in coffee houses and salons across Europe, as a meeting of typically educated and wealthy citizens to engage in rational debate about public—and often economic—matters in order to arrive at public opinion, which

was determined on the basis of the better argument, and thereby mediated between the public and the authority of the state regarding such matters.<sup>18</sup> Although there are a multitude of critiques of Habermas' initial formulation of the public sphere, Paul Stob suggests that "three issues in contemporary public sphere scholarship seem prevalent across academic disciplines: *identity*, *access*, and *power*."<sup>19</sup> *Identity* concerns how individuals and group identities affect the activities of the public sphere, *access* address the questions of who is or is not permitted into the public sphere, and *power* considers the issues of control over the resources of public engagement necessary to engage in public activity.

The result of these shortcomings of the public sphere led to theorizing about the possibilities of counterpublics. In her essay, "Re-thinking the Public Sphere," Nancy Fraser argues that "a host of competing counterpublics" which "contested the exclusionary norms of the bourgeois public" and provided "alternative styles of political behavior and alternative norms of public speech" emerged alongside the bourgeois public sphere.<sup>20</sup> As her argument progresses, Fraser advocates for what she calls "*subaltern counterpublics*" comprised of subordinated populations such as "women, workers, peoples of color, and gays and lesbians" who come together in "parallel discursive arenas" to "invent and circulate counterdiscourses" in order to extend the field of "discursive contestation."<sup>21</sup> Because counterpublics, for Fraser, extend the field of discursive contestation, they are, for Mouffe, an important part of the radical democratic program because such a project's aim is to deepen and expand the political—the realm of antagonism and contestation—to the fullest expression of its democratic potential.<sup>22</sup>

For Warner, this conception of the counterpublic—which is *a* public—as an alternative to the public sphere—which stands in for *the* public—requires more than the identity markers of the subaltern counterpublics in Fraser's essay. Counterpublics, Warner explains, have two important

features: first, they make no attempt to present themselves as *the* public and second, they maintain an awareness of their subordinate status.<sup>23</sup> This amendment to Fraser's subaltern counterpublic is significant because it insists that the identity markers that serve as entryways into such counterpublics are secondary to participation in those publics. Members of counterpublics, Warner contends, are "socially marked by their participation" in the counterdiscourse rather than by their predetermined material conditions. This does not preclude the material markers of identity from being the basis for counterpublic formation, but rather extends the counterpublic's potential by considering membership in a counterpublic to be, like citizenship, a kind of *practice* rather than a possession or state of being. In this way, members of a counterpublic are equipped for the rigors of citizenship because "even the counterpublics that challenge modernity's social hierarchy of faculties do so by projecting the space of discursive circulation among strangers as a social entity, and in doing so fashion their own subjectivities around the requirements of public circulation and stranger sociability."<sup>24</sup> That is, by participating in counterpublics we learn how to participate in *publics* and therefore are equipped to participate more fully the various expressions of *public* life.

To claim that the stand-up audience is a public is somewhat obvious. It is, after all, a concrete group of people gathered around a given text or performance that is bound to a space and time, even when that space and time are mediated by recording and playback. The claim that it is a counterpublic, however, requires moving beyond the obvious. As I have suggested, the public for stand-up satire is at least bifurcated into the victims who are the targets of the satire and the confederates who are the beneficiaries of the corrective laughter fostered during the performance. On the surface, therefore, it would seem that the two publics, which clearly stand in opposition with one another, could be understood as a relationship between the public

and a counterpublic. This is especially the case because the public represented by the satirical target can be understood to stand in for *the* public.

The alternative nature of the stand-up comedy counterpublic, however, is more complicated than it appears at first glance. It is not, as Fraser would contend, a traditionally subaltern counterpublic. In fact, the stand-up satire audience, with only a few exceptions, tends to be more like the image of *the* public with all of the race-, class-, and gender-based privileges that it carries. It is hard to imagine a group of mostly white, well-to-do men constituting a counterpublic as conceived by Fraser. Yet, I contend, that is exactly what happens in the stand-up situation. The counterpublic of the stand-up audience is constituted not by its lack of material privilege, but by its subordinate status as *comedy*. Because it is a public cloaked in comedy it is abundantly aware that its discourse is an alternative to the *seriousness* of the discourse of *the* public sphere. In this way, the stand-up comedy counterpublic opposes not only the projected publics of bigoted racists or ambitious politicians, but the very notion of *the* public itself. It challenges the rationality that organizes public activity by providing a public space organized by non-rational expression—laughter. Just as a counterpublic reveals how the public is not *the public* by contesting exclusionary norms and providing alternative avenues of public speech, the comic counterpublic highlights the irrationality of the serious public by laughing instead of debating. If participation in *the* public sphere requires adherence to the norms of rational debate, then participation in the counterpublic of stand-up satire requires that members observe the laws of the second world of carnival and laugh with gusto—especially when laughing appears to be the least appropriate mode of public expression.

In her critique of Habermas' public sphere theory and the deliberative democratic tradition that it spawned, Mouffe argues that democracy, as envisioned from an agonistic and



plural perspective, requires abandoning attempts to delimit public speech in order to reach consensus through rational debate. She contends:

Too much emphasis on consensus and the refusal of confrontation leads to apathy and disaffection with political participation. Worse still, the result can be the crystallization of collective passions around issues which cannot be managed by the democratic process and an explosion of antagonisms that can tear up the very basis of civility.<sup>25</sup>

Her counter to the rational public sphere model suggests that rather than bracketing non-rational discourse and argument in order to reach consensus that “the primary task of democratic politics is not to eliminate passions from the sphere of the public, in order to render a rational consensus possible, but to mobilize those passions towards democratic designs.”<sup>26</sup> The laughing counterpublic of stand-up satire, I argue, is organized around what Mouffe refers to here as “passions”—“the various affective forces which are at the origin of collective forms of identification”—rather than the norms of rationality that govern the public sphere.<sup>27</sup> In this way, stand-up satire offers an alternative venue of expression for passionate discourses otherwise excluded from the overly rational discourse of *the* public.

By providing a space for the second world discourse of comedy, the stand-up counterpublic models a kind of citizenship practice that moves not by the force of the better argument, but by the force of the heartiest laughter. In this way, the stand-up counterpublic equips citizens by engaging satire as a potentially democratic mobilization of passion by constituting a space for public humor where laughter can be engaged as an alternative mode of political expression. I qualify this claim as *potentially* democratic, because the affective force of satirical passions can also be mobilized towards undemocratic ends—the oppression of women and minorities, for example. This is not to say, however, that democratic potential is limited to

only those passionate expressions that are agreeable for one legitimate position or another.<sup>28</sup>

Quite the contrary, as William Connolly suggests, radically plural democracy requires, “gritted-teeth tolerance of some things you hate.”<sup>29</sup> In this way, laughter’s democratic potential is determined by its ability to provide alternate avenues of democratic expression even though its ambivalence may lead to oppression in much the same way as voting and legislating have been used for both democratic and undemocratic ends.

### **The Public Sense of Humor**

In constituting a comedic counterpublic, stand-up satire creates a space where humor can transition from a more or less private affair to a public mode of expression. This happens, I argue, because the decidedly public laughter of the nightclub audience is not only called forth by the comic text, but is actually *a part of the text itself*. As Joanne Gilbert indicates, “we know that humor exists in public discourse” because “*people* laugh.”<sup>30</sup> Typically, humor and the sense of humor are considered private matters.<sup>31</sup> In the satirical stand-up setting, however, they are as public as they can be. Individuals may laugh, but their laughter is never the laughter of an individual. It is always the laughter of a group. As John Limon explains, “An individual has the right to say: I am certain (I remember) that I did not experience joke *x* as funny, but I was laughing along with the audience... *The audience itself cannot claim this.*”<sup>32</sup> Their shared laughter, I contend, serves to outline a shared sense of humor that does not fall under the province of the individual. Because each individual is a part of the comedic counterpublic constituted by the text that they laugh at together, the humor and laughter of stand-up comedy is necessarily *public* humor and *public* laughter. In providing the response that completes the call of the satirical text, the audience’s laughter exists outside of each individual member of the

comedic counterpublic. It is externalized, publicized, and therefore is no longer the quality of the individuals, but instead a characteristic of the audience as public itself.

In this way, I contend that the comedic counterpublic, which counters *the* public, has its own sense of humor—an unwritten code of what is and is not laughable and what is and is not appropriate as a comic subject. My primary contention is that stand-up comedians, particularly satirists in the historical moment of my analysis, function as shepherds and cultivators of the public's sense of humor and that their performances play a significant role in simultaneously constituting and negotiating that sense of humor. Using Maurice Charland's notion of constitutive rhetoric as a guide, therefore, I analyze a series of routines to demonstrate how stand-up comedians foster a public sense of humor, how it changes over time, and how that sense of humor impacts other aspects of public life.

### *Constitutive Rhetoric and the Sense of Humor*

Drawing on the confluence of ideological critique and rhetorical theory, Charland contends that the audience of any discourse is rhetorically constituted rather than “*given*” or “extra-rhetorical.”<sup>33</sup> He argues that constitutive rhetoric “calls its audience into being”<sup>34</sup> and that “‘peoples’ in general, exist only through an ideological discourse that constitutes them.”<sup>35</sup> For Charland, rhetoric is indispensable to ideological critique because the audience in question, the very audience who experiences the effects of the ideological discourse, is *necessarily rhetorically constituted* as subjects. They are rhetorically constituted because all “persons are subjects from the moment they acquire language and the capacity to speak and to be spoken to.” For this reason, “constitutive rhetoric is part of the discursive background of social life.”<sup>36</sup>

Charland argues that constitutive rhetoric carries three ideological commitments: “a history, motives, and a *telos*.”<sup>37</sup> Each manifests in some way through the creation of a collective

subject, fostering a transhistoric understanding of that subject as having always already been as it appears to be, and by providing the illusion of freedom—the illusion that audience has chosen the constituted subject position by their own free will.<sup>38</sup> With that in mind, he further indicates that the ideological effects of constitutive rhetoric attain their potential by masking their rhetorical nature. He explains, “The ideological trick of such a rhetoric is that it presents that which is most rhetorical, the existence of a *people*, or of a subject, as extrarhetorical.”<sup>39</sup> Thus constitutive rhetoric constitutes an identity or subject position in such a way that it appears to be natural, rather than rhetorical, and still provides justification for openly rhetorical discourse. For these reasons Charland concludes, “Because ideology forms the ground for any rhetorical situation, a theory of ideological rhetoric must be mindful not only of arguments and ideographs, but of the very nature of the subjects that rhetoric both addresses and leads to come to be.”<sup>40</sup>

Studies of and about humor often assume an extra-rhetorical posture regarding the nature of humor as a subject. Humor is often presented as a given, almost universal phenomenon. Take for instance, Arthur Berger’s description of humor at the beginning of his book, *An Anatomy of Humor*. He explains, “Humor is everywhere. It insinuates itself into every aspect of our lives... There is no escaping humor and there is no subject...that has not been ridiculed.”<sup>41</sup> For Berger, humor simply *is*. As an ideal, this description of humor as an omnipresent possibility seems to make sense. What it obscures, however, is that humor—in practice—is *always* restricted to its context, its situation, and its audience. There may be no escaping humor in the long run, but in any given moment humor may or may not emerge for one reason or another. For this reason, Joseph Boskin contends, “as universal as humor is, it is bounded by a culture code” and, therefore, “to be understood and possess meaning, humor must relate to the customs, symbols, and experience of the people.”<sup>42</sup> Thus, humor is rhetorical because it requires the fiction of “the

people” and also because what does and does not count as humor is constituted from the moment individual persons acquire the capacity to be laughed at and to laugh at one another.<sup>43</sup>

This is not to say that there are subjects that cannot possibly be made humorous. Quite the contrary, as I suggested in the previous chapter, anything that can be taken seriously can also be taken comically. The constitutive rhetoric of humorous discourse—the sense of humor—limits the scope of comedy by binding humor to the subjects, audiences, and cultural codes from which it is drawn. In the same breath it says, “You can make fun of anything and everything,” and it qualifies its sweeping claim adding, “this, however, is an exception. You cannot make fun of this.” In this way, humor is an ideological discourse that protects some and pushes others into the fire. The trick of such a rhetoric, as Charland indicates, is that it appears to go without saying—it has, in this way, a kind of “transhistoric” property. That is, the standard of what can or cannot be jested requires no rhetorical justification. As was true for Berger’s description of humor, it simply *is* and it *always already* was. And yet, as Charland would surely note, the idea that something is or is not funny is not extra-rhetorical. It is constantly being negotiated by the humorist and her or his public.

In this way, stand-up comedy—and arguably all comedy—is dialogic in nature because the audience’s laughter has the capacity to validate or annihilate any comic utterance. The comic text is not monologic in form. It requires an audience and their laughing response otherwise it cannot be considered to be comedy. This feature affords the comedic counterpublic considerable agency in defining the sense of humor that constitutes its subject position. As Gilbert suggests, “Through the politics of laughter, the audience serves as ultimate arbiter of humor and power in public discourse.”<sup>44</sup> Thus, the audience appears to have the freedom to choose what does or does not count as humor, a quality that Charland indicates is imperative to constitutive rhetoric. There

is, however, an important caveat to this humor defining capacity. Only the *audience*, the *public constituted by the performance*, has the ability to laugh with constitutive authority. Such authority, I argue, cannot be wielded individually. No individual can determine for the others what the public deems humorous—not even the performer.<sup>45</sup> The performer's role in the constitution of public humor is to act as a guide by offering subjects for comedic judgment. Until the audience laughs, however, none of those subjects can be considered publicly humorous. In this way, the ultimate decision about the humor of any public resides in its shared laughter. Thus, the audience has the freedom to determine the standards of humor, but the individuals who comprise that audience are only afforded the illusion of such choice.

### *Constituting the Public's Humor*

The idea that the public has a sense of humor, although it is not clearly articulated from a rhetorical perspective, is suggested by studies of humor in other disciplines. In his book about joke wars and joke cycles, *Rebellious Laughter*, historian Joseph Boskin contends, “there is a high degree of coherence in the comedic narrative that arises from the bottom rungs of society and eventually surfaces in the larger public arena. There are, in short, common reference points in the humor that enable people of differing stripes and classes to plug into the scene and to derive meaning from it.”<sup>46</sup> Such common points of reference, I argue, are the markers of any public's sense of humor. They are, from the rhetorical perspective, the *topoi* of the laughable and those collective *topoi* form a standard that reflects the humor of a given public. In his book, *Engaging Humor*, anthropologist Elliot Oring writes of “national humors” comprised of “the content and style of a people's humor” that serves as “an index of [that] people's opinions and character.”<sup>47</sup> The addition of style, I argue, is significant to the public's standard of humor. Just as the *topoi* of the humorous change over time, so too does the form that humor takes when it

emerges. Further, drawing from examples of frontier humor, Oring argues, “these very localized humors came to be conceptualized as national humors because of the place these characters held in the national imagination. What tends to become national humor is humor by and about the kinds of people who come to stand for society as a whole—who are believed to embody the identity of the nation.”<sup>48</sup> In this way, Oring’s notion of a specific, localized humor becoming a national standard for humor speaks to the *public* nature of the rhetorical sense of humor because his argument allows for the possibility—indeed, the likelihood—that the humor of *a* public can become or appear to represent the humor of *the* public.

This public sense of humor, which is constituted through the performance of comic material and the laughter of its audience, is most apparent as it changes over time. The transition from the canned gags and one-liners of the post-World War II Borscht Belters to the sharp, cerebral satire of “new comedians” Mort Sahl, Lenny Bruce, and Dick Gregory offers some evidence to this point. Borscht Belt humor was fraught with jokes about wives and mothers-in-law, but it more or less lacked comic treatment of politics or social issues. The “new comedians,” however, turned the public’s sense of humor on its ear by ignoring the previously established conventions of comedy and daring to jest ambitious and misguided politicians, presidents, candidates, and the Jim Crow South. Within a decade after stand-up comedy had emerged as a popular American art form, it became clear that the public’s humor had changed, not only because the performers were different, but because the *topoi* subjected to comic treatment were different. By shifting their public’s comic gaze from quotidian domesticity to current events, the new comedians proffered a constitutive rhetoric that directed their audiences’ laughter toward new targets and expanded the public’s sense of humor to include those topics, which were previously beyond the reach of the comic, as potential fodder for comedy.

Concomitant with this topical transition occurred a similar shift in comic *form*. Form, for Kenneth Burke, is “an arousing and fulfillment of desires” in which “one part [of a work] leads a reader to anticipate another part, to be gratified by the sequence.”<sup>49</sup> The comic form of pre-stand-up performers was mostly conventional jokes with a set-up followed by a punchline. Rhetorically, this form is fairly simple. The set-up arouses a desire or creates an ambiguity that is addressed and fulfilled by the punchline thereby resulting in gratifying laughter for the audience who “gets” the joke. Importantly, for the Borscht Belters these jokes most often appeared as discrete utterances that were completely divorced from any context with the exception of joke series that presented a number of discrete jokes about a shared topic (such as wives and mothers-in-law). For the “new comedians,” the set-up and punchline joke was almost non-existent. In its place were satirical narratives and stream-of-consciousness diatribes, which were not only more critical, but also much more complex constructions. Even when conventional jokes appeared, they were almost always contextualized by a larger commentary or narrative.<sup>50</sup> This shift in form, as Burke indicates, created a shift in how comic desires could be called into being and how they could be fulfilled. For the stand-up public, the escapist joke telling of resort performers no longer satisfied, instead they craved the critical engagement of satirical commentary. To be funny, the jokes had to be more than *just* jokes. In altering the formulaic conventions of stand-up comedy to include satire, the “new comedians” concurrently changed the expectations that determined how to make an audience laugh.<sup>51</sup>

What is significant about these changes in subject and form is that they clearly define two different versions of the public’s sense of humor. Borscht Belt shtick and satirical stand-up are different in almost every way, but their difference, I argue, pertains specifically to the kind of public and accompanying sense of humor that each sought to constitute. In each case a laughing



public was constituted and revealed through the conventions of its humor—by what it chose to laugh at and by how its expectations prepared it to laugh. For a rhetorical scholar of humor, therefore, the concept of the public sense of humor as a rhetorical standard of what is or is not appropriate or necessary for generating laughter is a potentially valuable heuristic for understanding how comedy, and especially stand-up comedy, constitutes a public.

*These Words Must Not Be Spoken*

In addition to the commonplaces that indicate humor, the public sense of humor also constitutes those *topoi* that are considered *not* laughable or unfit for comic treatment. Marked by their absence rather than their presence, these elements are much more difficult to see in public discourse because comedians, especially stand-up comedians who regularly interact with their publics, generally avoid material that does not result in laughter. Unfunny jokes are rarely preserved for the sake of posterity. Although these comedic taboos may not manifest in comedy, they are most apparent in criticism of comedy. That is, just as performance attempts to constitute the sense of humor, so to does the response to that performance.

For example, over much of Lenny Bruce's career, he pushed back against the idea that his comedy was dirty, sick, or pornographic. In an article appearing in *Time* in 1959, Bruce was labeled as "the most successful of the newer sickniks" and compared to "the kid in Saroyan's *Time of Your Life* who keeps thinking that he is a comedian but succeeds only in spouting his miseries."<sup>52</sup> In an attempt to label Bruce's comedy as nothing more than "angrily and tastelessly" shouting "at the way of the world," the author of the critique quotes from three Bruce routines—notably, "Religions Inc." from *The Sick Humor of Lenny Bruce*. What is interesting about the quotations is that they are cited without elaboration as *prima facie* evidence of the fact that Bruce should not be considered funny. And, for that reason, the subjects, religious and political

leaders, were presumed off limits to the comedian. Of course, all of the jokes scored with audiences or they would not have made the recordings, but nevertheless, the author in *Time* used his pen to gesture toward subjects and styles that should be excluded from the public's sense of humor—such “sick” humor, had no place on the public stage. This critique would haunt Bruce, later characterized as “Dirty Lenny,” for the rest of his career.

More interesting than the critique itself, however, is the fact that Bruce used his performances and writing to respond to his critics' cultivation of the public's laughter and, in so doing, revealed how comedy serves as a space to struggle over the public's standard of what is and is not acceptable for comic treatment. In his appearance on the very first episode of *Playboy's Penthouse*, Bruce offers a response to the *Time* critique after the show's host, Hugh Hefner, asks him about the charge. Bruce explains, “There is no such thing, naturally, as sick comedy... sick jokes go all the way back to Shakespeare.” He then works a bit where he feigns sickness, borrows a handkerchief from another guest, and blows his nose on camera joking, “I just blew my nose and then I became controversial.”

Later in the program, he offers an extended rant about the *Time* piece. Specifically, he notes that the handful of sick comics that were grouped together in the article were not sick—all except then-psychiatric patient Jonathan Winters who Bruce laughingly admitted was “a little sick.” In his own defense, he argues, “I don't do any sick comedy, but it's a commercial tag that's happened now.” His point, that sick jokes were no novelty for American culture and that sick comedy was therefore a misnomer, becomes apparent when he compares his humor to an example of an earlier generation's “sick” humor. He explains:

Lou Costello, there's a good comedian. A well liked, well loved comic... You'd never think of Lou Costello as a sick comic would you? Lou Costello used to do a joke: “My

wife died last night.” Now, I would never move into that area at all in humor. I would never—comedy is tragedy plus time, that’s a little too close. So sicko. His wife died last night. He’s humoring: “On her deathbed she said, when I die, if you cheat on me, I’ll dig my way out of my grave and haunt you,” which is a pretty macabre situation we’re building. The joke. The punchline: “I buried her face down—let her dig.” That’s sick. That’s sicko. Wife, dead crawling through the grave...<sup>53</sup>

This bit of comic refutation exemplifies the struggle over the public standard of humor. For his critic, the subjects of Bruce’s satire were clearly off-limits. But for Bruce, his comedy should have been thought of as no worse than the “sick” comedy that had always already constituted the public sense of humor. In this way, Bruce makes the claim that his “sick” humor participates in what Charland would call a “transhistorical” discourse of similar comic sensibilities and thereby appeals to a standard that cannot be challenged on the grounds of novelty.

In his autobiography, which is comprised mostly of material from his stand-up repertoire that was published as a serial in *Playboy* over a five-year span after the *Time* article ran, Bruce dedicates nearly an entire chapter to refuting the “sick comic” label in a similar manner. Explaining that the label “sick” comedy implies some version of “healthy” comedy, Bruce references a series of comics who were not considered sick, but were guilty of the same sorts of behaviors that earned him the title. He wonders, “What happened to the healthy comedians who at least had good taste?... Ask the comedians who used to do harelip jokes, or the moron jokes.”<sup>54</sup> In similar fashion to his Lou Costello bit from *Playboy’s Penthouse*, he ironically pines for healthy comics like Joe E. Lewis who taught his audience to “always have a glass of booze in your hand” and Harry Youngman who made his living on “Ugly Girl routines” full of “Cockeyed Jennies.” He ends the bit by excoriating *Time* noting, “I was labeled a ‘sicknik’ by *Time*

magazine, whose editorial policy still finds humor in a person's physical shortcomings: 'Shelly [sic] Berman has a face like a hastily sculpted hamburger.' The healthy comic would never offend... unless you happen to be fat, bald, skinny, deaf or blind."<sup>55</sup> In many ways, the final critique of Bruce's written response to his critics is simply the satirist doing what he does. He identifies an ideal, provides examples of supposedly honorable people failing to live up to the ideal—which include his critics—and he therefore reveals the hypocrisy of the argument. From the standpoint of constitutive rhetoric, however, it both furthers his attempt to make “sick” comedy a transhistorical feature of the public's sense of humor and it serves to differentiate Bruce from both his critics and from the Lewises and Youngmans of the culture's comic universe. It creates a space for his public's sense of humor that is at once unique to their historical moment and yet comprised of always already existing characteristics of their cultural imaginary. In this way, Bruce's argument highlights the rhetorical struggle over the sense of humor and clearly marks his personal stake in the contest.

Bruce's campaign to make room for “sick” comedy in the public's sense of humor points to an active struggle over what was and was not funny. The *Time* article thus identifies one side of the antagonism and Bruce the other. In many ways, these active struggles offer some of the best evidence of the rhetorical construction of the standard by which public humor is evaluated. There is, however, a darker side of the public sense of humor in which the ultimately unfunny is also regarded as ultimately unspeakable. These *topoi*, considered too serious for comic treatment, obviously do not appear in performances, but they are frequently mentioned in memoirs. For instance, in *Heartland*, Mort Sahl laments that by the end of the 1960s there wasn't “any political humor” because “Nobody [was] trying to deal with the real black humor of our time.” Referring to the assassinations of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. as well

as the horrors of Vietnam, Sahl suggests, “This ought to be the stuff of political humor. But it isn’t. Nobody’s laughing.”<sup>56</sup> The absence of laughter clearly marks those *topoi* that are off limits to the comedian. When the audience does not laugh, the comedian fails to be a comedian and thereby forfeits her or his constitutive potential to the audience. In this way, unlike Charland’s original conception of constitutive rhetoric as an ideological discourse that hails an audience, the constitution of the public’s sense of humor reveals the interdependent relationship between the rhetor and audience in constituting such a public standard. It is not enough for the potentially humorous to simply be spoken to the public; it must be validated by its laughter or it will be, as Dana Cloud would suggest, “nullified” by its silence.<sup>57</sup>

Like Sahl, George Carlin indicates that times of national tragedy and confusion tend to limit what can and cannot be kidded. In his *Last Words*, he recalls having high hopes for his twelfth HBO special saying, “it had the makings of an explosive show, with a big fat target in the White House: Governor Bush and his Christian fucks. I had a sledgehammer values piece: ‘Why We Don’t Need Ten Commandments.’ And I had this major new tour de force... I had a hunch it was going to be the first HBO in a decade to equal, maybe even surpass, *Jammin’* [In New York].” The material that he planned to perform for his special, tentatively titled *I Like it When a Lot of People Die*, however, lost its laughter at “8:46 A.M., September 11, 2001, when the first plane hit.” The show, which was scheduled for taping that November, would go on, but much of the material lives on only in the pages of Carlin’s memoir. As he remembers, “Osama bin fucking Laden hadn’t just blown up the World Trade Center. He’d blown up the best piece I’d written in ten years. I’m a realist. We changed the name of the show to *Complaints and Grievances*.”<sup>58</sup> For Carlin, in his moment, the public’s sense of humor simply would not permit treating mass tragedy as comic fodder. From the perspective of constitutive rhetoric, Carlin’s inability to make

jokes about public disasters—even though the jokes were *good, funny jokes*—serves a reminder that not only does the audience have a role to play in the constitution of the standards of public humor, but that humor is only one voice in the cacophony of public discourse to which the audience must attend. When the discourse seriousness reigns, comedy is both a necessary counterpoint for the welfare of a multimodal democracy and a decorum violating discourse that could potentially alienate its audience. Its responsibility is always tempered by risk. In this way, as is true for the comic's onstage performance, when challenging the public's sense of humor, timing is everything.

Another way that the audience's constitutive capacity can be extended is by considering the public's perception of the performer. For instance, both Dick Gregory and Richard Pryor discuss the struggle not only to speak about African American experiences in their comedy, but also to be comedians who were, themselves, African American. In his memoir, *Nigger*, Gregory indicates that he made a conscious effort “to be a colored funny man, not a funny colored man.”<sup>59</sup> Pryor echoes this sentiment in *Pryor Convictions* suggesting that the late 1960s were “a politically charged time... white America wanted their black comedians colorless.”<sup>60</sup> Due to the constraints of his racial identity, Gregory indicates that he was careful to avoid falling into the trappings of the more conventional African American comedians of his era. He writes, “Stay away from sex, that's the big pitfall. If you use blue material only, you slip back into being that Negro stereotype comic. If you mix blue and topical satire that white customer, all hung up with the Negro sex mystique, is going to get uncomfortable.”<sup>61</sup> For Pryor, the issue of avoiding blue material was uppermost. He recalls being advised by his then-idol Bill Cosby “to be careful. Not to cuss. Not to talk foul. Not to act no fool.”<sup>62</sup> These examples of what could not be spoken point to an important aspect of the constitution of any public standard which Stob notes in his

summary of the critiques of the public sphere: access. For both Pryor and Gregory, the ability to engage in the rhetorical constitution of the public's sense of humor was constricted by their racial identities. In this way, who the public will permit to guide its laughter is just as revealing as what can be given the comic treatment and when.

### *Public Humor and the State*

If publics have senses of humor unique to the rhetoric that constitutes their being, then, consistent with Habermas' notion of the public sphere as an intermediary between the public and the state, it should follow that the state also has a sense of humor. M. Lane Bruner makes such a claim in his essay on carnivalesque forms of protest in the United States. He contends, "One could plausibly argue that the state's sense of humor is proportionate to the strength of the citizens' right and freedoms *against* the state, the general openness of governmental deliberations, the breadth and depth of political dialogue, and the degree to which state officials are legally constrained to tolerate public criticism."<sup>63</sup> For Bruner, the "healthy" state is flexible and able to appropriately manage humor and comedy whereas the "sick" or "humorless" state "has a very difficult time dealing with absurdity, symbolic protest, and the curious blending of the fictive with the real... but it has much less trouble violently dealing with more 'serious' forms of protest."<sup>64</sup> Arguably, it is for this reason that stand-up satirists are often marked as "serious," because such a connotation permits the state to take violent action against one of its citizens. This was certainly true in the case of Lenny Bruce's persistent legal trouble.

By 1964, agents of the state—police officers and attorneys—were regularly attending Lenny Bruce's performances. After being arrested in 1961 for saying "cocksucker" in San Francisco, he was arrested for saying "schmuck" in Hollywood, he was jailed in Chicago for making disparaging remarks about the Catholic Church, and, in 1964, after appearing at the Café

Au Go Go, he was arrested for uttering what Assistant District Attorney Richard Kuh would call an “anthology of filth” during the subsequent obscenity trial.<sup>65</sup> This last arrest led to his first conviction that would not be overturned by a higher court as a result of *The People of New York V. Lenny Bruce*. The string of arrests and his eventual conviction, from the perspective of the state’s sense of humor, suggests that the state no longer found Bruce funny. Its sense of humor had grown unable to ignore or adapt to the critiques that Bruce made from the stage and, therefore, the state mobilized its resources to bring his comedy to a violent end.

What is interesting about the sudden shift in the state’s response to Bruce’s comedy is that it was not precipitated by any substantive change in his act. In fact, he had performed “Christ and Moses” and “Las Vegas, Tits and Ass” at Carnegie Hall in New York three years prior to his eventual conviction. Both bits include a plethora of four-letter words and, for the former, an excoriation of the Catholic Church. What is more, following the Carnegie Hall Concert, Bruce was at the peak of his popularity, which would seem to suggest that his comedy still resonated with his public’s sense of humor. In this way, the primary variable between 1961 and 1964 was not the comic discourse itself or the public, but the manner in which the state perceived that discourse. Bruce’s formerly acceptable, though “sick” and “shocking,” humor was given a new, more serious moniker: “obscenity.” Turning his comedy into crime, the humorless state, which lacked the resources to laugh at Bruce’s off-color commentary, instead mobilized a farcical display of force and eliminated Bruce’s voice as one that could speak to the public’s sense of humor. His conviction in New York stood until 2003 when he was acquitted by then Governor George Pataki. Bruce famously explained to Hugh Hefner on *Playboy’s Penthouse* that “comedy is tragedy plus time;” given the fact that it took the State of New York



nearly forty years to pardon his obscenity conviction, it seems that the state requires more time than most to get the joke.<sup>66</sup>

This is not to suggest, however, that stand-up comedy cannot affect the state's sense of humor. By the time Bruce's primary disciple, George Carlin, would realize his own provocative potential, the state's laughter would come more easily than it had in the previous decade. For much of the 1970s, George Carlin rode the wave of success that followed from his two 1972 albums—*FM & AM*, which won a Grammy award, and *Class Clown*. Although *Class Clown* did not receive the recognition that *FM & AM* had, it did feature the track, "Seven Words You Can Never Say on Television," which would arguably define Carlin's comedy for the remainder of the decade and, perhaps, his career. His rap on four-letter words appeared in an updated version titled, "Filthy Words," on 1973's *Occupation: Foole*, and became a mainstay in his stage show closing each of his first two HBO specials, 1977's *On Location* and 1978's *Carlin Again*. Whereas Bruce struggled against the label "sick comedian" for nearly his entire career, Carlin made his career by embracing the very characteristic that led to Bruce's ruin. In fact, in the liner notes of *Class Clown*, he dedicates the album to Bruce for "taking all the risks," making the connection between their shared comedic pursuits all the more palpable.<sup>67</sup>

Like Bruce a decade earlier, Carlin's infamous routine drew the attention of the state and landed him in a Milwaukee jail in 1972 on an obscenity charge. The differences between Carlin's trial and Bruce's, however, are noteworthy. Whereas Bruce's early acquittals were granted by juries and appellate courts, Carlin's charges were dismissed almost immediately by the presiding judge because, as Carlin explains in his memoir, even though "[Judge Gieringer] had no doubt indecent language was used, he didn't believe anyone was violently aroused."<sup>68</sup> The contrast between Bruce's somber and serious court proceedings and Carlin's are also telling.

In his New York trial, Bruce pled with his legal counsel to permit him either to testify on his own behalf or to perform his act, which was only demonstrated for the court by a police officer using notes (“Lenny Bruce *in substance*”) and shoddy recordings of his Café Au Go Go appearances. Even after dismissing his lawyers and begging, “Please, your honor, I so desperately want your respect... Let me testify, please... don’t finish me off in show business,” the Honorable John Murtagh refused to allow the court to hear his testimony.<sup>69</sup> In Bruce’s trial, the state was in no mood for laughter. For Carlin, however, the case was more or less decided after his attorney, Jack Murray, played the final track from *Class Clown* in the courtroom. As Murray recalls, “the judge laughed through the entire thing.”<sup>70</sup> In just under a decade, the state’s sense of humor had made the transition from what Bruner would call sick, unwavering rigidity to a healthy flexibility capable of not only dealing with humorous critique, but also with laughing along with the public.

One reason for this shift in perspective, I argue, is that both Bruce and Carlin drew their so-called obscene material from comfortably within the public’s sense of humor. Even after his arrests began, Bruce regularly found ways of making his audience laugh at the ridiculousness of linguistic taboos and therefore the very notion of obscenity that led to his demonization by the state. For instance, in one performance Bruce riffs on the meaning of obscenity for his audience. He offers, “Now if I do a vulgar show, I sing rock ’n’ roll tunes. Just the most vulgar form with a big bulbous nose, that is not obscene. Obscenity has one specific meaning: to appeal to the prurient interest. To get you horny.” Then, after relating a quotation from President Kennedy referring to “all businessmen as sonofabitches” in an interview, he asks:

I would like an honest equation from at least any grammar school graduate. Is the word sonofabitch less obscene to you than motherfucker? Really? Is it the fact that a Catholic President called all businessmen sonofabitches and Jewish comic relates motherfucker?

If you're interested in the meaning of obscenity, I'm less obscene than the president. If the word motherfucker stimulates you sexually you're in a lot of trouble—especially if she was my mother.<sup>71</sup>

Turning from four-letter words to sex, he later expands on his theme by suggesting that anyone who considers the subject obscene on religious grounds “qualifies the creator’s creativity.” He explains, “They stop it above the kneecaps and don’t resume it until past the Adam’s apple. Thereby giving lewd connotation to mother’s breast that fed us and father’s groin that bred us. Which is quite poetic, but I got a hundred dollar contempt charge for that here last year.”<sup>72</sup> The bit scores with the audience and its laughter validates his attempt to constitute his topics not only as not obscene, but also as publicly laughable. Although this effort would not benefit Bruce in court, it did create—or perhaps maintain—a commonplace for the public’s sense of humor that could be massaged for laughter by his successors in continuing to make subjects deemed not laughable by the state appear to the contrary. Bruce’s insistence that his subjects were laughable rather than obscene and his audiences laughing endorsement became a site of struggle over not only the meaning of obscenity for his public, but over the state’s inability to take a joke.

When George Carlin riffed on the word shit in his *FM & AM* bit “Shoot”—which I addressed in detail in chapter two—Bruce’s cultivation of the public’s sense of humor had already removed much of the shock from the profanity around which the routine revolved. The popularity of “Shoot” continued to develop the notion that so-called bad words were little more than comic fodder and by the time Carlin began rhythmically listing the words that could not be spoken on the small screen—“shit, piss, cunt, fuck, cocksucker, motherfucker, tits”—his audience was more than comfortable hearing them, speaking them, and, most importantly, laughing at them. Carlin sets the stage for his routine on the “heavy seven” noting:

There are four hundred thousand words in the English language and there are seven of them you can't say on television. What a ratio that is—three hundred and ninety-nine thousand, nine hundred and ninety-three to *seven*. They must really be *bad*. They'd have to be *outrageous* to be separated from a group that large... [There are] no bad words.

Bad thoughts. Bad intentions. And words.<sup>73</sup>

This argument, that words are ambiguous, underscores the entire routine. More to the point, it also speaks to the kinds of arguments that drove Bruce's linguistic satires. Of the seven words, Carlin spends the most time with the word "fuck," suggesting:

I think the word fuck is a very important word. It's the beginning of life and yet it's a word we use to hurt one another quite often. People much wiser than I have said, "I'd rather have my son watch a film with two people making love than two people trying to kill one another" and I, of course, can agree. I think that's a great sentiment. I wish I knew who said it first... I agree with them, but I'd like to take it a step further. I'd like to substitute the word fuck for the word kill in all those movie clichés we grew up with, right. "Okay Sheriff, we're gonna fuck you now! But we're gonna fuck you slow."

Interestingly, Bruce used a similar logic as the counterpart to his often-repeated joke, "God made my body and if it is dirty, then the imperfection lies with Manufacturer, not the product."<sup>74</sup> In his *Carnegie Hall Concert*, for instance, he muses, "you can't do anything with anybody's body and make it dirty. It's illogical. How can you be dirty? I can kill you."<sup>75</sup> In this way, Carlin's "Seven Words" routine derives its laughter from an already established comic commonplace of public humor. His jokes are perhaps better conceived than Bruce's meandering digressions, but the laughter that he evokes emerges from the same place.

What is significant about this topical commonplace for the public's sense of humor is that as it persisted overtime—from Bruce in the 1960s to Carlin in the 1970s—it seems to have permeated the state's sense of humor. The jokes—or at least the incongruities upon which they were fashioned—had not changed, but whereas the state devastated Bruce's career, it laughed at Carlin. In this way, it is possible to think of the state's humor, not only in terms of its general scarcity and abundance, but also in terms of the specific *topoi* that comprise its standards for humor. In the general sense, Bruner explains:

Liberal (social) democracies tend to be the most porous, whereas conservative (market) democracies tend to be less porous, and totalitarian and fundamentalist regimes tend to be the least porous. Arguably, then, this is perhaps the main criteria for gauging the 'sense of humor' of the state: the first type being the funniest, the second type being less funny, and the third type not being funny at all.<sup>76</sup>

This changes when the sense of humor is particularized by tracing the subjects that draw attention from the state. Such a perspective assumes that the state's humor does not come and go indiscriminately or even, as Bruner suggests, in correlation to the prevalence of self-interest in the state; instead, it realizes the contingency of the state's laughter and its relationship to the public and subject of any humorous exchange. From this perspective, it is possible to think of the state's and public's senses of humor as antagonistic partners struggling to articulate the standards by which comic discourses should be judged. In this way, not only can the public's sense of humor mediate between a public *who represents* the *public* and the state, but it can also be mobilized as a means of political expression. Therefore, the sense of humor, for both the state and the public, is a site of rhetorical struggle that recognizes, as does Arthur Berger, that “the

ability to direct laughter at individuals, groups, institutions, ideas, what you will, is really a form of power, even though we may not generally recognize the coercive nature of this laughter.”<sup>77</sup>

### *Ridere Populi, Ridere Dei*

Stand-up comedians have unique access to the public’s sense of humor because of the ongoing nature of their performances. Nightly, comics perform their acts, which go largely unchanged, before different audiences—groups of strangers who may never otherwise meet in person.<sup>78</sup> In so doing, they cultivate a laughter that reaches across disparate groups and creates a public surrounding the comic text that extends beyond any one immediate audience. They perform bits and routines again and again for different people and, thereby, are able to get a sense of what their audience will and will not laugh at. Jokes that get laughs recur and jokes that fail do not. In this way, the stand-up performer works in a dialogic relationship with her or his audience to create a routine that is reflective of the comic’s public and that public’s sense of humor.

Attendant to this constitutive function of their rhetorical exchange, however, is also a demonstrative function. By constituting a public with a standard for humor, stand-up comedy creates a space where laughter can be understood as a kind of public address. By insisting on their laughter, stand-up comics equip their publics to respond to public discourse. Laughter, in this sense, is one means by which a public speaks—even if its speech takes the form of affective “passions” rather than other traditionally accepted forms such as rational argument or deliberation. Thus, I argue that laughter is a *vox populi*, a voice of the people.

The aphorism *vox populi, vox dei*—the voice of the people is the voice of God—provides an important foundation for democratic theory. If democracy is the rule of the *demos* over itself, then it must have some means of expressing that rule as power or authority, as God or sovereign. For Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the notion of the *vox populi* undergirds his conception of the

“general will,” which was to serve as not only the source of sovereignty but as a guide for civic action.<sup>79</sup> In so far as the general will functions in society, its articulation has become an important feature of democratic existence. For this reason, identifying the *vox populi*—what it is and where it can be heard—has become a site of theoretical contention. One approach to the *vox populi* is the notion of “public opinion.” For Habermas, the formation of “public opinion” was the ultimate goal of the public sphere. Referring to a consensus resulting from rational deliberation by private citizens in the public sphere, public opinion was the means by which the public sphere could address the state. For Habermas, “public opinion,” legitimizes state activity in the same manner as Rousseau’s “general will.”

Each concept stands in for the voice of the people in order to justify the state’s exercise of authority, which supposedly resides with the *demos*. Importantly, the *vox populi* is, like “the people,” a rhetorical fiction. It is, as McGee suggests, a mass illusion that is called into being in order to induce cooperation with a symbolic order of one kind or another. For this reason, any invocation of the “voice of the people” is, to a certain extent, a construction of that voice. However, just as “the people” carries a kind of objective reality because people exist, so too does their voice, in that there are actually people who actually speak. The mythic, and therefore rhetorical, aspects of the *vox populi* appear when “the people” are said to speak as a collective whole with a singular voice. In this way, the “voice of the people” is expressed as a rhetorical trope that homogenizes the field of antagonisms and discourses into an enthymematic premise that can be used to justify action. If “the people” are used as discursive proxy for the *demos*, then “the voice of the people” provides the same function for its *kratia*. For this reason, “the voice of the people”—how and why it is constituted or mobilized—is just as significant to democratic culture as “the people” and, therefore, the articulation and limitation of the *vox populi*

is at stake for any rhetorical critique of the discourses that organize such a culture. The question of how a given rhetoric constitutes a “people” or “public” may be primary for the critic, but the question of how that rhetoric constitutes the public’s voice and what actions do or do not count as articulations of that voice provides a necessary addendum to any democratically minded critical endeavor.

Perhaps the best example of an attempt to articulate the *vox populi* is the vote. In casting a vote, a citizen externalizes his or her private voice such that it can be made to participate in a collection of other such externalizations that results in a mass yea or nay. The vote, in this way, becomes a means of legitimating public activity by appealing to the collective force of the *vox populi*. If the people—or, more likely, a majority of the people—say it is so, then so it shall be. Voting, of course, is not the only possible expression of the *vox populi*, but it is likely the most concrete and explicit. Another means of attempting to represent the *vox populi* is the opinion poll. Popularized by George Gallup in the early twentieth century, opinion polls claim to objectively externalize public opinion in such a way that it can be measured, disseminated, and addressed. Although less explicit than the vote, public opinion surveys are nevertheless an attempt at capturing the *vox populi* and then translating it into a language—statistics—that renders it a rhetorically valuable resource for legitimizing governmental action to the public from which it is derived.

There are, of course, limits to each of these expressions of the *vox populi*. The reduction of the public’s voice to voting *or* polling reduces democracy from a way of being—or as Nathan Crick and William Connolly indicate, “becoming”—to a mere instrument of decision making.<sup>80</sup> What is more, by restricting public voice to a yea or nay vote on an issue, for or against a limited selection of candidates, or a survey response in favor of or against a given course action each of



these attempts to articulate and mobilize the *vox populi* restricts the field of antagonisms upon which “the political” is constituted and therefore the very essence of democratic possibility.<sup>81</sup>

These two examples are by no means meant to provide an exhaustive list of potential articulations of the *vox populi*, instead they should demonstrate not only how the “voice of the people” can be expressed, but also how any expression of that voice constrains democracy.

The question, for the remainder of this chapter, is how does stand-up comedy, and especially the satirical variety, permit and restrict its public from articulating a *vox populi*? I argue that the form offers two features as unique means of giving audience members an opportunity to express their “voice”: laughter and heckling.

Laughter, as Bakhtin contends, is not only the organizing principal for carnival, but it is a force of the people.<sup>82</sup> What is more, it is *never* singular. As Henri Bergson suggests:

Laughter appears to stand in need of an echo... it is not an articulate, clear, well-defined sound; it is something which would fain be prolonged by reverberating from one to another, something beginning with a crash to continue in successive rumblings, like thunder in a mountain... However spontaneous it seems, laughter always implies a kind of secret freemasonry, or even complicity, with other laughers, real or imagined.<sup>83</sup>

Laughter, conceived of in this way, is *public* because it “must answer to certain requirements of life in common” and it speaks as a kind of collective voice of the public from which it originates.<sup>84</sup> Thus it is particularly democratic.

As a rhetorical expression, laughter, like the comedy that beckons it, is a kind of epideictic utterance. It says something about who the laughing public *is* in the moment of their laughter and it speaks only to the moment of its eruption by casting judgment that validates the condemnation of ridicule while recognizing the great skill of wit. For this reason, its democratic

potential is restricted to the here and now. It explodes into being and temporarily overthrows the logical organization of serious discourse. As Robert Hariman explains, laughter “is one way in which great structures of domination can be leveled within consciousness. The annihilating laughter at the momentary triumph of the absurd is a moment of freedom.”<sup>85</sup>

It functions, in this way, as a kind of “fugitive” democracy. Sheldon Wolin describes the image of “fugitive” democracy, which is “a rebellious moment that may assume revolutionary, destructive proportions, or may not,” that is “a political moment... when the political is remembered and recreated,” as a contrast to constitutional or institutionalized pseudodemocracies in which the *demos* is required to forfeit its direct access to power.<sup>86</sup> “Fugitive” democracy explodes into being in exigent moments and offers the “possibility of renewal” because “ordinary individuals are capable of creating new cultural patterns of commonality at any moment.”<sup>87</sup> In this way, laughter, which Bakhtin suggests creates the possibility of renewal, offers a kind of “fugitive” democratic rhetoric that emanates from a public as an expression of the *vox populi* as *ridere populi*—the laughter of the people.

Whereas voting and polling offer incredibly articulate expressions of the “voice of the people,” laughter is as inarticulate as one could be. The chuckles and guffaws of the *ridere populi*, are therefore unfit for the rational debate of Habermasian public opinion. Instead, they are what Mouffe would call passionate *responses* to the overt seriousness that characterizes the myth of the public sphere. For this reason, the “laughter of the people” fits better into the “Vernacular Rhetoric” model of public opinion proposed by Gerard Hauser, which “understands **public opinion** to be a discursive judgment made by social actors... drawn from an examination of collective discursive practices that reveal **common understanding** about the reality of experience... and, thereby, emphasizes **dialogic** characteristics of discourse,” than it does the

normative models represented by opinion polls and voting booths.<sup>88</sup> Unlike those easily definable expressions of the “voice of the people,” laughter makes plain its connections to the rhetorical exchange from which it originates.<sup>89</sup> It recognizes the give and take between humorist and audience as fundamental to its manifestation. As a *vox populi*, laughter revels in its contingency and derives its meaning from the comic enthymemes—the common understandings, truths, and experiences—that it validates. It is through an analysis of those enthymemes, therefore, that the *ridere populi* can be approached and given symbolic form.

For the stand-up audience, laughter is the primary means by which the form becomes dialogic. The laughter of the audience is the response to the comedian’s call. Its absence can destroy any comedic utterance in the same way that its presence validates the comic enthymemes that can be mobilized to annihilate, however temporarily, hierarchical relations of power. Their laughter is their voice and it is welcomed with open arms. In this way, stand-up satire provides an outlet for their laughter that is otherwise unwelcome in other expressions of public life. Thus, as an equipment for citizenship, their laughter speaks beyond the walls of the comedy club. In part, this is because the comedian will perform the material to different audiences in different places and therefore cultivate a *ridere populi* that extends beyond the immediate audience. But it is also the case that the stand-up audience’s laughter “reverberates,” as Bergson suggests, across society as members retell jokes that made them laugh, playback performances for friends and family, and carry the attitudes articulated by the comic enthymemes with them into other spheres of public life. For example, in his memoir, Richard Pryor recalls a story in which one of his routines changed the nature of a traffic stop. He writes, “Backstage in Detroit, two black cops told me that they’d arrested a black guy who started spouting my line, ‘I—am—reaching—into—my—pocket.’ They nailed him for doing Richard Pryor and then finished the routine,

saying, ‘Okay, spread them cheeks. Put your face on the ground.’ Then all of them laughed.”<sup>90</sup>

Retelling the joke and sharing the laughter thus extends the *ridere populi* beyond the limitations of the nightclub and reorganizes publics—in this case police and drivers—by using their shared laughter to find common ground in other aspects of public life. In these ways, laughing at stand-up prepares the audience to share their experiences with others and thereby expand the comedic counterpublic to which they belong.

By engaging an affective passion as voice, laughter provides equipment for coalition building and identification unavailable through other common forms of democratic expression. What is more, the laughter of the stand-up audience provides an alternative expression of the *vox populi* that, because it is a “Vernacular Rhetoric” of public opinion as described by Hauser, can be utilized by audience members in vernacular contexts. This is significant because laughter is, as Bergson explains, a *collective* voice in that laughter occurs only when there exists the expectations that others are also laughing.<sup>91</sup> In this way, the laughter that circulates among audience members can be used to transform vernacular spaces, or what Laclau and Mouffe refer to as “social spaces,” into “political spaces,” thereby multiplying the possible sites of political contestation and “preventing the concentration of power [in this case, the *vox populi*] in one point,” or, in this case, one form.<sup>92</sup>

The other means of expression available to the stand-up audience is heckling. For rhetorical scholar and former stand-up comic Joanne Gilbert, “heckling is a feature unique to the genre of stand-up comedy, in that it is expected and even at times encouraged... The trick for the comic is, of course, to get the last laugh.”<sup>93</sup> Heckling is, like laughter, an audience interruption of a comedic performance. Unlike laughter, however, it is rarely a collective expression unless

“a heckler ‘steals the show’ by rallying the rest of the audience to his or her cause.”<sup>94</sup> In this way, heckling is not an articulation of the *vox populi*.

Typically, heckling takes the form of an individual shouting down a comic before having the annihilating laughter of the audience turned against them. As Gilbert explains, hecklers are “often inebriated... loud, threatening, and relentless.”<sup>95</sup> They are, like the anti-public created by satire, representatives of *the* public with whom the audience should not identify. In this way, the “ritual of heckling and squelching,” for Gilbert, “enables the comic to preside over the temporary social order of the club community.”<sup>96</sup> It is in shutting down the distracting dissenter that the comedian exhibits her or his control over the audience most overtly. For instance, at the start of the *Carnegie Hall Concert* Lenny Bruce addresses a heckler in the balcony. He says, “why do you sit way up there? Is it that much less bread?” before dismissing the heckler entirely quipping, “don’t jump and make trouble.”<sup>97</sup> The audience convulses with laughter as Bruce ridicules the heckler and the unwelcome interruptions to the performance come to an end. Arguably, this happens because Bruce directs his audience’s laughter at the heckler thereby offering a show of force that reveals just how overmatched the heckler is.

Although heckling is not the “voice of the people”—except perhaps in those cases when an entire audience turns on a performer—it does provide a metonymic expression of how the *ridere populi* functions. By directing the public’s laughter *at* an immediate target, the ritualistic destruction of the heckler offers a demonstration of not only how forceful laughter can be, but also of the process by which that laughter can be mobilized to delegitimize the subject of comic ridicule. In this way, heckling, too, equips the audience for citizenship because it provides them a model of how their laughter can be exercised as an alternative expression of the *vox populi* in order to curb antagonistic interruptions to otherwise productive dialogue.

The heckling ritual also provides equipment for citizenship around two distinctly rhetorical features of discourse. As Andrea Greenbaum suggests, responding to heckling requires what Isocrates refers to as “assurance.”<sup>98</sup> The comic must remain confident and in control in order to “win” the exchange with the heckler. In so doing, she or he models similar behavior for the audience. The winning comic thus demonstrates how to deal with purely antagonizing discourses without elevating them to the status of legitimate political positions by addressing them as they are rather than dismissing them or ignoring them. In addition to modeling assurance, Greenbaum notes that responding to hecklers and the spontaneity of stand-up performance also functions as a demonstration of *kairos*, “meaning time, due measure, or proportion in individual circumstance.”<sup>99</sup> The sense of *kairotic* timing, which is just as significant for the set-up-punchline structure as it is to shutting down hecklers, reminds the audience that, as John Poulakos suggests, “what is said must be said at the right time.”<sup>100</sup> Being a comedian requires a well-defined sense of *kairos*. In performing for their audience, they demonstrate the significance of saying the right thing at the right moment to any form of public expression. In terms of the heckler, the added notion of proportion, which Greenbaum rightly highlights, is key. Not only must the stand-up performer respond in an appropriately timely manner, but she or he must also dispatch the heckler in such a way that the guilty party can be welcomed back into the comedic counterpublic. The ridicule, in this way, must be proportionate to the antagonism in order to allow the performer to maintain an adversarial rather than outwardly hostile posture.<sup>101</sup> Just as a comic’s confidence in the face of a heckler models assurance for the audience, so to does the comic’s *kairos* model the appropriate and proportionate response to antagonizing discourses. In these ways, even though heckling is an individual rather than collective response to the stand-up performance, it nevertheless equips

citizens for task of engaging in the politics of contestation without devolving into hostility and antagonism.

### **Conclusion**

Over the course of this chapter I have explored the unique rhetorical features of the relationship between the audience and the stand-up form. In so doing, I have argued that stand-up satire creates a comedic counterpublic that emerges from the circulation of the comic text and stands against the discourse of seriousness. What is more, I have demonstrated that this counterpublic, and the satirical texts of its constitution, provides evidence of a public standard for what is and is not laughable—a public sense of humor. And, I have suggested that stand-up satire offers a space wherein the laughter of an audience can be considered an expression of the *vox populi* and therefore used to legitimize or delegitimize public action. In developing these theoretical claims about the nature of the stand-up audience, I also maintain that each reveals how attending to comedic performances equips audience members for citizenship by engaging them in the process of coalition building and mobilizing their “passions” in order to expand the possibilities of democratic contests. In the next chapter, I conclude this study by considering how the various equipments for citizenship modeled by the rhetoric of stand-up satire comes to bear on democratic culture and the project of radical democracy.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> As Henri Bergson contends, “our laughter is always the laughter of a group” and that laughter’s “natural environment” is society. Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (Mineola: Dover 2005): 3-4.

<sup>2</sup> The exception here is *FM & AM*, though he does include a brief discussion about the ways in which people describe feces in his “Shoot” bit. See George Carlin, *FM & AM*, Little David, 1972.

<sup>3</sup> Joanne Gilbert, *Performing Marginality: Humor Gender and Cultural Critique* (Detroit, Wayne State University Press, 2004): 22

<sup>4</sup> Michael Warner, “Publics and Counterpublics (abbreviated version)” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 88 (November 2002): 413.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 414.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 419.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 422.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 423.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Calvin McGee, “In Search of ‘The People’: A Rhetorical Alternative,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 61 (October 1975): 242.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 242.

<sup>11</sup> “How to Relax Your Colored Friends at Parties.” Lenny Bruce, *Lenny Bruce: American, Fantasy*, 1961.

<sup>12</sup> Differentiation, for John Meyer, is one of the four rhetorical functions of humor. John Meyer, “Humor as a double-edged sword: The Rhetorical Functions of Humor”



<sup>13</sup> David Kaufer, "Irony and Rhetorical Strategy" *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 10 (Spring 1977): 105. Emphasis added.

<sup>14</sup> As a caveat, the members of the performance's public may also be members of the victimized public because it is possible—even necessary—to participate in multiple publics at the same time. If a member of the audience belongs to both the victimized public and the confederate public then she or he has the opportunity to experience the personal renewal in the same way that *the* public is renewed by ridiculing the undesirable public and affirming the ideal image of itself.

<sup>15</sup> In this way, laughter acts as a kind of response to the satirical text that completes the form. Because laughter, as Bergson suggests, "stand(s) in need of an echo" it moves back and forth between the performer and the audience and between the audience members laughing (present and mediated) and any who may laugh (present or not yet present) thereby continuing an open-ended, indefinite circulation of the text and, therefore, the public itself.

<sup>16</sup> Warner, "Publics and Counterpublics," 419.

<sup>17</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, Thomas Berger trans. (Boston: MIT Press, 1991): 25.

<sup>18</sup> For more on the bourgeois public sphere see Jürgen Habermas, "The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article." Sara Lennox and Frank Lennox trans. *New German Critique* 3 (Autumn 1974): 49-55; or the introduction to Craig Calhoun ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Boston: MIT Press, 1992).

<sup>19</sup> Paul Stob, "Kenneth Burke, John Dewey and the Pursuit of the Public." *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 38 (2005): 228. Stob draws this conclusion after a careful review of literature regarding the public sphere and counterpublics. Notably, he draws heavily on Dan Brower and Robert

Asen's edited collection *Counterpublics and the State*, which offers a distinctly rhetorical take on the public sphere. See Dan Brouwer & Robert Asen eds. *Counterpublics and the State*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001).

<sup>20</sup> Nancy Fraser, "Re-Thinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," *Social Text* 25 (1990): 61.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>22</sup> Importantly, Fraser contends that not all counterpublics are egalitarian or productive, but from the perspective of radical and plural democracy their articulation is *still* significant for the project of radical democracy.

<sup>23</sup> Warner, "Publics and Counter Publics," 423-424.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 424.

<sup>25</sup> Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (London: Verso, 2000): 104.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>27</sup> Chantal Mouffe, *On The Political* (London: Routledge, 2005): 24.

<sup>28</sup> Hate groups, for example, would not fit under the umbrella of "legitimate" political positions as defined by Mouffe.

<sup>29</sup> William Connolly, *Pluralism*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005): 43.

<sup>30</sup> Gilbert, *Performing Marginality*, 13. Italics added for emphasis.

<sup>31</sup> This is especially true of academic treatments of humor in psychology and interpersonal communication. Humor or one's sense of humor is almost always characterized as a possession of personal quality rather than a social phenomenon. See for example, Mahadev Apte, "Ethnic Humor Versus 'Sense of Humor,'" *American Behavioral Scientist* 30 (January-February 1987):

27-41 and Rod A. Martin, "Approaches to the Sense of Humor: A Historical Review," in Willibuld Ruch (ed.), *The Sense of Humor: Explorations of a Personality Characteristic* (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2007):15-60.

<sup>32</sup> John Limon *Stand-Up Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000): 12. Italics added for emphasis.

<sup>33</sup> Maurice Charland, "Constitutive Rhetoric: The case of the Peuple Quebecois," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 73, (May 1987): 133. Specifically, he references the Burkean notion of Identification found on pp. 19-22 of Burke's *Rhetoric of Motives* and McGee's, "In Search of 'The People': A Rhetorical Alternative" where he argues that "'The people' are more *process* than *phenomenon*. That is, they are conjured into objective reality, remain so long as the rhetoric which defined them has force, and in the end wilt away" (242)

<sup>34</sup> Charland, "Constitutive Rhetoric," 134.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 147.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 141.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 137.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. 148.

<sup>41</sup> Arthur Asa Berger, *An Anatomy of Humor* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1993): 1.

<sup>42</sup> Joseph Boskin, "History and Humor" in *The Humor Prism in 20<sup>th</sup> Century American*, Joseph Boskin ed. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997): 19.

<sup>43</sup> I am taking for granted that humor is the result of a cognitive, and therefore linguistic/symbolic, process. A pre-linguistic child can laugh, giggle, and show signs of amusement, but they do not experience humor. For more on this distinction see John Morreall ed., *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor* (Albany: State University of New York, 1987). or John Morreall, *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor (New Directions in Aesthetics)* (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2003).

<sup>44</sup> Gilbert, *Performing Marginality*, 15.

<sup>45</sup> What I mean to say is that the performer laughing at her or his own joke does not constitute the public's sense of humor. The laughter must be the laughter of a public.

<sup>46</sup> Joseph Boskin, *Rebellious Laughter* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1997): 1

<sup>47</sup> Elliot Oring, *Engaging Humor* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003): 97.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>49</sup> Kenneth Burke, *Counterstatement*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press): 124.

<sup>50</sup> All of the comedians mentioned here—and notably Dick Gregory—used conventional jokes in their performances, but they were far less common than the satirical narratives and diatribes that marked their form as different.

<sup>51</sup> There is an argument to be made about how music affected comic form because jazz was so instrumental to both Sahl's and Bruce's seemingly improvisational performing style. From the perspective of the public sense of humor construct, I would argue that what jazz provided for stand-up comedy was a public, and a public that had become accustomed to formulaic complexity. In this way, the jazz public prepared the way for the formulaic shift from simple jokes to complicated satires because their gratification required more nuance than the folks

spending their weekends vacationing in the Catskills. This probably explains why Mort Sahl toured with Dave Brubeck and not Glenn Miller.

<sup>52</sup> “The Sickniks,” *Time* July 13, 1959: 44.

<sup>53</sup> *Playboy’s Penthouse*, aired October 24, 1959 on CBS.

<sup>54</sup> “Harelip” is a derogatory term for the condition of having a cleft lip; the “Little Moron” jokes, as Joseph Boskin explains, eventually developed into “Polack jokes.” See Joseph Boskin, “The Giant and the Child: “Cruel” Humor in American Culture,” in *The Humor Prism in 20<sup>th</sup> Century American*, Joseph Boskin ed. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997): 187-194.

<sup>55</sup> Lenny Bruce, *How to Talk Dirty and Influence People* (New York: Fireside, 1992): 98-99

<sup>56</sup> Mort Sahl, *Heartland* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Jovanovich, 1976): 103-104. There are not any jokes about Kennedy being shot on any of the recordings that I have come across from the early 1960s—though Lenny Bruce reportedly took the stage the night of the assassination and said, “Boy, did [Kennedy Impersonator] Vaughn Meader get fucked.” Peter Robinson, *The Dance of the Comedians* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013): 139.

<sup>57</sup> Dana Cloud, “Null Persona: Race and the Rhetoric of Silence in the Uprising of ’34,” *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 2 (1999): 177-209.

<sup>58</sup> George Carlin with Tony Hendra, *Last Words* (New York, Free Press: 2009): 263.

<sup>59</sup> Dick Gregory with Robert Lipsyte, *Nigger* (New York: Pocketbooks, 1965): 132.

<sup>60</sup> Richard Pryor with Todd Gold, *Pryor Convictions and Other Life Sentences* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1995): 82.

<sup>61</sup> Gregory, *Nigger*, 132-133.

<sup>62</sup> Pryor, *Pryor Convictions*, 73.

<sup>63</sup> M. Lane Bruner, "Carnavalesque Protest and the Humorless State," *Text & Performance Quarterly* 25 (April 2005): 137.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>65</sup> Stephen Kercher, *Revel With a Cause: Liberal Satire in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006): 421.

<sup>66</sup> Bruce on *Playboy's Penthouse*

<sup>67</sup> Carlin, *Class Clown* (1972).

<sup>68</sup> Carlin, *Last Words*, 168.

<sup>69</sup> Stephen Kercher, *Revel With a Cause*, 438.

<sup>70</sup> Qtd. in James Sullivan, *Seven Dirty Words: The Life and Crimes of George Carlin* (Cambridge: Da Capo, 2010): 137.

<sup>71</sup> "The Meaning of Obscenity pt. 1/ Drew Pearson's a Sonofabitch." Lenny Bruce, *Buyer Beware*, Shout! Factory, 2004.

<sup>72</sup> "The Meaning of Obscenity pt. 2" Lenny Bruce, *Buyer Beware*, Shout! Factory, 2004.

<sup>73</sup> George Carlin, *Class Clown*, Little David, 1972.

<sup>74</sup> Lenny Bruce, *How to Talk Dirty and Influence People* (New York: Fireside, 1992): 53.

<sup>75</sup> Lenny Bruce, *Carnegie Hall Concert*, United Artists Records, 1961.

<sup>76</sup> Bruner, "Carnavalesque Protest," 149.

<sup>77</sup> Berger, *An Anatomy of Humor*, 9.

<sup>78</sup> Stand-up, as a genre, does utilize a spontaneous or improvisational style, but it is not *ever* completely spontaneous. Comics write jokes and perform them repeatedly. The organization may change, but the material rarely does. Even Lenny Bruce, the great improviser, repeated bits

and jokes with regularity. In fact, his improvisation was more akin to honing his routines on the stage than creating them anew in each performance.

<sup>79</sup> *The Social Contract* book 2 chapter 1—"I hold that sovereignty, being nothing less than the exercise of the general will, can never be alienated, and that the sovereign, which is nothing but a collective being, can't be represented except by itself: the power indeed may be transmitted, but not the will." Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, Early Modern Texts, Jonathan Bennett trans. Accessed on June 10, 2014

<http://www.earlymoderntexts.com/pdfs/rousseau1762book1.pdf>

<sup>80</sup> Nathan Crick, *Democracy & Rhetoric: John Dewey on the Arts of Becoming* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2010); William Connolly, *Pluralism*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

<sup>81</sup> For instance, polling, as Michael Hogan argues, "suggests not only that the public already has spoken but that the public 'speaks' *only* through the polls." J. Michael Hogan, "George Gallup and the Rhetoric of Scientific Democracy," *Communication Monographs* 64 (June 1997): 177.

<sup>82</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1984).

<sup>83</sup> Bergson, *Laughter*, 3.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>85</sup> Robert Hariman, "Political Parody and Public Culture," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 94 (August 2008): 257.

<sup>86</sup> Sheldon Wolin, "Fugitive Democracy," *Constellations* 1 (1994): 23.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>88</sup> Gerard A. Hauser, "Vernacular Dialogue and the Rhetoricity of Public Opinion,"

*Communication Monographs* 65 (June 1998): 86. Bold typeface original.

<sup>89</sup> As Hogan contends, polling is certainly rhetorical because even the most carefully worded questions will guide the answers and therefore the results, but because polling is expressed using statistical and scientific discourse it obscures its constitutive function.

<sup>90</sup> Pryor, *Pryor Convictions*, 138.

<sup>91</sup> The obvious counterargument to this claim is that one is capable of laughing at oneself. Even in this case, however, the laugher laughs because he or she can see their own situation from the perspective of another who laughs.

<sup>92</sup> Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Verso, 2001): 178.

<sup>93</sup> Gilbert, *Performing Marginality*: 56.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>97</sup> Lenny Bruce, *Carnegie Hall Concert*, United Artists Records, 1961.

<sup>98</sup> Andrea Greenbaum, "Stand-up Comedy as Rhetorical Argument: An Investigation of Comic Culture," *Humor* 12 (1999): 37

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>100</sup> John Poulakos, "Toward a Sophistic Definition of Rhetoric," *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 16 (1983): 41.



<sup>101</sup> Michael Richards famously blew up at a heckler during a Los Angeles appearance in 2006. His reaction demonstrated neither assurance nor *kairos* and therefore both his performance and *ethos* suffered as a result of his failed attempts to quell a heckler. By assuming a hostile and overtly racist posture toward his distracter, Richards failed to fulfill his comic responsibilities to cultivate laughter and therefore lost his audience. More on the Richards incident can be found on the documentary film, *Looking for Lenny*, directed by Paul Osborne (Borderline Films, 2011).

## CONCLUSION. STAND-UP SATIRE AS EQUIPMENT FOR CITIZENSHIP

By the time Jon Stewart had taken his seat behind the anchor's desk at *The Daily Show* and assumed the mantle of political satirist-in-chief in 1999, the dual trajectories of the American traditions of stand-up comedy and satire had already begun to go their separate ways. Stewart's predecessors in political satire, Mort Sahl and Dick Gregory, continued to perform and release the occasional album, but neither comic ever came close to the success they had known in the first half of the 1960s. Richard Pryor had been absent from the stage for nearly a decade and Lenny Bruce had been dead for more than three. Of the five comics considered in this dissertation, only George Carlin—whose political edge was only then finally coming into focus—could still command an audience for his stand-up satire.

This is not to say, of course, that either stand-up or satire had disappeared from the landscape of American comedy, but their combination, which provided the genesis for the form of contemporary stand-up comedy, had become a rare sight in comedy clubs. As a form, stand-up comedy boomed in the 1980s, waned in the 1990s, and—thanks in large part to Comedy Central, HBO, and the NBC talent show *Last Comic Standing*—re-established itself in the new millennium.<sup>1</sup> Even so, stand-up comedy has lost its distinction as the haven for satire that it enjoyed in its earliest incarnation at least in part because performing styles diversified as the form grew in popularity. For this reason, even though many stand-ups dabble in satirical material, it would be hard to label any stand-up comic who followed Carlin and Pryor—with the notable exception of Bill Hicks—a *satirist* in the tradition of Sahl, Gregory, and Bruce.

Following its own trajectory, satire, which was always comfortable in the popular press, blossomed in magazines including *The Realist* and *MAD* as well as the faux-news broadsheet *The Onion*. It became a fixture in television's sketch comedy and variety programs such as

*Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In*, *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour*, *In Living Color*, and the ever-present *Saturday Night Live*. And fifteen years after Jon Stewart moved into the spotlight, even though Sahl and Gregory are still around, political satire has almost completely transitioned from the stage to the small screen due to the popularity of late night television shows such as *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report*, *Real Time with Bill Maher*, and, most recently, *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*. What is particularly noteworthy about this transition is that although each of these programs utilizes the full bag of televisual tricks and conventions to get laughs, each host—excepting Stephen Colbert who was trained as an improvisational comic—earned his satirical stripes on the stand-up stage. In this way, the relationship between stand-up comedy and satire in our contemporary moment seems to recall the emergence of stand-up satire as a form in American popular culture. When it comes down to it, Jon Stewart is really just doing Mort Sahl's shtick; Stewart has a camera crew, an incredible writing staff, a larger nightly audience, and a much higher budget, but he just riffs on the news of the day with video clips instead of a newspaper. In this way, the historical development of stand-up satire has had significant bearing on current and emerging satirical rhetorics.

### **The Callback, or the *Reader's Digest* Condensed Version**

My argument over the course of this dissertation has been that stand-up satire, as a unique rhetorical form, provides important equipment for democratic citizenship to the members of its audience by modeling attitudes and behaviors that deepen democratic culture. Organized as a generic exploration of stand-up comedy, this study approached each of what Aristotle identifies as the three key aspects of any rhetorical exchange—the speaker, the message, and the audience—in terms of its democratic potential in order to reveal how stand-up satire provides an alternative model to otherwise common, serious articulations of the rhetoric of democracy.

In considering the stand-up comedian as a rhetor, I suggested that two features—the authenticity of persona and the oppositional quality of the comic’s perspective—equip citizens for democratic life. The notion of the authentic persona, performing through one’s own identity and history, provides a model by which members of the *demos* can emerge from within their own ranks to become spokespersons for subjectivities and experiences that may not otherwise be represented in public discourse. In addition, the oppositional perspective that undergirds satirical stand-up equips audience members to resist agency limiting labels that preclude public discussion by assuming outcomes rather than engaging in productive clash. Additionally, I have suggested that the terministic opposition of stand-up satire fosters an attitude of *ironic agonism* that makes anti-democratic antagonistic clash laughable and opens space for productive adversarial relations.

Treating satire as rhetoric, I argued that the form performs three quintessentially democratic functions. First, it translates the complexity of political myth into the language of the *demos*. Second, it juxtaposes political myth and experience in order to tell the truth about the world “as it is.” And third, it takes idealism seriously for the purpose of more perfectly realizing the idealistic potential of democratic culture. Concomitant to these claims, I revealed how the ontological tension between comedy and seriousness as modalities of discourse and the hegemonic nature of seriousness limits the possibility of comic dissent. Nevertheless, I maintain that in modeling these three democratic commitments, satire provides equipment for a citizenship of dissent that perpetuates democratic struggles and prepares its audience to challenge the official discourse of seriousness regardless of its hegemonic capacity by recognizing that the discourse of democratic politics is fundamentally multimodal.

Concerning the audience, I have indicated that stand-up satire creates not only a public, which is constituted by the satirical text, but also a counterpublic that stands in marginalized opposition to the official public sphere and the state. What is more, I maintain that satire is a constitutive rhetoric that, unlike traditional conceptions of such rhetorics, is distinctly dialogic because the audience participates in the construction of its subjectivity through laughter. In choosing to laugh or not to laugh at satirical material, stand-up audiences validate the standard by which public forms of humor are to be judged. They determine what is and is not laughable. In this way, I have suggested that the laughter of the comedic counterpublic is an alternative expression of the *vox populi* as the *ridere populi*—the laughter of the people. From this perspective, stand-up satire equips citizens for public life by providing a space for public humor, counterpublic formation, and an unconventional articulation of public voice.

Together these characteristics of stand-up satire comprise an equipment for citizenship that can renew and radicalize democratic culture because laughter is, as Bakhtin describes, a force of the people—of the *demos*. Importantly, I do not intend to argue that any singular satire or satirist is capable of such renewal. Instead, it is only through the stand-up satirists' requisite contact with the *demos* that democratic renewal is possible. It is only through the exchange of satire for laughter that any of the democratic potentials of satirical rhetorics can come to fruition. Indeed, each of the above-mentioned qualities of the rhetoric of satirical stand-up is constrained by or intended for use by some conception of the *demos*.

For instance, the comic's authentic persona is constrained by the symbolic imaginary of the cultural group from which it emerges and, at the same time, grants the comic the authority to act on behalf of that group. For this reason, by grounding their performance in their actual experiences and cultural identities, Richard Pryor and George Carlin could speak to, about, and

on behalf of the people for whom their persona appeared to be authentic. In this way, each comic gave voice to the subjectivity from which he emerged. Similarly, stand-up satire's oppositional perspective models perpetual critique that provides examples of criticism of the present moment for use by audience members even after the performance ends. At the same time, such a perspective also helps to cultivate an attitude of respectful irreverence that can be utilized for future criticism, thereby reinforcing for the public both the democratic necessity of struggle and the humanizing mode of interaction whereby the *demos* can maintain its capacity to engage actively in such struggles. In this way, Mort Sahl's willingness to satirically target both the political left and right provided the resources of perpetual critique for his audience that required them to struggle not only against their political opponents, but also with their own positions and predispositions. By indiscriminately targeting *power*, Sahl's satire reminded the *demos* that even those leaders who appear to represent their political inclinations undermine their capacity to rule over themselves.

In much the same way, the ontological struggle between the modalities of comedy and seriousness is predicated upon the notion that even the power wielded by the language of political myth and conferred upon the structures of officialdom rightfully belongs to the *demos*. The function of satire, in this way, is to render the mythological interpretations of the world in terms of the experience of actual members of the *demos*, to challenge idealists to keep to their ideals, and to equip citizens to act in kind. Satire thus provides a check on power on behalf of the people. This was certainly the case for both Dick Gregory's and Richard Pryor's routines about the incongruities between African American experiences and the political mythology of American citizenship. Each comic used his satire to point to the limits of democracy and the exclusion of African Americans from the *demos* constituted by the mythology upon which it

stands. Although it is marginalized in comparison to the resources of seriousness, satirical comedy requires the *demos* to attend to the misuses of power by the institutions that claim to exercise their authority on behalf of the people.

By opening spaces for the construction of publics and counterpublics, stand-up satire also serves the *demos* by constituting its collective subjectivity. The *demos* does not, and perhaps cannot, wield democratic authority by way of individual action. Rather, it requires the collective force of the *vox populi* to exert influence on the political structures that otherwise attempt to contain it. In this way, when the public continued to laugh at George Carlin's "heavy seven" in spite of the state's declaration that Lenny Bruce's material, though similar, was obscene, the *demos* revealed the power of its laughter to alter even the state's flexibility regarding humor. Cultivating laughter across diverse audiences, satirical stand-up keeps the public laughing at power and emphasizes the notion that any collective expression of the *demos*, even laughter, has power. What is more, by identifying subject positions that are anti-democratic—as in the obviously racist white character in Bruce's bit, "How to Relax Your Colored Friends at Parties"—stand-up satirists also provide a check on the *demos* that reminds it of the democratic ideals to which it should aspire.

Although there should be little doubt that stand-up satire carries significant democratic potential, it is not a discursive political panacea. Satire is an epideictic rhetoric. It speaks only to the here and now, even though it may do so with an eye toward the future. For this reason, it is limited to the symbolic resources of the present moment. It is not, in this sense, a creative endeavor, because it works with symbolic materials that have already been worked over. Its capacity for rhetorical invention is severely restricted. Satire does not, in this way, suggest original argument; instead it presents already existing arguments in different ways because it

builds from already existing enthymemes. It works to perfect our existing ideals, not to establish new ones. Satirical comedy is also limited by its requirement to oppose its subject. The joke work of satire is dependent upon ridicule and therefore some manner of negative judgment of its target. Thus satire cannot directly advocate, only oppose, because the laughter that completes the rhetorical exchange rests on the satirist's ability to provide the audience with a series of "thou shalt nots" rather than positive recommendations for action. Satire cannot say, "be like this" or "do this;" it can only say, "do not be like this" and "do not do this."<sup>2</sup>

In a way, each of these limitations stem from what is perhaps the most obvious of restrictions on satirical discourse—it *has to be funny*. Satire derives its authority from its comedic impact. If it gets laughs, then it can be effective. If it does not, then it cannot be so. Although this may seem obvious, it is complicated by the struggle between the modalities of seriousness and comedy and the satirical modus operandi of jesting earnestness. If the satirist takes a subject too seriously—as was the case for Lenny Bruce, Mort Sahl, and Dick Gregory by the end of their careers—then he or she runs the risk of undermining his or her own credibility because that credibility is predicated upon the ability to make the audience laugh at the satirized subject. This restriction also depends upon the audience and context for any satirical transaction. As George Carlin's post-9/11 self-censorship indicates, there are simply some things at which the public will not laugh, some subjects that are *too serious* for comedy.

### **Laughing and Learning While Learning to Laugh**

In identifying these uniquely democratic functions and limitations of the rhetoric of stand-up satire, this dissertation has, at the micro-level, advanced a series of theoretical arguments that provide points of conversation between otherwise disparate literatures from rhetorical studies, humor studies, and democratic theory. Although I believe that each of the



above-summarized arguments offers a unique contribution to these fields of study, three key arguments stand out as particularly significant.

First, by grounding any rhetorical consideration of comic discourse in terms of the ontological struggle between the competing modalities of seriousness and comedy, this dissertation provides inroads for building on existing scholarship that addresses the democratic potentials of comedic rhetoric, while also considering how the marginalized discourse of comedy can be brought to bear upon other manners of serious discourses. Second, drawing upon the well-developed rhetorical literature on persona, this study has expanded our understanding of the role of the comic persona in stand-up performances by offering “perceived authenticity” as a significant factor in determining the success and rhetorical potential of such performances. Third, in articulating the notion of the public sense of humor as a rhetorically constituted standard by which humorous discourse is evaluated, this dissertation offers a unique means of thinking not only about the sense of humor as being a public, rather than individual, quality, but also considering the audience’s role in dialogically constituting the transhistorical subjectivities implied by such standards.

From the perspective of democratic theory and rhetoric, this study provides a means by which other popular culture forms can be considered regarding their democratic potentials by offering a reinterpretation of Kenneth Burke’s notion of “equipment for living” as “equipment for citizenship.” This dissertation also builds on literature regarding the rhetoric of dissent by clearly defining how satire functions as a discourse of dissent and coalition building that can orient its audience toward a citizenship of dissent. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, this study suggests that laughter should be understood as an unorthodox expression of the *vox populi* that encapsulates public opinion differently than other available resources such as opinion

polling and voting. This final theoretical thrust is significant because it expands the field of political contest by recognizing a space for political struggle that is not typically considered as such. In this way, thinking of laughter as a voice of the people builds on Chantal Mouffe's commitment to radicalizing the public sphere by including "passions" alongside rational debate as valid political speech.

At the macro-level, this study offers critique and analysis of rhetors who have otherwise been overlooked by the rhetorical literature, even though they have had significant impact on American culture and the rhetoric of comedy.<sup>3</sup> By considering stand-up satire as a unique rhetorical form, this dissertation has also contributed to both scholarly conversations of stand-up comedy and satire more generally. Although Bruce, Gregory, and Sahl are often treated in humor studies literature about satire, the uniqueness of the form that they represent is almost never considered in those conversations and they are almost completely absent from the rhetorical literature.<sup>4</sup> In emphasizing stand-up satire, therefore, this dissertation adds to rhetorical considerations of satire, which typically favor parody—in large part because the field is smitten with Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert—and animated situation comedy such as *The Simpsons*, *Family Guy*, and *South Park*.<sup>5</sup> In so doing, this study helps to contextualize current and emerging satirical rhetorics by considering the historical development of satirical forms from within American culture.

### **Avenues for Future Research**

As is true of any scholarly endeavor there have been things omitted from this study. I do not believe that any singular exclusion invalidates the critique and theory building that I have undertaken in this dissertation; rather, I would suggest that any omission herein provides an opportunity for future scholarly consideration. Of note, there are no female performers featured

in this study. In part, this is due to existing scholarship—notably Joanne Gilbert’s exceptional research on women in stand-up comedy—but also, it speaks to the dearth of female stand-up comedians and satirists during the period under consideration for this dissertation. There were stand-up comediennes who would have been contemporaries of Sahl and company, notably Phyllis Diller, Jackie “Moms” Mabley, and Joan Rivers during the 1950s and 1960s, as well as Lily Tomlin during the 1970s. None of these women, however, featured the kind of satire exemplified by the five comics considered here as the cornerstone of their act. Their performances may have occasionally gestured toward the satirical, but they were not known as stand-up satirists. This difference, I think, begs the question, why? Stand-up satire was incredibly popular during the period of my analysis, but curiously there were no women utilizing—or perhaps recognized for utilizing—the form in their performances. I suspect that this is because women, who were hard enough to find in comedy clubs as it was, were discouraged from cultivating a satirical voice. Women were, and arguably still are, only barely permitted to be funny, but they were simply not permitted to be both funny and dangerous.

Similarly, aside from addressing both Gregory and Pryor specifically in terms of their race, there are no other comedians of color in my analysis. Just as my intention was not to explore the presence or absence of female satirists, neither was my intention to theorize or critique African American satire or the satire of other minority groups as a distinct form of comedy. In part, this is because there is already a rich tradition of scholarship regarding African American humor, but also because doing justice to such a study would require addressing the paucity of other satirists of color in the stand-up arena.<sup>6</sup> Apart from Jonathan Winters, who claimed Cherokee heritage, and the prevalence of Jewish comedians—Sahl and Bruce, for example—the discussion of race and satire would seem to begin and end with Gregory and

Pryor. In fact, until the 1970s, when Cheech Marin and Tommy Chong rose to popularity as a comedy duo, there were no noteworthy Latino or Asian stand-up comedians, let alone satirists, performing in the United States. In this way, stand-up satire seems to have been—and perhaps is still—a black and white matter.

Lastly, I have presented stand-up satire almost entirely in a favorable light. This is due, in large part, to the fact that my intention was to illuminate the democratic potentials of satire as equipment for citizenship. Satire's democratic potential, however, only tells one side of the story. There are certainly instances where satire can be used as an anti-democratic force because, even though it is a discourse of the people, the people are not always terribly democratic. For instance, Sahl, Bruce, and Pryor regularly peddled satire that was particularly misogynistic. Perpetuating a discourse that oppresses a significant portion of the *demos* is not especially democratic, but I do not believe that their sexism—which likely speaks more to their ideological and cultural context, than some personal motive to degrade women—completely undermines their potential to equip citizens for democracy. Nevertheless, the fact that their comedy was not *wholly* democratic serves as a powerful reminder that satire, even as a form with profound democratic potential, can also provide equipment for oppression. This opening, I believe, has the most to offer future attempts to understand the relationship between comedy—especially satire—and democracy.

### **Whether Satire? Whither Satire?**

Satire, as I have demonstrated, is a part of the very core of the American experience and, yet, it emerges only periodically as a renewing and democratizing force for the citizenry. Between World War I and the Great Depression, Will Rogers put down his lasso and picked up a microphone. His early iteration of stand-up satire captured the attention of the nation and

cultivated the *ridere populi*. The laughter ended with start of the Second World War and would not return until after the end of the Korean War. Fewer than six months after the signing of the Korean Armistice Agreement, however, Mort Sahl carried his newspaper onto the stage at the Hungry i and stand-up satire began to take hold of the culture again. Following Lenny Bruce's death in 1966, escalating conflict in Vietnam—notably the Tet Offensive in 1967—and the assassination of Martin Luther King in 1968, satire moved from center stage back to the wings until George Carlin and Richard Pryor resurrected it for their counterculture audience in 1972. Stand-up satire, in its counterculture incarnation, would rise to new heights of popularity and maintain its standing as a cultural force until the end of the decade. At the end of the 1970s, Carlin went on an extended cocaine run, Pryor lit himself on fire as a result of his own drug use, and their stand-up satire faded again into the background of the cultural cacophony. By the end of the twentieth century, stand-up satire was a form no longer recognizable to contemporary American audiences. Satire, however, did not disappear from the culture's comedic landscape. Instead, a former stand-up comedian, Jon Stewart, repackaged it for the small screen instead of the stage, and thereby reasserted the form as a fixture in American culture.

Throughout history, satire has ebbed and flowed as a significant form of American public culture. For this reason, as is true for rhetoric, the question is not whether satire, but whither satire? The question is not if it will be, but how it will be in the future. Satire, as history indicates, will always re-emerge in fitting times. It will change with the public it serves just as its stand-up iteration underwent a metamorphosis between Will Rogers and the new comedians and then another with the rise of the counterculture comedians. With each new manifestation of satire, the public is provided new and differing equipment for citizenship appropriate to its era. This is not to say that each version of satire reinvents this equipment anew. Instead, it is to

suggest that just as any constitutive rhetoric builds upon previously constituted rhetorics, the equipment for citizenship provided by satire extends the equipments imparted by previous incarnations of the form. When Jon Stewart moved from the stage to the screen, the form took more seriously the charge of translating seriousness into the language of the *demos* and, at the same time, brought to maturity the ability for satire to equip citizens for information dissemination in an increasingly mediated culture. Sahl riffed on current events in such a way that he equipped citizens to act in kind, but Stewart's satirical take on the news incorporates an additional equipment that prepares citizens to better wade through the fog of information that characterizes twenty-first century public life.

Presently, the form of satire has risen to a peak in its cultural oscillation. History suggests that even though *The Daily Show* and programs like it have been popular for fifteen years that we are likely not far from another period of satirical famine. Given the fact that Stewart's Comedy Central comrade, Stephen Colbert, has announced that he will be leaving his program and, perhaps more importantly, his satirical character, behind when he takes over for David Letterman as the host of *The Late Show* in 2015, it could well be that such a satirical sea change is closer on the horizon than many suspect. If such a fate is in store for satire and its comedic counterpublic, the question is not if it will return, but when will it return and when it does, what new equipment will it provide?

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Of course, the 1990s did enjoy an uptick in sit-coms based on stand-up comedy and stand-up comedians, but many of those performers—Jerry Seinfeld, Rosanne Barr, and Tim Allen, for instance—rose to prominence in the 1980s.

<sup>2</sup> In fact, I cannot think of a comic form that can actually advocate and still get a laugh. Even parodic tribute is laced with some manner of negative judgment or deep ambivalence toward its subject. This may be a more universal characteristic of humor than I originally expected.

<sup>3</sup> With the exception of Pryor, who is the subject of a pair of published essays. Jonathan Rossing, “Critical Race Humor in a Postracial Moment: Richard Pryor’s Contemporary Parrhesia,” *Howard Journal of Communication* 25 (February 2014): 16-33; Evan Cooper, “Is it Something He Said: Mass Consumption of Richard Pryor’s Culturally Intimate Humor,” *The Communication Review* 10 (2007): 223-247.

<sup>4</sup> Most rhetorical research on satire, as noted in the introduction, addresses television. Beyond rhetoric, if you add literature to the texts under consideration then between the two media you would find the vast majority of the texts used in scholarly treatments of satire. What is more, even when stand-up comics are brought into the mix, their satire is usually conflated with satire from other media. I add the caveat “almost” to this final claim because Joanne Gilbert does make a passing reference or two to Lenny Bruce. See Joanne Gilbert, *Performing Marginality: Humor Gender and Cultural Critique* (Detroit, Wayne State University Press, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> See Jonathan Gray, Jeffrey Jones & Ethan Thompson, eds., *Satire TV: Politics and Comedy in the Post-Network Era* (New York: New York University Press, 2009); Jonathan Gray, *Watching with The Simpsons: Television Parody and Intertextuality*. (London: Routledge, 2006);

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Mel Watkins, *African American Humor: The Best Black Comedy from Slavery to Today* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2002); Mel Watkins, *On the Real Side: A History of African American Comedy from Slavery to Chris Rock* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 1999); Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifyin' Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).



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