THE COMEDY ROAST AS AMERICAN RITUAL: PERFORMING RACE AND GENDER

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation examines comedy roasts as an American form of cultural ritual. It focuses on selected televised comedy roasts from the mid-twentieth century to the present. A roast is an event when a panel honors a well-known public figure, usually an entertainer and sometimes a politician. Notably, the process of "honoring" the person involves ridicule, lampooning, and carefully crafted insults known as "roasting." A roast's overt content is significant, but it is also necessary to recognize that the structure and context of roasts provide insight into the positioning of power and the changing social hierarchies in America since 1900. The roast format may appear to perpetuate racist and bigoted comedic actions, but rather than dismiss the cultural ritual on that account, the dissertation's research intervention explores how roast rituals reflect the tensions and contradictions in their evolving social contexts.

The project's focus on performance rituals and culturally specific developments, rather than ahistorical aesthetic, philosophical, or psychological studies of comedy or humor in the abstract, places it within the interdisciplinary field of American Culture Studies. Applying a multidisciplinary approach to four case studies, *The Dean Martin Celebrity Roast: Sammy Davis Jr* (1975, ABC), *The Dean Martin Celebrity Roast: Joan Collins* (1985, ABC), *The Comedy Central Roast of Pamela Anderson* (2005, Comedy Central), and the *Comedy Central Roast of Flavor Flav* (2007, Comedy Central), the dissertation shows how the changing dynamics in comedy roasts are closely intertwined with developments in American values, identity, and inequalities. The analysis of the participants and their performances reveals that roasts can be a useful site of analysis of shifting cultural developments.

This project traces the American form of ritual from its development from Vaudeville performance of the early twentieth century to the Friars Club in the 1940s, and to the televised performance roasts of today. Framing the roast as a performance ritual allows for analyzing the ritual as a unique, heightened experience for participants. The case studies selected represent specific snapshots that bring focus to various tensions and contradictions of representing race and gender through television. Although the roast is defined by formal properties deviations and ritual rifts further the focus on contradictions among representation. The roast ritual will continue to serve as a unique and productive site to further understand race and gender through a televisual medium.

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CHAPTER ONE. THE ROAST AS AMERICAN RITUAL

This dissertation examines comedy roasts as a uniquely American form of cultural ritual. The focus is on televised comedy roasts from the mid-twentieth century to the present, in which a panel honors a well-known public figure, usually an entertainer or sometimes a politician. Notably, the process of "honoring" the person involves ridicule, lampooning, and carefully crafted insults known as "roasting." A roast's overt content is significant, but it is also necessary to recognize that the structure and context of roasts provide insight into the positioning of power and the changing social hierarchies in America since 1900. The roast format may appear to perpetuate racist and bigoted comedic actions, but rather than dismiss it immediately on that account, the vital point of this research intervention is to explore how the performance highlights the dynamic tensions and contradictions in evolving social contexts. I argue that analysis of the participants and their performances reveals that roasts are a form that allows both participants and observers to see how various social hierarchies and power structures can be constantly in flux and dependent on larger cultural contexts.

In this project, I examine comedy roasts as a type of ritual performance with explicit and implicit rules for the target of roasts (often labeled the "guest of honor"), the roasters, and the audience. However, these roles are fluid, and some roasts include just the guest of honor and the participants, who constitute the audience. Thus, I refer to all involved in the ritual, whether the roasted or the roaster, as roast participants. This use of wording is significant because, as I will discuss, the roles of roaster, roastee, performer, and audience can shift and overlap for each individual throughout the roast. Additionally, televised roasts include an audience separated by physical and even temporal distance.

Researching American comedy roasts is significant because these cultural rituals provide an opportunity to examine forms of power and their evolving limits. Analyzing the instability of roasts' performance dynamics and boundaries requires examining cultural and media representations of identity. It also involves recognizing that roasts allow participants to explore social norms and reform social bonds that sometimes support and sometimes reconfigure dominant power relations. The performance of power relations in American comedy roasts is inextricable from cultural identity. Thus, roasts provide a helpful lens for contextualizing identity within US popular culture. This chapter provides an overview of the main theoretical approaches used in the study, with performance studies and ritual providing the main framework.

Contribution to the Field of American Culture Studies

The 2018 White House Correspondents' Dinner, an annual event in which a comedian delivers a speech in the style of a roast of the current president and their administration, inspired my investigation of comedy roasts. Comedian Michelle Wolf's commentary on the Trump administration and Sarah Huckabee Sanders, White House Press Secretary from 2017 to 2019, created a broader conversation about the role of comedy roasts in public discourse and civility politics (Stewart 2018). Most objections to Wolf's performance by the administration and others arose because, in this instance, their involvement in the roast occurred outside of the ritualistic rules that typically occur in roasts. Yet this event also sparked interest in how roasts and the act of roasting can serve as a way to uncover social contradictions because roasts reflect comedy's longstanding ability to generate social commentary and ritual's established role in negotiating social tensions. When investigating the origins of the roast, I found that although the roast's formal properties persist through time, the roast's performance has changed throughout the last half-century, particularly when considered through the lenses of race and gender. The roast's

form is a structure that retains familiar elements throughout time. However, its form is merely a container that facilitates changing relationships and social contexts of identity.

By situating the roast as a cultural object of study, this dissertation uses an interdisciplinary methodology, including performance studies, feminist studies, and a cultural studies approach to race. This multifaceted approach represents a needed intervention because little academic research exists on the roast as a ritual or venue for ideological analysis; most published work is in the popular press, which celebrates rather than analyzes the roast (Dougherty, 200). Current comedy scholarship primarily focuses on stand-up and sketch comedy, with the roast seen simply as a variation of stand-up comedy. Although theoretically and aesthetically tied to stand-up, the comedy roast is a unique cultural entity.

It is important to note what will not be included in this dissertation. Comedy roasts are certainly a significant part of comedy studies. The participants are often stand-up comedians. Although both fascinating and insightful, the structure of jokes and language and the psychological, physiological, and cognitive understanding of humor are not the focus of this dissertation. Roasts represent a distinct type of performance that constitutes a genre with its own form and cultural dynamics. Thus, my research focuses on the form and performance of comedy roasts rather than the aesthetics of jokes. The project recognizes that the content of specific roasts is important, but instead of asking the ahistorical question (why are insults funny?) or analyzing texts to assess their entertainment value, it examines how the conventions of the comedy roast ritual have been used in changing social contexts from the early twentieth century forward.

The project's focus on culturally specific developments rather than ahistorical aesthetic, philosophical, or psychological studies of comedy or humor in the abstract places it within the interdisciplinary field of American Culture Studies. The dissertation's methodological

orientation is designed to facilitate examining roasts as an American conception and as popularized by American television. Moreover, the particular form of the comedy roast is not just an American Culture Studies subject because it has developed within America's geographic confines; the changing dynamics in comedy roasts are closely intertwined with shifts and developments in American values, identity, and inequalities. The roast rituals thus reflect the dominant American culture of its time and challenge to prevailing norms. Along with providing needed critical insight into comedy roasts, I offer new knowledge to challenge the idea that comedy roasts have no social or political implications; recent evidence suggests that they reveal both the strength of existing norms and challenges to them. My choice of case studies includes guests of honor, who, although they retain power, respect, and influence in their chosen careers, represent non-dominant identities. The juxtaposition of cultural power and non-dominant identity is a rich source of contradiction and tension in the roast performance.

Key Research Questions

My methodology includes interdisciplinary approaches to the text, context, and spectator interpretation. I consider the following research questions:

1. What historical-cultural factors encouraged the establishment of the American roast?
2. How has the roast reflected, sustained, and challenged dominant racist heteropatriarchal culture over time?
3. What salient cultural and material factors have shaped or amended the dynamics of comedy roasts and their participants?
4. How do the participants' performances within the boundaries of the ritual create opportunities to reveal contradictions and tensions of cultural norms?

Theoretical Approaches

Extensive scholarly research about comedy roasts is absent. The few mentions are afterthoughts or assume that roasts are merely an extension of stand-up comedy. Roasts appear as part of studies that focus on a particular performer's body of work (Goltz 2015) or study the content without considering the roast's form as significant (Novak and Jamillah El-Burki 2016). Other scholars lament that disciplines such as anthropology and sociology have not yet taken up the serious study of roasts (Oring 2003; Test 1983). Thus, the comedy roast requires a new intervention that defines it as a unique cultural phenomenon rather than an extension of current comedy studies.

My primary methodology for studying the roast is through performance studies and, more specifically, ritual performance. Within the performance approach, I draw on the cultural history of Vaudeville, representations of Blackness in popular culture, the carnivalesque, and feminism. My multi-focused approach reflects my drive to understand roasts as a dynamic subject that often generates contradictions and instabilities.

Performance, Play, and Ritual: A New Model for Roasts

Studying roasts requires a theoretical model because televised roasts' popularity conjures a comedy genre associated with professional comedians. Of course, the content is comedic and requires a comedian's skill in both delivery and the actual jokes. Interrogating the phenomenon of why the roast happens and why it continues to occur reveals a simple answer: it is enjoyable. The roast is not a fully formed event written or created by one person; it is a group effort with repeated structures, orders, and contexts. What happens is important. Thus, I stress the study of how the roast happens, why it continues to occur, and what aids its continued existence. Therefore, my working definition of a roast is an American ritual performance originating from

Vaudeville rituals, whose form, rules, and power differentials drive its persistence through varied contexts. I do not claim this as a universal definition; this does not even describe other elements of the roast, including any mention of the joke structure of comedians. However, the previous statement is vital in that it describes how the roast content is a vehicle for shifting power dynamics. I see it as the definition needed to understand roasts outside the realm of comedy's aesthetics. The roast is the platform for the comedy to emerge. The comedy is not accidental, but it is incidental. To further parse out my definition, it is necessary to consider performance, ritual, and play.

Performance studies is the umbrella term for the interdisciplinary, multi-method field born from, but not limited to, traditional theater studies, anthropology, cultural studies, and sociology. Richard Schechner's work is significant because he liberated the idea of performance from the binary of performers and audience (Schechner 2003). Performance studies also blurs the boundaries between theater as high art, low art, and everyday life. Stage and daily life are considered places of performance. Performance theory, a central discipline of performance studies, claims that the context of performance, alongside the aesthetic aspects, is worthy of study. Schechner's work is also significant for extending rituals beyond the realm of ethnographic study, allowing for the analysis of less formalized rituals that are transformative to all participating. In *Between Theater and Anthropology* (2000), he argues that scholars no longer search for "quantifiable differences between cause and effect, past and present, form and content, et cetera (and the linear modes of analyses that explicate such a world view)" (Schechner 2000, 33). In other words, performance does not happen unilaterally—that is, from performer to audience and in a linear line of time. Performance permeates beyond the rise and fall of the curtains on stage. Instead, the analysis focuses on "the deconstruction/reconstruction of

actualities: the processes of framing, editing, and rehearsing; the making and manipulating of strips of behavior" in formalized contexts and daily life (33). Strips of behavior can be scripted, improvised, or recreated from everyday situations. "Actors" are defined not by their profession but rather by their role in the interaction. The stage is no longer a restricted structure separated from the audience.

Most importantly, the audience is not a passive viewer but an essential component that influences all performances. A comedy roast is not what one would consider a traditional theater experience. It is not a high-brow form of entertainment, nor do the participants perform fully scripted performances. Even a stand-up comedy performance is different; in that case, the performer engages in a conversation with the audience, whereas there are more vectors of performance in a roast. As I have mentioned, to study roasts as a ritual is to look beyond the aesthetic quality of the humor involved and see the contexts and performances that shape the ritual.

Restored Behavior

Roasts contain what Schechner refers to as "restored behavior." Performance does not need to be for entertainment alone or to happen in an official capacity. Schechner emphasizes that performance can be studied in various spaces using the idea of "restored behavior," which posits that performances contain actions from previous thoughts, constructs, and identities (Schechner 2000, 33). As Schechner explains, restored behavior "is symbolic and reflexive: not empty but loaded behavior multivocally broadcasting significances" (33). He proposes that in performing "restored behavior," the "self can act in/as another; the social or transindividual self is a role or set of roles" (33). Because performances go beyond scripted performances, the

performers can act like themselves in different contexts and often act out different versions of themselves.

A common example is a sporting match; the athletes play a role for the audience in the context of the game, although this is not a completely made-up character, nor is the action scripted. The audience is an integral part of the performance in a match, as evidenced by the difference between a game played at a packed stadium and an empty one. Multidimensional individuals play roles for audiences that are also frequently in flux. To call something a performance does not imply that an audience is immediately present, nor that the audience and performer are separate entities. All individuals involved are participants in the performance with shifting and dynamic roles. Participants shift between performer and audience roles; often the roles are indistinguishable, as will be explored in case studies.

Entertainment and Efficacy

Schechner's entertainment versus efficacy model provides more context on why the roast is a ritualized performance. Liberating performance from a formal stage does not mean that it eliminates a theatrical experience. Instead, it forces the participant to consider the dimensions of performance with a constantly fluctuating meaning. The offstage/onstage, performer/audience, and aesthetics/emotional boundaries are in constant flux. The performance theory model argues that these are frequently in flux and emphasizes the focus on performance, rather than considering the textual elements of a performance (such as script and scenery). Schechner proposes that performance exists along a spectrum of entertainment and efficacy, constantly in a dynamic suspension between the two at any given time. Efficacy brings forth a transformation among those involved in all roles of performance. Entertainment denotes a separation between audience and performance, where the performers are experts at their craft, and the audience

appreciates the artistic value. Schechner explains: “When efficacy dominates, performances are universalistic, allegorical, ritualized, tied to a stable, established order; this kind of theater persists for a relatively long time. When entertainment dominates, performances are class-oriented, individualized, show business, constantly adjusting to the tastes of fickle audiences” (2000, 119). Roasts rituals are efficacious because of the interactions, responses, and relationships between participants. The reaction of a roast joke’s target is essential to the joke’s performance, and it creates tension and spontaneity. These aspects explore various power dynamics and reflect tensions from the current cultural context. Furthermore, roast participants perform some scripted material, but participant interactions and affirmations drive the performance in the moment. The roast becomes entertainment when it became popular on television, with “professional” roast participants performing for audiences at home as a packaged performance. However, efficacy and entertainment are not a strict binary. Thus, a study of roasts must consider how the participants present themselves as both efficacious and entertainment within the same space. Efficacy shows how performers display their in-the-moment reactions. Reactions show formal, personal, and cultural boundaries being tested or crossed. As entertainment, televised roasts become cultural benchmarks of the time and place.

As I will discuss, roasts began as more closed, private affairs, but once they gained popularity, they were performed for audiences, although still exclusive and small. Roasts were easily adapted to television, which aligns them more towards the entertainment end of the spectrum. There are the obvious influences of television: performances contain editing, taboo topics and vulgarity are limited, and the essential liveness of the experience is absent. However, I argue that the sustainability of the original form is a testament to the efficaciousness of the roast form. The element of televised performance does not hinder the roast nor fundamentally change

the ritual. On the contrary, it provides a different context into which the form persists and adapts. The retaining of a recognizable form across different contexts is due to the power of ritual performance.

Roast as Ritual(ization)

Within the discipline of performance studies, ritual performance provides a way of studying roasts beyond the surface and probes the roast's efficacy and transformative nature. With the assertion that the roast is a performance ritual, I must mention the tumultuous academic approach to the study of ritual. Previously routed in religious studies and anthropology, rituals were observed by outsiders who sought to place exact meanings and reasons for the rituals. In other words, scholars assumed that the ritual's function is to meet a specific goal, containing a cause-and-effect purpose.

Furthermore, the study of the ritual was a way to study communities that scholars at the time perceived to be primitive and othered. One of the first studies of ritual insults in the United States was conducted by folklorist Roger D. Abrahams on "playing the dozens" in inner-city African American communities in the 1900s. This ritual is of particular relevance to roasts because they employ the performance of insults. However, playing the dozens is rooted in Black inner-city culture, which was othered and considered inferior at the time of the study and continues through present studies. Playing the dozens describes an event that involves young men trading insults (often involving the target's mother) as a competitive game. After observing this, Abrahams concluded that the ritual "is an early example of the infantile fixation illustrated by the use of agonistic rhymed verbal forms, a neurotic symptom which is observable in many Negro males through much of their lives" (1962, 209). Abrahams also postulated that, because single mothers raised most young Black men, they needed to exert masculinity to protest their

matriarchal environment. Not only are Abrahams's claims marred by stereotypical thinking and insufficient research, but the argument also concentrates more on finding a definitive meaning or cause of the game rather than on how the performance of the ritual provides meaning for the participants.

Furthermore, this ritual occurs among members of an already marginalized culture, so the dynamics of power and resistance take on more complex forms and cannot be explained simply by cause and effect. Focusing on what a ritual means or conveys does not leave room for how the performance of a ritual shifts, deconstructs, and actively changes personal and social dynamics. Furthermore, early anthropological studies often promoted white, male, and western interpretations of the "other," thus replicating and perpetuating stereotypes. Consider applying the question of "what it means" to roasts. On the surface, one could answer that it is an entertaining way to honor someone. Others could say that it is a fun game. However, a roast is not the only way to accomplish these things. Why a roast in particular? The roast does not have to produce a definitive outcome, but what happens during the performance is critical.

To shift perspective to the performance of a roast rather than the purpose, I turn to the more recent work of Catherine Bell (2009) and to Schechner's work on ritual (2000; 2003), which builds on Bell's framework. Bell contests previous scholarship on ritual to show that a ritual reveals a culture's specific embodied truth. Previous research has also attempted to categorize rituals, ranging from the informal (such as family dinners) to the formal (such as Sunday mass). According to Bell, categorizing types of rituals (as Abrahams does) devalues the critical functions of rituals of all kinds, including those that take place beyond formal circumstances. Bell prefers the term "ritualization" because creating taxonomies of rituals makes assumptions about what the rituals mean. Ritualization "focus[es] more clearly on (1) how

ritualization as practice distinguishes itself from other practices and (2) what it accomplishes in doing so" (Bell 2009, 89). In simple terms, instead of asking *what this ritual means*, Bell reframes the analysis to study *what happens* during the ritual. The emphasis on what it accomplishes in the time and space in which it occurs is more significant than determining a definite meaning for the ritual. Each performance of the ritual can have various meanings. Bell's use of ritualization also asks the important questions, "under what circumstances are such activities distinguished from other forms of activity? How and why are they distinguished? What do these activities do that other activities cannot or will not do?" (Bell 2009, 70). It seems counterintuitive for an academic investigation of cultural performance to resist asking why and instead concentrate on what. Concentrating on the roast as ritualized performance allows for multiple meanings to occur at the same time.

Ritualization marries two camps of thought in ritual study: ritual as a distinct performance different from human activity (and therefore symbolic). The other idea is that ritual is a heightened social performance of activity seen elsewhere. This argument lies in the perception that ritual has a specific goal for those performing it. Bell notes that "in ritual activity, the relationship between ends and means is rule-governed, routinized, symbolic, or noninstrumental. By contrast, technical activity is pragmatic, spontaneous, and instrumentally effective" (Bell 2009, 70). The roast certainly has rules and structures, but formal rules alone do not make a roast. The overall purpose of the roast is to honor someone. However, honoring someone can be performed in various ways, not just in a roast. Performing the act of honoring in a roast ritual creates symbolic meaning within the ritual boundaries. As Bell explains, "The expressive aspects of ritual are usually considered to be more authentic to ritual per se than its pragmatic aspects, which may even be characterized as magical" (2000, 89). In this context,

"magical" refers to events that appear to happen without any other efforts or direct causes. Ritualization is a way of masking what is happening, albeit not duplicitously; the performance provides the opportunity for collective transformation rather than individual participation.

As I will discuss in later chapters, the power differentials among the participants may shift from those who hold more power in show business to those who hold more power in cultural hegemony. These thoughts are not diametrically opposed. Rather, the shift is constantly in motion. In many rituals, including roasts, individuals of varying power levels—power being defined as contextual to the group performing—engage with each other in ways not available in everyday life. Bell identifies three significant oppositions in ritualization: "(1) the vertical opposition of superior and inferior, which generates hierarchical structures; (2) the horizontal opposition of … us and them, which generates lateral or relatively egalitarian relationships; and (3) the opposition of central and local, which frequently incorporates and dominates the preceding oppositions" (2009, 89). These oppositions can take on various meanings in context and are never fixed, even within the same performance. The oppositions of us versus them and superior versus inferior inform the studies included in the following chapters.

According to Schechner, rituals, despite having the same formal properties each time they occur, do not have a fixed meaning. In *The Future of Ritual*, Schechner asks, "If these interactions are the 'real events' rituals enfold, then what are the rituals themselves?" (2003, 230). To answer the question, he explains, "They are ambivalent symbolic actions pointing at the real transactions even as they help people avoid too direct a confrontation with these events. Thus, rituals are also bridges—reliable doings carrying people across dangerous waters" (2003, 230). In other words, the content of rituals is deceptive in that it may appear to imitate one sort of behavior (a heightened version of events), but what happens during the ritual may find another

meaning entirely. In contrast, when the elements are repeated and recognized (like a bride and groom's first dance, a family gathering for a meal at the same time each week, or a group performing a festival celebrating the harvest), the familiar elements do not have a stable meaning. Instead, the embodiment of the recognized ritual form changes as it appears in different contexts. Thus, the idea that rituals simply "preserve traditional actions" is inaccurate. Rituals are often associated with the idea of the "traditional" and "the older ways of doing things." Yet, in a performance studies analysis, the research considers that rituals can also transform the people who enact and witness the ritual.

As I have discussed, a roast is considered a roast because it contains recognizable elements: a guest of honor, participants taking turns roasting the guest of honor, responding to roasts, and laughing at other participants' roasts, and others. These are what define the roast; the roast takes its form from the definition. However, ritualization means that these forms can and will change; their transformation strengthens the ritual over time. A ritual with rigid rules that can never change cannot adapt over time. Furthermore, each ritual's performance is never the same, even if the same people are involved. A fully scripted performance is never the same for each performance. A roast is always different, as roast jokes are rarely if ever, used again, even if the same people are participating in a different roast. The elements of reaction and response are crucial to the roast, and although different, the reactions happen within the structure of a ritual.

Stanley J. Tambiah presented a further challenge to how ritual is perceived. Like Bell and Schechner, he challenged the longstanding assumption that rituals directly engage the ritual participants with the meaning of their own culture. Tambiah adds to this idea that rituals distance the participants from the meanings. At the same time, "cultural elaboration of codes consists in the distancing from such spontaneous and intentional expressions because spontaneity and

intentionality, are or can be, contingent, labile, circumstantial, even incoherent and disordered" (Tambiah 1979, 124). Thus, the comedy roast is heightened, out of the ordinary performance for the participants, and "distancing separates the private emotions of the actors from their commitment to a public morality" (124). If a ritual were rigid and always the same, the roast would not be a successful ritual. Success is a complete performance of the ritual. I will discuss ritual "failures" and mistakes in Chapter Five.

At the time, Tambiah's view was a challenge to current scholarship, in which observers assumed that rituals were a direct mirror of the participants' beliefs. Tambiah's argument of distancing, however, certainly does not negate any meaningful purpose of a performance ritual. On the contrary, the distancing from the culture allows for the mutation and reshaping of meaning. This model is a good match for the comedy roast ritual because it is so out of the ordinary, a heightened, almost magical reality that places the participants in an unusual atmosphere without the restrictions of decency and public moral codes. The roast, a more exclusive, private event, altered the ritual by transforming it into a televised production. The ritual never starts as one thing and then changes; the external contexts (like a roast filmed for television) change the performance elements of the ritual. Still, the recognizable form of the ritual exists despite the adjustments due to external forces.

Play

Whereas ritual is the container in which roasts occur, play happens within the ritual and preserves the form. If ritual represents a plot of land, play is the blueprint for building the roast. Although I argue that rituals are not static and do change, some elements need to remain to make them recognizable. While I previously named what loosely defines a roast, these are not explicit directions participants receive. People engaging in a roast know they are engaging in a roast because implicit rules are followed and often pushed to the limits. Boundaries, both physical and

social, are what define the roast. Roast participants engage in play to establish the boundaries of the roast.

The concept of play crosses the fields of psychology, evolutionary biology, child development, and performance. For these purposes, I identify the play associated with performance. However, even within performance, play is so closely associated with the ritual that some scholars find separating the two difficult (Huzinga 1976; Caillois and Barash 2011). Ritual and play share the characteristics of having a designated space, time, and rules. Just as I approach roasts as performance, I am interested in examining the how and not the why of play. Although there is a slight distinction, I use the terms "play" and "game" synonymously for this study. The discourse of why humans and other animals engage in play can be related to evolution and biological adaptation; what is important here is that play occurs in adult life and is not just what people assume is for children. Sports' popularity in both participation and spectatorship is proof that play is a significant element of everyday life; play does not just occur in leisure time.

Among the various scholarly pursuits of play, I turn to Roger Caillois's *Man, Play, and Games* (1984) to explain how play creates necessary social and physical boundaries. Caillois names four rules of play:

(1) Free: playing is not obligatory; if it were, it would at once lose its attractive and joyous quality as a diversion. (2) Separate: circumscribed within limits of space and time, defined and fixed in advance. (3) Uncertain: the course of which cannot be determined, nor the result attained beforehand, and some latitude for innovations being left to the player's initiative.

> (4) Unproductive: creating neither goods, nor wealth, nor new elements of any kind; and, except for the exchange of property among the players, ending in a situation identical to that prevailing at the beginning of the game. (5) Governed by rules: under conventions

> that suspend ordinary laws, and for the moment establish new legislation, which alone counts. (6) Make-believe: accompanied by a special awareness of a second reality or of a free unreality, as against real life. (Caillois 1984, 9)

To engage in play is to understand and agree to all the above, even if not explicitly. Again, we must remember that the play remains within a ritual even when the contexts change and even in a private event or a televised performance. I continue to stress that the televised version of roasts does not diminish the ritual. Television amplifies the boundaries of play, making it more apparent what is going on and what to expect. Once televised, the ritual becomes a performance genre yet still has a foot in a social ritual's efficacy. Roasts continue to happen because the participants learn the rules from seeing them on television. Individuals may alter roasts to their needs, but the form is still recognizable. Recently, drag queen roasts have risen in prominence (McKinnon 2017), likely due to the influence of *RuPaul's Drag Race* (VH1, 2009–present), another televised, produced event. The ritual purists who only observe ritual as an ethnographic discovery obscure the importance of television for rituals.

A roast is unproductive (Caillois's fourth rule of play) because there is no exchange of property. Most importantly, it "ends in a situation identical to that prevailing at the beginning of the game," which is not to say that the participants are unchanged by the game. When a roast is over, demarcated by the guest of honor addressing the dais, the participants revert to the game's original social hierarchy. Insults are no longer socially acceptable, and people leave the feelings in the magic circle behind. However, this does not mean a transfer of power or personal transformation within the magic circle is insignificant. On the contrary, it is part of why the ritual persists and changes over time. The conundrum here is that it can only happen within a specific time restricted by the magic circle and the rules of play. The term "unproductive" becomes

complicated when applied to the roast. Once roasts become televised, participants are paid for their appearance and television networks benefit financially. Participants also gain exposure and clout which will lead to material benefits. However, unproductive refers specifically to the ritual performance itself; there is no material gain in the immediate performance; benefits are due to things that happen outside the magic circle (i.e., performers getting paid for their appearance).

I borrow the term "magic circle" from gaming studies to explain how play exists within the roast's boundaries and maintains the rules. The magic circle refers to a physical space that someone voluntarily enters to signal that they consent to the game (Stenros 2012). These rules of the game derive from prior knowledge and those collectively created and reinforced during play. This is important because, in a roast, participants understand the form and bring pre-written material (prior knowledge). Still, a roast's performance requires a unique choreography of verbal sparring, reactions of laughter, and improvised moments guided by those within the magic circle. This collective game creates a heightened, out-of-the-ordinary ritual nature that opens the opportunity for transformation and resistance (Huzinga 1976). Here, another seeming contradiction occurs: the tension of breaking points establishes the boundaries. The boundaries are known and most effective when a player threatens to surpass and ignore them. A roast would not have this power and distancing effect if the insults were not personal, biting, or clever. The most compelling part of a roast is when a participant almost goes too far, touching the boundaries of what is too much. The further some participants go, the more the boundary stretches for others. Boundaries are not just for the ones hurling the insults. The roast rules also establish that participants cannot be offended within the magic circle because they agreed to play. To push this boundary, a person may appear to be surprised at the level of insult, be shocked at its absurdity, or feign anger before revealing the anger to be a ruse. Above all, the

person should never show real insult. To show insult would annihilate the structure of the game and render the group a failure.

In summary, I have used performance theory, ritualization, and play to emphasize that rituals have specific definitions. Considering the roast as ritualization allows for adaptation across time and contexts. The critical question is *what happens during the ritual* rather than *what does it mean*. Using performance theory background, I have set up the lens to shift from a unified meaning and intention of the roast to what happens during the roast and what it does. Next, using the framework of performance and ritualization of play discussed above, I will turn to the specific temporal, financial, cultural, and social concerns that converge with the roast ritual. Even if the actual roast in its form—including calling it by name for the first time—is identified as beginning with the Friars Club in the 1940s, there are many other events and shifting of cultural norms and performances that set the stage, so to speak, for the ritual to emerge.

Hegemony

Cultural hegemony is discussed in Gramsci's work, *The Prison Notebooks* (1992). In this study, I use "hegemony" to describe the hegemonic forces that protect and perpetuate white supremacy and heteropatriarchal forces that inform participants' beliefs and self-identification coming into the roast. Despite the roast being a heightened reality, participants do not come in as blank slates. Instead, the performance creates opportunities for resistance against the cultural hegemony that exists in the real world/outside the roast. I am less focused on the formation of hegemony as a more extensive process; here, I consider hegemony the norm that roast participants challenge and resist.

The current scholarly research on humor and hegemony has not considered the comedy roast specifically and, if so, only as a brief mention. The scholarship available draws from stand-

up comedy and televised political humor (such as *The Daily Show*). I approach comedy roasts as not merely another genre of comedy but rather a performance ritual. However, I must not ignore the cultural analysis of comedy, specifically in ethnic humor, as a response to hegemonic cultural norms. The study of self-deprecation in ethnic humor illuminates how individuals navigate the powers that control their everyday lives. Self-deprecation serves to establish someone as a worthy participant in the roast and their own identity. Specific examples from roasts will illustrate this strategy.

To claim the roast as a type of resistance to cultural norms requires discussing what determines the cultural norms. The hegemony model is helpful in this analysis because the resistance is not merely against explicit bigotry and oppression. As mentioned above, roast participants often harness these taboo subjects to dismantle their power. Furthermore, roasts are not an exact reflection of social attitudes; rituals also create distance from culture and often represent exaggerations of everyday life and attitudes. Hegemony describes powers at play that often seem like the natural order. As a heightened performance, the roast explicitly displays subtly manifested cultural beliefs.

In the boundaries of a roast, the taboo behavior exposes power imbalances and invites criticism. Thus, the origins of the roast require an analysis of ethnic humor and its development. Ethnic humor has often been about the struggles of assimilating to a growing and changing America, and these struggles inform the performance of televised roasts.

Historical Contexts

This study begins with the inception of the American Roast in the early twentieth century to the present. American cultural contexts create a specific configuration of elements that define the comedy roast. The Friars Club, a professional organization of theater publicists founded in New York City in 1904, originated the comedy roast in its current form. Although the first official Friars Club roast did not exist until 1950, the roasts' forerunners date back to the club's inception. The Friars and their activities share a common cultural history and form with Vaudeville in New York City. This history includes minstrel acts with both Black and white performers in blackface. The club's historical accounts note this briefly, dismissing it as a product of its time.

I turn to theater historians' scholarship on Vaudeville to draw connections between the rituals, meanings, performances, and symbols that remain embedded within comedy roasts and their ritual form throughout the last century. Because many of Vaudeville's performers were also founders of the Friars Club, Vaudeville's legacy of assimilation and ethnic humor is integral to roasts. The struggle of assimilation remains, perhaps not for the immigrants of New York City, but for various ethnic and cultural groups struggling for power, fighting stereotypes yet retaining the right to claim them as cultural markers.

Feminist Approaches

From its earliest conception, this dissertation has been a feminist project. This is due to my own feminist values, ideology, and motivation for researching culture. Using a feminist methodology for the project, I must simultaneously consider myself a researcher, spectator, and critic of the cultural artifacts I encounter. I subscribe to theater critic Jill Dolan's concept of the feminist spectator: "Feminist criticism, then, participates in an activist project of culture-making in which we're collectively called to see what and who is stunningly, repeatedly evident and

what and who is devastatingly, obviously invisible in the art and popular culture we regularly consume for edification and entertainment" (2013, 2). In other words, a feminist spectator will make meaning of not just what is present in the text but what individuals, viewpoints, and narratives are absent. If one were to do a cursory analysis of the jokes often used in comedy roasts, one would find that when women are being roasted, the jokes themselves reflect misogyny. The jokes directed at women are meant to demean and subordinate participants. I use the feminist discourse of agency and coercion to illustrate the fluctuating power statuses throughout the performance. Whereas this behavior can be harmful or disempowering in other contexts, the important thing is that a roast is a heightened ritual in which the bargaining chips of power are rooted in the context and participant reaction.

Given that insults and politically incorrect content are the form's hallmarks, I am interested in how power is continually shifting within these confines and how gendered behavior manifests within the ritual's boundaries. For example, when Phyllis Diller tells jokes about her own lack of sexual attractiveness, is this self-subjugation or an acknowledgment of her power? What does it mean for a woman to roast a man by pointing out his shortcomings as a sexual partner? One analysis is that she is buying into patriarchal, misogynistic ideology. However, a feminist lens allows for considering that they are not merely replicating masculine power but instead destabilizing it in a process that can potentially change power dynamics within the roast and society.

An important component of feminist analysis is to consider who acts as agent and who is absent. The blurring of lines between sexual choice and agency benefits white women and erases a lived experience of oppression among women of color (Hall and Rodriguez 2003). The women who use sexuality and self-objectification to gain power within a roast are primarily white.

Significantly, women of color are primarily absent from any roast in contemporary American culture. When present, they are often there because of their relationship with the guest of honor and are usually not full roast participants. The absence of women of color in roasts speaks volumes about how sexual agency privileges white women in roasts.

Race and Roasts

Race is integral to the study of popular televised comedy roasts because of who is excluded—it began, and remains, a predominantly white activity—and how race and identity are used in both the ritual's performance and situating the power dynamics. It is crucial at the outset that when discussing race in this study, I am focusing on a Black/white dichotomy of race. In the televised roasts that are the object of this study, there are very few, if any, Latinx or Asian participants. The absence of these participants is, of course, significant to the exclusive nature of the roasts.

As mentioned above, the Friars Club was formed in New York City during the height of Vaudeville. Minstrelsy, a popular form of entertainment since Reconstruction, was still prevalent in entertainment. Thus, it is essential to look to the dominant images of Blackness that developed during this time, as many of the images continue to shape the representation of race and gender Here, I turn to the scholarship on Black representation in film and television, which has similar origins to tropes born from minstrelsy. I draw from early imagery of Blackness on the screen through the present's construction of good and harmful stereotypes. Minstrelsy influences remain in performance through the present, and both the performance and the cultural implications and symbolism inform the roast ritual. Referencing these older tropes in the present, even if subtly, often appeals to a white audience. The Black participants of roasts are a product of Black comedians and actors that have often intentionally or unintentionally portrayed these stereotypes,

coming in with a known persona and using these types of characters in a sort of double performance: to perform in the roast and to perform within the persona as they are known to white audiences.

The Friars Club's popular histories overlook its roots in blackface, minstrelsy, and other well-documented stock characters, attributing it to a product of its time. It is important to include these histories because they are embedded in the American comedy roast. The comedy roast highlights power struggles, and a Black/white dynamic is vital to these roasts. A newcomer to comedy roasts may see the content as offensive and heavily racist, thus finding it difficult to imagine how power is controlled and wielded. However, I believe it is important to consider who roasts and is roasted as power indicators. I argue that within the boundaries of the comedy roast, analyzing the text of the jokes out of context misses an opportunity to see examples of cultural resistance. Thus, it is important to remember that the roast is a performance and a ritualized, heightened version of reality.

Because this project focuses on popular televised roasts, the identity of the guest of honor within a predominantly white medium is the focus. Although flawed, Abrahams's work does, however, highlight ritual insulting as an important part of Black culture. The ritualization of roasts developed in Black communities, and roast norms and rituals are crucial to the Black cultural experience. Because of the absence of whiteness within the roast boundary, a roast with all Black participants has fundamentally different rules, dynamics, performance, and representations of resistance. These rituals have developed alongside the Friars Club roasts but remain rooted explicitly in Black culture. Only recently have the importance and significance of these rituals been considered worthy of academic attention. However, this project's scope at the current time focuses on Blackness as it is represented in mainstream televised roasts.

Methods

For this project, I will be examining several types of materials, including televised roasts, written accounts, performer biographies, and media mentions and reactions. After studying a wide range of recorded roast performances, I intend to identify connections, patterns, genres, and tropes that relate to my research questions. I consider the archives' implicit meanings and why some things are readily available, and some are not. The absence of information is sometimes referred to as hidden transcripts, which are "critiques of domination by the dominated that take place 'offstage,' out of sight and illegible to those controlling the public transcripts [… this requires] the conscientious reader [to] search for such hidden transcripts" (Deloria and Olsen 2017, 165). As Deloria and Olsen suggest, archives are not to be read at surface value. I anticipate many exclusions from the "official archives" to mirror the exclusionary history of the phenomenon of comedy roasts. Information and archives gathered by past and current roast participants may be less critical because their participation inherently endorses the ritual. For example, Joey Adams, a comedian, performer, and longtime Friars club member provides one of the few firsthand accounts of the private roasts; he has a stake in preserving the positive memories of roasts and not entering into a critical investigation. Because archives are never neutral nor wholly factual, the configuration of patterns is important. I must also think about what is missing from these accounts and why. Using performance studies methodology, I will examine existing accounts in a broader context alongside the actual texts. Who produced these documents? Why are they presented how they are? Where, if they exist, are the archives of people critical of the comedy roasts?

My main sources for primary materials are televised roasts, including *The Dean Martin Celebrity Roasts* and the various roasts produced and broadcast by Comedy Central starting in

2003. The mediated viewing adds another layer to study. Despite the camera leading my gaze, I can still closely observe the visual elements and read the performers' physical affectations and reactions. Studying roasts includes an analysis of audiences' responses and behaviors. Furthermore, I am interested in the comedy roast as a text; I am also interested in the comedy roast as cultural production. The specific choices of how the images in the televised roast are framed, edited, and presented reveal interesting data for analysis.

A Note on Language

Because roasts involve taboo subjects, many taboo terms, slurs, actions, and descriptions are used. As these are integral to the performance, these words are included in quotes and analyses throughout this dissertation. If certain words are not essential to my example or analysis, I have made efforts not to include them. However, when necessary, I have abbreviated or modified the words so that the intended word is recognized. I believe these words must be included to understand comedy roasts, yet I understand that full words can create unintended discomfort. Thus, using edited words is the best option.

Defining the Roast

In the following chapters, I will analyze the performance, aspects, and functions of the roast. However, as a ritual, roasts follow a specific form. This is important to distinguish from other forms associated with the roast. Roasting, as a verb, is generally used to insult someone, either invited or unsolicited. Roast battles are a related genre in the form of two participants taking turns trading insults. These two contestants are chosen not because they know each other but because they have harnessed the skill of composing the form of the roast joke. As defined by this project, the roast is a coordinated event in which the participants come together to engage in a ritual. The roast is usually in honor of one person who, in everyday life, holds power in career

hierarchy, experience, or social dominance. Each participant has their chance to roast the guest of honor and others participating. The final word is from the guest of honor, who has the opportunity to respond by roasting those who roasted them. A roast does not require a secondary audience; the origins of the roasts were closed rituals meant to be heard and seen only by those presenting.

There is, of course, a change in watching a televised performance rather than a live performance. Plenty of research exists on liveness's importance to performance (Auslander 2018), but here I contend that the televised roast still allows for the adequate observation of a roast. The ritual adapts and changes to the context, and the context of being taped for television has affected the roast. For example, the guest of honor cannot be held in esteem only by the other participants but must be well known to the public for the insults to be understood. Hence, televised roasts often feature celebrities from film, television, and politics.

Throughout this project, I will use several terms that often have different meanings outside the context of the study.

Roast: I use this to refer to the specific roast form, which includes the guest of honor and other participants in a set amount of time. This is separate from roast battles or the idea of "roasting" someone.

Guest of honor: This person has agreed to be the subject of the roast and the unifying subject. On television, this person is often a celebrity. In other social groups, this may be someone with managerial power, age, or another hierarchical position.

Participants: All those included in the roast, including those who are currently performing and those who are present and may or may not react. Participant simplifies the idea of the roast's performer/audience/reactor/object because these often overlap.

Dais: Taken from the literal setup of many celebrity roasts. Specifically, the roast participants exist on a dais in such a way that they are all facing the audience.

Roast Joke: The term "joke" comes with various definitions, forms, and structures, but here, I refer to it as a directed, often scripted form that includes the insult of one or more on the dais. A roast joke invites reactions, vamping, improving, or riffing from participants.

Secondary audience: Although participants are also audiences, roasts often include other spectators that observe the roast. Their reactions and participation are integral to the performance but are by those not on the dais. The secondary audience is present for all televised roasts.

The Rules of the Roast

Historically, the roast's ritualization occurred through performing oppositions, allowing the Friars Club members to distinguish themselves from the typical Vaudeville performer. However, for this ritual to be carried forward and repeated, the ritual must develop a recognizable form. The structural aspects are transmitted through culture and embed the ritual within different contexts. I could not focus on later televised rituals if the form did not serve as the vehicle to disseminate the ritual. I consider the formal properties the rules of the ritual. These structural identifiers determine the boundaries of the ritual. The boundaries declare, "the roast is now happening." The roast, as with performance rituals, have both implicit and explicit rules. The explicit rules are on the surface and include more logistical rules, such as the seating arrangement and order of ceremonies. The others are learned by the observed behavior and drive the dynamic and changing contexts. In analyzing the rules of a performance, I turn to the concept of play, specifically the work of Roger Caillois.

In returning to Caillois's definition of play, two main components are that play is unproductive and governed by rules. These features allow for the transgression to happen during

the roast. Unproductive refers to the lack of immediate material prizes, and thus the fact that participants perform for the sake of the ritual. The social negotiations within the roast provide the outlet for cultural change. This may or may not affect the outside world, but rules are determined by the group while within the play's boundaries. To step into the magic circle is to enter the physical and mental space of play voluntarily. This participation must also be voluntary; engaging in play with someone who does not know they are in the play violates the ritual's very fabric. The rules of play in the roast ritual mirror the entertainment and efficacy model of Robert Schechner: some exist for entertainment purposes, for the structure of providing entertainment, while other rules are perhaps less spoken and more about transgression. The efficacy brings forth a transformation to the performers; entertainment denotes a separation between audience and performance. Thus, the rules are as follows:

Explicit Rules/Entertainment Model

1. The roast typically has a master of ceremonies or a host who has an established relationship with the guest of honor.
2. The roast features a guest of honor, well known to the other participants or the public.
3. This guest, in everyday life, is held in high esteem (socially, professionally, or both).
4. Each participant takes a turn to roast the guest of honor. During this roast, the speaker may also roast themselves and anyone else present on the dais.
5. The host, guest of honor, and other participants must be on the stage facing the secondary audience to show the participants' reactions.
6. The guest of honor will speak last, responding to the roasts and roasting the rest of the participants.

7. The roast ends with the guest of honor thanking the participants for the roast and acknowledging the honor.

These formal properties of the roast have whispers of Vaudeville. Each person has a turn, scheduled and in order. In their roast jokes, participants need to put one over on each other and the guest of honor to make the connection. The roast's magic circle begins with distinct markers, often announced by the host, which allows for comfort in the disposing of everyday rules and social behavior.

Implicit Rules/Efficacy Model

1. Participants usually begin by mocking themselves to create a level of trust and to inoculate themselves from other insults.
2. The roast jokes' subject must include something about the guest of honor that is common knowledge to the rest of the participants. Often, it is a characteristic that they are most known for.
3. The subject matter can be taboo and unsavory, as long as it occurs within the roast.
4. If a participant is a recipient of a roast joke, they must not show sincere insult. Reactions of delight, laughter, and agreement maintain the magic circle. Mock offense is permitted, but only if the participant is clear that it is not how they feel.

The televised roast adds new elements, including a larger secondary audience and a home-viewing audience. This addition may change the stakes and oppositions explored in the ritual, but the form and rules of play keep the ritual intact over time. Despite some adaptations, the constant across time is that the ritual creates a "make-believe space" in which common relationships and statuses can be renegotiated free from the everyday rules. Participants constantly negotiate the oppositions during the performance.

Structure of the Dissertation

Chapter Two: Origins: Vaudeville, The Friars Club and Ritualization

This chapter includes a more in-depth analysis of the early twentieth-century origins of the roast in America and the emergence of the ritual form. Vaudeville performance and themes, including ethnic humor and minstrelsy, are critical influences of the roast. Representations of Blackness in entertainment at the turn of the century are also a crucial influence on roasts from their inception to the present. The roast's thematic origins inform the establishment of its formal ritual properties and vice versa.

Chapter Three: Performing Blackness in the Roast

This chapter explores the negotiation of power in roasts through the lens of race—specifically, Blackness—as identified through two televised roasts, *The Dean Martin Celebrity Roast: Sammy Davis, Jr.* (1975, NBC) and *The Comedy Central Roast of Flavor Flav* (2007, Comedy Central). The televised roasts provide a space in which the hegemonic beliefs and images of Blackness, reinforced by representations in film and television, reveal many tensions and contradictions surrounding Black stereotypes. Specifically, I examine the performance through Bell's concept of superior and inferior oppositions of ritualization. The roast theme is based on resemblance and adherence to demeaning tropes of Blackness in the dominant white imagination, which exist in tension with the elevated status of two guests of honor, Sammy Davis, Jr and Flavor Flav, whose cultural significance is reflected in the roast performance.

Chapter Four: Gender, Agency, and Coercion in the Roast

This chapter focuses on televised roasts in relation to conflicting representations of gender and feminine sexuality. Specifically, I use *The Dean Martin Celebrity Roast: Joan Collins* (1984, NBC) and the *Comedy Central Roast of Pamela Anderson* (2007, Comedy

Central) to examine how the form of the roast ritual both highlights the fluctuating control women have over their own sexual agency. Using the feminist concepts of agency and coercion and the sexualization of women on television, I connect the tensions and contradictions of sexuality within the roasts to the corresponding cultural milieu of the guests of honor. Within the specific setting of the roast, Joan Collins and Pamela Anderson operate as individual agents. However, the coercive forces outside their control work against their own intentions. The roast ritual places Collins and Anderson in a position where both tensions and contradictions of sexuality are magnified through the ritual.

Chapter Five: Conclusion: The Ritual Rift

This chapter addresses ritual mistakes and their influence on ritual performance. First, I explore the challenge of defining a ritual mistake and offer the alternative term "ritual rift." Then, I offer three case studies of ritual rifts and how they affect the outcomes of the ritual. Finally, using these case studies, I argue that a ritual rift is crucial to the longevity of the ritual and allows for the rift to be absorbed into the ritual. These rifts do not detract from the ritual but instead provide more opportunities to highlight the tensions and contractions in the surrounding cultural milieu.

Conclusion

The comedy roast is a uniquely American ritual whose form was first established at the turn of the twentieth century in New York City shaped by Vaudeville, ethnic humor, and the rapidly expanding immigrant influence of the time. Although the form of the ritual has remained recognizable throughout the last century, changing social forces and televised popularity have shifted some of the focus on the content occurring within the boundaries of the ritual. An exploration of the historical roots of twentieth- century Vaudeville culture and the formation of

the Friars Club is necessary to frame the changing social dynamics that the ritual endures throughout the last century. To this end, specific televised roasts are closely examined to explore how dynamics of race class, and audience are reflected through the roast over time. The roast format remains a useful tool that magnifies the various tensions and contradictions of race and gender are represented. The ritual framing is especially important because incidents that may be misinterpreted as ritual mistakes are, in fact, further reinforcements of the impact of roasts on recent American culture.

CHAPTER TWO. ORIGINS: VAUDEVILLE, THE FRIARS CLUB, AND RITUALIZATION

The American roast emerged from Vaudeville performance culture of the early twentieth century in New York City. The connection between Vaudeville and the Friars Club roast is not simply a cause and effect, nor is the roast a direct product of Vaudeville. Rather, in this chapter, I explain how Vaudeville culture and aesthetics created the environment for the Friars Club to flourish into a unique ritualized performance. I argue that roasts are not a direct, linear result of Vaudeville; rather, the specific culture, myths, and historical context of Vaudeville provided the environment for roasts to flourish as its own unique ritual. Although Vaudevillian elements exist in roasts throughout the present, it is in fact, the need for performers to establish themselves outside of the Vaudevillian identity that escalated the formation of the roast.

Starting in the 1910s, Roasts took place in a ballroom or events space with formal dress. The juxtaposition of the high-class personas with bawdy humor was especially delightful given the contrast to the often low-brow and taboo content. Participants gathered to honor someone. The honoree was seated on the stage for all to witness, while the participants were seated onstage usually on a long dais. The dais was often decorated formally, with decorative table dressings and formal drink wear. A host introduced each guest as well as delivered roasts of their own. As a participant, the host was also the recipient of roasts. One by one, the participants came to the main podium to deliver their remarks, usually roasting everyone present including the guest of honor. Participants responded with laughter, and verbal comebacks, but in general, the person currently at the podium had the floor. The guest of honor spoke last during the night, usually after inebriation and increasingly uninhibited behavior had built up during the previous remarks. The guest of honor either responded to roasts aimed at them or offered more roasts to the participants. Typically, the guest of honor would eventually issue sincere gratitude and affection

for those present, signaling the end of the roast ritual. Vaudeville-like characteristics included flamboyant performances, larger-than-life characters, and provocative double entendres. The roast differed from Vaudeville in that it was set as a formal affair. A dais of panelists is presented on a highly decorated stage. In the first Friars Club roasts, this fanciness was a parody of high-class, professional theater. Participants wore tuxedos and formal dress, as did many of the participants seen on *The Dean Martin Celebrity Roast* specials. Roasts were high energy, rapid-fire, and a battle of wits and pushing the boundaries of appropriateness. The fanciness of dress and importance of the formal order of speakers in contrast with the taboo and raucous jokes served as a parody of formality.

The bridge from Vaudeville performance to the recognizable form of the roast was not merely an aesthetic similarity or a copying of Vaudeville behavior. Rather, there were several cultural factors, myths, and ritualization of Vaudeville that provided a fertile ground for the American roast to emerge. This emergence is best explained in three stages: Vaudeville origins, in which the culture, attitudes, and rituals of Vaudeville emerged; Vaudeville to roast, where Vaudevillian performers engaged in roasts as a response to their Vaudeville experience. The third stage is the ritualization of the roast. Here, the roast becomes a ritual of its own, creating unique rules, form, and meanings. Although now separate from Vaudeville, the roast retains elements of Vaudeville which carry on even in present roasts.

There are several ways to approach the influence of Vaudeville on the comedy roast. Centering a performance studies approach highlights common performance rituals, symbols, and forms of play. Thus, prioritizing performance and ritual provide a productive way to understand how the roast emerged as a specifically American ritual of the early- to mid-twentieth century. The form persists into the twenty-first century, but as will be explored in future chapters,

individual roasts disclose their era's cultural beliefs. The formal properties of the roast arose from a time and place-specific culture in New York City and thus reflect the evolving tensions and contradictions stemming from immigrant life in the US, the wider circulation of ethnic humor, and the working conditions of Vaudeville.

Although roasts emerged from Vaudeville, the Vaudeville and roast histories follow their own trajectories that overlap and diverge throughout the twentieth century. Dividing the trajectories within the three stages provides insight into how the roast emerged and prevailed even in the decline of Vaudeville. Tables 2.1 through 2.3 show the three phases and the most relevant points for both Vaudeville and roasts.

TABLE 2.1 *Phase One: Vaudeville Origins*

Dates (approximate)	**Friars Club**	**Vaudeville**
1905	The founding of the Friars Club (1904)	Traveling variety shows begin to transform into Vaudeville stage shows
1910	Friars Frolic variety shows (continues until approximately 1930)	Vaudeville is at its height (through approximately the 1930s)
1915	Club headquarters (the Monastery) established	Vaudeville's popularity continues to increase

TABLE 2.2 *Phase Two: From Vaudeville to Roast*

Dates (approximate)	**Friars Club**	**Vaudeville**
1920	Testimonial Dinners begin	Vaudeville begins to decline; film takes over as the main form of amusement
1925	Testimonial Dinners continue	Vaudeville's popularity takes a sharp decline in the 1930s
1930	Friars Club faces financial troubles and appears to be in decline	Decline continues
1935	Friars Club finds new official building and begins renewal	Decline continues

TABLE 2.3 Phase Three: Ritualization of the Roast

Dates (approximate)	**Friars Club**	**Vaudeville**
1940	Official Roasts begin, replacing the Testimonial Dinners; the Friars Club is reinvigorated	Vaudeville is almost nonexistent; most theaters are closed, sold, or converted into movie theaters
1950	The Friars Club moves to its current location; Roasts appear on early television variety shows (late 1950s) and continue as live events at the Monastery	Many Vaudeville acts appear on televised variety shows (late 1950s)

Understanding the emergence of the roast ritual requires an understanding of the historical and cultural background of Vaudeville performance. Thus, Phase one includes the historical context of Vaudeville performance, which includes minstrelsy and ethnic humor. Additionally, I examined newspaper reviews, artifacts, and cultural critiques of Vaudeville written between 1900 and 1940 to identify specific rituals and performance tropes of Vaudeville, including the Myth of Success, ethnic humor, and minstrelsy. In Phase Two, I argue that the Friars Club's rituals emerged as a form of Bahktin's carnival, subverting the rules of Vaudeville and allowing those in Vaudeville to perform in a way that challenged the struct rules of Vaudeville. Finally, in Phase Three, I use ritual and play performance theories, specifically Bell's performance of oppositions, to explain how the ritual found its unique form and emerged as its own type of ritualized performance independent of Vaudeville.

Phase One: Vaudeville Origins (1900–1915)

The Vaudeville Turn

Vaudeville is an all-encompassing term for the energetic, inexpensive, and variety theater dominating mass entertainment between 1895 and 1930. Vaudeville's immediate ancestors are

traveling variety shows, circuses, and oddities exhibits. The term "vaudeville" is a descriptor of aesthetic and business practices. Vaudeville theaters proliferated among urban areas at the turn of the century, especially in New York City. The audiences were often working class and middle class, seeking leisure within an emerging urban labor industry structure. Given the influx of the working population and immigrants to urban areas in the early 1900s, theater owners scheduled several shows on the same day. With rapid industrialization came workers who had designated leisure time and spendable income for amusements. To the chagrin of some "legitimate" critics, Vaudeville created a low-brow version of theater, challenging the idea of theater as high culture. Nadine George-Graves, in her work on uncovering the history of the Whitman Sisters, an African American Vaudeville act, recounts that Vaudeville is a neglected field of study in theater history scholarship that favored high-brow "serious" drama over other mass-consumed genres like Vaudeville (George-Graves 200, 3). This neglect also means that the archival evidence of Vaudeville is lost, buried, or never recorded (George-Graves 2000, 5). Black performers in Vaudeville especially are absent in the remaining archives. Therefore, Vaudeville reviews must be taken with the knowledge that they were written by white men who attended shows with non-Black audiences, discouraged any Black Vaudeville ambition, and only gave favorable reviews to those whose preconceptions and stereotypes matched their current view.

Vaudeville theater owners seized the financial opportunity to operate multiple shows per day, constantly changing the lineup of acts. No time or space was wasted in service of having multiple shows a day. In a 1905 profile in the entertainment newspaper *Variety*, Edwin Royce describes the art of managing a show:

> The man who arranges the program has to have some of the qualities of a general. To fix eighteen or nineteen different acts into the exact time allotted, and so to arrange them so

> that the performance shall never lapse or flag; to see that the "turns" which require only a front scene can be utilized to set the stage for the turns which require a full stage, requires judgment and training. Still, there is very little confusion even at the first performance and none thereafter. (211)

Thus, shows were modular, allowing theater owners to keep some acts on extended contracts while quickly replacing unsuccessful acts. Because the lineup changed frequently, audiences often returned to see new acts. The repetition and precision of shows created a meticulously planned experience for performers. Each movement, pause, and punchline was precisely timed to fit into the show's logistics.

Vaudeville performers took on duties beyond their roles onstage. They were salespeople, selling their acts to various theater owners; they managed props, costumes, makeup, and direction. Whereas in high-brow theater, where actors are separate, unique entities, the Vaudeville performers worked long hours and tolerated less than luxurious conditions, which resembled the social class and life circumstances of their audiences. As a type of entertainment, Vaudeville reflected a constant tension between being a genuinely populist form of entertainment—often cited as one of the first forms of mass entertainment in America—and providing subversive performances that kept people's interest (Lewis 2003). Acton Davies notes in a 1905 *Variety* essay, "What I Don't Know About Vaudeville," that Vaudeville had a broad appeal:

> [Vaudeville] touches us and our lives at many places. It appeals to the business-man [*sic*], tired and worn, who drops in for half an hour on his way home, to the person who has an hour or two before a train goes, or before a business appointment, to the woman who is wearied of shopping; to the children who love animals and acrobats; to the man with his

> sweetheart or sister, to the individual who wants to be diverted but doesn't want to think or feel; to the American of all grades and kinds who wants a great deal for his money. The vaudeville theatre belongs to the era of the department store and the short story. It may be a kind of lunch-counter art, but then art is so vague and lunch is so real. (Davies 215)

He explains how Vaudeville blurred the lines between the spectrum of high art/low art and work/leisure. It quickly fit into the routine of the workweek and family obligations. Vaudeville was accessible in terms of time and money; the content was also accessible to the middle-class audience. Thus, Vaudeville became entertainment for the masses.

Putting One Over

The term Vaudeville also defines a specific type of performance and a specific aesthetic of performance. Vaudeville acts were loud, quick, energetic, and often larger than life. Acts included single artists and groups of performers who sang, danced, gave monologues, performed feats of wonder, and often combined these genres into what is generally known as a "turn." Vaudeville turns inspired strong reactions throughout the entire act, with planned beats emphasizing audience applause and attention. Unlike a traditional drama, acts often broke the fourth wall, interacting with or speaking directly to the audience. A successful act was popular if the act could "put one over" on the audience. Rich DesRosers describes putting one over as the ability to "speak a line, to sing a line, to do a piece of the action in such a way to cause an audience to see, understand, comprehend and appreciate the intention and meaning" (DesRosers 2016, 31). Putting one over on the audience was achieved by creating intimacy with the audience, including leaving the stage's boundary and physically coming into the audience. Although intended to look like natural ease to the audience, every aspect of the Vaudeville turn

was carefully orchestrated, including pauses, expressions, accents, and movements. Performers honed this with trial and error over multiple performances, observing the audience's intensity of responses. "Killing" or creating a "laugh riot," measures of success determined by a positive audience response, guaranteed a more extended contract. The pressure to perform effectively was crucial to the performers' craft and financial success.

Putting one over was a talent but not necessarily correlated to specific talents, including, among others, acting, singing, and comedy. In a 1916 issue of *The Green Book Magazine*, William M. Cressy declares that "In vaudeville, every artist from the opening act to the closing act must 'put it over.' If he does not possess this quality, the probabilities are that he will never get into Vaudeville" (220). This was not considered a skill a performer learns. Instead, it was something someone inherently possessed: "If you do not have it when you are born, you will never have it" (Cressy 1916, 220). This put Vaudeville performers into hierarchies of ability based on deterministic qualities: you either could or could not put one over; if you could not, you never would. Real Vaudeville actors had it, and imposters did not.

Putting one over is a helpful way of describing the Vaudeville style. Vaudeville was not simply loud, brash, carnival, and slapstick, but connected performer and audience. Vaudeville was not unique in that it required this connection; however, Vaudeville needed to establish this connection immediately to have a successful show. More traditional theater of the era had a long time to provide character development and engage the audience's trust. Thus, the trick of putting it over in Vaudeville required direct appeals to authenticity. In a 1916 issue of *The Green Book Magazine*, Cressy describes examples of performers putting it over:

> A few years ago, there came to our shores a little French chorus girl. She had almost no voice at all and was not uncommonly beautiful, but she had a pair of big eyes that could

> make every married woman in an audience certain that she (the actress) was after her own personal husband. And those eyes have made Anna Held one of our best-known stars. (Cressy 1916, 220)

Anna Held connected with the audience through her sexual appeal. While women succeeded in putting it over through their bodies, expressions, and movement choices, men's putting it over often relied on comedic intentions. As Cressy explains:

> Another wonderful case of personality is Bert Melrose. Here is a chap who wanders out on the stage in Scotch clown make-up, stays there for fifteen minutes, does one acrobatic trick, taking fourteen and a half minutes to get ready for it—and it is funny enough to make a [statue] laugh. (222)

Notice that the descriptions mentioned that the performers' skills or talents in their respective acts—singing, acrobatics—were not the best. Yet, it is the connections created by personality and emotionality that made them successful.

As mentioned above, programming a Vaudeville show required curating the popular turns sparingly with newer acts. The show featured Vaudeville's turns to draw in the audience; the other acts would become more well known by proximity to the turn. Acts, once hired, would be let go if the theater manager did not see them put one over their first night. In a 1916 article, Davies interviews a Vaudeville performer about this precarious situation. A tough manager used to "stand in the wings with a whistle, and if he didn't like your act he blew it, and a couple of stagehands ran in and shut you out from your audience with two flats upon which were painted in huge letters 'N.G.,' [no good] and that was the end of your engagement" (Davies 1915, 214). The trial by fire of breaking into Vaudeville further exploited the notion that a performer either could or could not cut it and that no amount of practice could substitute for being able to put one

over naturally. Many acts created believable characters that were unintelligent, unrefined, and uneducated, but these characters were likable and relatable to audiences. They connected with audiences despite their shortcomings, not because of them. The stress of rejection, however, took a toll on the actor's craft. Breaking into the theater was rare, but the specific type of skill needed for Vaudeville became so specialized it was largely not transferable. As Davies points out:

> Variety actors may transfer to the regular stage and then return to vaudeville and prove just as clever as ever, but I have yet to see a single actor who having played in vaudeville for any length of time returns to his stage as good an artist as when he left it. Almost invariably the vaudeville rapid-fire methods of accentuation and playing for points tells against him when he reappears in a legitimate drama. (214–215)

Vaudeville's monetary success had a ceiling. Even at the top of Vaudeville, it was unusual to transition out of it. Thus, the definition of success became different. It was not just about material gain but the persona of stardom, even if local. Success signified less material gain but represented the Myth of Success.

The Myth of Success

Most scholarship on Vaudeville theater focuses on either the content of performances and their social meanings or the economic and structural model of Vaudeville. Albert F. McLean, Jr.'s work *American Vaudeville as Ritual* (1965) goes beyond these methods to discuss how rituals, myths, and symbols arose from the temporal, socioeconomic, and cultural space of Vaudeville. According to McLean, more than any other amusements, Vaudeville "offered the American People a definitive rhythm, a series of gestures which put man back in the center of his world, a sense of the human community, and effective emotional release" (6). Considering the erratic, crowded unpredictability of the time's urban environments, Vaudeville provided many

ritualistic opportunities for participation. First, the introduction of new acts and lineups made Vaudeville a constant entertainment; audiences rarely saw the same lineup, even in performances days apart. Second, even if not narrative, the acts signaled promise, excitement, danger, and joy. The "surge of magical power evoked by brassy rhythms, the staccato wise-cracks, the poised charisma of the star, or the mastery over reality demonstrated by the juggler or animal trainer" (McLean 1965, 7). Speaking directly to the audiences, the performers appeared as "themselves," albeit a constructed version of self. Audiences digested these entertainment experiences because they resembled the popular Horatio Alger rags-to-riches stories that equated a long life of hard work with monetary gain. The Horatio Alger rags-to-riches myth rewards pious, honest work and the Protestant work ethic. The individual endured the hardship of work and sacrifice, all in the name of future wealth. In contrast, the Myth of Success was the experience of pleasure and cleverness used along the journey to wealth.

Like the American Dream, the Myth of Success hinged on material success but went beyond success measured by wealth. Whereas financial success was the reward for businessmen and tradesmen, Vaudeville promised success to the everyman, arguing that success resulted from "glamour, glibness, and know-how." The symbols of success were "clothes, noise, and self-confidence" (McLean 1965, 10). These are things that did not cost money; anyone could appear successful if they acted like it. Riches could be obtained from artistic talent, personality, and general behavior. A wealthy lifestyle was no longer the happy ending at the end of a life of work, but in-the-moment pleasure, mirroring an audience's immediate pleasure derived from a Vaudeville show. Thus, the path to success involved not just becoming wealthy but also enjoying the wealth. The distinction between the American Dream and the Myth of Success may be slim. However, Vaudeville's critical difference told the story of anyone having wealth and pleasure,

not just the few who sacrificed pleasure to get a reward. Vaudeville represented immediate gratification, both in the moment and in the symbolism.

"Browsers," agents searching for new talent, were always looking to discover the next big act. An anonymous 1914 article in *Theatre Magazine* explains that the browser's role was finding performers in New York: "struggling for a 'hearing' he finds them in the back rooms of salons entertaining the loafers; he finds them in the tank towns, the villages, the small, out-of-the-way concert halls in the South and West" (160). The idea of being discovered perpetuated the myth that someone would find a person and make them successful if one is talented enough. They were rewarded immediately for their innate talent, rather than doing the work of auditioning and playing smaller circuits. Instead of putting in years of work, they got to bypass the typical system of making it in Vaudeville. According to the Vaudeville culture, to be successful is innate and cannot be conjured by years of practice. This divided the community's culture, showcasing the authentic (a natural performer) and inauthentic (someone without natural talent). This bifurcation is expected in the performing arts profession and is not unique to Vaudeville. Still, it perpetuates the Myth of Success that anyone can be successful, but only if they have self-confidence and personality.

The precarious, busy lifestyle of a Vaudeville performer was the sacrifice to reach the Myth of Success. Vaudeville performers went on the circuit, traveling across the country to play in different theaters. This made for transient, fleeting moments of rest and connection. Vaudeville actor Bennett Musson, chronicling life on the Vaudeville circuit in a 1910 issue of *American Magazine*, writes:

> Dressing room number 4 proves to be small dirty ill-ventilated and ill-lighted. It is next to the boiler room and the heat is intolerable or near a door that opens into an alley and the

> cold is unbearable it contains a small tin pitcher and bowl and there is no place to throw the water there are few hooks and nails on which the actors preceding you have hung pieces of paper to protect their clothes from the dirty walls. There are a few dressing rooms in the theater so you share yours with another man dividing the hooks and nails with him…while you were doing this the first act is being set overhead stagehands are stamping about moving scenery properties and so on and the particles of dust and white wash fluttering down settling on your wardrobe and your makeup. (51)

As seen here, performers had to get ready in unkempt spaces, and they had little privacy. They performed for the public on stage, yet they were still in view of their peers when they came offstage. On the road and in New York, performers stayed in boarding houses that catered to Vaudeville performers because the work was precarious. For performers, Vaudeville culture and rituals pervaded their offstage as well as onstage life.

As with many spaces where one's work identity and social identity become the same, rituals, myths, and common language strengthen identity. The culture has its own rules and rituals, both implicit and explicit. They also develop a common language. In a *New York Evening Post* feature in 1924, Marian Spitzer defines the main slang terms, including a flop (failure), all washed up (no further booking in sight), all wet (the same, but worse), a riot (enthusiastic audience response), deucing (appearing second on the bill), a shine (a hack who thinks he is an artist), excess baggage (a wife who accompanies her husband on tour), and guttenberg (an actor's wardrobe) (1924, 227). The slang is occupationally advantageous because many of the terms distinguish the innate, authentic talent from the lesser talent. Fellow performers can be flops, shines, or fishes, in contrast to real, authentic artists, who have the innate talent to put one over. Performers often worried that once deemed a flop or other variety of names, they would never

shed the reputation, and theaters would not hire them. Vaudeville performers also contended with scrutiny beyond the performance onstage.

As Schechner stresses in performance studies, performance does not just happen on the formal stage. Vaudeville's community of actors, stage technicians, costumers, theater managers, press agents, choreographers, prop makers, and others, were all performing their roles, sometimes for each other rather than for an audience. Often, a Vaudeville performers took on more than one of these roles, developing their own acts and being responsible for their own costumes and props that they took with them from theater to theater. Vaudeville was an all-encompassing identity and way of life, guided by the Myth of Success. The Myth of Success also created an interesting problem for the Vaudeville professionals. Although several Vaudeville performers were financially successful, the next step was moving towards being a more upscale theater actor and removing themselves from the Vaudeville community. To be successful may have negated their identity as struggling, working-class artists assimilating into New York City's new world. I do not mean to conjecture that Vaudeville performers turned down financial incentives to retain their Vaudeville identity (although perhaps some did). To succeed at Vaudeville was, ironically, to leave it. Although financially advantageous, to be an upscale theater actor was to leave the all-encompassing Vaudeville identity behind. The Myth of Success did not include how to be successful outside of Vaudeville.

Ethnic Humor and Minstrelsy

The Myth of Success was not the same for every individual, especially when faced with the racial and class divides in New York in the early twentieth century. Ethnic humor and minstrelsy were essential components of the Vaudeville industry and influenced how performers were treated and accepted by both audiences and those in the business. The Myth of Success was

not only about being successful; for immigrants, the stakes were even higher and the barriers more immense. Thus, ethnic humor flourished in American urban centers during this time. The term "ethnic humor" is broadly defined as a form of humor whose understanding and framing derives from traits commonly associated with an ethnic identity. Ethnic humor represents, celebrates, and derides ethnic identity that is the "other," often simultaneously. As in performance and popular culture, not all audiences interpret the use of ethnic humor universally. My goal is to explain the cultural significance of ethnic and minstrel humor and its role in the roast ritual, thus focusing on the performer's connection to ethnic humor. I also use the terms ethnic humor and minstrelsy separately because although minstrelsy is a type of ethnic humor, the origins and the stakes are vastly different. The term ethnic humor, when discussing it within the time of Vaudeville, involves the ethnicity of new immigrants to America and especially to the urban landscape of New York City. Minstrelsy originated in plantation culture that existed in America for hundreds of years. Still, minstrel acts and ethnic acts shared the stage, and both contributed to detrimental stereotypes.

As Boskin and Dorinson explain in an overview of ethnic humor of this time, scholars approach ethnic humor in several (sometimes conflicting) ways, especially given the creator of the humor. Ethnic humor can be an "effective and vicious weapon in the repertory of the human mind," creating harm but also reclaiming power (1985, 81). In Vaudeville, ethnic acts could reclaim power through humor about their own identities. This is different from minstrel acts, where sometimes non-Black actors donned blackface, taking on the role of the Black stereotype. Often, ethnic Vaudeville performers benefitted from minstrel performance because it afforded them a "mask of blackness guaranteed freedom from conventional restraints" (Boskin and

Dorinson 1985, 89). Thus, they felt they could take more character risks by putting on the mask, and exploiting the minstrel tropes for their own gain.

As Boskin explains, a prevailing explanation for ethnic humor is the "release valve" theory, in which ethnic humor sedates the stress and pain of life's struggles. Another approach is that ethnic humor affirms ethnic pride and provides social cohesion, signaling that the group's punchlines are genuinely authentic. Finally, ethnic humor mitigates conflict and gains control, to "smile through one's teeth" while "stoically laughing on the outside to cope with the inside" (Boskin 1997, 93). From a cultural perspective, all these theories are in play in Vaudeville and, eventually, the roast, especially the idea that "minority laughter affords insights into the constant and often undignified struggle of upwardly striving Americans to achieve positive definition and respectable status" (Boskin 1997, 97). Thus, the realm of mass entertainment, especially Vaudeville, gave a stage, literally and figuratively, for ethnic groups to express their lives in a changing New York City.

James H. Dorman explores the ethnic humor that emerged in Vaudeville through the stereotype process. Dorman explains, "the qualities that define the type are ascribed qualities, qualities believed to exist in reality, are presumed to exist in reality" (1991, 182), a cognitive shorthand for the categorization of people. In Vaudeville, stereotyping also served a marketing purpose because ethnic acts promoted themselves to theater owners. For example, "the Hebrew" type proliferated. The Hebrew was an exclusively male act, in a frock coat and a Derby hat, a "nose distinctly prominent and often accentuated with nose putty…. speaking in a Yiddish English dialect that bore the weight of the act's humor" (Dorman 1991, 184). The Hebrew's "very value system was dominated by his concern for money, and the acquisition and retention of money … shaping his [entire] character" (Dorman 1991, 184). This core value shaped the act

and the humor, providing comedy through his success or failure to acquire money. Furthermore, the Hebrew was non-threatening to others. The Hebrew often used persuasive skills to achieve his goal, harking back to the Myth of Success. His negotiating skills and use of language gave him success. The Hebrew stereotype emerged long before the time of Vaudeville, but Vaudeville certainly exploited it and perpetuated it.

Dorman also explains the character type in the "Italian acts" was "insouciant but lazy … and has a genius for getting fired from every job" (1991, 188). Still, the Italian was always happy, "woefully ignorant and without sophistication, given to indolence and an easy-going lifestyle; the good fellow, loved by children and an instinctive musician" (Dorman 1991, 189). Like the Hebrew, despite being passionate and often ready for a fight, the Italian Act's stereotyped characters were also deemed unharmful, the opposite of the time's widespread xenophobia. Instead of being bothered by a lack of sophistication, the Italian characters accepted their state of being and found enjoyment in life. In a 1919 review of the act, Mack and Paglia report:

> Two men. One does a "wop" in exaggerated desire to approach the dressed-up man. The other works "straight" and does a corking first aid to a comedy type that scored at the American. The talk for the most part registered through the capital way the duo handled it, the "straight" making sure that every line was heard in all parts of the house and that the confused English of his partner hit the bullseye. A good combination and one that should have no trouble going right along with consecutive bookings. The men sing better together than many other older "teams" of a similar nature. ("Mack and Paglia," accessed March 10, 2021)

Although stereotypes from ethnic humor were not just embedded in entertainment but also used by institutions of power to cause harm and violence, Dorman offers reasons why these stereotypes flourished among audiences in Vaudeville theaters. For one, the acts provided a benign depiction. They allowed the immigrants in the audience to "appreciate the humor of character as reality" (Dorman 1991, 190) and to enjoy "the ability of talented performers to invoke the stereotype by emphasizing and exaggerating qualities [that] seemed characteristic of the type" (Dorman 1991, 190). This suggests that the audience understood the stereotype was heightened, but embracing the stereotype resulted from the performers' talent, and group members could laugh at the heightened stereotypes. The humor and situations often derived from immigrants' misunderstanding due to speaking a different language from English and not knowing American customs. Unlike high-brow theater, the audience was more likely to relate to the act, however exaggerated and flamboyant. Yet this explanation puts faith in a common understanding by the audience of how stereotypes work and ignores how repetition and representation can create a racist and xenophobic culture, even if it is "just entertainment."

Whereas the Vaudeville aesthetic shaped the development of ethnic humor, minstrel performance had a long and storied history before Vaudeville. While the Hebrew, Italian, and other European immigrants were considered part of America's "melting pot" fantasy, minstrel acts remained entrenched in the deep segregation of Black Americans. Vaudeville absorbed the minstrel show, forcing conformity to the Vaudeville business model. Minstrel acts and ethnic acts have many common performance aesthetics and audience appeal. However, minstrelsy's origins and functions are unique. Like Vaudeville's origins, minstrelsy started as a traveling show and developed into various variety shows and musical acts, alongside other types of acts. Whereas the new ethnic humor came from the immigrants of the nineteenth century,

Vaudevillian minstrelsy was developed from deeply American culture and replicated the previous minstrel genre. Just as there was a hierarchy of demand for ethnic acts, Vaudeville theaters exploited minstrel shows' familiar tropes. Ethnic acts made up a hierarchy. Despite the illusions of belonging and assimilation, this was not mirrored within the Vaudeville industry, and Black minstrel performers were treated as less than white performers.

Eric Lott's research on the origins and development of blackface minstrelsy provides a way to critically understand minstrelsy history and how it existed in Vaudeville. In his work, Lott asserts that at its height in the second half of the nineteenth century, many white Americans thought minstrelsy to be the only original artistic contribution by Black Americans and thought that it was a form of Black folk culture. Early minstrel shows featured both Black and white performers in blackface. The intentions and receptions of minstrelsy are, like any cultural artifact, challenging to determine as absolute. As Lott explains, "this structure began to take the form of a complex dialectic: an unsteady but continual oscillation between fascination with 'blackness' and fearful ridicule of it, underscored but not necessarily determined by an oscillation between sympathetic belief in blackface's authenticity and ironic distance from its counterfeit representations" (1993, 227). White audiences both feared and were fascinated by what was presented to them as Blackness through the minstrel act, yet they feared the Blackness in life not bound by a stage performance. Lott comments, "it was possible for a black man in blackface, without a great deal of effort, to offer credible imitations of white men imitating him" (227). Performance and humor provided a subversive resistance and instilled alternate meanings.

As mentioned, primary sources from Black Vaudeville performers are scarce. In her work on the Whitman Sisters, George-Graves found that the act was performed for many Black audiences as well as White audiences. The meanings taken by a Black audience would have been

far different than that of a non-Black audience watching a minstrel act. In Vaudeville, for example, the Whitman sisters incorporated minstrel elements in their act, including the Cakewalk. The Cakewalk, a dance with exaggerated movement of the body that may appear flamboyant to the audience was, in fact, a "high step and strut about subversively mocking the mannerisms and pretensions of the slave and mistress (George-Gaves 200, 20). Mabel, Alberta, and Essie Whitman performed as white-passing and dressing as men, often hiding their race and gender from the audience entirely until a reveal at the end of the act, forcing the audience to experience themes of queerness and miscegenation. This was a way to "capitalize, critique, and reinvent" (George-Graves 2000, 39) themselves onstage.

Like the Whitman Sisters, the few Black minstrel performers in Vaudeville were likely able to extract some resistance from the performance, but more popular minstrel acts were more likely to be White men in blackface acting in accordance with expected stereotypes. The white-performed minstrel shows prevail in popular historical memory. Remembering that Vaudeville fulfilled the audience's desire for the familiar while keeping enough novelty to succeed, white men as minstrels were familiar. Rick DesRochers describes the most common Vaudeville minstrel acts:

> Structured as a semicircle of four or five, white male performers with black greasepaint or burnt cork painted on their faces, wearing absurdly oversize or ragged "Negro" costumes, sang and played various instruments, including the banjo, fiddle, tambourine, and bone castanets. The show had three parts: the first featured a random selection of songs interconnected with stereotyped "Negro" jokes and foolishness. The second part, known as the "olio," performers who specialized in comedic dialogues would give malapropism-laden stump speeches or cross-dress and impersonate "wenches." The third

> part was a playlet, usually set in the South, comprising music, dancing "darkies," and burlesques of Shakespeare plays and melodramas. (2016, 36)

The tropes and style of the minstrel show described fit well into the Vaudeville aesthetic. The cause for comedy was in characters acting broadly and misinterpretations by "Negroes" about modern life, just as other ethnic acts used misunderstandings of American life as a centerpiece of their acts. Minstrel acts also fulfilled the Vaudeville aesthetic because of the extensive focus on body movements and distortions of the body, in which "dancers relied on the vigorous leg and footwork, twists, turns, and slaps of toe and heel. The body was always grotesquely contorted, even when sitting; stiffness and extension of arms and legs announced themselves as unsuccessful sublimations of sexual desire" (Lott 1993, 230). Minstrel movement derived from the focus on slaves' bodies, which were often objectified for labor and sexual control. The Vaudeville acts played on fears of and fascination with Black men's presumed excess of sexual deviancies.

In Vaudeville, minstrelsy resembled previous minstrel acts in visuals, costumes, and character aesthetics, but lacked the potential subversiveness of its predecessor. The primarily white actors—with some notable exceptions, like Bert Williams—distilled the performance to its most recognizable features in the Vaudeville turn. Vaudeville minstrels mimicked a style that displayed narrow stereotypes. A 1914 *Variety* review of the act Lang and Coulter reads:

> One [man] is short and dapper and the other tall and lanky, with a sort of Bert Williams style of humor, and yet not patterned after him at all. The men come on after the sound of pistol shots backstage. It is explained they have been in a "crap" game, but the dapper little one has made away with all the money, leaving the lanky one to fight it out with the belligerent darkies who remain. A comedy razor is used with laughable effect, and a crap

> game played in the footlights is another good laugh. The little one has a song and later the tall one ambles on in a woman's gown, and there follows a travesty on the modern dance. The act closes with a quaint dance, while the men play harmonicas. Both have a rich dialect, redolent of the southern darkey… The men depend on a little too much on realism, and their own native wit, but when they have worked the act out a little more, it will be. ("Lang and Coulter," accessed March 10, 2021)

According to the review, this act contains several of the common stereotypes found in a minstrel act: the trickster, trying to make easy money, quick to get in a fight, and dressing in women's clothing were standard features in Vaudeville acts in which characters had little time for development and thus depended on the audience recognizing the tropes. The reviewer's note that the performers "depend too much on realism" has multiple meanings. One is that the characters were too real and rebuked the stereotypes. Following this logic, the reviewer would have preferred the act to lean into the stylization of minstrel acts. The reviewer uses the term "own native wit," which suggests that they meant the performers relied on their own (white) personas, and after they "worked the act out a little more," they would become more like the expected stereotype. I interpret this in two ways. First, a white man in blackface performing for a white audience creates a gross distortion of the authenticity of the Black experience. The second way is that the act and performance were not authentic to the minstrel style and aesthetic. The primarily white audience was more interested in seeing an act with familiar minstrel tropes than an act that reflected the actual experience of Black Americans. In the second interpretation, the most successful minstrel act was dehumanizing and damaging to its subjects. Dehumanization was financially beneficial, even more so than the other ethnic acts, whose characters were intended to resonate with immigrant audiences. The reliance on the minstrel stereotype was crucial to putting

one over on the audience. As I will discuss in later chapters, the minstrel stereotypes and stock characters persisted in film and television long beyond Vaudeville.

Phase Two: From Vaudeville to Roast (1915-1940)

The roast is not a mere adaption of Vaudeville performances. The roast is a ritual that emerged from participants removing themselves from their everyday lives in the Vaudeville industry, creating a heightened, specific place to play and perform. Thus, on the surface, the performance of roasts may seem to be a rejection of Vaudeville. However, ritual performance is not one of direct cause and effect. Roasts are not a direct rejection of Vaudeville. Instead, they were a way for performers to negotiate their identities within the Vaudeville culture. The Friars Club held Testimonial Dinners, which then transitioned into the roast. Because roasts originated with the Friars Club, a study of the formation of the Club is critical to connecting Vaudeville to the roast.

The Friars Club: A Very Brief History

The Friars Club was formed in 1904 in New York City. First formed as a professional organization for press agents, the Friars Club's membership quickly changed to include all those associated with Vaudeville. The focus shifted to brotherhood and social bonding alongside professional considerations. "Friar" is a translation of the Latin word *frater*, meaning brother. Even though the Friars Club originated the American roast, the roast is not entirely a new concept. Lampooning and insulting those in power has been in existence, as evidenced by, for example, medieval literature and ancient Greek satire. Even the Friars Club expanded on previous rituals. George Test (1980), writing about roasts as a uniquely American ritual, explains that the Friars Club roast mimics the Gridiron Club of professional journalists in Washington, D.C. In the 1850s, the Gridiron Club gathered regularly to honor political figures and fellow

journalists. Although lampooning fellow journalists was a large part of the Gridiron Club, it was not the main attraction. Gridiron dinners included skits, musical numbers, and other entertainment. The Friars Club resembles the Gridiron Club because it also began with those working in the news sector. In 1904, a group of press agents came together to support each other and unify in opposition to other people who claimed to be press agents to get free access to the theater. By 1916, the Friars established a physical home in New York's Upper East Side and named it the Monastery.

The purpose of the Friars club as a strictly professional organization was short-lived. At the onset, the Friars Club was a social club that excluded women and people of color. This resulted in cycles of exclusion and discrimination. Importantly, exclusivity was an essential framework of Friars Club roasts, which perpetuated white supremacy and heteropatriarchy from the start. Although women could participate in the events and visit the clubhouse, membership was exclusively male until 1988 (Adams 1976). Similarly, there were Black participants who were entertainers popular with white audiences. However, their membership did not come with complete acceptance, as evidenced by the early roasts, which included ethnic humor and minstrel acts with Black and white people performing in blackface. The Club included Black men, but only if they were entertainers respected by white audiences. Although early rosters of the Friars club are not known in entirety, but based on the information given, it is likely that comedic talent, bravado, being well-liked, and being a great performer became the social currency. Women and non-white performers of Vaudeville were often excluded from these social circles, whereas European immigrants were more easily accepted. Membership was likely extended by current members to individuals similar to themselves which perpetuated its exclusionary nature. Historical accounts address this briefly, dismissing it as a product of its time. For example, Barry

Dougherty states that his account is "not the place to judge, criticize, condone, or condemn—it's just a vehicle to pass along some fascinating tidbits about some very fascinating people who have their own agenda—to entertain" (2000, 30). However, scholars must be critical because popular entertainment is never a neutral distraction. As I will discuss in later chapters, the roast provides opportunities for resisting hegemonic racism and sexism, but this was only after the roast persisted as a ritual outside the private Friars Club's confines. To better understand the later roasts, one must consider the origin.

In the 1920s, the club held an annual Friars Fest, a variety show starring Vaudeville's featured acts. These were social events as well as fundraisers for the club. Later, the club sponsored testimonial dinners and black-tie affairs in which musical acts and speeches celebrated a guest of honor. At testimonial dinners, guests toasted the guest of honor. As comedians were often those giving testimonials, the honoring included comedic insults. Eventually, the testimonial dinners continued explicitly as "roasts," a play on the word "toast," a short speech in honor of someone (Test 1980). The first official Friars Club roast honored Joe E. Lewis in 1950. The formal dinner, complete with a lavish menu, took place at the Waldorf Astoria, a luxury hotel known for its popularity among the wealthy. Often, the Friars' events did not take place at the headquarters, enhancing the formal qualities. As the events grew in popularity, the audience outgrew the Monastery.

In the 1950s, the Friars Club established chapters in California and Ohio as original members relocated to these areas. Today, the Friars Club—still restricted to members—hosts roasts but more often books stand-up comedy acts. As one can expect in the rapidly changing economics of New York City and the state of live entertainment, the Friars Club has struggled and recently had a decline in financial stability leading to an investigation of its current director

(Abrams 2019). However, in March 2021, the management announced that the Club was recently renovated and taking reservations for its lounge and restaurant, but access was again restricted by the COVID-19 virus in summer of 2021 (https://www.friarsclub.com/). In 2022, the club is open for reservations once again.

The Round Table

As a precursor to the testimonial dinners and roasts, the Round Table set a carnivalesque atmosphere for rituals to develop. London writer Charles Lamb brought the Round Table to New York City in the 1860s. Lamb's round table dinners were a "rendezvous for luminaries in the world of arts and letter" (Adams 1976, 2004, 60). Round tables were a central point in many clubs involved with the arts. The Friars Club Round Table, unlike the other clubs, did not need a specific invitation (although it was still only for Friars Club members). The literal and figurative idea of a round table is that everyone has equal footing. At the carnivalesque Friars Club version, a lunchtime event, everyone at the table had an equal right to complain and criticize. Starting in the 1920s, the Round Table gathered in various New York celebrity locales, eager to continue the ritual at night, such as Lindy's Restaurant and Max's Delicatessen. Even though the physical space was different, the Friars Club's round table's magic circle—that is, the implicit agreement to play by the rules—retained its form.

Friars Club biographer Joey Adams recalls that the Round Table's implicit rule was that "if you can't say anything nice about the guy—let's hear it" (Adams 1976, 63), which eventually became part of the roast ritual. Comebacks to criticism and verbal sparring were common. Dougherty notes that much of the discussion was about who was stealing whose act. The inauthenticity of using someone else's material was the worst crime among the group. Dougherty

lists some legendary stories about the roundtable. As he tells it, these may or may not have happened, but the stories have become part of the Friars Club mythology. He recalls:

> Frank Fay was a brilliant comic who was a self-made man and adored his maker. "I insist I'm not conceited," he said often, "although you realize I have every right to be." Bert Wheeler chided him one lunchtime, "I agree you're great but how could you stand up in court and say you're the greatest living actor of all time?" Fay pulled himself up to his full ego [*sic*] and answered, "I was under oath; I didn't want to commit perjury." (Adams 1976, 60).

This example, neatly packaged as Friars Club folklore, is an early ancestor of the roast. The original speaker leads with something about himself, and when rebuked by another, instead of being insulted, provides another clever comeback, asserting his power. The Friars Club Round Table also initiated the idea that members perform for each other rather than just for an audience. Both the joking and the reacting were part of the performance, as dictated by the Round Table's social boundaries.

The Friars Club and Carnival

Literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin identified the concept of "carnival," which appeared throughout literature, performance, culture, and history. Carnival is a specific time and space in which the regular rules governing class and power are disregarded. The time-and-space–bound suspension of everyday rules and norms allows individuals to behave in ways that test and question roles and power dynamics. This can only happen, however, if the heightened performance is bound by time and space. The interactions occur in what Bakhtin calls the "town square" (Bakhtin 1984, 10). The town square translates to a temporary space of freedom for the masses to mock and criticize the powerful. During carnival, the king is "uncrowned," and "while

the usual world order is suspended, the new utopian order which has come to replace it is sovereign and embraces all" (Bakhtin 1984, 265). Even though the uncrowned king will eventually return to his throne, a symbolic regeneration occurs among the common people, permitting the use of insult and criticism of those more powerful without any reprisal. Carnival is at its most present in the roast. Subjecting the king (the guest of honor) to a roast will momentarily uncrown him so that transformation and regeneration can occur among the less powerful. This regeneration process sustains the king's power, providing a space for excising frustrations of power struggles. Revolution and dissent are held at bay by giving space to exorcise frustrations in a controlled space. The mocking renders the king more potent because mockery is hurled at those with the capacity for dominance over others. The participants all know that the switching of power is temporary and that their mockery is visible when contained within the boundaries of time designated as carnival.

In my discussion of rituals, I emphasize that ritual distances the culture from creating new meanings. Like a ritual, the carnival has established boundaries of time and place, and behaviors are acceptable only within these boundaries. The king, who holds power in everyday life, is analogous to the guest of honor in a roast. Bakhtin discusses the ever-present character of the clown, who "grant(s) the right not to understand, the right to confuse, to tease, to hyperbolize life" (Bakhtin 1981, 163). The king has the potential to be the clown, but only when "his costume [is] changed, 'travestied,' to turn him once more into a clown" (Bakhtin 1981, 197). Likewise, the guest of honor becomes a clown in front of their "subjects." The insulting and mocking of the powerful are "equivalent to a change of costume, to a metamorphosis. Abuse reveals the other, true face of the abused; it tears off his disguise and mask. It is the king's

uncrowning" (Bakhtin 1981, 197). Because the people/roast participants have the freedom to mock the king/guest of honor, it renders the king powerless for an established boundary of time.

Incorporating carnival into the ritual illuminates why roasts are comedic and share stand-up comedy's sentiment of dissent and cultural commentary. Thus, as one might expect, roasts are often perceived as a subgenre of stand-up comedy. However, while the laughter emerges because the roast jokes are individually funny, the laughter reflects deeper sentiments. Roast jokes are for mockery; with mockery comes laughter. According to Bakhtin, laughter is not merely a reaction to individual jokes or insults but "rather laughter conceived as an objectivized, sociohistorical cultural phenomenon" (Bakhtin 1981, 236). Laughter is not related to one person or an individual joke. In a roast, the absurdity of relationships and behaviors produces laughter. Bakhtin further explains that carnival laughter "builds its own world in opposition to the official, its own church versus the official church, its own state versus the official state" (Bakhtin 1984, 88). The laughter is group laughter, a way to distance the laughers from official, everyday power structures. Carnival laughter occurred in the early Friars Club roasts and is present during contemporary roasts. Although individual jokes may cause laughter, the laughter is symbolic of the "people," those not in power. Bakhtin says further, "this laughter is ambivalent: it is gay, triumphant and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives. Such is the laughter of carnival" (Bakhtin 1984, 12). Laughter arises from the removal of routine power structures. In a roast, the participants' laughter, which comes from others being roasted and being the recipient of a roast, is important as a whole unit. As Bakhtin states, participants laugh at those who are already laughing (Bakhtin 1984, 12). By stepping into the roast's magic circle (the designated arena of play), one commits to laughing during the roast. The person in power is uncrowned, and the laughter is directed at the absurdity of the ritual and not just at original jokes.

Phase Three: Ritualization of the Roast (1940-1960)

The rituals of Vaudeville and the Friars Club set the stage, so to speak, for the comedy roast. Bell's theory of ritualization, which focuses "more clearly on (1) how ritualization as practice distinguishes itself from other practices and (2) what it accomplishes in doing so," provides productive ways to analyze roasts (2009, 89). Ritualization does not provide a ritual's absolute meaning. Ritualization of roasts creates a space where participants have permission to explore confrontational and unexpected behavior, guarded by the rules of play that distinguish it from the real world. The performance itself serves as the means to an end. There are two key tenants of ritualization: (1) The ritual is a bridge between a heightened, made-up reality and everyday life maintained by social and physical boundaries of play, and (2) the ritual is based on performing binary oppositions of us/them and superior/inferior. As discussed in the previous chapter, the roast's early emergence reflects the *us* and *them* opposition. The Friars Club members (*us)* represent more individual freedom from those controlling the business of Vaudeville *(them).* The *us* and *them* become inverted within the boundaries of carnivalesque play. Bell's other opposition, *superior* and *inferior*, emerges strongly in the later televised roasts, discussed in a subsequent chapter. The term "opposition" is purposefully used instead of binary or opposite. In performance ritual studies, the focus is the tension and negotiation between the oppositions. As found in Bell's ritualization research, performance is a constantly liminal, shifting state and is rarely wholly one thing or the other.

Us and Them

Once the roast became a separate entity from Vaudeville, the Friars controlled the explicit and implicit rules of the ritual. By the time roasts emerged in the 1940s, some members had performed in Vaudeville for over twenty years. Even with the decline of Vaudeville, its rituals

and culture ran deep in the membership. To trace the emerging rules of roasts, one must consider the importance of physical space. Vaudeville's physical space had a fundamental context: the performer was onstage, backstage, on the road, or in a boarding house with other performers. The locations and contexts determined behaviors based on external audiences (onstage) and an audience of peers (backstage and on the road). The decline of Vaudeville liberated performers from the physical locations of Vaudeville, but the lingering effects of rituals and social performance remained. Ritualistic behavior emerged in these contexts, ranging from ethnic acts, minstrel acts, special slang, and spoken and unspoken rules about interacting with the audience. In conjunction with the rituals of Vaudeville, the Myth of Success established the idea that talent was innate and success did not necessarily come at the end of a long life of hard work. Instead, savviness and personality could make someone get ahead. This sentiment carried over to the Friars' roasts.

Performing the opposition of *us* and *them* prevails throughout the threads connecting Vaudeville to roasts. Establishing who is *us* and who is *them* depends on the performance's context, and the oppositions constantly flip and change even within the same performance. The *us* can be a stand-in for authenticity, worthiness, and respect. *Them* includes outsiders, imposters, and those who do not understand the Friars' true nature. I argue that the roast ritual first emerged through the negotiation of *us* as the Friars in opposition to *them* as the restrictive rituals of Vaudeville. There are three specific oppositions performed in the early Friars Club roasts: occupation, ethnic performance, and audience.

Consider the Friars Club's initial founding: the press agents grew frustrated that other people were posing as agents, taking away financial opportunities. Thus, the need to preserve the profession's authenticity drove their mission. What started as an occupational advocacy group

eventually grew into a social club defined by exclusivity. In an account of the early Friars Club, Adams writes, “What is a Friar? He is a press agent, a producer, a hoofer [dancer], a vaudevillian, a picture star. He’s a theatrical agent, a songwriter, a promoter, a nightclub owner, a TV executive, a newspaperman who likes to be with his own, the people he writes about” (1976, 14). Authenticity took on many forms in this group. Debates emerged: How did authenticity favor connections in the theater industry? Did it mean financial success? Being authentic did not guarantee Friars membership; one had to become and embody the Friars. An invitation to the Friars Club was a confirmation of embodying the unique spirit of the Friar—an intangible, elevated state of being. Just as in Vaudeville, succeeding as a Friar was an innate characteristic and not one that someone could learn.

In 1916, when the Friars moved to their new, larger Monastery in mid-town Manhattan, they extended invitations to a wider circle in the industry, including friends and acquaintances more loosely tied to the entertainment industry. The emphasis moved from occupational authenticity to personal authenticity. Being an authentic Friar was now less tied to occupation and more to culture and social identity. To roast someone and be roasted became a way to perform loyalty and prove oneself to be an authentic Friar.

Ethnic Humor: Who Can Use It?

The use of ethnic humor, just as in Vaudeville, created several configurations of *us/them*. In Vaudeville, ethnic humor and ethnic acts were often used to connect with the audience and their struggles in a new and changing city. Often, ethnic performers created a connection to the audience that removed the line between *us* and *them*, even when the acts sustained damaging stereotypes. Placing negative characterizations in entertainment considered family-friendly was an implicit endorsement. In the Testimonial Dinners and later roasts, the Friars did not have a

mass audience to gauge reaction or create an audience connection, because the audience and performers were the same.

One possibility is that without the accountability of an outside audience, self-regulation is abandoned in favor of the hedonistic freedom to use vulgarity and harmful stereotypes. Performers are now free to perform ethnic humor of their choosing regardless of whether they identify with the ethnic group being mocked. Friars Club members wore Blackness/ethnicity as masks, both by applying burnt cork and taking on the tropes of the ethnic act. The repercussions of a large commercial audience were now absent. Even today, comedy and performance criticism sometimes excuse the behavior, suggesting that "it's just comedy" and "it's not real." A generous reading of ethnic humor is that it brings attention and thus criticism. If considering the use of ethnic humor in the context of play, the "rules" of the roast make the most outrageous insults fair game. Often, ethnicity is the first thing someone mentions in a roast. Participants know that ethnic humor is a particularly egregious and taboo insult, thus using ethnicity is a strategy for the game. However, as I have noted, audience reception of satire is never universal.

A second reason members used ethnic humor during the Friars' roasts was the liberation from the strict curation of acts by theater owners, who limited the amount of each type of ethnic act per show. In the Friars Club, performers were free to have as many ethnic acts as they chose. Even though some events were open to entertainers, the Friars Club was a homogeneous group of mostly white men with little incentive to fully confront the harmful stereotypes of the behavior. The Friars were a brotherhood, and confronting someone's comedy, or expressing offense, was against the culture of the Friars. Dissenting risked exclusion.

Audience: Who Performs for Whom?

As the Friars established themselves as a legitimate organization, their activities expanded to more than just social gatherings. The Friars regularly sponsored a popular public performance called the Friars Frolics. The Friars raised money by doing what they did best: entertaining. As many of the members and performers were Vaudeville performers, the Frolics contained the same performance types. Dougherty explains, albeit reluctantly, "while the Frolics were a wonderful mishmash of songs, sketches, and even interludes of the best of the best in show business, a large number were in the form of minstrel shows" (2000, 14). The difference was the freedom from Vaudeville rituals, expectations, and restrictions. Free from the Vaudeville framework, the performers became *us* while the Vaudeville theater owners became *them*. The Friars Frolics show took advantage of the loose time restrictions on acts and profanity rules, and they were free from the familiarity and repetition of acts. The Follies were more ephemeral performances, playing for only a few nights.

In the 1930s, the financial and critical success of the Friars Frolics led to public Testimonial Dinners. The Friars' signature Testimonial Dinners arose as "press agents, ever itchy to find another way to scratch their clients' egos and always looking for a promotional angle, came up with the idea of the guest of honor dinner" (Adams 1976, 8). The financial necessity, of course, had an impact. Still, the Testimonial Dinners flourished because they became a uniquely Friars club event in which the Friars were free as performers to disregard and defy the rules of Vaudeville's performance. Where Vaudeville was "entertainment for everyone," often appealing to lower- and working-class audiences, the Testimonial Dinners were black-tie affairs, with upscale food and programs written in formal language resembling older models of decency and manners. The formal nature was also, perhaps, simultaneously a way of mocking it; hurling low-

brow insults while in formal dress and eating a multi-course meal was a titillating juxtaposition. The *us* is the Vaudeville performers, considered low-brow entertainment for the masses, and *them* is the upper-class, elite society who would perhaps not even consider the idea of attending anything but serious theater. Quite simply, wearing a formal gown and saying impolite things was, indeed, a thrill.

The Testimonial Dinners entertained members and acquaintances from the club and rendered the event exclusive. Non-Friars attended by invite only. The divide between the performers and the audience was blurred; the performers performed for each other. The Testimonial Dinners allowed the members to be performers and audience, unshackled from the ways that Vaudeville operated. Vaudeville acts defined every moment and aspect of their acts based on audience reactions, repeating it precisely every performance. Whereas the format and sequence of action in Testimonial Dinners were precise, the insults were meant to surprise the participants. Opportunities for improvisation and rebuttals provided more impromptu performances, an escape from the trappings of repetitive precision of acts. Performers demonstrated their ability to be spontaneous and creative, which made the dinners a vehicle for establishing status among the community. A member did not need financial success to gain power; he needed to impress and entertain his fellow members. Where the general Vaudeville audience was *them*, the *us* (the Testimonial Dinner attendees) performed for each other. Recall that a performance ritual is a performance in which a completely separate audience need not be present—the ritual is performed for those performing it. This idea propelled the Friars to up the stakes in the Testimonial Dinners, providing even more exclusivity and *us/them* divide. In the 1940s, the Testimonial Dinners were rebranded as Friars Club roasts.

Despite being known as bawdy, Vaudeville's acts were beholden to vulgarity codes, stopping them from "going blue" in response to both the moral values of the time and the assurance that Vaudeville was family entertainment (Stein 1984, 336). The Vaudeville performer's trick was to perform an act that came close to the line, including innuendos and jokes that were not explicit, creating another opposition: those who got the joke and those who were oblivious. The ethnic acts of Vaudeville may have used the innuendos to their advantage; using language, idioms, and sayings known to their community but not the mainstream could allow for the covert delivery of taboo humor. Using taboo humor tested the boundaries of acceptability. Testing the boundaries of appropriateness was later seen as a hallmark of the roast. Still, in a roast, the boundaries extend much further, allowing performers to be more daring and explicit in their roasts, eliciting the shock and respect of other participants. Without an audience, the performers in Friar Club roasts practiced their own less restrictive code of conduct.

The Myth of Success reinforced the difference between Vaudeville and the Friars. In Vaudeville, the myth suggested that one had to be resourceful, sly, and have an influential personality to put one over on an audience. To put one over was to convey an idea to the audience and convince them it was true. In Friars Club roasts, the Myth of Success was to prove worthiness to one another with talent and wit. To hold one's own in a roast was to simultaneously honor someone, and, when the target of roasts, accept it graciously. The reaction to a roast was essential to the performance: to laugh and give the idea of authentically laughing at oneself created the impression that one had the power not to be upset by insults. Within the Friars Club, the *us* were those who not only could roast but could take the best of them. To not take it seriously was to hold the same power as the guest of honor.

Conclusion

This chapter establishes the foundations for critically examining the American comedy roast: performance studies, ritual, and play. Using this approach, I connect the Friars Club, the roast originators, with the emergence of Vaudeville as popular entertainment. In its current form, the roast did not spontaneously materialize in the 1940s. As performance studies suggests, rituals rarely emerge in full form. Instead, the Friars club emerged with the opposition of *us* and *them*, with members distinguishing themselves as Friars, free from Vaudeville culture's restrictions. Although the content and performances within the ritual changed to reflect the cultural tensions and contradictions of its time, the specific cultural contexts of its origins are essential to understanding the ritual dimensions of the roast.

After the end of the popular reign of Vaudeville, the roast ritual flourished, and the formal properties of the Friars roast became the blueprint for future televised roasts. The following chapters examine case studies from televised roasts. These analyses show how the ritual form of the roast retained some structural consistency, yet the form is not exclusively tied to the cultural contexts of its origins in early twentieth-century New York City. Issues of race and gender identity do indeed play a part, but the form allows for shifting representations of tensions and contradictions between power and identity.

CHAPTER THREE. PERFORMING BLACKNESS IN THE ROAST

This chapter explores the negotiation of power in roasts through a lens of race—specifically, Blackness—as found in two televised roasts, *The Dean Martin Celebrity Roast of Sammy Davis Jr.* (1975) and *The Comedy Central Roast of Flavor Flav* (2007). As suggested in previous chapters, rituals create a performance that reflects the tensions and contradictions of Black representation in changing social contexts. These two televised roasts provide a space in which hegemonic views of Blackness, reinforced by representations in film and television, are extricated and power dynamics are negotiated among participants. The roasts can be examined through Bell's concept of superior and inferior oppositions in ritualization. In contrast to other cultural texts in which guests of honor appear as heightened versions of themselves, the 1975 and 2007 roasts speak to the power structures, contradictions, and tensions in cultural representations of Blackness in their eras. First, I examine how Sammy Davis Jr.'s appearance on an episode of *All in the Family* reveals contradictions about how his Blackness is perceived by the white mainstream and how he uses those contradictions to maintain power, which is similarly played out in the roast. Next, I examine perceptions of Flavor Flav in the reality show *Flavor of Love* as a contradiction between challenge and adherence to historical tropes of Blackness in dominant American culture. For both celebrities, the venues of their respective roasts (*The Dean Martin Celebrity Roasts, Comedy Central Roast of Flavor Flav*) bring the performers' impact into a sharp, direct focus within a roast; the ritual of the roast makes clear the contradictions elsewhere in American popular culture.

Representations of Blackness

Before analyzing the case studies, it is critical to understand the origins of the cultural history of stereotypes, because these character tropes are deeply embedded in media of the

twenty and twenty-first centuries. Black performers are often measured by their adherence or rebuffing of these tropes. As discussed in Chapter Two, minstrel performance is an important cultural influence on mainstream perceptions of Black performance and these stereotypes continue to fuel modern roasts and representations of Blackness. In 1993, popular news outlets reported on the appearance of actor Ted Danson at his then-partner Whoopi Goldberg's Friars Club roast (Williams 1993). Danson, who is white, appeared in blackface. Some argued that it was permissible because Goldberg asked him to do so and found it amusing. Even though the performance was not filmed, several anecdotes have come to light. Danson appeared in blackface with a white-outline mouth and a straw hat, directly replicating a minstrel performer of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The controversy of whether Danson's behavior was permissible because it was a roast continues to this day because, by being highly visible to the public, his performance extended beyond the boundaries of the roast. Members of the public who saw or read about Danson in blackface were not participants and did not agree to the roast rules.

Televised roasts are part of a larger landscape of Black representation in film and television throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. These representations have fueled conceptions of Blackness within the imagination of the white mainstream and other social minorities while having the potential to create self-images for Black individuals. I look to these forms of representation starting from 1900 because these stereotypes continue to influence Black representation today. The stereotyped characters are key to the ritual performance of the roast. Participants use the stereotypes to assert power over other participants and subvert the stereotypes.

Minstrel Types in Early Film

In the previous chapter on Vaudeville, I discussed live minstrel acts in the early days of the Friars Club roasts. Although live minstrel acts decreased in popularity in the 1930s, their influence did not disappear. The minstrelsy persisted in representations of Blackness in early films, television variety shows, and later, television sitcoms. Although live Vaudeville diminished, the format shifted to televised variety shows. However, before television, early films began to cement tropes of Blackness that persisted throughout forms of popular culture. Donald Bogle's historical analysis of film and television history and representations of Blackness offers a useful foundation for discussion. In *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in Films* (1973), Bogle explains that the early tropes of "toms" and "coons" rendered Blackness as harmless and specifically subservient. Based on the "Uncle Tom" character inspired by the many adaptations of Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, these individuals "are chased, harassed, hounded, flogged, enslaved, insulted, but they keep the faith, never turn against their white [masters] and [they] remain hardy, submissive, and stoic" (Bogle 1973, 6). Rather than recognizing the agents of Black subjugation in America, white supremacist values framed Uncle Tom as a stoic hero who is admired for his perseverance. The character prevailed despite his treatment, with little to no recognition of the context he must overcome. The Uncle Tom character prevailed in dramas, but comedy favored the coon character.

The Coon was a figure in white-dominated America that read as unreliable, lazy, and an object of amusement. Coon characters wanted to please their master, as his approval was all they sought. A variation on this character was the trickster, a scheming character who steadfastly concocted reasons to get out of working hard. The Coon character, if not a child, was played as

childlike, and naïve in the ways of the white community. He was illiterate, seemingly not because he had been deprived of education but because he did not have the intellect. In the silent film era, white actors almost exclusively played these characters and did so in blackface. The white actors benefitted from these character types as roles to fill. As Bogle explains, "the character types sat like square boxes on a self. A white actor walked by, selected a box, and used it as a base for a rigidly defined performance" (1973, 4). In the 1920s and 1930s, despite more casting opportunities for Black screen actors, they were still required to inhabit the coon type because white "audiences rejected any modification of the character" (Bogle 1973, 17). As with Vaudeville minstrel acts, white audiences reveled in seeing familiar character types rather than any attempt at authenticity or the humanization of Black characters.

In the studio era, Black actors might have found more job opportunities, but character types were rigid, and once cast in these roles, Black actors found it hard to move on. Scripts were created by white producers, directors, and writers who had little incentive to represent Black characters with any depth or authenticity. As Bogle remarks, the actor "gives not a performance of his own, not one in which he interprets black life, but one in which he presents for mass consumption black life through the eyes of white artists. The actor becomes a Black man in blackface" (Bogle 1973, 27). If they wanted to work in mainstream American cinema, Black actors had to take these roles. Bogle explains that in the 1930s, a new Black character type emerged: the loyal servant under the control of white families, one who provided emotional as well as physical labor. As film techniques advanced, white filmmakers were eager to feature more song and dance numbers. As part of the Black characters' household duties, servants provided this entertainment. The most well-known actor in these roles was Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, who rose to fame appearing in films as child star Shirley Temple's faithful servant,

shielding her from harm and teaching her how to dance. Robinson was always "well-mannered," patient, and compliant in whatever request he got from Temple's character. The actor, according to Bogle, initiated the humanized servant tradition, a variation on the Uncle Tom character type. The servant character became more human when he was refined and compliant, especially if the actor had skill in dancing or singing, an attribute that proved his value both to the family the character serves and to the film's producer. Bogle writes, "perhaps it would be more appropriate to say that certain black actors, by individualizing their servants through their own unique and winning personalities, had proven these black faces were not just escapist creations on the screen but realistic human ones, too" (Bogle 1973, 52). Early films' history of Black representation often focuses on Black male performers because female types were even more marginalized and dehumanized. Black women were rarely, if ever, given agency on the early screen. The 1930s and 1940s, as Bogle explains, saw more Black women on screen, but their characters' agency was often denied. While individual actors may have successfully humanized their characters, the more prominent character stereotypes were still deep in white viewers' consciousness. The introduction of television in the 1950s provided more reach and opportunities for progress.

By the 1950s, television's popularity surpassed live theaters for entertainment. In *Primetime Blues* (2001), Bogle traces the Black stock characters in sitcoms and variety shows, illustrating how the characters reflected the same racist character types despite progress in representation. Black entertainers often found screen time in variety shows as guests and hosts. The shows would be profitable if they appealed to white audiences, thus perpetuating non-threatening character tropes. Bogle sees *The Flip Wilson Show* (1970–1974, NBC) as a bridge between the older images of Blackness and the images that dominated 1960s and 1970s television. *The Flip Wilson Show* was a significant landmark because it eschewed the large

production numbers and Vaudeville stylings of variety shows of the 1950s and 1960s, focusing more on simple acts and recurring characters.

However, the characters were deemed safe, and their "docility and the fact they lacked anger" appeased white audiences (Bogle 2001, 75). The characters appeared detached from any major political struggles of the time, "untouched by any large social issues" (Bogle 2001, 75). Wilson's characters, then, were "a collection of repackaged stereotypes from another era" but slightly adjusted for social relevance (Bogle 2001, 75). In *Blacks and White TV* (1992), J. Fred MacDonald takes an even more critical view of *The Flip Wilson* show, arguing that the Black comics, including Wilson and his guests, were dangerously self-deprecating, "continually joking about being black … it now became riotously funny to joke about skin color, hair texture, race riots, poverty, welfare checks, and minority social customs" (MacDonald 1992, 174). MacDonald notes that "it became a mark of fashionable outspokenness to deliver jokes based on old bigoted slurs" (1992, 177). Fashionability is more about what is profitable because it appeals to white audiences. Making racist comedy is an aesthetic choice, but it is also driven by contextual and hegemonic forces based on the majority audience. As I will discuss, this type of representation creates categories of "good" and "bad" stereotypes but only as defined by the white audience.

Whereas variety shows often featured both white and Black actors, the situation comedy showcased entire Black casts. Sitcoms such as *The Jeffersons* (1975–1985, CBS) and *Good Times* (1974–1979, CBS) featured the domestic lives of Black families and provided some realities of Black life but were tempered by their need to appeal to white audiences. While many white critics applauded the efforts of depicting Black life in sitcoms, the relegation of Black casts to television comedies was a continued assurance of docile Black characters modeled on early

Black screen types. MacDonald states that at the beginning of the 1970s, “as the nation slipped easily into a mood of self-delusion encouraged by the politics of the time, soul-searching disappeared from the network video” (MacDonald 1992, 166). Tired of the difficult conversations, white viewers “preferred seeing the good things about America. Ratings figures told the networks that most citizens want to escape instead of education in support in a place of questioning” (MacDonald 1992, 166). Although many television shows did challenge social norms, MacDonald argues that white mainstream viewers preferred not to see any strife or criticism, thus erasing opportunities to show the actual struggles and humanity of marginalized characters. The dominant audience preferred Black characters to entertain them. Regardless of content, MacDonald criticizes the relegation of Black casts to comedies as an era of “New Minstrelsy.” This view, however, erases the idea that for Black audiences, seeing these families on television was, in fact, escapism. As media reception theories instruct, audiences are rarely monolithic entities. Their reaction is negotiated (Hall 1972), sometimes reading against the grain. One person’s stereotyped character is another viewer’s satire. Nowhere is negotiated decoding more central than inside the constraints of a comedy roast.

Assumptions

Before analyzing *The Dean Martin Roast: Sammy Davis Jr.* and *The Comedy Central Roast of Flavor Flav*, addressing assumptions is necessary. When using ritual performance as my framing device, I refer to the inside and outside the boundaries of the ritual. However, the transformative effect of the ritual is not a phenomenon that only happens within the boundaries of the ritual. A specific type of performance and rules occur within the boundaries, but the larger context involving identity and positioning of power is not only exclusive to the roast. Rather, the roast performance brings them into sharp focus. As the ritual continues and is enacted, the

transformative properties change because the contextual cultural notions change. The roast's inferior and superior deals with positioning of Blackness, but changes as the positioning as Blackness changes within popular culture. Thus, my choice to compare the roast rituals, one from 1975 and one from 2007, is deliberate. Despite the wildly different eras of morality, aesthetics, and production, the patterns regarding the tensions and contradictions of Blackness are present in both.

Secondly, I cannot ignore the fact that these are televised and heavily edited roasts. Especially in the *Dean Martin Celebrity Roast*, cuts to participants laughing and reacting seem to be spliced in. Furthermore, the 1975 roasts rarely show anyone "bombing" or lines that fail to get a laugh. The 2007 roast includes some of this, but a lot of material is purposefully edited out. The extra material is also publicly available as outtakes and from first-hand accounts of the participants. While I agree that liveness in performance is crucial to performance analysis, I reject the idea that this makes televised roasts an inauthentic ritual. The editing, production, and camera work are all part of the performance as presented to widespread audiences. The entirety of the produced television show is the holistic performance, just as watching a live performance also contains constraints by creators and performers to obfuscate the production mechanics. The televised rituals serve as instruction manuals for the ritual, enabling people to hold both public and private roasts. When individuals invoke the rituals in local communities, they take direction from the popular televised roasts. Rituals are meant to adapt and change to the context. Thus, the televised roast becomes a vehicle for maintaining the cultural life of the roast ritual.

Selection of Case Studies

I chose these two roasts for several reasons. First, the guest of honor is a notable Black performer whose Blackness is often at the forefront of the criticism and legacy of the actors,

even if they themselves do not engage in a critical analysis of their race. Secondly, these roasts feature a more significant number of Black participants. This is most likely due to the relationship between the participants to the guest of honor. There is implicit permission if racially charged roast jokes come from other Black participants. The default on televised roasts is a white guest of honor and white participants; thus, the roasts of Black men become the other, the special category. These are the "Black versions" of the Dean Martin and Comedy Central Roasts. All-Black versions of roasts thrive and exist in other forms, such as in private, on specials like *Shaq's All-Star Roast* (2003), and often in local comedy clubs. Nonetheless, the othering of these Black versions is the most public-facing roasts.

These two roasts feature Black men as the guest of honor. There are only three Black woman-identified guests of honor in both case studies. I cannot analyze what is not present, but here lies a hidden script of how Black women are devalued, not just in the roasts but in the comedy and entertainment business. The Dean *Martin Celebrity Roast* and the early years of Comedy Central featured mostly male comedians; men are considered the default. Black women are present in roast performances but are absent in two of the most publicly consumable roasts. In an unfortunate way of pitting white women against Black men in a battle of insults to gain social capital within the performance, the women involved are primarily white.

The Dean Martin Celebrity Roast: Sammy Davis Jr.

After Vaudeville, roasts appeared on televised variety shows. Many of those involved in these shows were former Vaudeville actors and were associated with the Friars Club. Dean Martin, a longtime entertainer, was well-connected and respected in entertainment. Formerly of the infamous Rat Pack, his post–Rat Pack career flourished, riding on the white masculine ideal. Martin was generally known for his laid-back ease of humor and constant smoking and drinking.

His alcoholic tendencies were often the subject of roast jokes directed at him. Although, in contrast, the Comedy Central Roasts used a different host for each roast, Martin's consistent appearance made for audience familiarity.

The Dean Martin Celebrity Roasts were filmed at the MGM Hotel in Las Vegas, which the introduction of the show calls the "the entertainment capital of the world," emphasizing the star-studded nature of the roast. Continuing the tradition of the Friars Club, participants wear tuxedos and fancy dresses. Most notably, these roasts include a large audience observing the roast, which I name as a secondary audience. However, they are still participants, as their reactions are crucial in determining the performers' success in their roasting abilities. *The Dean Martin Celebrity Roast* has a specific dais setup. The roaster stands at a podium in the middle, flocked by the guest of honor and Martin. All participants on the dais face the audience. This further enhances all participants' performance and participation, because, even if not at the podium, their reactions are essential.

One of the conventions of a roast ritual is that the participants are personally acquainted with the guest of honor and thus able to produce insults. Moving this to a mass audience requires the guest of honor, and all participants, to be somewhat known to the public. In roasts in workplaces or communities, private jokes and insider information are used. Still, the participants and their personal lives must be public knowledge for a televised roast to make the roasts relevant. It is worth noting that as lifelong performers, they are used to being in front of an audience and managing their facial expressions and reactions. I find this just as compelling and still along the spectrum of authenticity—their role requires them to react according to the rules and react with laughter at any cost. They have a heightened awareness of how they present themselves, raising the stakes of their participation.

Sammy Davis Jr.: *All in the Family*

In 1975, Sammy Davis Jr. had over four decades of a successful entertainment career. He began his career in Vaudeville as part of a family act, later becoming a solo entertainer and a member of the notorious Rat Pack. However, he does not fit many of the same white masculine ideals that the other Rat Pack members do. His small stature became part of his trademark, along with his tinted glasses and cigarette/cigar smoking. He was also known to wear flashy gold jewelry—something he was derided for in roasts, once again challenging white masculinity in standards of appearance and style. Davis Jr.'s public persona reflects many tensions and contradictions of Blackness and representation of Blackness in the entertainment industry.

Davis Jr.'s personal life and beliefs were under intense public scrutiny, especially when he converted to Judaism in 1963, assuming that his Blackness and Jewishness were incompatible and that Davis, Jr, was not taking his religious identity seriously. He also survived a near-fatal car accident, causing him to lose an eye. His quote from a 1966 *Ebony* article became infamous: "Once, when I was playing golf with Jack Benny, he asked what my handicap was. I couldn't resist kidding him. 'I'm a one-eyed Negro who's Jewish,' I said" (Davis Jr. 1966, 124). Although faced with aggressive and direct racism during his career, his acceptance by the Black community was not universal; many saw him as pandering to a white audience. Nevertheless, he was vocal about social justice and his struggles. In the same *Ebony* article, he discussed the experience of being in an interracial marriage and having multiracial children: "I want my kids to have dignity. I want them to greet their fellow men as they expect to be greeted. In other words, I don't want them to walk around with a chip on their shoulders because [they are Black] and feel any prouder of their race than the next man feels of his" (Davis 1966, 131). This sentiment could also be interpreted as desiring to assimilate into the white mainstream. Regardless, Davis Jr. was

actively involved in conversations about race and civil rights and used his show business status as a platform.

By the time of the roast, Davis Jr already had a four-decade career in which his identity changed throughout the context. His Blackness was a topic of conversation about him; his appeal to white audiences brings about ideas of how he performed blackness, and why it was absorbed by white audiences. Davis Jr's general demeanor was affable, but that does not mean he was immune to racism lodged against him. Rather, he used his celebrity power to bring attention to this, while still maintaining the white audience. As discussed earlier regarding *The Flip Wilson* show, white audiences needed discussions of race to be less palpable, if not avoided outright. Davis Jr, instead, leveraged the ignorance of some of the white audience, making a statement without them knowing, creating a subversion of his role as a Black man. He represented many of the contradictions and shifting boundaries of what addressing racism in entertainment was. Therefore, his appearance on the groundbreaking and controversial sitcom, *All in the Family* (CBS, 1971-1979), was the perfect opportunity for a subversive examination of race.

In the episode, Archie Bunker, a cab driver, told his wife, Edith, progressive daughter Gloria, and son-in-law Mike, Archie's constant opponent in social issues, that Sammy Davis Jr was coming to the house to retrieve his briefcase that he left in Archie's cab. Archie commented, "He's sittin' there in the backseat talkin' to me about the weather and all, and you shoulda heard him answer me. Just like a regular person. I swear, if it weren't for no rear-view mirror, it coulda been a white guy there." Here, Archie has set up the idea that normal means white, and that Davis was not acting in the way he presumes Black people act. Black performers were expected to fulfill the coon, trickster, or roles, as Bogle outlined, to ameliorate any threat. Not only did Davis differ from these tropes, but he has transcended them, he also has been elevated to the

honor of being perceived as white. Archie's surprise that his passenger was Black telegraphed that Davis was not acting "too Black" for him. His family chides him for this statement, but in his usual demeanor, brushes it off.

When Davis Jr. arrived at the Bunker house, Archie said, "Wow, Mr. Davis, I can't believe what an honor it is to have you in the house and break bread this way. You can ask any of my family here … I always considered you the greatest credit to your race." Davis, not missing a beat, replied, "Thank you. I bet you've done a lot for yours, too." Archie responded, earnestly, "Thanks, I try." This exchange resembled the dynamics of the roast. Davis can handle the remark because not only is he aware of the racist nature of it but can respond this way due to his superior status in the relationship. Archie's sentiment that he is a "credit to his race" is similar to how Davis was regarded by white audiences, making Blackness palpable. Davis' defense is calling out Archie's ignorance with a veiled insult that he is too unaware to understand.

Later in the episode, Edith told Davis Jr., "Archie said he never thought he would see the day when coloreds and whites could be hugging and kissing coast to coast." When Archie protested, Davis Jr. said, "I know what you mean Arch, but I gotta do it! They put a kissing clause in my contract. Look, it isn't me, it's those white celebrities. They think it makes 'em look good … you see, we're in now, and they're all jumping on the bandwagon." Here, Davis leveraged Archie's obliviousness to his sarcasm to make a point that Black is not trendy. Continuing to embarrass his family, Archie continued, "No prejudice intended but if God wanted the races to be together, he would have put us together. But God put you in Africa, and he put us in all the white countries." Davis Jr. responded wryly: "Well, someone must've told you where we are because someone came and got us. They had work for us here, of course, and the offer

was tempting…considerin' free transportation, room and board, and chains. I mean, how can one resist." Davis's now obvious sarcasm still did not penetrate Archie's delusion of a serious conversation about race. The power dynamic has shifted, as the audience is fully aware of the joke—yet Archie's ignorance persists. Davis has not been mean but instead friendly, allowing Davis Jr. to look amicable in conversations about race with white people yet still pointing out the ignorance and contradictions in his words.

As he is about to leave, Davis Jr. has the last word: "Now, if you [Archie] were prejudiced, you could have called me a coon or a n***ger. But you didn't call me that, you came right out clear as a bell and said colored." He continued, "And if you were prejudiced, you'd close your eyes to what's going on in this great country of ours, but not you. You know the difference between black and white, and I have a feeling you'll always be able to tell the difference between black and white. And I know if you are prejudiced, you go around thinking that you're better than anyone else in the world, Archie. But having spent these marvelous moments with you, I can honestly say that you ain't better than anybody." Archie, still oblivious, took this as a high compliment. Right before he left, Davis agreed to pose for a picture with Archie but, at the last second, kissed him on the cheek as the flash goes off, forcing an enduring image of Archie Bunker in such close physical proximity to a Black man, recalling the earlier conversation about interracial kissing. Finally, in the tag (a short scene before the credits), Archie received an autographed photo of Davis, signed "To Archie Bunker—the whitest guy I know."

Although Davis Jr. was a frequent guest on many shows, his appearance on *All in the Family* was a useful platform to expose many contradictions of his treatment as a Black performer. *All in the Family* was unique at the time for bringing social issues into sitcoms for

(white) mainstream audiences. Black-led sitcoms had already been bringing up these issues, but in this case, white equated to the mainstream. The combination of Davis Jr. and a social platform brought to light several contradictions and Blackness in entertainment: (1) Davis's high status as a successful performer vs. his Blackness still being at the forefront of his identity, which positioned him as a Black performer in the eyes of white audiences (Archie was surprised when he learned Davis Jr. was Black since he spoke like a white man); (2) Black performers are accepted into white spaces, but the treatment once there is still subject to long-held racist ideas (the discomfort with Davis Jr. kissing white actresses), and (3) the hypocrisy of white audiences accepting a Black performer but only if they act according to white norms (Archie considering Davis Jr. a good Black man because he placated Archie's arguments of race). Because this is a sitcom, the contradictions came to light because of the inclusion of humor. Davis Jr. was far from a victim. He used his status as a celebrity and Archie's blind confidence to expose Archie's shortcomings. By seeming to agree with Archie, his subversive answers were clear to the audience and the characters of Archie's family.

Recalling the format and rules of the roast, these contradictions appear in a similar way just three years later in the *Dean Martin Celebrity Roast*. Just as the social progressiveness of *All in the Family* magnified many contradictions, the roast provides a stage for these tensions to become visible. Davis Jr., as the guest of honor, holds power in the roast, yet roast jokes about his identity still speak to his Blackness as a recognizable target of jokes and attempts to take power. As will be discussed, Davis Jr.'s celebrity status and success bestow him power, yet the roast jokes about him are largely about race. This will show the contradictions of representation of Blackness, aided by the roast ritual performance of superior and inferior.

The Roast Performance

The formal properties of the roast inform the relationships among the roast. The order of participants is intentionally designed to show importance. Participants in the middle do not hold as much clout as the opener and closer.

TABLE 3.1 *The Participants at* The Dean Martin Celebrity Roast: Sammy Davis Jr.

Speaking order	**Name**	**Profession**	**Relationship to Guest of Honor**
0 (host)	Dean Martin	Entertainer	Longtime friend
1	Milton Berle	Entertainer	Longtime colleague
2	Wilt Chamberlain	Professional Athlete	Unknown
3	Freddie Prinze	Entertainer	Longtime friend/
4	Norm Crosby	Entertainer	Frequent performer on the *DMCR*
5	Dionne Warwick	Entertainer	Longtime friend
6	Joey Bishop	Entertainer	Fellow member of the Rat Pack and frequent performer on the *DMCR*
7	Nipsey Russell	Entertainer	Longtime friend/Frequent performer on the *DMR*
8	Phyllis Diller	Entertainer	Frequent performer on the *DMCR*
9	Jan Murray	Entertainer	Frequent performer on the *DMCR*
10	Frank Gorshin	Entertainer	Frequent performer on the *DMCR*
11	Foster Brooks	Entertainer	Frequent performer on the *DMCR*
12	Don Rickles	Entertainer	Longtime friend/Frequent performer on the *DMCR*
13	Altovise Davis	n/a	Current wife
14	Sammy Davis Jr.	Guest of Honor	n/a

The list and order of participants are helpful tools when examining the power dynamics. Within the ritual, oppositions of superior and inferior shape the performance. In this carnivalesque ritual, the dynamics of everyday superior/inferior are erased and often inverted. There are several ways to examine inferior and superior. The personal proximity to Davis Jr. is one form of power, as being close to him is a sign of prestige, especially in the entertainment industry. The larger superiority is the privilege of maleness and whiteness, especially in the entertainment industry. The women on the panel, despite their proximity to Davis, hold little

power. Two of the women, Dionne Warwick and Altovise Davis, are not comedians by profession, and thus they tell tepid roast jokes, appearing to be timid, quick to apologize, and quick to remind Davis that her joking is out of love, which the others on the panel do not feel any obligation to do. Phyllis Diller, a very established comic at the time, used her time to make her trademark jokes about her unattractiveness and frustration with her husband, Fang. In this way, the women are excluded from the magic circle of the ritual, thus rendering them inferior participants. However, in the performance, race is a clear marker of the superior/inferior opposition.

Dean Martin, as the host, introduced Davis. In this roast and others, Martin's performance as host exuded a laid-back air of coolness, almost as if he decided not to try so hard, despite it being his show. Martin was almost always smoking (not unusual for 1970s television), and his speech patterns hinted at inebriation of varying levels. Although not in this roast, several guests on other roasts have directed comments about Martin always being drunk. He and other guests frequently nursed cocktails while on the dais.

Martin's first line was, "in accordance with honoring the great Black men of our time, the NBC Peacock is wearing an afro." This was a fitting opening to this roast, where this episode is "wearing Blackness" as a costume because it was a deviation from the standard roast, where whiteness is the norm. Thus, it was not the usual roast; it is a "Black" roast. Martin's short opening set was full of racist tropes, heavily transferred from minstrelsy stereotypes, including a joke about how when Davis grew up poor, he slept in a hollowed-out watermelon as a child; when he was born, the "doctor didn't know if he was a boy, girl, or a Jimmy Dean sausage." Furthermore, he said that when he got off the plane in Atlanta, the mayor greeted him with a rope, and the KKK voted him "most likely to be next." Then, Martin, going off-script, asked the

audience, “he’s not coming for me, is he?” further perpetuating the stereotype that Black men are violent and are to be feared.

Vaudeville veteran Milton Berle, one of the original members of the Friars Club roasts, was the first participant at the podium. I will focus on his roast set because his roast ran the spectrum of the various tactics, angles, and combinations of written material, ad-libs, and reactions. Regardless of any subjective opinion of his talent, his experience as a performer was obvious; he was acutely aware of the beats of his jokes and audience reactions, and he read the room well. Throughout his set, he confirmed the rules of play of the ritual. Davis had already agreed to the roast, thus stepping into the magic circle, but there was still discomfort for him to endure if he followed the rules.

Berle turned to Martin and told him, “This is a roast, but you’re fried,” one of many references to Martin’s alcoholism. “But you’re burnt to a crisp,” he told Davis. This is also a very telling opening; Berle roasted Martin’s behavior, but Davis Jr.’s Blackness. This is not to say that Blackness was not important to Davis, but it was a general mark of difference, and not just about him. Martin had the “honor” of getting roasted through something specific to his personality. Here, Davis Jr. started to set the tone for his reactions. Davis threw his head back with a hearty laugh and clapped. This was instructional to the participants and the audience; Davis, through his reactions, permitted Berle to continue this line of roasting. It was also okay for the audience to laugh because they laughed alongside him. I doubt that Berle would have changed his roasts if Davis Jr. had reacted differently, but it would have changed the energy and confidence of successive roasters. Davis Jr. had signaled that he is actively engaging in the rules of play. The ritual was on track to continue because he signaled his approval of the roasting through his performance.

Berle addressed the rest of the participants and secondary audience but stating, “In honor of the Blacks [on the dais], the hotel didn’t put any silverware on the table.” Upon hearing this, Wilt Chamberlain, a Black basketball player, stood and jokingly advanced toward Berle, his hand up in anger. Berle took the cue and looked alarmed, stepping back in fear. The visual joke was that Chamberlain towered over Berle, but the other implication was that Berle should fear the anger of a Black man. Chamberlain, feigning anger, had further established that roasts promoting Black stereotypes were fair game. Although the rules dictated that one could be offended, Chamberlain’s acting still reminds us that these jokes were inappropriate in the real world but permitted within these confines. Chamberlain relented and sat down, laughing, showing that he understood the roast’s implicit rules, never to show offense. Berle continued, “The doctors had to operate on his throat, but they had a problem. They had to roll him in flour to find his mouth.” Wilt Chamberlain performed next. His jokes focused on Davis’s shortness: “He doesn’t want to walk through Central Park. He is afraid of being mugged by a pigeon.” Chamberlain was not a trained comedian, which would explain his jokes’ tepid nature. Still, it is noticeable that his jokes are not related to race and were almost exclusively about Davis’s height challenges.

The next participant, Puerto Rican comedian Freddie Prinze, thanked Martin while using an exaggerated, thick accent. He told Martin that he will not clean up after his drunkenness, as it was not his job, alluding to the assumption that he was a janitor. He continued, “I’m proud to know Sammy because he overcame the prejudice of his minority background to become a superstar. It’s not easy being Jewish.” This was one of the first references to Davis’s Jewish identity and admonished him for the choice to convert to Judaism and be further marginalized. Prinze’s set was self-deprecating and used stereotypes against himself. He continued to joke that

he was in awe of Davis Jr.'s mansion and hoped he could one day be the gardener. He professed solidarity with Davis Jr.: "We come from the same ghetto, but his people got there before we did." Prinze addressed Davis Jr.'s Blackness but does so in solidarity with his own marginalized identity.

Several other comedians on the dais, including Norm Crosby, Foster Brooks, Jan Murray, and Frank Gorshin, were frequent guests on *Dean Martin Celebrity Roasts*, and their time at the podium resembled a standup act centered on their characters. Their roasts were impersonal and stay on the theme of the clash between being Black and being Jewish. These perhaps served as a filler, a way to technically observe the roast's rules but to keep it on track for the more provocative players.

The only Black women on the dais were singer Dionne Warwick and Davis Jr.'s then-current wife, Altovise Davis (who was brought onstage only for her roast). These women were not comedy performers by profession. Warwick's sweet delivery showed some hesitation and nervousness. She told the audience why a long-ago relationship with Davis Jr. did not work out. She said, "I started singing gospel at age six, he started breaking the commandments at seven." However, Warwick got an enormous reaction from Davis Jr. when she said, "I don't know why Sammy wanted to go out with me then. I wasn't sexy, I wasn't beautiful, I wasn't white." Davis Jr. stood up and pretended to leave the stage in shock. This statement got an enormous laugh reaction from most of the dais, likely in surprise that Davis's former marriage to a white woman was even brought up, and by someone so unexpected.

Phyllis Diller's set was all about her signature self-deprecating jokes, and her other jokes were about Davis Jr. being Black: "He has a white gardener, maid, and chauffeur and a black secretary to make sure they don't steal." Diller noticeably did not look at Davis during the set;

she focused more on delivering her lines. This performance challenged the rules, as she rarely engaged with other participants and focused on her scripted jokes. Whether or not her jokes landed, her refusal to engage with the implicit rules did not shift any power. She neutralized the participants, stopping the momentum of the performance. Diller's actual intentions were not scrutinized; there were many valid reasons why she delivered this performance. Quite possibly, she was aware of her gendered status, and not engaging fully with racialized roasts was possibly a way to not lose power. Unlike Prinze, she perhaps had more to lose if she did not connect to the audience as she did not have solidarity with Davis Jr.

Altovise praised her husband and offered a tepid insult: "Sammy created jobs for people that didn't have any, like tailors." As she agreed to appear, she had agreed to be in the roast, but her hesitancy did not imply enthusiastic participation. However, her appearance did provide an explicit endorsement of the roast. The small number of woman-identified performers was a noticeable absence, mired in the 1970s ethos of comedy being a man's game and the lack of opportunity for Black women.

Performing the Superior and the Inferior

As discussed in Chapter One, analyzing ritualized performance depends on the transformations during the ritual rather than a definitive cause-and-effect relationship. Transformation occurs when performance is distanced from real life. Through rules of play, this out-of-the-ordinary behavior allows the participants to redefine relationships and power. Catherine Bell asserts that rituals are performances of opposition, specifically "(1) the vertical opposition of superior and inferior, which generates hierarchical structures; (2) the horizontal opposition of here and there, or us and them, which generates lateral or relatively egalitarian relationships" (2009, 89). Davis Jr. and the audience were subject to stereotypical insults for an

hour. How can there be any room for a transfer of power? In a performance studies approach, I looked at the structures that build stakes for participants. These are not just jokes recited by participants. They invoke reactions that are part of the performance, bolstering an ongoing game and power struggle. The meaning of the words is powerful, but reactions and play within the boundaries provide the ritual's magic circle.

Whereas the early Friars Club roasts performed the opposition of *us* (the Friars Club) and *them* (traditional Vaudeville), the *Roast of Sammy Davis Jr.* incorporated superior and inferior opposition. Superior and inferior are relative and contextual. For example, when entering the ritual, the white participants had superior status inherited from their privileged place in a sociopolitical hierarchy. For this, they can make racist jokes without significant consequences; the only consequence they faced was not performing the ritual correctly, that is, bombing their jokes. The stakes were limited to the arena of the ritual. Blackness was a marked category. Their insults revolved around Blackness as a stereotype; many of their jokes were based on Black stereotypes and not specifically on Davis Jr.

In a roast, the insults often indicate the participants' level of intimacy with the guest of honor; many of these jokes were not about Davis but were, in fact, jokes about racist stereotypes. However, the socially inferior participants did possess performance tactics to elevate their power status. These tactics would not work in real life, but they were a powerful factor in the roast's carnivalesque arena. Davis Jr. brought his superior status to the roast: he was financially, critically, and socially connected. This was opposed to the images of Blackness explored by Bogle; Davis Jr. had influence and power and had been vocal about civil rights. In the roast arena, this power was attacked through racist stereotypes; Davis Jr. bucked the social order by not resembling the image of the Black man in entertainment as determined by white standards.

While explicitly part of the form of the roast, the racist stereotypes reminded Davis Jr. that he was still racially inferior. This was a complicated situation for Davis Jr., who, while he had the power of social influence, was always marked as Black. Once he was in the roast, his superior status was at stake, so he used the performance tool of laughter to counteract the stereotypes.

The other guests were also vying for power, constantly trying to align themselves with the superior and avoiding the inferior. Davis Jr. laughed uproariously at times to some of the roasts but gave a simple smile or a measured puff of a cigarette as an action. The other participants sought his approval of their jokes. They, as underlings, presented themselves to the person in power, hoping that he would approve. Laughter, in ritual performance, is not merely a reaction to a joke. Laughter, in the Bakhtinian carnival sense, is laughter at those already laughing. To laugh is not to condone or put to shame, but to acknowledge the incongruity of the interaction, Despite the attempts to push him back into the image of the docile Black man who accepted his place, Davis Jr. resisted through laughter. Laughter's response to a roast is "triumphant and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives" (Bakhtin 1984, 12). Carnival laughter mocks those who mock. Of course, I do not speak of what Davis thought but rather what his performance of laughter did for the transfer of power. His ability to be in a position to laugh was both inferior and superior. He laughed at those in power in the real world who tried to deride him, but he laughed because he had achieved the power in the real world that others did not want him to achieve because of his race.

The stereotypes in these jokes were based on many things, including fears and subjugation of Blackness, including many described by Bogle and Gates. The jokes indicated Davis being poor and uncivilized, and they pointed to Davis's skin's darkness—a fascination with darkness that has long justified biological essentialism. Making jokes about his dark skin

resembled a desire to relegate Davis to the Black minstrel's one-dimensional stock character. They could laugh at him, but the minstrel cannot laugh back. Davis's refusal to do this through laughter may not have given him ultimate power, but it did blur the hierarchies outside the ritual.

The white comedians maintained the racial hierarchy; they were superior to Davis Jr. as a Black entertainer. Despite Davis Jr.'s financial and critical success, he would always be seen by whites through the lens of his race; his talents or individual accomplishments will always be considered in relation to white performers. In a ritual, the performance illustrated these oppositions, and the white performers demonstrated clear superiority as they could make racist jokes without consequence. However, who determined the consequences? In discussions about comedy roasts, the argument usually steers toward a version of "it's a roast, it's supposed to be mean and offensive." The "supposed to be" refers to the formal rules of the roast. However, this argument ignores the implicit rules of a ritualized performance. Being mean is not what makes a roast successful; it is the suspension of the real-life hierarchies that vividly reveal social tensions and allow for transformative performance.

At the end of the roast, Davis Jr. did something unusual: he did not respond to the insults, nor did he roast the other participants. Instead, he told the audience, "The day they don't make fun of you means they don't give a damn about you," a simplified explanation of the performance ritual. His acceptance of the insults maintained the balance of the roast, signaling the end of the time and space of play and returning to the realities outside the ritual. The show exhibited only a few seconds of handshakes and pleasantries among participants, leaving the audience to believe no harm had been done.

Defining the success of a ritual is two-fold. In this instance, the ritual was successful because all the participants played their parts. They kept the speakers' order, spurned insults, and

did not take offense, and the guest of honor expressed appreciation at the end. This roast performed the opposition of *us* and *them*, with the white comedians maintaining dominant status and, with their jokes, establishing that the Black performers are the other. At best, *The Roast of Sammy Davis Jr.* allowed Davis Jr. to show that he can withstand racist insults because of his success. At worst, this performance exploited a ritual form to use racist jokes without consequence.

The Comedy Central Roast of Flavor Flav

About the Comedy Central Roasts

In 2007, thirty-seven years after the *Roast of Sammy Davis Jr.*, *The Comedy Central Roast of Flavor Flav* aired on the basic cable channel Comedy Central. In the 1990s, Comedy Central produced some Friars Club Roasts as standalone specials. The popularity of these spurred other roasts, which eventually dropped the "Friars Club" from the title. Unlike the *Dean Martin Celebrity Roasts*, the production budget for the Flavor Fav roast was high. The stage was adorned with pictures of and artifacts about Flavor Flav, and his guest of honor seat was an actual ornate throne. A slickly produced video montage opened the show, and the guest of honor flew onto the stage from the ceiling attached to wires. Time and context also changed. As a popular cable network, Comedy Central was already known to have more graphic language and content. The change in time and context also allowed further transformations and negotiations of power. Like the Dean Martin Roasts, the series of Comedy Central Roasts aired exclusively with white guests of honor and primarily white participants. This roast, then, was a deviation from the established norm. Despite these differences, the ritual performance went according to the formal properties.

Flavor Flav: Cultural Icon of Black Liberation to Reality Show Star

Like *The Dean Martin Celebrity Roast: Sammy Davis Jr.*, the guest of honor was a popular Black performer and entertainer whose career spanned multiple decades. Born William Jonathan Drayton Jr., Flavor Flav co-founded the highly political hip-hop group Public Enemy in the early 1980s. As the hype man, Flav's flamboyant behavior, signature bright clothing, and large clock as an accessory became dominant visual symbols of the group. Public Enemy's album *Fear of a Black Planet* is now considered an essential artifact of Black hip-hop and Black resistance (Tate 1988). Public Enemy's mainstream popularity was solidified by their single "Fight the Power," heavily featured in Spike Lee's 1989 film *Do the Right Thing*. Public Enemy's music told of Black disenfranchisement, inequality, and a call for revolution. Public Enemy later released the single "911 Is a Joke," featuring Flavor Flav on vocals. The song is about the lack of police and emergency support in Black neighborhoods. Flav's persona called attention to the group's message of Black liberation and institutional bigotry.

After leaving Public Enemy in the mid–1990s, Flavor Flav had staying power as a known icon of popular culture because of the highly recognizable markers of his persona, especially his penchant for wearing large clocks and using exaggerated movements. However, the context of his notoriety changed dramatically in the early 2000s. In 1992, the music video channel VH1 produced a reality show, *The Surreal Life* (2004), a take on *The Real World* franchise popularized by MTV. The twist was that celebrity "has-beens" now lived together. Flavor Flav appeared in the second season, emerging as a fan favorite. Flav was given two VH1 spinoff shows, one called *Strange Love* (2005), which chronicled his unlikely romantic pairing with actress Brigitte Nielsen, and then *Flavor of Love* (2006–2008), a satirized take on the *Bachelor* franchise, in which women competed for the romantic attentions of Flav. *Flavor of Love* ran for three seasons and spawned two more VH1 spinoffs, the popular *I Love New York* (2007–2008)

and *Real Chance of Love* (2008–2009). In the early 2000s, VH1 became a central producer of low-culture reality television, undoubtedly driven by Flavor Flav's popularity (Jefferson-Jones 2015). Ironically, Flav rose to fame based on being cast on a show because he was no longer famous.

Double Negatives

During the 2000s, Flav once again became a controversial figure in popular criticism. The popular perception of Flavor Flav involved similarities to the pervasive character tropes of the Black man. Now more known to white audiences, some critics saw Flav as a modern-day minstrel, acting like the foolish coon characters from minstrelsy (Wiltz 2005). ESPN journalist Jason Whitlock accused Flav of "bojanglin for dollars," because Flav performed the white audience's most narrow form of Blackness (MacIntyre 2005). Flav's public behavior played into ongoing stereotypes: he had eight children by different women. He was arrested and wore showy clothing, gold teeth, cornrows, and tracksuits. Moreover, his demeanor was eternally cheerful, which many saw as ignorant and childlike. Critics also questioned where the line was between the public persona of Flavor Flav and his true self, implying that Flavor Flav was a character. Both answers received pushback: if it was a character, it resembled minstrelsy. If it was authentically him, he still allowed himself to be seen as a stereotype. The question of "Is Flavor Flav good for the representation of Blackness?" was riddled with contradictions.

Black characters are often assessed by the extent to which the characters resemble or depart from minstrelsy tropes. This creates a good/bad scale of stereotypes. More simply, to resemble the minstrel is a bad stereotype, and distancing from the minstrel type is preferred. However, considering stereotypes purely as bad or good is an arbitrary, culturally formed

measure. A bad stereotype is not an objective measure. The white mainstream's dominant speech, dress, and behaviors define the ideal, and thus a deviation becomes a bad stereotype.

In addition to Bogle's and MacDonald's work on pervasive Black stereotypes in film and television, I turn to Raquel Gates's concept of the photonegative model of Black representation in popular culture to address the complicated understanding of Flavor Flav as a persona. The photo negative is a metaphor for the positive/negative dichotomy of Black representation; in other words, what is deemed positive by the mainstream created a binary where anything not positive is automatically bad. Gates recognized that the Black performers and creators have no agency in their labor and that "those that negatively perform Blackness bear the responsibility when their positively performing counterparts have their rights and privileges taken away. Yet this reasoning overlooks the fact that neither positive black people nor negative 'n*****s' actually holds the structural power to confer or deny these privileges" (2018, 4). Thus, when analyzing Blackness in popular culture, critical attention must be paid to all representations instead of immediately categorizing representation on a scale from positive to negative. Rather than arguing whether a presumed "negative" image is bad for Black identities, Gates urges scholars to consider that the "reverberations of negative texts function as tremors that irrevocably weaken the foundation on which their positive counterparts are constructed" (2018, 30). The meanings of good and bad are in fact, arbitrary. Gates argues that scholarship on so-called low culture, such as reality television, is crucial to the representation of Blackness in American popular culture. To dismiss representation as "negative" ignores the agency of the means of production. Black performers may invoke stereotypes for irony, satire, and defiance in the face of cultural hegemony. Gates explores how Flavor Flav's image is a double negative. This will be

discussed later when analyzing this roast. The roast ritual is an arena in which this defiance is an available tool.

Where Bogle and MacDonald point out patterns and images that have controlled Blackness in the white imagination Gates provides the context in how the Black performers may leverage this for their own means. Guests of honor are either too Black or not Black enough—a position the white (and male) participants do not have to face. Flavor Flav's leading role in *Flavor of Love* is a constant use of the double negative. *Flavor of Love*, like *The Bachelor*, invites a large group of women to stay in a mansion and compete for Flav's favor. Just as *The Bachelor* hands out a rose to those he wishes to stay, Flav gives his women a replica of his signature clock necklace. The women represent the spectrum of stereotypes. Many women proclaimed themselves "ghetto" and often got entangled in physical altercations, often out of jealousy for Flav's attention. A lasting trope of the show was the bestowing of nicknames by Flav. Based on a quick first impression, Flav gave names such as "Hoops," "New York," "Like Dat," and "Hottie," denying the women their names in favor of the one given by Flav. The reaction to the show was mixed; many critics pointed out its damaging representation of Black women and Black culture. Others appreciated its satirical elements and parody of "love" game shows. As is the case with popular texts, one cannot assume a universal interpretation of the message, yet even if not meant to be serious, the show still had an impact on the representation of the performance of Blackness.

Returning to Gates's theory of the double negative idea reveals the contradictions in considering a binary of good and bad representation of Blackness. *Flavor of Love* is often taken as a way of visibility of Blackness; at the time, *Flavor of Love* was the only reality show to feature Black romantic relationships (Dubrofsy and Hardy 2008). Therefore, rather than ask, "Is

Flavor Flav good or bad for the representation of Blackness?" a better question is "Who decides if Flavor Flav is good for the representation of Blackness?" Dubrofsky and Hardy (2008) argue that the self-referential silliness of the show, including editing, music cuts, and in general, creates a mediated product that highlights that the actions are a performance. This is now a given in today's reality television world, where there is an assumption of heavily mediated storylines, but *Flavor of Love* was an early entry into the reality show love competition genre.

The women on the show, like Flavor Flav, are left open to criticism about their good and bad behavior. A lot of the women's behavior was excessive and included fighting, drunkenness, and attention to bodily fluids. Producers gave contestant Darra "Like Dat" Boyd subtitles to poke fun at white audiences who would not understand the slang words she used. Dubrofsy and Hardy note that "the subtitles suggest that the behavior needs explanation, translation, that it is not natural, foregrounding that the activities are a performance and calling attention to the producers' intervention to give the action meaning" (2018, 382). The mediated context of the show allows the behavior to be viewed as illustrating a "bad stereotype." Despite the creators' attempts to use stereotypes of Black women as fodder for white amusement, Flav is genuinely accepting of the women's behavior. Flav "poke[s] fun at the women and even get angry at them, but ultimately the women are presented as multidimensional, their outrageous actions not the sum of their identity" (Dubsofky and Hardy 2018, 384). The implication is that Flav and the women's behavior are deviations from white mainstream behavior, but the tongue-in-cheek playfulness of the show creates an alternative paradigm that centers Blackness and decenters white norms.

The juxtaposition of Flav as the political musician and Flav as the reality show star can be put into context through Gates's double negative. While a performer in Public Enemy, Flav was respected as a hip-hop performer and a (positive) proponent of Black resistance. It was with

his shift to a commercial reality show star that he became a negative stereotype. While in Public Enemy, his primary audience was Black. His move to reality television placed him under the scrutiny and interpretation of a white audience. It was only then that his performance was labeled "coonery," a term that combines the racist trope of the "coon" with the word "buffoonery" (Gates 2018, 2). The more animated his performance, the more popular and financially successful he became, but many critics deemed him guilty of taking on the role of the Coon too agreeably. The shift to a negative perception redefined the positive: to avoid criticism, Flav would need to act in accordance with white standards. With Public Enemy, his performance of Blackness surpassed positive/negative (despite a mainstream effort to decry rap as causing a moral panic). Flav himself did not display negative Black stereotypes, but rather the socially constructed boundaries of good/bad representation shifted. Gates argues that these ever-shifting boundaries must be scrutinized to understand why Flav is such a divisive figure among Black and white critics and audiences. Gates argues that Flav's behaviors and persona are consistent over time, but that his appearances on widely circulating television shows generated the discourse about stereotypes.

Furthermore, Jon Kraszewski argues that the inclusion of objects from Flav's Black Power era erases the impact of Flav in Public Enemy. He states,

> The iconography of Public Enemy's video for "Fight The Power" (1989) shows how Flav's hype enunciates the band's politics. Flavor Flav wears his trademark clocks around his neck, signifying the importance to act now. His flamboyant outfits celebrate an ornate hip-hop culture. The stage on which the group raps features a picture of Black nationalist Malcolm X and a print of a Black man with a target on him, a reoccurring

> image that Public Enemy used to visualize the way that African Americans became targets of institutionalized and cultural oppression. (Kraszewski 2014, 246)

This very recognizable iconography is re-appropriated by the show and used as décor in the setting of the *Flavor of Love* mansion. The iconic clock now becomes the token symbol of his chosen women for the weak, his ornate outfits become a part of his eccentric personality. Krazweski highlights another way Flav's Public Enemy political persona is played for laughs; the women's dates with Flav that are a reward for winning the week's competition "transform the black lower class from an oppressed group into a tasteless group completely unaware of the cultural norms of dating shows" (Kraszewski 2014, 248). The women are given elegant dresses and they are picked up in a limousine; these images offer the promise of high-class outings but the episodes then reveal that the destinations are lower-class establishments, such as Kentucky Fried Chicken or Medieval Times. Krazewski suggests that "one could envision a way to narrate these dates that allow Flavor Flav and the working- and lower-class women to explain how fast food, even though it is unhealthy, becomes the food of choice in many lower-class communities because of its affordable price, and the scenes could call attention to the class differences between typical dating show norms on *The Bachelor* and the reality of the contestants on *Flavor of Love*" (Kraszewski 2014, 248). This is similar to Dubrofsky and Hardy's interpretation of the show in that there is a potentiality for larger conversations and observances within the mediated presentation of Blackness. However, Dubrofsky and Hardy's argument relies heavily on the double negative idea of representation; for example, a date to a fast-food restaurant, while referencing a lower socioeconomic date activity, can only be redeemed by directly addressing its importance to Flav's personal life and his past. The changing perceptions of Flavor Flav's public presence involve misplaced nostalgia and the assumption that Flav lost his credentials, respect,

and power because of context. However, the salient point is who creates the context. As Gates highlights in discussing the trap of the photonegative stereotype, context is not just time specific but instead defined by who confers social value and who decides what is a good or bad character type.

This dimension of the context defining Flav's persona in the 2000s is mirrored in the Comedy Central Roast of Flavor Flav. The double negative is in play when he is roasted for his current behaviors as minstrel adjacent and as an affront to African Americans, despite his behavior remaining relatively constant from his days in Public Enemy. As I will discuss, the roast, like the analysis of his reality show, illustrates the many contradictions and tensions of the representation of Blackness, especially when placed in a binary of white-defined tropes.

The Roast Performance

The roast is a game whose participants, through performance, create a complicated web of insults and relationships. The most prominent trend was roasting Black stereotypes. The roasts directed at the women participants were about sexual desirability and appearance, including several jokes about Nielsen appearing to look like a man. Many of the roasts directed at white men were also about their physical appearance and sexual orientation, commenting on them being closeted, gay, or a woman (Carrot Top), implying that he is transgender. Although I am concentrating on Blackness, gender is important. The white men were roasted for not fitting ideals of heteropatriarchal masculinity. The white women were roasted for not fitting the ideals of white men and thus being attractive to Black men. This overview points to the standard of the white man's masculinity and white women fitting into the role of being desirable to them, and anything outside of this being othered. This is no surprise as it matches the climate of a vastly entrenched hegemonic culture. Within the confines of the white male standard, participants

deployed different strategies and reactions depending on their status. Even Flavor Flav, the guest of honor, does not always hold superior status in this context.

TABLE 3.2 *The Participants at* The Comedy Central Roast of Flavor Flav

Speaking order	**Name**	**Profession**	**Relationship to guest of honor**
0 (host)	Katt Williams	Comedian	unknown
1	Greg Giraldo	Comedian	unknown
2	Sommore	Actress	unknown
3	Jimmy Kimmel	Comedian	unknown
4	Ice-T	Musician/Actor	Friend
5	Jeff Ross	Comedian	unknown
6	Carrot Top	Comedian	unknown
7	Brigitte Nielsen	Actress/Reality TV Star	Former co-star and partner
8	Patton Oswalt	Comedian	unknown
9	Snoop Dog	Musician	unknown
10	Lisa Lampanelli	Comedian	unknown

Compared to the roast of Sammy Davis Jr., more of the participants did not have a specific personal relationship with Flav. This is a component of the roast being widely televised: both the participants and the audience must be familiar with the guest of honor. The participants knew Flav through his public persona, which is the same context as the home audience. The relationship was one-sided in that participants "know" him, but he may not know the others personally. Several participants were professional comedians known for writing roasts rather than knowing Flav. However, this did not diminish the performance of the roast; instead, it set up a dynamic in which Flav must adjust his reactions and uses of power. Further, two of the three Black participants were also well-known rappers. The one participant who was a personal acquaintance is Nielsen, who was not a professional comedian and, as I will discuss, a target of many participants.

Comedian Katt Williams, who is Black, was the host. Williams's comedy act dealt with the Black experience and involved confirming and affirming Black stereotypes, creating a double

negative, as Gates would point out. Williams immediately mentioned Flav's Blackness. After Flav's grand entrance of flying onto the stage in a harness, Williams asked, "where are the rest of the flying monkeys?" Williams began to set the boundaries: the "monkey" slur is fair game, and Flav's Blackness is centered. Greg Giraldo was the first at the podium; an experienced comedian, his body language and hesitancy told otherwise. He leaned over the podium and laughed nervously. Although a staple of the Comedy Central roast, he carried slightly nervous energy as he began. He told participant, rapper, and actor Ice-T that he was "so old, the first thing you bought with your record deal is freedom." This roast had its desired effect: it shocked the participants, but they also laughed in response. The positive reception energized Giraldo. He continued with confidence with other jokes about the dais but then returned to Flav, "You should find a plastic surgeon who can add another chromosome," referring to Flav's appearance and lack of intelligence. Finally, he closed with a comment that was not a joke but instead the declaration that Flav was an "oily cadaver, a turd with teeth, and a skeleton covered in electric tape." This insult related not just to Flav's Blackness but specifically spoke to the level of darkness of his skin. This resembled the one-dimensional early film tropes, the darkness, docile behavior, and lack of intelligence suggested by blackface. The roast collectively placed Flav within these roles.

At the time of airing, Jimmy Kimmel, next in the lineup, did not have his late-night show and thus was not as well known to the mainstream. Giraldo's previous roast was an invitation to use Flav's Blackness as a fault. Kimmel's roasts were short and delivered as more traditional comedic punchlines. He remarked, "Flav created more homeless children than Hurricane Katrina," and "Chris Benoit [a deceased professional wrestler who murdered his wife and children] is a better father than you." Kimmel continued, Flav "is the reason Bush doesn't like

Black people"—a phrase popularized by Kanye West on a live taping of SNL. Kimmel's choice of roasting aligned with Black men's stereotypes: they father many children (with different women), and they remain absent in their children's lives, leaving the burden on the mother(s). The comments referred to specific stereotypes of Black men rather than specific characteristics of Flav. Thus, he was roasting stereotypes of Blackness. The implication was that Flav was at fault for aligning with the Black stereotypes when, in fact, the "negative" stereotype is a white construct.

Participant Lisa Lampanelli was an established comedian known for her brash subjects, delivery, and open struggles as a fat woman; she was also a frequent participant in Comedy Central roasts. Her sexual preference for Black men and promiscuity were mentioned repeatedly. Lampanelli, who will be discussed in subsequent chapters, establishes Blackness as a taboo sexual fetish and sign of sexual depravity. Not only is Lampanelli's body and sexual activity objectified, but the Black man's sexuality also becomes a fetishized object, morally questionable for white women, and one that provided an opportunity to roast Lampanelli and Black men simultaneously. Lampanelli also exhibited the most expressive reaction, laughing uproariously while being targeted. While this might have been a sincere reaction (as she has made her career at insult comedy and roasts), her reactions were vastly different from the men's. The men showed faint amusement or disapproval, so her strong reaction was a strategy to lessen her inferiority. She pitted her identity as a white woman against Black men and women in an arena where people of various racial and gender identities elements are often pitted against each other.

Flavor Flav, in closing, approached the podium in his signature style (happy, always in motion), took off his glasses, and looked bug-eyed at the audience, in a way leaning into the criticisms of his behavior. However, he suddenly changed his demeanor slightly, becoming more

focused and his speech more deliberate to roast his underlings. His targets matched the patterns and rules of the evening. He proceeded to give those on the dais nicknames (something notable he does on *Flavor of Love*). He named Katt Williams "sickle cell because only Black people get you." To Jimmy Kimmel, he called him "funny, because you should hear it once before you die." He complimented Snoop Dogg on his performance, telling him, "this wasn't the only time he got away with murder." He gave Brigitte Nielsen a name referring to her large breasts. In closing, he tells the group, "It's an honor to be made fun of. I've been through some f**ked-up times, but it's good to be back on top." In this short utterance, he ended the ritual by acknowledging his appreciation and expressing gratitude for the chance to be roasted. He also closes it by reminding the participants that he is, in fact, superior; the king relinquishes the role of the fool and regains his crown.

Performing the Superior and Inferior

Flav's Blackness as the primary category of roasts situated Flav and the other Black participants as the inferior power, dragging the oppressive stereotypes that occur outside the roasts. However, the Black participants were not merely roasted because they are Black; they were roasted because they embodied (white-defined) Black stereotypes. Applying Gates's double negative here, the Black stereotypes assigned to Flav are negative because mainstream white culture has placed them there, as was the case with his portrayal on *Flavor of Love*. Participants confirmed Flav as a negative stereotype—being an absent father, promiscuous, dark-skinned, and inferior intelligence—and thus Flav was roasted for acting like a "bad" Black person. This also mirrored criticism of Flav as a public figure; he had gained financially from his public image, despite his behavior in stereotypical roles. His role as the guest of honor placed him as the superior (with celebrity capital), blocking the real-world expectation of his inferiority. Both the

Black and white participants addressed this indirectly: he was superior because he exhibited these negative stereotypes and was rewarded for doing so because it defined his persona as a celebrity. From a white participant's perspective, he was inferior because he exhibited the negative stereotype. Flav's reaction was his signature loud laugh; he used the same behavior he was often criticized for to respond to his roasts. His carnival laughter served its purpose, he was more aware, using his persona as a weapon against criticism. His laughter at the stereotypes telegraphed that he was in on the joke.

There is a lot that makes the 2007 event different from the roast of Sammy Davis Jr. One of the major functions is that there is information available from the participants, specifically Katt Williams, who described his negative experience as the host of the roast in his stand-up album *Pimpin', Pimpin'* (2007). At rehearsal, he was not made aware of any of the participants' materials and a team wrote several of his jokes. He felt uncomfortable calling Flav a "crispy, crispy crisper." Later, he approached Flav backstage, asking how he could let this happen to him, and Flav responded that all that matters is that he had been paid well. This new information provided a further performance analysis of Williams: he seemed to be more neutral when he was not speaking and on the dais reacting to roasts of the participants and himself. The most common reference to him was his shortness, which did not seem to surprise him.

Williams's experience was unknown at the time of the performance. However, it still provides insight into how the ritual mechanism, despite the guest of honor and the many Black participants, established whiteness as superior and Blackness as inferior because the roast jokes about Flav were almost exclusively based on his Blackness. Here, Blackness is framed as insult. However, one can separate his persona from Blackness, but the roasts were insults based on the

photonegative stereotypes that derive from white standards. When a roast was made about Flav not taking care of his children, the roast landed because Flav appeared to embody the stereotype.

For most of the roast, Flav's biggest opportunity for resistance was his laughter. His willingness to laugh was carnival laughter, in that laughing at the others is an acknowledgment of the temporary switch of power. The laughter can be doubly determined to be part of his perceived coonery, as he did not know any better, and his laughter shows ignorance. Because he did not speak at the podium until the end, the other Black participants represented Blackness at the roast. In most interactions, to show resistance and gain superiority would be to condemn the racial insults; however, the roast ritual renders this strategy useless. The Black participants must participate to gain some superiority. This is about more than credibility; it is about playing by the rules to have a place in the game. Although likely not conscious, the roasts of other Black participants did not rely on broad stereotypes but personal comments. Snoop Dogg, speaking about Ice-T, said, "he's so old, we call him Ice Age." To Katt Williams, Snoop asked, "when did they start selling gangsta clothes at Baby Gap?" Sommore remarked, "Flavor Flav hasn't produced sh*t except for eight kids." These roasts were related to race but are not specifically about the race of their target.

However, the opportunity to perform superiority was in the Black participants' roast content of the white participants. More often than not, the roasts of white participants included topics such as career failure, likability, and sexual prowess. In these roasts, performing superior and inferior did not have a clear opposition. In contrast, by invoking stereotypes that are labeled bad, the white participants performed racial superiority. Yet when we consider Gates's idea of the photo negative, the Black participants exercised power by engaging these stereotypes that are actually social constructs, perhaps embraced by Black participants and viewers. Even if the

moments of resistance were subtle, the ultimate subversion is the existence of Flavor Flav as the guest of honor, and he shows this by telling the participants, "This roast reminds me of my show [*Flavor of Love*]. It's one star in a room full of b**ches."

Conclusion

The history of representation on screen establishes that the default identity is the white, heterosexual man. Any deviation becomes a marked category. The roast is no exception. The roast inception through the Friars Club established it as a way for white men to honor each other. Thus, the two episodes examined in this chapter are examples of deviations, making it not just a roast but a Black roast. The representations of Blackness within the roast reflect the tensions and contradictions of Black stereotypes in public media, specifically in the public perceptions of Sammy David Jr. and Flavor Flav and their prior appearances on *All in the Family* and *Flavor of Love.* I have asked how notions of Blackness affect, alter and complicate the roast's ritual properties. The categorization of Black stereotypes as a binary of "good" or "bad" becomes unstable as the roast performance reveals the many tensions and contradictions of this way of thinking. Participants weaponize the marker of difference as one way to fulfill the rules of the ritual. The marker of difference becomes integral in the performer's response and choice of roast jokes and provides some opportunity for subversion and resistance. Simply having a Black guest of honor does not immediately subvert the entire roast. Smaller acts of resistance challenge the ritual form and reveal how rituals shift slightly in meaning with each iteration.

To establish more opportunities for subverting cultural hegemony, roast conventions must be subverted incrementally; the form remains, but changes, slippages, and mistakes transform the ritual into opportunities. (These ritual "mistakes" will be explored in depth in Chapter Five) Furthermore, the oppositions of insider/outsider and superior/inferior take on new

forms when the participants are mostly Black men. Blackness as a marker becomes the baseline but it remains visibly distinct from the white norm. Black roasts are popular in less well-known mainstream forms, including *Shaq's All-Star Comedy Roast 2* (Benjamin and Parris, 2003), which focuses on Black athletes and entertainers. Similarly, roasts have been and continue to be prominent in the drag community, adding other markers of difference. In the next chapter, I examine gender—specifically, women and feminine sexuality as an identity that reveals negotiations between dominant and resistant forces in a patriarchal society. Concerning gender, men are the default norm for roasts, and the two case studies, much like the ones studied in this chapter, situate women as a marker of difference and derision.

CHAPTER FOUR. GENDER, AGENCY, AND COERCION IN THE ROAST

Gender, and especially women's sexuality, is a significant theme in the televised roast, but it is especially noticeable when the guest of honor is a woman. *The Dean Martin Celebrity Roast: Joan Collins* (1984) and the *Comedy Central Roast of Pamela Anderson* (2005) are useful case studies in understanding how the roast ritual reinforces gender roles. The two guests of honor have similar cultural significance even though their roasts are thirty years apart. Both Collins and Anderson were known as sex symbols; Both were also in situations where their real-life personas and the characters they played were blurred in the public's eye. During the height of her career, Collins was known for her glamour, wealth, and fashion, while Anderson was seen as amoral, trashy, undignified, and lacking good taste.

The Friars Club roasted celebrity women as early as 1953 (Dougherty 2000, 67), but early televised roasts more often featured male guests of honor. The Collins and Anderson roasts deviate from the white male norm. To date, there are not any televised roasts of non-white women; the glaring lack of intersectional representation points to social hierarchies in the U.S. because although othered by their gender, white women still benefit from their racial privilege.

Sexuality is the main subject in the roasts of Collins and Anderson. When the participants make jokes about the women's sexuality, their jokes are about attraction, identity, or orientation. Yet they also reference the external, public representation of sexuality, pornography, sexual objectification, and morality concerns about sex as expressed in popular culture. The jokes also depend on heteronormative assumptions about women's sexual desirability because contemporary roasts exist within heteropatriarchy. The participants work within heterosexual assumptions to deliver their jokes and not consider anything outside the sexual attractions between men and women, only using queerness as an insult.

Agency and Coercion

Within a patriarchal structure that justifies laws and policies, shaming women for any expression of sexuality is an all too familiar tactic to control gender. Sexuality is also a prominent issue in the political history of women's rights. The second-wave feminist movement, for example, focused on pornography and sex work as a source of oppression. Many feminists asserted that pornography promoted exploitation and violence against women. The availability of television, film, books, and other texts involving sexual objectification had audiences and critics concerned about their influence on public consciousness. However, third-wave feminists reclaimed sexuality as a part of agency and freedom, reappropriating the term "slut" and legitimizing sex work. Yet the waves of feminism are hardly resolved in chronological simplicity, and the debates keep reemerging within different contexts. Present-day politicization and legislation of a woman's bodily autonomy show that the devaluation of women's bodies is far from resolved.

Scholars have proposed that the reclamation of sexuality as a conscious choice is a feature of the postfeminist era. Postfeminism suggests that feminist activism is no longer needed and that the inclusion and acceptance of sexuality is an individual choice (Brooks 1997; Genze and Brabon 2009; Gill and Donaghue 2013). This includes the commercialization of "girl power" sentiments and the "girl boss" philosophy of careerism. Postfeminist scholars point to popular culture texts, such as romantic comedies, reflecting a postfeminist mindset. The issues typically associated with earlier waves of feminism are now seen as an individual choices rather than as realities influenced by larger institutional forces. Although popular culture texts have provided a wider range of narratives about women's experiences, postfeminism aligns closely with mainstream, heteronormative white ideals of womanhood. Postfeminist scholars largely ignore

the racial privilege white women hold in expressing sexuality (Hall and Rodriguez 2003). A postfeminist view may place Pamela Anderson's sexual objectification within her own control. However, how her sexuality is perceived cannot be separated from institutional forces beyond her control Still, postfeminism is not a sufficient explanation for the role of gender in the roasts of Collins and Anderson. To understand the roast, one must think of the behaviors as both internal and external to the individual.

A feminist analysis of the roast ritual benefits from engaging the oppositions of agency and coercion as examined in the anthology *Gender, Agency, and Coercion* (Adhok, Phillips, Wilson, and Hemmings, 2013). This work challenges postfeminism in its overstated focus on individual choice. As the authors explain, previous work on agency situates women as choosers or losers: "either the free agents of liberal fantasy or the oppressed victims of coercion" (2013, 3). Agency is a concern of Westernized feminism, where an individual reaches self-actualization through making their own choices. However, focusing on only individual choice ignores the all-encompassing institutions that are beyond individual control. Thus, a better model for individual choice in feminism includes how both agency and coercion work and how these two forces entwine. Rather than one or the other, agency and coercion exist in a state of constant flux.

Furthermore, agency/coercion is contextual. Performing agency within a roast is different from self-expression outside the roast because of the roast's ritualized structure. When analyzing a roast, one need not segment the performance into moments that favor agency and those that favor coercion but instead acknowledge that agency and coercion are not a clear-cut distinction. In other words, feminist analysis is used best when considering the entire context and forces at play. For example, some argue that Pamela Anderson's repeated unclothed appearances in *Playboy* are objectifying and anti-feminist. However, within the roast space, revealing her body

in a public media source serves as a marker of superiority and power using sexual appeal as social capital. Therefore, taking a feminist/antifeminist, agency/coercion stance is not relevant nor valuable to the study of roasts.

The opposition of agency/coercion is present in the roast as a performance of opposition. Recalling Catherine Bell's ritualization theory (2009), rituals rely on oppositions, such as *us* and *them* and superior and inferior. Agency is the assumed preferred status, one in which the woman is both aware of and can control the effect of oppressive forces. Like the roast ritual, there is no clear distinction between what is agency and what is coercion. Rather, tension and dynamic nature are always at play. In their essay "The Feminist Subject of Agency: Recognition and Affect in Encounters with 'the Other," Hemmings and Kabesh state, "We want to explore ways in which the oppositions work in tandem, rather than as a binary: We understand current uses of agency to extend the very oppositions and exclusions (victim/agent; margin/center; self/other; active/passive; recognized/unrecognized) that they purport to ameliorate" (2013, 29). Here, they point to some of the contradictory nature of separating agency and coercion because it puts the subject/woman into opposing preferable and undesirable categories. Identifying the agency in a situation can be tricky because the exercise acknowledges agency and coercion as disparate ideas. Therefore, focusing on the dynamic tensions between the two is preferable. Hemmings and Kabesh continue, "Whether [agency is] used as a way of countering descriptions of inequality or exclusion, a way of recognizing or engaging 'the other', or as an antidote to insecurity of various kinds, we want to examine the effects of these different uses rather than compare competing accounts of agency per se" (2013, 29). In other words, the productive way to use agency in feminist discussions is not to quantify agency based on actions. It is best to identify agency

within its own context just as agency can look different in different popular culture texts and lived experiences—the context of the ritual matters.

The Dean Martin Celebrity Roast: Joan Collins

Joan Collins: Eighties Excess

Joan Collins and her star turn as the scheming and glamourous Alexis Carrington on the nighttime soap *Dynasty* (1981–1989, ABC) exist within a moment of changing cultural representations of women on television. To understand the role of powerful women on television in the 1980s, it is necessary to know what came immediately before. In Elana Levine's *Wallowing in Sex* (2007), Levine argues that the depictions of sex on TV in the 1970s were more restrained than the sexual revolution occurring at the time. Levine calls representations on TV "not a sexual revolution, but radically safe" (2007, 5). Although the mere inclusion of sexual content was boundary-breaking, the lack of specificity and on-screen depictions told a different story. Television creators erred on the conservative side of sexually charged content, instead making mention of sex as a playful attention grabber. Characters mentioned sex in an abstract or joking way, leaving enough for the audience to get the meaning. Since sex was not discussed directly, writers relied on devices such as audience interpretation, jokes, and double entendres. Levine believes that the tentative depiction of sex created a false sense of the progressive acceptance of sexuality in everyday life. She states, "Television's emphasis on idiosyncratic characters grappling with sexual change could make it seem like the sexual revolution was not about challenging the heterosexual nuclear family, patriarchy, or the capitalist system, but only about the choices of certain individuals" (2007, 5). Characters, especially women, expressed sexuality as a recognizable character attribute, marking them as sex symbols. Thus, the sex

symbols of 1970s TV had an unspoken bargain; they could be sexy, but only if they were not explicit about their sexual desires.

The sex symbol of the 1980s included not just sexuality, but excess in other pleasures, such as money and power. It wasn't just that the 1980s morals allowed for more discussion of sex on television, but that sex was also equated with power. Nighttime soaps like *Dynasty* proliferated alongside other prime-time soap operas *Dallas* (1978–1991, CBS) and *Falcon Crest* (1981–1990, CBS). These shows were often dismissed as low culture in the same way their daytime counterparts were. However, these shows had one of the few representations of older, middle-aged women, who were now transitioning out of motherhood and back into the public sphere to experience sexual adventures and business dealings. As Patricia R. Zimmerman (1985) notes,

> unlike their daytime counterparts which deflect economic functions into backdrops for the emotional disturbances and disequilibrium of nuclear families, nighttime melodramas reverse this structure. They constitute economic relations as family problems of patrilinity, reproduction (both of babies and wealth), incest (between relatives or companies), sexuality (whether as the eroticization of power and money, or as the primary explanation for corporate decisions), and mothering. (1985, 67)

Joan Collins's character, Alexis Carrington Colby, represents a conflict between patriarchal society and the sexual older woman. The conflict involves not only the perpetual challenge of women rejecting tradition but also the uncontrolled sexuality of an older woman. As Zimmerman explains, "Alexis's sexual aggression evolves into ideological punishment for independence. Because she is beyond her child-bearing years, Alexis' sexuality is described as pure pleasure-seeking" (1985, 70).

This pleasure-seeking excess is not just in sex but using sex to gain power over the family business and social standing; the plot of *Dynasty* is not just about a family, but a family's fight for control over a business empire. Alexis's sexual desire makes her dangerous because it represents uncontrolled greed. One interpretation, as offered by Zimmerman, is that "in the subtext of the narrative, Alexis is afflicted with sexual aggression because of all those years without a husband" (Zimmerman 1985, 71). Her sexual aggressiveness, however, can be seen as a strength, a gift that Alexis uses for survival in the competitive world she has married into. Alexis "manipulates men's desires with abandon, and the political agenda transforms into the rest of the characters who operate in varying degrees of conformity to the nuclear family" (Zimmerman 1985, 69). As a sex symbol of the 1980s, Alexis now maintains both feminine and masculine traits. She is glamorous, has expensive tastes, and pursues romances along with the more masculine trait of business ambition.

Of course, Alexis Carrington is a fictional character and Joan Collins is the actress. However, Joan Collins's public persona at the time was closely associated with the character of Alexis. Either by confirmation bias or by choice, Collins embodied glamour and expensive tastes, a sharp tongue, and a hearty pursuit of men. Although Collins generally did not possess the ruthlessness of Alexis, she did have a strong ambition for success within her field. Previously a "serious" actress in Britain, her casting as the glamorous middle-aged Alexis seemed to be a perfect match. Her reputation as an actress also brought credibility to the soap genre, although in later seasons Collins publicly expressed dissatisfaction with the continuing outlandish plotlines of her character. The public saw her as Alexis-like; her numerous marriages and relationships were fodder for the tabloids and were often the subject of many talk show interviews. Despite the comparisons to Alexis, Collins would often dispute the similarities. In Jay David's biography of

the actress, Collins states, “Sometimes I’ll say things that don’t win me any popularity contests. But I, unlike Alexis, don’t try to manipulate things. Alexis will move in devious ways to get what she wants. I will come right out and say what I want” (1988, 148). However, audiences did not see the differences between the character and the actor. Despite how vocal she was about being unlike Alexis, she did not dispute her association with glamour, wealth, or men. In her book, *The World According to Joan* (2011), she states, “Although women’s lib was not yet in full flower, I considered myself to be a free and emancipated woman who did not owe anything to a man. I made my own money and lived by my own rules. But it was still considered shocking to many people then that I believed in ‘free love’” (2011, 84). Here Collins recognized the contradictions in her life. In the 1980s, living by her own rules was a product of her agency. Whereas Collin practiced monogamy, the number of monogamous partners was misinterpreted as promiscuous. This perceived contradiction became fodder for public interviews and later, her roast.

Collins’s Public Persona on Talk Shows

Collins appeared on a February 1974 episode of The *Merv Griffin Show* (NBC). On the show, Griffin comments on her necklace, immediately drawing attention to her decolletage. “I’m looking longer than I should be,” he says. Collins responded, “I wear it well. Speaking of jewelry, I was jewelry shopping in London last week,” and she continued with a story about traveling. This tactic of redirection points out that Collins accepted the remarks about her looks and sexuality but was still in charge of the conversation. She used the same tactic when Griffin commented, “There must be pitfalls from playing a character that mean.” This allowed Collins to explain how people often confuse her personality as the actress Joan Collins with the character of Alexis Carrington. Although she did defend her fictional character, she used this comment as a

segue to talk about how she thinks Alexis was misunderstood and is “fun and quite charming.” Still continuing to lead the conversation, she shared an anecdote about Orson Welles. Collins explains, “Someone asked him why [Welles] wanted to be an actor. He replied, ‘because I want to show off.’” Griffin then asks, “Why did you want to be an actor?” Collins replies, “I wanted to show off.”

In June 1984, Collins made one of many appearances on *The Tonight Show with Johnny Carson* (NBC) to promote her made-for-television movie *Cartier*, confidentially congratulating Carson for knowing the pronunciation of the name, Cartier. Carson attempted a bit in which he asked Collins to be interviewed in a baseball catcher’s mask, but she simply brushed it off, redirecting the interview. Collins already had a rapport with Carson and their conversation reflected this. Carson, predictably, asked if she named names [of men] in her recent book. “I simply told the truth,” she replied. “I concentrated on writing about romance [in my life] because the most important thing in life is loving somebody.” Then, she added, “I’ve been very good at it for a long time.” Closing the interview, Carson turns to Collins’s appearance in the tabloids. “Are you overexposed?” he asked, trying to use a double-entendre. Collins ignored the attempt and answered, “episodic television is a chance to try out different things from week to week.”

In these interviews, Collins both embraced and challenged her status as a sex symbol, both owning her persona and yet challenging the interview questions that were meant to criticize it. She also drove the interview because of her assertiveness and charisma, which enabled her to be in control of the situation, not allowing the interviewer to shame her or cause her to act defensively. The difference between the talk show interviews and the 1984 roast is that Collins could not respond directly after each joke, but the choices of what to roast Collins about still upheld the tensions between Collins’s agency and social coercion.

The Roast Performance

In the *Dean Martin Celebrity Roast of Joan Collins* (1984, NBC), there were more women among the participants than in other male-centric roasts. As seen below, four of the twelve participants were women, which is still a larger representation than other Dean Martin Celebrity roasts, where there was often just one woman on the dais.

TABLE 4.1. The Participants at *The Dean Martin Celebrity Roast of Joan Collins*

Order of Speaking	**Name**	**Profession**	**Relationship**
0 (host)	Dean Martin	Comedian	none
1	Bea Arthur	Actress	none
2	Red Buttons	Comedian	none
3	Phyllis Diller	Comedian	none
4	Angie Dickinson	Actress	acquaintance
5	Charlie Callas	Comedian	none
6	Rich Little	Comedian	none
7	Don Rickles	Comedian	none
8	Zsa Zsa Gabor	actress	Friend
9	John Forsythe	Actor	Co-star
10	Aaron Spelling	Producer	friend
11	Dom Deluise	Comedian/Actor	None
12	Milton Berle	Comedian	None

The roast jokes of Joan Collins generally fall into three categories: Collins as a predatorial, promiscuous woman; Collins as a diva at work; and Collins as a representative of moral decay. She is painted as an active predator in the seduction of men and someone to be feared by other women because she targets their husbands. In his introduction, Dean Martin said, “She’s had fourteen husbands; four have been her own.” This statement invited the ire of other

women as if her sexuality was not liberating, but to be feared by both men and women. Although participants shared personal anecdotes about Collins beyond what the public perceived, her sexuality remained the central topic. Collins was not roasted as Collins, the individual, but as a stand-in for a sexually aggressive woman.

Martin continued, "Joan obviously takes care of herself. She only smokes one cigarette after making love. She is down to two packs a day." This line established Collins's sexual proclivities as the focus of the roast. Now that the boundaries were established—Collins's promiscuity was fair game—Gavin McLeod, star of *The Love Boat* (1977–1986, ABC), continued the theme and said that Collins had "sailed the world, and in every place treated like royalty, except in the Virgin Islands, she was treated like a stranger." Of the participants, the men were more likely to comment directly on her promiscuity. The women mentioned it but placed it in context. Bea Arthur asked, "When could I have ever gotten to know Joan? I haven't been to an orgy since 1946." However, Arthur shifted her comments to the general topics of morality and television, stating that "*The TV Guide* now comes in a plain brown wrapper." She then remarked, "*Dynasty* is such a big hit, most in part to Joan's acting, beauty, and a general decline in American morality." However, Arthur was not without direct jokes, saying, "Joan has destroyed more homes than the San Francisco earthquake."

Angie Dickinson, a popular television and film actress who was also considered a sex symbol declared, "You were voted in college most likely to succeed with anybody." She also praised Collins's photoshoot for *Playboy* magazine. Next, comedian Charlie Callas performed in character as a *Playboy* photographer, who chastised the *Playboy* models for saying intellectual things while displaying their bodies. The basis of the joke was that women who are intelligent and show their bodies are a contradiction. Although the joke was not aimed at Collins alone, he

targeted women who willingly displayed their bodies and promoted themselves as sexual beings. Comedian Phyllis Diller continued the ritual by adding more comments about Collins's promiscuity, saying, "Joan sat on the engine on *the Love Boat*. The engine started." Diller also remarked that Joan was popular as a teenager since "she did not know cars had front seats until she was 21."

Actor John Forsythe, who played Blake Carrington in *Dynasty* and Collins's onscreen husband/ex-husband, spoke in the last third of the roast, a spot often reserved for high-profile participants. Forsythe is presented as the closest to Joan personally as her coworker and on-screen partner. Forsythe began by coming to Collins's defense, but in doing so, reinforced the thin line between Collins as her character and Collins as a persona. Forsythe joked, "How could you abuse this innocent party? … Although Joan hasn't been to an innocent party in many years." He then added as a faux whispered aside, "who looks dynamite in a slip." He confirmed her diva-like attitude, saying, "I'd better be nice, or she'll steal all my lines." Since sexuality had already been established as the theme of the roast, the few roast jokes aimed at other participants on the dais were about men's sexual function, desirability, and sexual stamina. These jokes served less as an "all parties are targets" and more as a reinforcement of the sexual double standard. While Collins is overly sexual, the men are chided for their lack of sexual attractiveness.

Throughout the roast, Collins remained confident and composed. She never stopped smiling and laughed spontaneously at several jokes. She provided the necessary participation—her consent to be roasted—and played the "good sport." Often there appeared to be a slight hesitation among her participants, especially when compared to the *Roast of Sammy Davis Jr.* and other Dean Martin roasts. Notably, the participants looked less at Collins when making their

remarks and more directly at the in-person audience. Compared to other Dean Martin Roasts, these participants used less off-the-cuff and improvised riffs. This may be because they wanted to be gentler in roasting a woman or were wary of upsetting her. Either case provided the potential for Collins to gain superior status.

Superior and Inferior / Agency and Coercion

Bell's concept of ritualization indicates that a function of the ritual is to reveal the ongoing tension between superior and inferior status among participants. The agency and coercion opposition does not map precisely onto the superior and inferior opposition but works alongside it. Like agency/coercion, inferior/superior status is in a constant state of flux and depends on the context. Collins's sexuality was presented as morally inferior, but these attributes are also what gave Collins the advantage in the roast. Collins's sexuality was her greatest power and her weapon to wield over men. Presented as a notorious husband-stealer, the roast suggested that Collins was always successful in her seductions. Despite her hyper-femininity, her sexuality was a masculine trait, like the sex symbols on 1970s television (Levine 2009) but with the excess desire for power of 1980s television (Zimmerman 1985, 67). She was superior because she was a "new woman," permitted to act masculine but only if she retained her ultra-femininity. Furthermore, she was known for seducing rich, powerful men; to be chosen by Collins was a sign of superior masculine status.

Collins's perceived behavior was a symptom of gender stereotyping on television (Signorelli and Bacue, 1999). Alternatively, her "difficult" persona could be a survival method in a coercive, patriarchal space where she had to act aggressively. Conversely, when considering questions of agency, this means she refused to be a powerless object. Most importantly, multiple states of being can be true at the same time. She can have agency and superior status while

coercion is still at play. Her sexuality and boldness were due to her innate sense of confidence rather than something that she had no choice about.

Comedian and actress Bea Arthur's comments deserve a closer reading because she presented herself as a counterpart to Collins by using self-deprecation. Arthur's comedic talent and delivery make for a successful joke, but she did something interesting within the ritual rules. She complied with the rules as they had been set (Collins as a promiscuous woman) but also commented on her own relationship to sexuality. Arthur's self-deprecation bolstered Collins's agency. Arthur pointed out that her advanced age was a reason not to engage with (perceived) sexual deviance, and she expressed a wistful longing to be involved. She did not shame the act of sexuality but praised Collins for being young at heart and open to it. Arthur used this comparison of herself and Collins to comment on sex on television: "I remember the good old days when going all the way meant a hamburger with everything on it." The comment takes the focus off Collins as sexually promiscuous and on Arthur's naivety about sex. The implied problem is not that Collins is promiscuous, but that Arthur's view of sexuality is outdated. However, in the context of the roast, Arthur's target was the outdated morals of an older generation. Remembering that a roast is an inverted, carnivalesque, and heightened space, citing moral decay is a condemnation not of the guest of honor, but a celebration and acknowledgment. Arthur placed Collins as a leader in a sexual revolution: moral decay in the roast but progress in the real world. Arthur's remarks did, in fact, revert to calling Collins promiscuous, but the subtle difference was that she was not condemning it. Arthur's commentary placed Collins as an agent working against a conservative hegemonic force; Collins's defiance reflected her agency.

When considered a superior role, Collins suggests that she practiced sexuality for her own desires and not in service to men. Collins's confident reactions to participants' jokes

allowed her to remain in a superior position, genuinely enjoying the roast. Her closing remarks specifically answered and refuted each of the participants' comments. Her strategy was not to deny the allegations but to agree with them. "I enjoyed your treatise on morality," she told Bea Arthur, "But [bad morals] makes for a great party." She used sexuality to point out the undesirability of the men on the dais. To Rich Little, a comedian known for impersonations, she said, "Your wife must enjoy your [celebrity] impersonations. She can imagine herself with someone else." Little showed surprise at the direct insult. Although confident from the outset, Collins gained even more power by using the rule that has been established (sexual desirability) on the participants. Collins's sexuality remained a powerful tool throughout the duration of the roast. It is necessary to acknowledge that in the 1980s, femininity and female empowerment meant white woman's empowerment. The opportunity to be honored for being a sexual being would likely not be extended to a Black woman, as a guest of honor or participant at a roast. The absence of non-white men and women in this roast is a testament to the advantages given to white women. By making white the default, race did not need to be mentioned by the participants, although whiteness was the driving force in allowing Collins to remain superior.

The Comedy Central Roast of Pamela Anderson

Pamela Anderson, American Sex Symbol

Few twentieth-century sex symbols are better known than Pamela Anderson. (She changed her professional name to Pamela Anderson Lee after her marriage to Motley Crüe drummer Tommy Lee but then changed it back to Pamela Anderson after her divorce.) The Canadian actress rose to fame as C. J. Parker in the international hit show *Baywatch* (1989–2001, NBC, syndication). Anderson started modeling in Canada and took small television roles, but her lead role on *Baywatch* catapulted her to success. *Baywatch*, despite being ridiculed by critics,

had an international following and became synonymous with Anderson and other actresses running on the beach in swimwear, albeit to save people's lives. The semiotic images of the women in the red one-piece bathing suit became an ode to femininity and desire. *Baywatch* was so influential that, according to the *New York Times*, the show single-handedly brought back the popularity of the one-piece swimsuit (Pajera 2019). Anderson's character on *Baywatch*, C. J. Parker, was not an overtly sexual character; C.J. had long-term relationships and, according to a *Baywatch* press kit, "Anderson refinishes antiques and resides with her Golden Retriever at the beach in Los Angeles, just like her character C. J." (All American Television, Inc. 1991). Unlike Joan Collins in *Dynasty*, Anderson was not associated with the sweet, free spirit of C. J. Her public persona, style, and high-profile relationships branded her a sex symbol. Anderson and the other attractive female cast members running in bathing suits in slow-motion on full display for the male gaze became a recognizable trope of the show and was often parodied. Anderson's features were the idealized woman of the time: blond hair, full lips, large breasts, and a slim waist. Anderson was a successful model for *Playboy* and later acted in campy television shows, such as *V.I.P* (1998-2002, UPN), and films, such as *Barb Wire* (Hogan, 1996). She was identified with her ultra-sexual persona. Although she has been public about being monogamous with her husband(s), her choice of husbands has colored the public's beliefs. Anderson's tumultuous marriages and subsequent divorces with Tommy Lee and later, musician Kid Rock, were prominent gossip in celebrity news.

If the 1970s contained hints and innuendos of sexuality and the 1980s anointed sexuality with excess, the 1990s, according to some, was the explicit acknowledgment of sexuality as a commodity. For stars like Pamela Anderson, self-commodification was tantamount to their brand. Anderson's body was commodified for fame and success. Publicly, Pamela Anderson was

an active participant in this commodification. Anderson, despite maintaining a level of modesty and sweetness in her public appearances, rarely cowered when interviewers mentioned the sexually explicit nature of her work in film, television, and photo spreads. Anderson often framed it as her job, sometimes feigning embarrassment.

Anderson's embrace of her own sexuality while offering her body up for consumption was, not surprisingly, a conundrum for feminism. In terms of agency and coercion, Anderson's career decisions showed great agency. Her self-commodification made her one of the most popular and well-paid celebrities of the 1990s, albeit relegated to low culture and trash culture by many. This is, no doubt, anchored in her association with *Baywatch*. After Anderson appeared nude in *Playboy*, her career crossed over to adult entertainment with the 1996 release of *Pam and Tommy*, an explicit recording made with her then-husband, Tommy Lee. At the time, because of her overt sexuality, many assumed that this was a conscious career choice. Only recently an investigative journalist (Lewis 2014) revealed that the tape was stolen from a safe in their home by a disgruntled employee; this discovery shed new light on the event. At the time, the public assumed that Anderson and Lee released the tape for financial profit, in part because Anderson belatedly decided that getting compensation was the best possible option, given that the tape had already been made public without her permission. A 2022 Hulu miniseries *Pam and Tommy* explored themes of consent and exploitation. The production itself participated in those dynamics because the filmmakers did not ask for Anderson's involvement, leaving her feeling violated and unhappy about having to relive that time of her life (Melendez 2022).

At the time of the 2005 roast, the transition from Anderson the actress to Anderson the porn star was cemented in the public eye. Perhaps because she had already been displaying her body on television and in *Playboy*, there was an assumption that the release of the sex tape was a

consensual career move. After all, the tape was one of the best-selling adult videos of all time, and inadvertently started the genre of celebrity sex tapes. Because of the legal proceedings, Anderson owned it and used the experience to augment her celebrity. Fitting with this heightened sexual persona, she did not speak out publicly about it, allowing the public to believe it was intentional. The agency of her sexuality was now at odds with coercion: a patriarchal and sexist event pushed her into a realm thought of as coercive and destructive to women. In the 1990s, the *Pam and Tommy* tape was a lightning rod for moral panic over erotic exploitation and promiscuity.

Anderson became a frequent cover model for *Playboy* and a symbol of ultra-feminine sexuality. She appeared to use this sexuality to her advantage, normalizing it as part of her identity. Anderson, a frequent guest on the night talk show circuit, would often be asked about her suggestive photo shoots or being a sex symbol. Anderson would neither shy away from the topic nor glorify it. Not surprisingly, the hosts would focus on her looks rather than her latest film project or her animal rights activism.

Despite her immense popularity among both male and female fans, Anderson represents a host of contradictions for popular and scholarly analysis, offering herself up for sexual objectification but on her own terms. This self-commodification connotes an agency within the patriarchal society. What she is promoting is suited to patriarchy, but she yields it in a way to benefit from it. Sex positivity and agency are a large part of third-wave feminism and thus Anderson is a prime example of the movement, even though Anderson has never publicly called herself a feminist or anti-feminist. Yet feminist critics suggest that Anderson's approach represents a false sense of agency, one that masquerades as empowerment but is subject to coercion (Levy 2016, 35).

When the *Pam and Tommy* tape was released, Anderson's public persona became a tangle of contradictions and tensions. Now a perceived pornographer, she was deemed immoral because she voluntarily released intimate images of her body to the public. However, her public embrace of sexuality was a lightning rod for discussions of femininity, commercialism, and empowerment. Her physical self, widely gazed upon in *Baywatch*, photo spreads, and the adult film became a sticking point in debates about masculine and feminine norms. Popular critic Chuck Klosterman's essay "Ten Seconds to Love" (2003) addresses how Anderson's sexuality is a contradiction. He writes,

> Everyone is willing to classify Pamela Anderson as a bimbo and a whore and an idealized version of why half the women in America loathe their bodies, and all of that might be true—but what nobody seems willing to admit is that she's the most crucial woman of her generation, partially because we hate to think about what Pam Anderson's heaving bosom means to our culture. (2003, n.p,)

Anderson is not just a celebrity sex symbol. She is an agent provocateur. She represents the collective unrealistic beauty standards and the ideal heteronormative object of desire. This, according to Klosterman, makes many hate her: "Her body is not just an object to admire and ogle, but a body to project one's own contradictory emotions upon" (Klosterman 2013, n.p.). Klosterman expresses how he, representing male desire, both desires Anderson but also despises the fact that he does. Her body is the sum of feminine ideals, almost too perfect to be real. In addition, "Modern men want Anderson because she makes love to the concept of celebrity" (Klosterman 2013, n.p.). Perhaps in roasting Anderson, there is resentment because she has had an effect on sexual desirability. There is a constant tension between supporting Anderson in her choices as an individual with agency and concern with what she represents as a symptom of

coercion. This strong contradiction is a vehicle for study because these two opposing sides will never be separate, and the shifting tension is what makes Anderson such a beguiling roast guest of honor.

Late Night Talk Show Interviews

The dynamic of power and objectification is a central theme of Anderson's appearances on talk shows during the years 1995 to 2005. At this time, booking an interview on *The Late Show with David Letterman* (1992–2015, CBS) and/or *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno* (1992–2009, NBC) was the favored method of promoting one's work. Anderson was also a frequent guest on other late-night shows (*Late Night with Conan O'Brien* and *The Late Late Show*), and she appeared on daytime talk shows geared towards women (*The View* and *Ellen*). I will look at Anderson's *Letterman* and the *Leno* appearance because these shows were the leading late-night programs of their time and, like her male-dominated 2005 comedy roast, the men in the interviewer role establish a heterosexual power imbalance.

In her talk show interviews, Anderson wore form-fitting dresses, often low cut and strapless, and donned heavy makeup and hair extensions. The hosts often made comments about being attracted to her and needing to hold themselves back. Anderson usually laughed off these comments, both accepting and owning her own sexual power, not succumbing to the "dumb blonde" act. In these interviews, Anderson was sharp and quick to go along with the host's direction. However, she defied expectations by answering confidently about her projects—which almost always had her as a sex symbol—in a way that she was proud of. Anderson's bodily behavior created a subversion of expectations. When she talked, she fidgeted in her chair, and often had her hands in her hair, fixing it or moving it over her shoulders. She bounced her leg and talked with her hands. She was constantly in motion; her movements, at face value, could be

considered vain, vapid, or even seductive. However, her words negated this, as she spoke proudly and seriously about herself, not getting deterred by the interviewer attempting to fluster her.

This contradiction will be seen later in her roast where she acts like a sexual being who still maintains agency and confidence in the face of someone trying to minimize her based on her sexuality. On September 12, 1996, Anderson appeared on *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno* to promote the latest season of *Baywatch*. She wore a tight-fitting rubber dress. After she sat down, Leno leaned in to pin the microphone on her, pretending to be nervous and fumbling with the mic quite close to her breasts. The in-studio audience hooted when seeing Leno close to touching her chest. Anderson allowed him to do this for a minute but stepped in to help secure the microphone. “Can you believe this woman had a baby two months ago? Leno said. “Women at home are hissing at her.”

Anderson took the incendiary compliment as an opportunity to talk about motherhood. Anderson responded by explaining that she had birthed her baby at home, in water, and that her labor was seventeen hours. “Wow, seventeen hours?” asked Leno. “But the conception I’m sure was much shorter.” Anderson responded “well, yes,” and then laughed. “I felt so strong [after having the baby at home.] I feel like if I [did] that, I could do anything.” Leno spoke next about Tommy Lee. Anderson shared a story about how she “kidnapped” Lee and flew him to Cancun because he needed a break from working on Motley Crue’s album; “We got married again at the beach.” At the time of the interview, Anderson and Lee had been married for eighteen months. Leno, referencing tabloid pictures from a year before, asked, “so you got married [to Tommy Lee] in a white bikini?” Anderson responded yes, and that they had gone back to the original

wedding location. “Did you wear the bikini again?” Leno asked provocatively. “No, I wore a rubber dress,” she answered matter-of-factly.

In an August 2, 2004, appearance on *The Late Show with David Letterman*, Anderson wore a satin low-cut green dress, her hair curled, and in full makeup. When she sat down, Letterman noticed that the height of his chair was greater. “Do you want me to sit up here?” asked Anderson, moving to sit on the armrest of the chair next to Letterman’s desk, which put her breasts at Letterman’s eye line. The in-studio audience laughed. There was no need to even say this out loud; the sexual implications were clear. After some banter, Letterman turned the conversation to her book, *Star* (2004). He stated, rather than asking, “you wrote a book.” Anderson laughed and responded, “Are you surprised?”

Letterman asked her about the writing process. She explained that a publisher wanted her to write an autobiography, but she thought that would be boring. Instead*, Star* is a fictionalized version of her early life. Letterman continued to ask about the writing, and Anderson admitted with a laugh, “I had a ghostwriter.” Letterman showed surprise that she admitted that, but she was unfazed. She explained, “It’s my words but he wrote them down.” Letterman revealed that the inside of the dust jacket of the book contains a nude picture of Anderson. While the image was blurred for the TV audience, when Letterman showed the picture to the studio audience, they cheered. Anderson said, “It was taken by [photographer] Dave LaChapelle. I love it.” LaChapelle is a highly regarded photographer, and, at the time, known for photographing high-profile celebrities. The book *Star* and her subsequent books were also fodder for the roast.

Although the Leno and Letterman interviews followed the expected pattern—the host asks a question and the guest answers it—Anderson’s answers assertively conveyed power. Her responses both embraced and challenged the questions that were meant to sexually objectify her.

She did not dismiss them, nor did she become frustrated. Anderson accepted the objectification and consciously played on it. The tensions and contradictions of power in the interviews are comparable to those of the subsequent roast. When Leno remarked on how Anderson's body looks after having a baby, she acknowledged it but also mentioned birthing her child and how it made her feel strong. In talking about her book, she admitted, without shame, that she used a ghostwriter, and discussed the process and how much she enjoyed it. The sexualized picture inside the book cover was a chance for Anderson to say it was photographed by a critically acclaimed photographer. Leno showed a clip from the new *Baywatch* season of Anderson clad in her famous red swimsuit running to save someone. When the drowning man revealed it was a ruse to have her rescue him, her character C. J. responded, "Prompting a false rescue is a crime!" It was campy and perhaps not the most artistic performance, but Anderson acknowledged both the campiness of the scene and her pride in the work.

The way Anderson presents herself during these interviews illustrates how her persona lies at the ever-changing intersection of agency and coercion. She accepted the objectification as a compliment and as a bridge to share more substantive information. Her status as a sex symbol was shaped by a coercive environment, ruled by white, patriarchal standards. Yet she used this status as a launching pad to act with agency within these parameters. This dual dimension of sexuality is common in the current climate of celebrity influencers, but it was not so in the early 2000s when the binary of agency and coercion sometimes gave way to a "both-and" situation.

The 2005 Anderson roast oscillates between shaming her and praising her sexuality. Since the airing of this roast, Anderson's career has continued to be full of contradictions. She has since released several fiction books and memoirs. She is also active in political causes. In 2006, she actively supported the exoneration of Wikileaks founder Julian Assange (Gray 2021).

Moreover, she voiced her opposition to then-President Donald Trump, which precipitated her move to France. In 2018, she proclaimed the dangers of men watching pornography and co-authored a sex advice book with an Orthodox rabbi. Anderson has also contributed to charities and ventured into philanthropic causes. Her career is an interesting journey of managing public perception. Thus, it is no surprise that *The Comedy Central Roast of Pamela Anderson* is rife with contradictions and tensions.

The Roast Performance

Like other Comedy Central roasts, professional comedians filled many of the spots on the dais. However, these comedians had a parasocial relationship with Anderson, meaning that they knew of her celebrity persona, but did not know her personally. Table 4.1 lists the relationships to Anderson, which became evident by what was said in the roast. Three of the participants, Elon Gold, Courtney Love, and Tommy Lee were Anderson's close acquaintances at the time. A fourth, David Spade, presented a pre-recorded message. To participate in the roast, participants had to be acquainted with Anderson but were not required to know her personally. The jokes commented on her celebrity persona with few remarking on a personal relationship.

TABLE 4.2 *The Participants at* The Comedy Central Roast of Pamela Anderson

Order	**Name**	**Profession**	**Relationship to Guest of Honor**
0 (host)	Jimmy Kimmel	Comedian	None
1	Greg Giraldo	Comedian	None
2	Nick DiPaulo	Comedian	None
3	Jeffrey Ross	Comedian	None
4	David Spade (prerecorded)	Comedian/Actor	Friend
5	Andy Dick	Comedian/Actor	None
6	Courtney Love	Singer	Friend
7	Sarah Silverman	Comedian	None
8	Tommy Lee	Musician	Ex-husband
9	Lisa Lampanelli	Comedian	None
(cut)	Lady Bunny	Comedian/Drag Queen	None
(cut)	Bea Arthur	Comedian/Actress	None
(cut)	Eddie Griffin	Comedian	None
(cut)	Elon Gold	Actor	Former co-star

Two major themes emerged: Anderson's sexual promiscuity and her desirability to heterosexual men. Anderson's promiscuity was simultaneously roasted and lauded by participants, sometimes contained within the same insult. The introductory montage included scenes from Baywatch, several magazine covers, Anderson posing for paparazzi on red carpets with her various husbands, and other celebrities speaking about her. After viewing the montage, Anderson laughed but looked hesitant and slightly nervous, perhaps embarrassed by all the attention. She wore a conservative (for her) black dress, retained her signature heavy makeup,

and had teased blond hair. Her outfit choice was important for a later reveal; the material became transparent under the lights when she was at the podium.

Host Jimmy Kimmel's opening monologue established the acceptable content for participants. Kimmel covered Anderson's alleged promiscuity, poor choice of husbands, and even allegations of domestic abuse by Lee. (Anderson and Lee later reconciled.) Kimmel equated her promiscuity with her "large vagina," which "her children walked out of." This focus on her supposedly large vagina was frequent throughout the roast; although many jokes were pre-written, as the host, Kimmel's joke established the topic as fair game. One might note that in early sexuality studies, enlarged genitalia was once identified as a feature of sexual deviance and used as a reason to justify mistreatment. Unsurprisingly, the size of Tommy Lee's genitalia is also mentioned but framed as positive. Anderson and Lee became objects attached to their genitalia; in this case, Lee's body was a positive attribute due to gendered double standards.

The first half of the roast emphasized Anderson's promiscuity and desirability but also included some remarks about her intelligence. At the time of airing, Anderson was not exclusively a sex symbol, and she did not come off as unintelligent. At the time of the roast, Anderson had published two commercially successful books. However, a sex symbol cannot have both sexuality and intelligence. Comedian Greg Giraldo remarked, "She has written more books than she has actually read." Later, comedian Jeff Ross said, "it's been fun roasting someone who won't get any of the jokes," which, according to Anderson's reaction, was false.

The second central theme was sexual desirability based on male heterosexual proclivities. Participants praised Tommy Lee's sexual abilities and genital size. By comparison, many participants speculated about comedian Andy Dick's sexuality, calling him gay as an insult; a few months after the roast aired, he confirmed his bisexuality (Booth, 2006). Anderson's body

was a topic of objectification and a test of heterosexual masculinity. To objectify her body was to prove the participant's heterosexuality. Twice during the roast, participants touched her breasts. Lee fondled her as he hugged her as if being previously married to her gave him unchecked access to her body. Andy Dick performed in character as Anderson's plastic surgeon. He asked Anderson if he could perform a check on her and then he grabbed her breasts. She seemed genuinely surprised at this move, yet still laughed. Even though Anderson's body and plastic surgery were fair game in the rules of the roast, physical touching had not been done previously. Anderson's laughter signaled that she was okay with being touched, thus giving permission to include touching within the boundaries of the roast going forward.

The comments aimed at other participants also confirmed the value of desirability. Andy Dick retaliated by suggesting that comedian Jimmy Kimmel has engaged sexually with comedian Adam Corolla to help his career. This was Dick's own way of gaining the upper hand after he had been labeled gay; the logic was that he could call someone gay because he had experienced the same mockery during the roast. The other women participating in the roast, Lisa Lampanelli, Courtney Love, Sarah Silverman, and Bea Arthur, were framed as the antithesis of Anderson. They were called ugly, manly, mentally ill, drug-laden, and possessing sexually unappealing bodies. The female participants spoke last, with Bea Arthur's set appearing only in a commercial bumper. The participation of Lady Bunny, a drag queen known within drag communities as a skilled roaster, was edited to one line. She said, "I'm here to give you a boner break," thus reinforcing heterosexual standards of female attractiveness. To be straight, one must be attracted to Anderson and turned off by a man in drag, thus Lady Bunny's other joke was, predictably, about her lack of sexual desirability, presumably because she was a man in drag.

However, when Courtney Love was at the podium, her jokes referenced her sexual relationship with Anderson. This pronouncement created titillation and conformed to many stereotypes about bisexual women being hypersexual and existing for heterosexual men's pleasure. Love responded to various roast jokes about her drug addiction and mental health problems by declaring them as true. However, she resisted taking an inferior position by implying that she, herself, had been sexually intimate with Anderson. This runs counter to an assumption about Anderson's sexuality. A suggestion of queerness was a challenge to the notion that Anderson's sexuality existed for men's pleasure only. By declaring her physical intimacy with Anderson, Love identified herself as equally worthy as Anderson's sexual partner of choice. Love's declaration was also a powerful resistance to rules established earlier. It negates the established narrative of the roast, that Anderson's sexuality existed for men's pleasure only.

Lisa Lampanelli, also present at *the Comedy Central Roast of Flavor Flav (*Comedy Central, 2004), delivered her set according to the rules of sexuality and desirability but offered another layer to the performance. As mentioned earlier, Lampanelli's comic persona is that of a loud, fat, and mean woman, often dubbed "the Queen of Mean" (Lampanelli 2009). As in previous roasts, Lampanelli delivered cutting, taboo jokes, but was often the one laughing the loudest at the jokes aimed at her. Kimmel introduced her as "someone who has sex with Black men, not just because she has to," thus playing on white assumptions that her preference for Black men is indicative of her lesser value. Lampanelli's confidence and professional comedic experience lent superior status to her performance. She challenged the previous performers by stating, "Look at this dais: we have a drag queen, a pervert, and a drug addict. I'm talking about Andy Dick." Her dismissal of the performers through a joke at Dick's expense labeled them as deviants. Despite being at Dick's expense, the joke followed the established rules, but also

defended Anderson from Dick's behavior by calling him a deviant. The homophobic nature of her jokes should not be excused, but they were the tools that had been given to her in the roast. Lampanelli was skilled in that she accepted the insults thrown at her and then wielded them when attacking the other participants. Although she still referenced Anderson's sexual behaviors ("Nobody can do what Pam does!") she redirected the burden to herself, stating, "Pam, you treat everyone with kindness and respect … knock it off, b**ch, you are making me feel like a foul-mouthed c**t." Lampanelli, using her shared identity as a woman, roasted the other men in solidarity.

Superior and Inferior / Agency and Coercion

In the Pamela Anderson roast, superior and inferior status fell along gender lines. Tommy Lee was praised by both men and women while Anderson was shamed by men but praised by women. When it came time for Anderson to make her remarks, her initial nervousness diminished her superior status. "For the record, I do have a tight p**sy," she said with a nervous laugh. Her shirt, now under the stage lighting appeared transparent. "Wait, is this see-through?" she asked and laughed, briefly covering her breasts with her hands. Her performed reaction to the discovery was indicative of her response throughout the roast; she was proud of her breasts and in on the jokes about her exhibitionism. After regaining a confident hold of herself, she moved back towards a superior status. She responded to the roasts about her sexuality and objectification, while consciously and playfully objectifying herself with her choice of transparent clothes. At first, she seemed a bit hesitant to deliver her roasts, but her body language quickly shifted as she proceeded to tell her scripted jokes, including the remark, "I was going to invite everyone I f*cked, [but] the Staples Center wasn't available." In response to Sarah Silverman implying that Anderson was successful only because of the people she'd had sex with,

Anderson thanked "everyone that Sarah Silverman f*cked," implying that Silverman used sex for professional advancement, whereas Anderson's sexual exploits were for her own pleasure.

The participants' emphasis on Anderson's sexual promiscuity initially categorized Anderson as inferior. However, when it came to Anderson's personal agency, the divergence between inferior and superior status was in flux. If only coercive forces gave Anderson her sex symbol status, the conclusion would be that her sexual status was in the hands of the patriarchal apparatus, the white male gaze. However, this was not an either/or situation. Anderson, like Joan Collins, already held sexual power and superior status coming into the roast. Like Collins, Anderson's decisions about who to have sex with and when to exhibit her body gave her power and superior status.

Conclusion

This chapter explores the roast ritual through gender and sexuality. Using *The Dean Martin Celebrity Roast: Joan Collins* (1984, NBC) and *The Comedy Central Roast of Pamela Anderson* (2005, Comedy Central) as case studies, I have examined select talk show interviews to show how the subjects represented themselves in public venues that highlighted sexual objectification. Unlike the one-on-one interviews, the roast conventions made it impossible for the two women to immediately respond to and redirect the social coercion implicit in the jokes. However, similar tensions and contradictions factored into the interviews and the roast ritual. Both the talk show interviews and guest of honor responses illuminated how objectification existed in a constant shifting of agency and coercion. The roast format amplified these shifts, thus substantiating the roast as a significant venue for the study of gender and television in American contemporary society.

CHAPTER FIVE. CONCLUSION: RITUAL FAILURES AND THE RITUAL RIFT

This chapter examines ritual mistakes and their potential for illuminating cultural anxieties, dominant power structures, and the fragility of authoritarian political regimes. It explores the challenge of defining a ritual mistake and then offers the idea of a ritual rift. It then offers three case studies of ritual rifts, analyzing how those rifts affect the ritual performance. Using these case studies, I argue that a rift at first appears to derail the ritual but that is, in fact, an important contribution to the spoken and unspoken rules of the ritual. Finally, I summarize the project's findings and suggest future research

Ritual Failures

There is little consensus on what constitutes a mistake in a ritual. Edward L. Schieffelin states that ritual failure involves "allegations, procedural errors, deviations, mishaps, internal contestations, and oppositional critiques" (2007, 16). While all of these developments deserve their own analysis, this chapter focuses on mishaps, internal contestations, and operational critique. As earlier chapters have noted, rituals involve rules of play; for a ritual to be successful, all the participants must implicitly agree to the rules. Yet success and failure are murky concepts and, importantly, a ritual can contain rifts but still reach completion.

Ute Husken (2007) provides insight into how mistakes and success in rituals are defined. Husken explains, evaluation is an "intersubjective process … based on certain sets of values which might stem from canons which the participants themselves have not created, but it might equally be based on the expectations, intentions, and agenda of individual participants" (2007, 339). In other words, not all participants might recognize a ritual mistake as a mistake. What one participant perceives as a mistake, another participant may not notice. Although the formal properties of the ritual are common knowledge among participants, interpretations of moments

within it might differ among individuals. In fact, accusing others of making mistakes in the ritual is common to many rituals, making it almost a part of the rules of play. Similarly, ritual performances often depend on the ability of a performer to convince the other participants to commit to the ritual. Especially since audience and participant roles can overlap, ritual mistakes can become even more blurred; a mistake is only a mistake if others detect the mistake.

Previous chapters challenge attempts to assign absolute results and meanings to a ritual. "Results" are often undefinable and depend on the context. Trying to identify a certain result can obscure meanings created by performances throughout the ritual. A ritual is unsuccessful if it fails to fulfill its purpose. For a roast, this means failure to pay tribute to the guest of honor. By comparison, a failure of form is a mistake in executing correct order and operations and can include what Husken calls relational failure, which is "an action aimed at the wrong person, not performed by the appropriate person, at the wrong time and wrong place" (2007, 347). When applying Husken's ideas to the roast ritual, this can mean speaking out of turn, failing to understand the boundaries of insults, or not supplicating oneself to the guest of honor. Still, these "mistakes" occur to different degrees in all televised roasts since they are common to all performances of the ritual.

Although roasts are still often private affairs, a breach in a boundary can create mistakes or rifts. As I explored in an earlier chapter, many point to a 1992 private roast of Whoopi Goldberg as a failure because the material was too offensive. Whoopi Goldberg and Ted Danson argued that it was acceptable within closed doors because the offensive behavior took place within the context of a roast. However, reports explain that participants at the roast did not all agree that Danson's blackface was appropriate for the roast. For example, talk show host Montel Williams, present at the roast, left the performance because he saw Danson's choice as racist

(Fisher 1993). As a live audience member, Williams leaving could be dismissed as a failure of the roast because all participants did not have the same expectations of the rules. However, "failure" connotes an active and conscious act by one of the participants. This incident at the Whoopi Goldberg roast is significant because it was one of the first closed roasts of the late twentieth century to gain attention in national media. The participants could not edit the news released to the public, whereas *The Dean Martin Celebrity Roasts* had the advantage of editing the roast before presenting it to audiences. The objection to this edited programming was limited and not often discussed in mainstream media. However, the 1992 incident, at minimum, made the public more aware of roasts, and at maximum, set the stage for the larger public to become an ancillary participant, which created the possibility for more ritual "mistakes." Thus, the ritual rifts discussed below take place in contexts in which secondary audiences (viewers and critics) contribute to the ritual rift. This is not just because the roasts are recorded and televised, but because the expectation for pushback and criticism is normalized.

The Ritual Rift

Although rituals are identified by their rules and form, these aspects evolve with their social and technological context and those changes strengthen the ritual and allow it to continue its existence. Thus, given the unstable idea of a ritual mistake, I offer a new term, *ritual rift*, to describe disruptions and perceived mistakes. A rift is a disruption or a separation between parts, while a mistake implies a binary outcome: correct or incorrect, right, or wrong. A rift implies a slight disruption within a process rather than the idea that the entire ritual is unsuccessful. Within a ritual, a ritual rift causes the performers to accommodate and incorporate or absorb the rift into the ritual. The rift might be apparent to only a few participants, and they may take action to conceal the rift from other participants. The magnitude of a rift and participants' ability to course

correct affects the completion of a ritual. All other iterations are successful if the ritual is completed. A completion, however, still bumps up against boundaries, challenging those boundaries, and it might contain one or many rifts. In fact, a rift can enrich the performance. The roast ritual, despite having commonly understood rules and some scripted material, depends on unexpected moments and responses in real-time. The performance of the ritual absorbs the rift into the ritual. Completion can depend on these rifts and how they affect the roast participants.

I offer three different examples of roast rifts from televised comedy roasts to show how they are accommodated and eventually incorporated into the shape of the ritual. First, a 9/11 joke by Gilbert Gottfried at the TV special *The Friars Club Roast of Hugh Hefner* (2001) illustrates a rift in form. Next, Patrice O'Neal's unscripted responses during *The Comedy Central Roast of Charlie Sheen* (2011) show how ritual rift can be used to challenge cultural power dynamics. Finally, the televised 2018 White House Correspondents' Dinner speech by Michele Wolf involves a ritual rift that reveals the complications of powerful audiences and oppositional critiques.

Rift in Format: Gilbert Gottfried's 9/11 Joke

An infamous example of how a ritual mistake is reabsorbed into the ritual took place during *The Friars Club Roast of Hugh Hefner*. This special aired on Comedy Central as a precursor to the Comedy Central Roast series. Although it was not filmed at the Friars Club, it retained the name for the recognition. Several other Friars Club Roasts aired on Comedy Central before the premiere of the Comedy Central Roast. The Friars Club televised roasts are not licensed to any streaming platform nor released on DVD. This detail is important because this roast is not available on the numerous streaming platforms and has not been widely seen since airing, thus allowing mythology to surround it. However, clips of the roast and recollections

appeared in the documentary *The Aristocrats* (Teller, 2005), in several written accounts, and segments posted on YouTube and similar video-sharing sites.

Recorded only weeks after September 11, 2001, when terrorists hijacked four commercial airlines, flying one into the Pentagon and two into the World Trade Center, killing almost three thousand people, the comedy industry grappled with the existential question, "is it ok to joke again?" Gilbert Gottfried, a comedian known for his grating voice and insult humor, began his set with some general jokes before addressing the guest of honor: "Sorry I was delayed, my plane had a stopover at the World Trade Center." The audience audibly booed and laughed nervously with dissatisfaction. It is important to note that they had not disapproved of a comment about Hefner, the guest of honor, but instead of Gottfried's joke about 9/11. In this instance, Gottfried had not followed the rules, because the joke was not directed at Hefner but rather implicated 9/11 victims, who had not agreed to be roasted, and thus audiences considered that the joke went "too far." This mistake had micro and macro effects. The micro effect was that Gottfried's credibility and trust to follow the rules were broken, causing him to stall and acknowledge the change in tone of the audience.

Bombing is a term in comedy to indicate a failure of the performance, usually indicated by audible displeasure from the audience. Bombing is not uncommon in a roast set, yet because of the roast form, the tone is reset once the next participant comes to the podium, allowing the next participant to start with a clean slate. However, the impact of the previous set can affect the energy of the audience and participants. Gottfried, because of his professional experience, was intent on winning back the audience and thus overcoming the ritual rift. In the performance, Gottfried became visibly uncomfortable for a moment and then started to chide the audience,

which in both traditional stand-up sets and roasts usually creates more animosity between performer and audience.

Gottfried quickly changed tactics, beginning a narrative joke referred to as "The Aristocrats," a type of performance with its own ritualistic rules The Aristocrat joke begins with a variation on "an act walks into an agent's office…" and the performer sells their act to the producer. Notably, this type of joke is meant to be as raunchy and shocking as possible, usually including sexual depravity, scatological humor, and incest, among other elements. Gottfried's take on The Aristocrats joke was not about Hefner, and thus still outside the rules of the game, but Gottfried's misdirect did reset and redefine the roast's boundaries. Whereas the 9/11 joke went too far, The Aristocrats joke was perhaps another instance of showing the limits and rules of roasts because he used a joke with shock value. Gottfried reestablished the limits of taboo topics and shocking material by transferring the taboo subject (9/11 victims) to taboo content. This transfer of the roast joke subject created a rift, which was successfully incorporated into the roast. Gottfried's rift concerned the rules and formal properties of the roast, but a rift can become a larger obstacle when one does not break the rules inadvertently but instead breaks them to make a statement.

Rift as Resistance: Patrice O'Neal Goes Off Book

The Comedy Central Roast of Charlie Sheen, which aired in 2011, contained a production design and format similar to the Comedy Central Roasts described in earlier chapters. This roast contained jokes pertaining to actor Charlie Sheen's rampant drug use, arrests, domestic abuse, divorces, and other misadventures. Comedian Patrice O'Neal was last in the lineup; this was due to his successful status as a popular comedian and frequent participant in other roasts. Therefore, his insistence on not following the rules was certainly not due to inexperience. In fact, his blatant

disregard for the rules became a place to draw attention to the roast's racist comments about Blackness and thus create a ritual rift by calling out racism.

The only other Black participant in this roast was former boxing star Mike Tyson, whose erratic behavior and frequent heckling of other participants created fodder for ridicule; as a participant, Tyson started the process of pushing roast behavior boundaries by calling out to featured roasters as they performed their sets. Tyson's erratic and unscripted behavior challenged the unspoken rules of the roast—to not respond or get offended. Tyson's rift in the ritual created the expectation that challenges to racial remarks were now a possibility for others.

The jokes aimed at O'Neal were about his Blackness, his weight, and his presumed health. For example, after commenting on O'Neal's grandmother, comedian Amy Schumer, a white woman, remarked, "I assumed she raised you." O'Neal reacted with what seemed like genuine shock. Schumer's joke carried assumptions about unstable Black parenting and implied that his parents likely died early of diabetes. Schumer sensed his discomfort and became less confident in her next assertive joke, "Diabetes is in his future, farewell to his foot." Visibly upset, O'Neal said, "that's not right." Taking his cue, the audience groaned at Schumer's joke. Schumer was upset by the rift and the audience's reaction, her body language showing defensiveness. Schumer finally overcame the rift by turning her attention to other participants. However, her words were not forgotten when O'Neal's turn came.

O'Neal arrived at the podium with notes in hand, but then he leaned on the podium and looked down at his notes. After glancing at them, he shook his head; he said, "I…uh, had all this planned sh*t but I didn't" and stopped to look at his notes again. He was visibly annoyed. He then looked at the performers on the dais and said, "I didn't know William Shatner was going to be a quasi-old racist man [he pauses, and the audience laughs] … but everyone's giggling' like

"whoa…" [To Shatner] "you're a f**king a**hole, Captain Kirk," referencing Shatner's famous role in the *Star Trek* series. The audience applauded. O'Neal's off-script act was a strategy and a ritual rift. Just as he had earlier in response to Schumer, he showed offense and anger, which was contrary to the rules of the roast. O'Neal knew the rules and what he was participating in, and by reacting negatively, he derailed the ritual. He withdrew his consent to the ritual based on in-game rules formed before he spoke. I believe that O'Neal's resistance to the rules was conscious and brought attention to the fact that comments directed at him as a Black man were about Blackness and Black stereotypes. Other participants were afforded commentary on their careers, life choices, and items specific to them as individuals. Weight and appearance were often fodder in the roasts of other participants, but O'Neal recognized the stark differences in race-based roasts towards him.

As I discussed in Chapter Three, the formal properties of the roast bolster the social superiority of whiteness and create a context in which Blackness can be subjugated without immediate reprisal. The Black participants must use the roast context to harness some power to resist. O'Neal's strategy was to challenge the formal structure by breaking a rule—at first. For instance, if he had left the stage calling out Shatner, the "mistake" would have devalued his original message. O'Neal created a rift, but he was able to get back on track. Moving through the rift allowed his protest to remain within the ritual. After an enthusiastic response from the audience, William Shatner asked from the dais, "what are you talking about?" O'Neal said, "Like I don't respect him, but I [do] respect him because he's fu***ng Captain Kirk, but I think he might be racist because his hair plugs look like black girls' p***y hair." O'Neal responded to Shatner's defensive outburst (which is also a rift on its own) not just by declaring Shatner a racist

but also by placing his joke in the context of the ritual. This strategy thus mended the ritual rift he created to make a statement about social norms.

O'Neal then eased back into the form of the roast and called out some newer comedians for being unremarkable and unknown. He returned to his scripted material, signaling that he was returning to adherence to the roast format. Tensions cleared until he opened another rift. Looking up again from his notes, he said, "How the f**k can I be too mean after all this s**t? I can't believe it. I'm dying of diabetes and you motherfuckers are like, 'oh that evil fat f**k.' You know." Without taking a beat, he returned to his written roasts. His insertion of resistance had now become part of the roast, blended into the ritual rules. O'Neal created a rift to see it through and make his resistance seem like an expected progression of the ritual. Despite not following the rules initially, his rift redirected the roast to highlight the racist comments of other participants in the ritual while remaining within the rules of the ritual. Not many participants would be able to achieve this; O'Neal's status as a revered, experienced comedian helped him as he came to the roast with that advantage. Since he had been involved in several roasts, when he did cause a rift, it was not due to inexperience or lack of judgment but instead his urgent desire to bring light to an issue within the roast.

Rift in Opinion: Michelle Wolf at the White House Correspondents' Dinner

The White House Correspondents' Dinner (WHCD) shares a history of ritualized performance with the Friars Club Roast and later televised roasts. The WHCD is a time of carnivalesque display when journalists and politicians alike are satirized and parodied. The WHCD and the roast's common ancestor is The Gridiron Club of Washington, D.C. The Gridiron Club began as an association of journalists whose annual revelry included the entertainment of skewing fellow journalists and the subjects they cover. The goal was for the

press and politicians, who were often assumed to be adversaries, to come together and "poke fun" (Dunn 1915). Members of the press and political circles performed sketches and gave humorous speeches, but in recent years, popular comedians performed the "roast" section of the night, an embedded roast ritual in the evening's activities, causing many to decry the "Hollywoodization" of the WHCD. Former *New York Times* acting editor-in-chief, Dean Banquet, remarked that the dinner had "evolved into a very odd, celebrity-driven event that made it look like the press and government all shuck their adversarial roles for one night of the year" (Romanesko 2011). Without realizing it, he referred to the WHCD as a roast ritual, as the night brought an out-of-the-ordinary, heightened reality.

Criticism of the dinner came from both political and press sides. The belief that the press should keep an "objective" journalistic distance from elected politicians was blurred when the two sides came together for a night of entertainment. A 2020 study about the WHCD by Perreault, Stanfield, and Luttman explored how journalists navigated boundaries in their professional lives. Journalists, in general, consider themselves "watchdogs" of the political sphere, with any sort of personal relationship threatening their journalistic integrity and thus their professional identity. The journalists interviewed in the study who did not attend the WHCD felt attending would represent support for the scathing comedic remarks of the comedians. However, the event itself is a threat to journalistic boundaries. The researchers concluded that this is in part because of "its self-congratulatory [tone] which portrays an image of journalistic hubris that is also unhelpful" (Perrault et. al 2020, 10). I draw attention to this study because it rings true to ritualistic performance. Attending the dinner would be an inherent agreement to follow the rules of the evening. To preserve their journalistic power, members of the press avoid any event that

could threaten or undermine this power. The few journalists who do attend are powerful in their fields and thus their integrity is less likely to be threatened.

The WHCD courts public criticism because it is televised (aired live on CNN) and lives on through video clips and soundbites that permeate social media sites. Recall my discussion of how televised roasts open the ritual to those beyond the direct participants; in closed roasts, only those present need to agree to the rules. Televised roasts open the ritual to a secondary audience: those in the audience at the event and the viewing television audience The same consequences befall the WHCD'a secondary audience. The difference, however, is that not all involved agree to the rules and public consumption exposes this confusion of boundaries. The guest, often a stand-up comedian, is relying on their stand-up skills and performance; however, this setting is remarkably different than stand-up comedy: it is for a specific audience whose reactions are also broadcast to a wider public and the comedian's jokes are directed at attending politicians and members of the press.

President Barack Obama took delight in his own speeches, delivering roasts of himself, his administration, and other involved parties. Right-wing pundits jumped on the opportunity to call this "disrespectful" and "unprofessional." However, Obama only delivered remarks like this within the boundaries of the ritualistic roast portion of the WHCD. In an analysis of his speeches, James Nixon explains that:

> Obama found a distinctive freedom in performing within a comic mode, stepping skillfully between realms of accountability and nonaccountability, joviality and seriousness, and fiction and reality. His stand-up comedy addresses exemplified a skillful traversing between the limitations and hindrances of the commander-in-chief and the more liberating and less answerable role of comedian-in-chief. (Nixon 2019, 123)

Obama, not being a professional comedian, had his speechwriters craft his comments. Moreover, Obama wandered into realms of "nonaccountability" because the boundaries allowed it. He switched from president to comedian only within the designated space. He could not do this from the podium in the White House Briefing Room. If he did, the behavior would undermine his power.

The documentary *Nerd Prom* (Gavin, 2015) features various comedians who have performed at the WHCD and explores their varying levels of success and reception. For any comedian, an invitation to perform at the WHCD is a professional accomplishment, yet many would choose not to partake. Black and female comedians, to no surprise, have had a harder path to audience approval. For example, Wanda Sykes, a Black female, queer comedian, did not have an easy reception in 2009. As Mattie Kahn observes,

> When she performed at the dinner six years ago, she called Rush Limbaugh a terrorist, offered an absent Sarah Palin a lesson in abstinence, and chided Sean Hannity for failing to follow through on his pledge to endure waterboarding for charity. When the merciless set drew some boos from the audience, Sykes shot back: "Oh, shut up. You're gonna be telling that one tomorrow." (Kahn 2015)

Whereas reacting to boos would not be following the "rules," a professional comedian like Sykes can turn this ritual rift into another indictment of dominant culture: it's not okay for a Black woman to say these things, but white men (presumably) can say these without being criticized. Since 2009, the comedians invited to the WHCD have all been male. In 2018, the next time a woman hosted, there was a perfect storm for a controversial evening.

The invited guest, Michele Wolf, was successful in the stand-up world, but not well known to the larger public. She was female and younger than most of those in the ballroom

audience. Furthermore, then-president Donald Trump, having attended a WHCD for Obama and found himself the target of a roast, showed his disapproval of the event by not attending. In fact, many speculate that the WHCD insult, issued by Seth Myers, inspired him to run for president (Wang 2017). Trump was the first president to skip the WHCD since 1981 (Peters 2017). His absence was not a surprise, as Trump's past behavior had proved he did not take insults well. Ironically, Trump had been the guest of honor at a Comedy Central Roast in 1994. The important difference was that Trump had the final say about what the participants could discuss. According to some journalists, Trump insisted that any jokes about his family, failed businesses, or intelligence was forbidden. He did not have such control over the WHCD. Several members of his administration were present, including Sarah Huckabee Sanders, then Press Secretary for Donald Trump. Trump's absence constituted one of the evening's many ritual rifts. The rules of the ritual suggest that all participants agree to be roasted, whereas Trump's absence, hypothetically, indicated his nonconsent to be roasted. However, in this case, roasting Trump's administration is an extension of Trump. Roasting the current administration constituted a recognized feature of the dinners, so an indirect roasting of Trump was inevitable.

Wolf's remarks were written with the knowledge of the roast ritual and the WHCD specifically. In fact, her opening line served to reiterate the rules of the ritual. She explained, "Just a reminder to everyone, I'm here to make jokes, I have no agenda, I'm not trying to get anything accomplished. So, everyone that's here from Congress, you should feel right at home." In a room full of journalists, this roast of a familiar target set the stage and gave permission for the roast to begin with the boundaries set. She further communicated the rules by adding a remark that, although against a well-known target at the time, was a bit more risqué. Wolfe noted, "I am 32 years old, which is an odd age—10 years too young to host this event, and 20

years too old for Roy Moore." The audience laughed, but the laughs were tentative. Wolf tried to mend the rift with the unscripted remark, "Yea, he got elected. It was fun." (Roy Moore, a former Alabama Supreme Court Chief Justice and Republican Senate candidate, had been accused of sexual misconduct towards underage women; he was removed from office in 2017.)

Sensing that the audience was not quite on board, Wolf offered herself up as a target: "I took an aptitude test in 7th grade, and it said my best profession was a clown or a mime. Well, at first it said clown, and then it heard my voice and was like, "Or maybe mime. Think about mime." In doing this, she called attention to what she had heard plenty of times before, namely, the coded misogyny about people finding her voice annoying. Thus, she telegraphed that she, too, is up for ridicule, showing her participation in the rules of the ritual.

Wolf, having secured the implicit understanding of the rules from the larger audience, proceeded to roast Trump on his sexism, racism, lack of wealth, and alleged collusion with Russia. She then confirmed the rules of participation by offering attention to Democrats: "Democrats are harder to make fun of because you guys don't do anything. People think you might flip the House and Senate this November, but you guys always find a way to mess it up." In a nod to the Friars Club roast ritual, she also initiated a call and response that is often employed. "Trump is so broke," she said, instructing the audience to ask, "How broke is he?" in a way to involve the audience within the performance, inviting them into the boundaries.

Wolf used a lot of her time targeting the women of the Trump Administration, calling Senior White House Advisor Kellyanne Conway a con artist and referring to Trump's daughter Ivanka as being "as helpful to women as an empty box of tampons." Wolf's comments to Sarah Huckabee Sanders, however, were most notable because not only was Sanders present but she was seated on the dais onstage and her displeasure was on display for both the live and television

audiences. In roasting Sanders, Wolf referenced Aunt Lydia, the cruel headmistress in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, a 1985 dystopian novel about a theocratic dictatorship, as well as religious-minded Vice President Mike Pence and Trump administration opponent reporter Jim Acosta of CNN. She said:

> We are graced with Sarah's presence tonight. I have to say I'm a little star-struck. I love you as Aunt Lydia *in The Handmaid's Tale*. Mike Pence, if you haven't seen it, you would love it. Every time Sarah steps up to the podium, I get excited, because I'm not really sure what we're going to get—you know, a press briefing, a bunch of lies or [being] divided into softball teams. "It's shirts and skins, and this time don't be such a little bi**ch, Jim Acosta!" I actually really like Sarah. I think she's very resourceful. She burns facts, and then she uses that ash to create a perfect smoky eye. Like maybe she's born with it, maybe it's lies. It's probably lies. And I'm never really sure what to call Sarah Huckabee Sanders, you know? Is it Sarah Sanders, is it Sarah Huckabee Sanders, is it Cousin Huckabee, is it Auntie Huckabee Sanders? Like, what's Uncle Tom but for white women who disappoint other white women? Oh, I know. Ann Coulter. (Stewart 2018)

During Wolf's remarks, the camera turned to Sanders's reaction. She frowned, but then quickly tried to return to a neutral face. In a roast, even the slightest display of displeasure can break the pact among the participants. If Sanders responded with laughter, her supporters may have not had the reactions they had.

The comments from Sanders's defenders and conservative media framed Wolfe as being too mean and inappropriate, with responses steeped in sexism and a misunderstanding (perhaps deliberate) of the context of the dinner, which was enacted according to the formal and informal

rules of the roast ritual. Sanders later responded that Wolf "should never go after a woman's appearance" (Heil 2018). This belated ritual rift violates the ritual boundary of time and place; the controversy generated by Sanders and the conservative media breached the boundaries of space and time of her roast. Instead of claiming that "it was supposed to be mean," and that "they didn't get the joke," I believe the more important conversation is on what oppositional forces were performed after the WHCD, and how this roast magnified the levels of power. Sanders held a higher power status over Wolf before, during, and after the roasts, despite Wolf's scathing remarks. Sanders's retort is an attempt to reinforce her status that transcends the rules and punishes Wolf, whose roast jokes criticized her power. Although Sander's attendance made her a participant, her remarks and those of conservative media represent a retroactive attempt to rewrite the rules of the roast.

Wolf's speech about Sanders became a ritual rift because the participants did not react within the rules. However, Wolf's performance represented a critique of those in power despite the subsequent break in the ritual form. Whereas power is critiqued in the other roasts examined in this study, in those cases any rifts took place within the boundaries of the roast. However, this specific rift extended past the performance boundaries and into politicized public opinion. Wolf's roast was in an arena that had a large audience and a more powerful target—the administration in control of the federal government. If we harken back to Bakhtinian carnival, this dinner was one of the only opportunities to criticize those in power in this way. Of course, many of the sentiments Wolf discussed had been uttered in the media and private conversations, but not in a setting where Wolf could speak directly to the targets in the room and make their reactions visible. The roast setting is the only "acceptable" way this can happen. Further blurring the temporal and spatial boundaries of the roast, after the dinner the WHCD President released a

statement, saying: “Last night’s program was meant to offer a unifying message about our common commitment to a vigorous and free press while honoring civility, great reporting, and scholarship winners, not to divide people … Unfortunately, the entertainer’s monologue was not in the spirit of that mission” (Johnson and Causland, 2018). The President was in the delicate role of maintaining relationships with both press and politicians. However, admonishing Wolf, a guest that their organization invited, violated the rules of the roast ritual and sent a clear message about whose side the White House Correspondents’ Association favored.

The WHCD did not hire a comedian for the 2019 dinner. Instead, they chose historian and author Ron Chernow. Oliver Knox, the White House Correspondents Associations President, stated, “If journalism is the first draft of history, who better than to explain this moment than a historian? Because of the success of ‘Hamilton’ the musical, I thought Chernow was at the intersection of scholarship and entertainment” (Rosenwald 2019). Although this was the official reason, many critics speculated that it was because President Trump disliked any criticism in any form. Allegedly, leaders in the Trump administration told their staff not to attend the event (Bradley 2019). This evidence points to the Trump administration’s unwillingness to work within the rules of the roast and the choice of guest signaled the association’s subservience to the administration’s rejection of the ritual rules. In response to the selection of historian Ron Chernow, Wolf observed, “The [White House Correspondents Association leaders] are cowards. The media is complicit. And I couldn’t be prouder” (Wolf 2018). Symbolically, Wolf continued the ritual expectations by not giving in to the criticism, albeit long after the ritual was over.

In 2020, after Biden was elected, the WHCD returned to inviting comedians. The return to the previous format signaled the WHCA invitation to the ritual and Biden’s attendance signaled acceptance of the roast ritual. The agreement to be roasted was restored. Although

canceled due to COVID-19, comedians Keenan Thompson and Hasan Minhaj, two comedians of color, were invited to speak. The event was again canceled in 2021 due to COVID-19. In 2022, the first event under the Biden administration, comedian and *Daily Show* host Trevor Noah acted as both host and speaker of the dinner. In mainstream media, the content of his remarks was overshadowed by reports of many attendees contracting COVID-19 from attending the event (Cameron 2022).

Unlike Gottfried's and O'Neal's ritual rifts, the 2018 WHCD rift occurred largely outside the time and space of the actual ritual event. Wolf lost the chance to absorb the rift of Sanders's critique as the ritual boundaries of time and space were no longer available. Given Trump's rejection of roast rules, Sanders's objections might be expected but they still fall outside the boundaries of the roast ritual performance. The self-victimization of Trumpian politicians erases Bakhtinian opportunity to momentarily critique and challenge power; it also means that they forfeit the chance to reactivate their power through good-humored participation as guests of honor.

Conclusions

Although I have argued that a ritual is recognized by its form and rules, the rules are not strict and impenetrable. In any game, rules exist to give direction and allow for play. The risk of a player breaking the rules may add welcome tension to the game. Breaking and amending the rules is necessary for the longevity of the form. The roast would not have become a televised event if the rules and structure were rigid. The ritual had to be adjusted to be viable for television. Shifts and rifts also adhere to the evolving contexts of roasts. Eventually, roasts have been incorporated into fictional narratives. For example, the sitcom *The Office* (2005–2013,

NBC) and the drama *Succession* (2018–present, HBO) use roasts modeled after televised roasts to show the weakness of honored guests whose non-cooperation illustrates a character flaw.

The study's central goals are to highlight the roast as a ritual form in American culture and provide an interdisciplinary method for studying roasts. Using a combination of performance studies, feminist scholarship, critical race theory, and American Studies scholarship, I have illustrated that what happens during the ritual boundaries of time and place is crucial, but not the sole source of the roast's meaning. By framing the roast as a ritual performance, cultural anxieties, tensions, and power dynamics are brought into critical focus. A roast is an art form that is usually subsumed under the rubric of stand-up comedy but one that should be given its own category for critical analysis.

One of my research questions asked, what historical-cultural factors encouraged the establishment of the American roast? Using Catherine Bell's (2009) work on performance rituals and studies of performance and play, I outlined the formal and informal rules of the roast and clarified that consent by all participants is important. Bell's idea of ritualization includes the performance of oppositions, specifically performance that includes us and them, superior and inferior. Describing the performance of oppositions, I argued that the roast's heightened performance points to the contradictions and tensions of power seen elsewhere in subdued form. Although the roast has roots in historical precedent leading back to ancient Greece, the American roast originated in New York City in the early twentieth century. The influence of Vaudeville business, culture, and performance primarily shaped the roast ritual and established the recognizable roast elements (a dais, a host, a guest of honor, etc.) The Friars Club Roast that emerged in the 1940s established the current recognizable properties of the roast. Since the form

appeared on television in the 1950s, subsequent televised roasts continue to use the established spoken and unspoken rules.

Next, I asked, how has the roast reflected, sustained, and disrupted white supremacy and heteropatriarchy over time? The roast has deep roots in Vaudeville, minstrelsy, ethnic humor, and the exclusion of several identity groups, including women. Even if the representation of othered identities is present in roasts, dominant cultural forces are still very much in play. However, agreeing to participate in a roast does not negate the potential for resistance. Disruptions and rifts throughout the history of roasts have created opportunities for an individual participant to resist dominant social norms. Inclusive cultural progress is not strictly linear, and progressive progress cannot be measured over time; instead, it is found in moments within certain roasts. In the case studies, I showed that the minstrel stereotypes, ethnic humor, heterosexism, and misogyny that inhabited the roasts of the 1910s to the 1960s remain in place today. However, a rift is valuable in making dominant values visible and available for dissection and discussion. A rift does not halt the ritual, but, in fact, brings to light more about the dynamics at play among participants.

My final research question was, how do the participants' performances within the boundaries of the ritual create opportunities to reveal contradictions and tensions of cultural norms? As I discussed, the transition from local, private roasts to televised roasts transformed the ritual into a more public performance with reconfigured boundaries and audiences. No longer a private affair in the exclusive Friars Club, the secondary and home audiences became part of the ritual. Furthermore, as the televised roasts of Sammy Davis Jr. and Flavor Flav reveal, Black stereotypes pervading the entertainments of the early twentieth century remained embedded in the dynamics of roasts. As the roasts of Joan Collins and Pamela Anderson show, the gendered

dynamics of agency and coercion, and the place of women's sexuality on television, played a role in certain roast performances and expectations. Although the stereotypical images persist, analyzing these tropes in the unique content of the roast provides a chance to examine social contradictions and tensions and question who is responsible for standards of good/bad representation, agency/coercion, and superior/inferior. Further, by reframing the elusive idea of the ritual mistake into the ritual rift, I provide a pathway for the roast ritual to embrace and wield these disruptions to further amplify complicated relationships of race, gender, and social power.

Future Considerations

As with any project, there is a lot of related research that is not yet explored. My focus was on Blackness and gender as made visible in selected roasts. This provided the beginning of a conversation about oppressed identities in a roast, but the findings cannot be generalized. The relative absence of many types of participants is a clear indication that white supremacy still shapes commercially popular roasts. I chose the most public and popular roasts as a starting point to study how a marked or othered identity worked within the roast system to create resistance. The next step for this research is to examine roasts in which heterosexual white males are not the predominant participants. Ritual insults among community members existed before the Friars Club and have since developed within contemporary culture. These include further studies of "playing the dozens" that go beyond Abrahams's initial study (Wald 2012), the roast in a digital environment (Dynell 2019), the practice of "razzing" in Native American Cultures (Pratt 1998), and ritual put-downs and verbal sparring, called humor orgies, among older working-class men (Murphy 2017).

The roast as a ritual is critical to the history and culture of drag. For example, roasts have an important place in the language of drag queen culture (McKinnon 2017). "Reading" is a form

of ritual insult from the ballroom community, made popular by the documentary *Paris is Burning* (Livingston, 1990). The ritual has been revived by the reality show *RuPaul's Drag Race* (2009–present, VH1), where contestants "read" each other and participate in roasts of established, successful drag queens. Live roasts of drag queens are popular events (Bailey 213; Musto 2015) and are common in many drag queens' performance repertoire.

Some roasts occur in different mediums. *The Howard Stern Show* (1986–2005, WXRK) holds roasts in audio format on the radio show. Roast battles, which pair two people in a battle of wits in front of a judging panel, happen often in local comedy clubs, the televised British program *Roast Battle* on Comedy Central (2018–2020), and the US program *Jeff Ross Presents Roast Battle* on Comedy Central (2018–present). Although these are not the forms I chose to study in this research project, the different iterations are important in understanding the larger picture of insult ritualization.

The last Comedy Central televised roast was *The Comedy Central Roast of Alec Baldwin* in 2019. The future of the Comedy Central roasts is still in limbo; since they are only produced every few years, it is premature to say that they are over. However, recent social conversations about who deserves a platform may alter the future of comedy roasts. During the roast, Alec Baldwin's unfavorable behavior and verbal abuse of his family were at the forefront of the roast. However, giving Baldwin, or another controversial celebrity the guest of honor treatment may be too much of a financial risk for Comedy Central. What emerged in its absence is a new form of roast in which roasters take on the fictional and exaggerated characterization of historical figures. In 2019, comedian Jeff Ross hosted *Historical Roasts*, a three-episode series on Netflix in which comedians played historical figures. The show is based on a popular live show in Los Angeles (Walker 2019). For example, the "Roast of Anne Frank" included the historical figures Hitler,

Franklin D. Roosevelt, and God as participants. At first glance, this roast might seem to be in poor taste, but the form of the roast provided a way for the performers to create an incisive satirical look at atrocities in history. The Fictional Roast productions are live shows that are also recorded for YouTube (@fictionalroast). Performances include fictional roasts of Disney Villains, Harry Potter, and characters from the *Game of Thrones* book series and television show. Although the participants still improvise and include unscripted reactions, the choice to perform in character allows for more personal distance. By playing a character, the participants can still get the benefit of the heightened, often taboo performance within the ritual yet can remove themselves from a personal stake in the ritual.

More often, roasts still take place in companies, families, or communities in private spaces. The conundrum for research is that one needs to be a part of the community to participate and/or observe. However, these instances, if encountered, provide a look into a local enactment of the ritual and how it creates meaning for a smaller, more tight-knit social group. The roast is a ritual that will continue both in and out of the public eye. Although the taboo content is time and place-specific, any public content is up for scrutiny. The American roast ritual is still young, and in its short time, the format and use have changed significantly. We can expect that new social landscapes will provide other changes in the public consumption of the roast. If the roast disappeared or became morally shunned, this change would eliminate a powerful tool of resistance.

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