

# STAND-UP COMEDY AS A TOOL FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

by

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To my family and friends, who help shape and affirm my beliefs about the value of comedy & the importance of social justice.

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## ABSTRACT

Stand-up comedy is among the most popular forms of entertainment in America today. It is also one of the few places in mainstream society where people speak candidly about the topics of race and racism. This is no coincidence. This thesis identifies the aspects of stand-up comedy which make it a forum uniquely suited for creating social change, and analyzes how those dynamics work by applying the writings of three theater theorists to the work of popular stand-up comics.

The first chapter primarily addresses the issue of defining what makes stand-up comedy unique from other forms of entertainment. The setting of a stand-up performance, the conversational relationship between a comic and her audience, and the general intent of the comedian as a performer all help to establish stand-up comedy as a unique brand of performance. The analysis of these aspects of stand-up comedy is supported in large part by the writings and interviews of stand-up comedians themselves, as well as by advice from trade literature intended for aspiring comedians.

In the second chapter, each aspect of stand-up comedy is further explored through the writings of Bertolt Brecht, Michael Goldman and Victor Turner. Brecht is used to explore and answer the question of how a performance can be simultaneously entertaining and instructive. Goldman's theories of aggression are employed to explain the tension in the relationship between the comedian and the audience. And Turner's theories on liminality and *communitas* are used to explain why stand-up comedy lends itself to cultural critique, and show how an audience benefits from the temporary sense of community which is created during a stand-up performance.

The final chapter briefly discusses the importance of understanding stand-up comedy's role as a tool for creating social change, not a means in itself. It also touches upon the problematic role of satire in socially progressive stand-up comedy.

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## INTRODUCTION

### *Why Stand-Up Comedy?*

*We've got a lot of things, a lot of racism in the world right now. Who's more racist: black people or white people? Black people. You know why? Cause we hate black people too. Everything white people don't like about black people, black people really don't like about black people ... Boy I wish they'd let me join the Ku Klux Klan. Shit—I'd do a drive-by from here to Brooklyn.*  
--Chris Rock<sup>1</sup>

*“How come Chris Rock can do a routine and everyone finds it hilarious and groundbreaking, and I do the exact same routine, same comedic timing, and people file a complaint to Corporate? Is it because I'm white and Chris is black?”*  
--Michael Scott, *The Office*<sup>2</sup>

Paul Antonie Distler mourns the death of the racial comic. He looks back on the days when theaters were filled with highly-paid comedians doing race bits the public was dying to devour. He notes that the comedy reached people of every class and level of education. But most of all he seems perplexed at the “extinction of this whole comedic genre,” killed by groups who found it offensive. With only a tinge of bitterness, he assures his reader that “racial comedy inevitably had to pass from the entertainment scene,” that “this nostalgic longing for something that can never be again” is natural, that it is representative of a collective wish for simpler times.<sup>3</sup>

From his vantage point of 1966, Distler speaks of the racial comedy of vaudeville in the early nineteen-hundreds, which focused largely on white ethnic minorities; mainly Irish, Jewish and German immigrants. Ironically this very same year, as he writes, a young comedian named

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<sup>1</sup> *Chris Rock: Bring The Pain*, dir. Keith Truesdell, perf. Chris Rock, DVD, Dreamworks, 2002.

<sup>2</sup> *The Office*, Prod. Ricky Gervais. Perf. Steve Carell. NBC Studios. NBC, New York, NY. 29 March 2005.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Antonie Distler, “Exit the Racial Comics,” *Educational Theatre Journal*, 18.3 (1966), 247-254.

Richard Pryor is just beginning to cut his teeth on the growing stand-up comedy scene, performing on *The Tonight Show* and *The Ed Sullivan Show*.

Stand-up comedy can indeed trace its roots back to vaudeville and, before that, back to the clowns and jesters of earlier eras, and even as far back as the works of Aristophanes. However, the past sixty years have seen a marked development in the niche and role of stand-up comedy in mainstream society. At the time Distler was writing, the stand-up comedians of the time were relegated mainly to the role of show host, cracking one-liners and delivering monologues on television and radio programs intended appeal to a mass audience. But with the emergence of comedians like Lenny Bruce, Richard Pryor and George Carlin, stand-up took on a new form. These comics stopped dressing in the polished suits of their predecessors and became much more casual and conversational in their performances. They spoke candidly about sex, race, politics and popular culture. Their raw honesty was strikingly new and influenced a wave of comics after them to affect the same tone, seeking out social taboos and discussing them in an extremely personal and aggressive way. Edgy, obscene, critical and frank, these new comics transformed the notion of stand-up comedy so that the routines no longer simply reinforced the image of a clean, “typical” American, as Jack Benny and Bob Hope’s did (“Golf is my profession. Show business is just to pay the green fees!”<sup>4</sup>), but instead raised the stakes by revealing more “anti-social” observations which pushed the envelope on what was socially acceptable (“If Jesus had been killed twenty years ago, Catholic school children would be wearing little electric chairs around their necks instead of crosses.”<sup>5</sup>) By and large, these new

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<sup>4</sup> Geoff Tibballs, *The Mammoth Book of Zingers, Quips, and One-Liners*, “Bob Hope” (New York: Carroll & Graff Publishers, 2004), 234.

<sup>5</sup> Sonal Panse, “Lenny Bruce—How to Talk Dirty and Influence People” *Buzzle.com: Intelligent Life on the Web* 8 March 2006, 16 March 2008 <<http://www.buzzle.com/editorials/8-3-2006-104397.asp>>.

performers were wildly successful, as evidenced by the explosion of comedy clubs which opened across the country between the 1970's and 1980's.

Since then, stand-up comedy has become a major part of modern pop culture. People quote comedians, imitate them, see them in advertisements, and even rely on comedians to represent a part of their personality--much like a list of one's favorite books or musicians would. With such a broad appeal, it is interesting that stand-up comedy is also known for its ability to cause discomfort, often by breaking social boundaries and taking on taboo subjects. From a purely economic standpoint, the fact that there is such a large market for the humorous social commentary found in stand-up shows that people want to hear it. That people are choosing a form of entertainment which is based upon critiques of society suggests that they are, in general, dissatisfied with parts of the society they are a part of and are hungry to hear someone else talk about it candidly.

There is a rich tradition in America and beyond of ethnic, social and racial minorities who have had comedy used against them to mock and denigrate, and who have in turn used comedy in their defense. Richard Pryor, for example, is someone many view to be the first person to successfully attack the subject of racism in mainstream comedy—that is, comedy intended for white audiences. Since him, there have been numerous “minority” stand-up comedians who discuss their respective communities, such as Margaret Cho, Dave Chappelle, Chris Rock, Bill Cosby, Wanda Sykes, Eddie Murphy, George Lopez, and Russell Peters. In each case, such performers, once they find mainstream success, have been able to create visibility for their community and are offered the opportunity to challenge people's prejudices and misconceptions about them by adding complexity to the stereotypes imposed on them. This paper will attempt to contextualize and analyze the dynamics of stand-up comedy to understand

the ways in which the form has the capabilities to bring about social change. In focusing on the phenomenon of racial stand-up comedy, the mere fact that there is a large and enthusiastic audience for it is testament to the fact that there are still issues of racism and oppression in American society—for why else would people choose to have a comedian make them feel uncomfortable, unless they saw some truth in what was being said?

Stand-up comedy is in many ways the art of observation. It is a reflection of the culture from which it comes. Because of this, stand-up is edgy when it is new, and dated once culture has changed. Tellingly, Richard Pryor’s routines on race are as biting now as they were thirty and forty years ago. Distler hypothesizes that one of the reasons racial comedy in vaudeville died out was that the “races” upon which it was based simply disappeared—their offspring having fully assimilated into “American culture.”<sup>6</sup> There was no longer a “human point of reference” for the caricature. This assimilated generation, furthermore, took offense to being stereotyped and many targeted groups organized to boycott the shows and performers they found demeaning.<sup>7</sup> The end result was that in a short amount of time, most European “races” had simply become “white.” The difference in life-span between the racial comedy of vaudeville and the stand-up comedy of today, then, has much to do with the fact that racism based on a difference of physical appearance cannot be as easily assimilated into American culture—the stereotypes and prejudices of being perceived as “not-white” are much more long-lived when they based on skin-color.

The United States, despite any attempts to cling to the civil-rights movements of the 1960’s and current popular trends of “diversity” and increasing “racial awareness,” still has a large, serious and often unaddressed problem with race. One major issue exacerbating the

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<sup>6</sup> Distler 249.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

situation is the difficulty white people have in finding appropriate words to even discuss the topic of race. Even in popular media, it is extremely difficult to discuss race because it is so easy for anyone who disagrees with the speaker to find grounds for accusing them of racism. Facing the threat of being called a racist, many people restrict their talk about race to the most neutral of terms, while others simply opt out of addressing it altogether. In the primaries for the 2008 presidential election, for example, there have been numerous difficulties in debating the sociological and cultural differences between the Democratic nominees: Barack Obama, a young black man, and Hillary Clinton, a middle-aged white woman. Most recently, Geraldine Ferraro, a member of the Clinton campaign and 1984 Democratic vice-presidential nominee, was accused of racism for stating that “If Obama was a white man, he would not be in this position.”<sup>8</sup> Her comment was in the context of critiquing the media coverage of Clinton’s campaign for being sexist, however her words also suggest that there is a hierarchy of oppression in America—that it is more difficult to be a woman than it is to be black. Regardless of what Ferraro’s intentions and feelings actually are, the reaction among the press and the general public to the statement clearly indicates that people are acutely sensitive to the topic of race and racism, and that it is indeed a controversial and, oftentimes, taboo subject.

Comedy is an especially effective way to address such taboo topics as race and racism because it is an arena in which we now expect to hear people speaking candidly, and not being “politically correct.” What cannot be said in newspapers or in the wake of delicate political campaigns is welcomed in the routine of a stand-up comic. And because of stand-up’s massive popularity in America, it reaches enough people to be considered capable of creating major social change. Studying and understanding the form of stand-up comedy can help to identify

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<sup>8</sup> Michael Luo and Jeff Zeleny, “Obama Wins Mississippi Primary,” *The New York Times* 11 March 2008, 15 March 2008 <<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/11/us/politics/11cnd-campaign.html?em&ex=1205467200&en=39d0a3ae61fe55af&ei=5087%0A>>.

what about it makes it capable of actually changing people's perceptions of race. By specifically focusing on the roles of pedagogy, aggression and community in stand-up comedy, we can understand the very specific situations in which it can be most socially constructive. In addition, clearly defining these parameters for socially progressive comedy will help to create more informed audiences, who will then be better able to critically evaluate the performances they see, and judge for themselves whether the comedy they are watching is doing the work socially that they want it to. In this way, my paper will provide information which has the potential to make stand-up comedy as a whole more socially relevant.

## DEFINING STAND-UP COMEDY

### *Identifying Features of Stand-Up Which Promote Social Change*

Stand-up comedy as an art is difficult to define because it contains so many elements of other genres of performance. Comedians are similar to actors; both perform monologues, work on stage, and use their voices and bodies to convey stories and ideas to their audiences. Comedians also share many traits with orators; each speaks to the audience directly and attempts to build a rapport with it. Stand-up comedy even has close connections to the performance of music: a fluid stand-up monologue can draw comparisons to a jazz musicians' improvisational riff, both artists having mastered the art of timing. However, there are a number of distinct traits which define stand-up and set it apart from a play, lecture, or concert. The setting in which stand-up takes place, the conversational nature of its performance, and the intent of the comedian as a performer all make stand-up comedy an art form uniquely well-suited for challenging audience's social beliefs and ideas.

## SETTING

The two main spaces in which stand-up comedy typically takes place are in darkened night clubs and large concert halls or stadiums. While each setting lends itself to a different performance and audience dynamic, both foster a sense of anonymity and community. In smaller venues, anonymity comes from feeling hidden in a small, dim space; in larger performance spaces, it comes from being faceless among a massive crowd. Comedian Oliver Double, in his book of advice for beginning comedians, warns that the most difficult gigs for any comedian are small, half-empty rooms, because the people in the few audience members present "start off cold

and defensive...each one feels exposed.”<sup>9</sup> This feeling of exposure prevents people from laughing. While in many forms of performance, having a small audience in the single digits can be a problem, in stand-up comedy it is particularly difficult because so much is asked of the audience in terms of participation. They are not just listening or observing, but need to be constantly responding to the jokes of the performer. When exposed, Double suggests, people are less likely to participate. It is important to determine why an exposed audience is no longer laughing, in order to discover what is truly necessary in a setting for stand-up comedy, for while elements of community and anonymity are both present in a stand-up audience, both may not be essential to it.

In part, Freud’s theory of comedy suggests that it is primarily a release of anti-social feelings.<sup>10</sup> He theorizes that, like dreams, jokes are an outlet for the socially unacceptable desires of the unconscious to be expressed. Using this theory, one could assume that anonymity is vital to stand-up performances because the audience feels shame for laughing.<sup>11</sup> If audience members could only laugh with the protection of being a part of a faceless crowd, then it would follow that stand-up comedy could not be a tool for engaging and changing people’s thoughts and beliefs about society, because it would be a space which people would need to forget in order to return back to society. Stand-up comedy would be incapable of creating social change, because it would be based primarily on shame and fear; its main function would be to offer people a “consequence-free” release of their anti-social urges—something they could escape from without having to think about or be reminded of later.

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<sup>9</sup> Oliver Double, *Stand-Up! On Being a Comedian* (London: Methuen, 1997), 158.

<sup>10</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, Trans. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton, 1963), 118.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

This is not the case. Anonymity is not necessary because the audience feels shame, it is necessary because it creates a sense of community. Double tells aspiring comedians that they can still salvage the dilemma of the half-empty room by abandoning their prepared monologue, and instead creating an intimate party-like atmosphere—even going as far as to have everyone in the audience introduce themselves.<sup>12</sup> His strategy suggests that the feeling of being exposed which can stifle an audience is *not* a feeling motivated by the fear of being individually recognized—otherwise the exercise of individual introductions would be the ultimate routine-killer. It is, instead, the lack of a feeling of community which can ruin a performance. And it is for this reason that individual introductions among an audience are able to salvage a performance: in doing so, the room has morphed from a space of scattered and “exposed” strangers into a group of people united by their presence at the performance. This example proves that the function of anonymity among stand-up audiences is not as much connected to shame from fear of exposure as it is connected to a desire be a part of a group, laughing together. In larger performances, it is not practical to introduce every audience member; anonymity serves as a quick and easy way to create a community—individuals lose themselves and join together to form the collective body with whom the comedian converses. By coming together in this way, people form the singular unit of the audience, which obscures individual identities and creates one large whole.

The collective atmosphere of stand-up comedy is further enhanced by the presence of alcohol. The very largest comedy performances typically take place in traditional theaters or large arenas, and may only serve alcohol in the lobby or lounge before a show, if at all. However, most stand-up comedy in metropolitan areas is performed in comedy clubs—venues which exist specifically to showcase stand-up comedians. Comedy clubs almost always have an in-house bar, and many have a “drink minimum,” meaning patrons are obligated to purchase at least two,

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<sup>12</sup> Double 158.

sometimes three, alcoholic drinks<sup>13</sup>. This policy is often justified as a way to ensure that owners of an establishment make a suitable profit, though in some clubs there are rules stating that the required drinks must be purchased while sitting in the performance space—not in the lounges or dining areas the club also contains, suggesting the desire for the effects of alcohol to contribute to the performance atmosphere. Even in geographic areas without a comedy club, stand-up performances are typically seen in local bars or hotel lounges, where the audience can sit and have a drink.

Due to the significant presence of alcohol, the space in which stand-up comedy takes place can be considered a “drinking space,” like a bar or a lounge. Scholarly studies of such drinking-spaces reveal that they hold a role of great significance in societies, and that their social functions make them places well-suited for facilitating social change. Foremost, just as anonymity functions to foster a sense of community, so does the consumption of alcohol.

In its comprehensive report, *Social and Cultural Aspects of Drinking*, Oxford’s Social Issues Research Centre asserts, “The primary function of drinking-places, in almost all cultures, appears to be the facilitation of social interaction and social bonding.”<sup>14</sup> The bond created by communal drinking in America is especially strong as a result of the country’s historically puritanical views towards drinking as being an immoral act.<sup>15</sup> By collectively acting against that prevailing value structure, American bar patrons—and stand-up audiences—create a new environment in which they are all equals, bound by their (albeit temporary) rejection of conventional morality. This sense of separation and egalitarianism in the drinking-space facilitates camaraderie among people of different social classes and races. In this way,

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<sup>13</sup> Ny.com, *NYC Comedy Clubs*, February 4 2008, <<http://www.ny.com/clubs/comedy/>>.

<sup>14</sup> “Social and Cultural Roles of Alcohol,” *Social and Cultural Aspects of Drinking*, Feb. 17 2008 <<http://www.sirc.org/publik/drinking6.html>>.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

performance spaces for stand-up comedy, like pubs and bars, become “environments in which the prevailing social order may be challenged.”<sup>16</sup>

## CONVERSATION

The unique relationship between a comedian and her audience also works towards the formation of a communal atmosphere in stand-up comedy. Nearly every comedian poses rhetorical or real questions to his audience (e.g. “Have you ever seen one of those ads for prescription pills?” or “Who here drives a Hummer?”). Many comedians add asides to the audience as they are telling a story (“And so, you know, I’m thinking...”). A comedian might find someone sitting close to the stage and have a conversation with them in front of the rest of the audience, or they may address the entire audience as a whole. Ideally, a comedian gives the audience the feeling of having an in-the-moment dialogue with them, while at the same time performing a rehearsed monologue, typically comprised of his own observations. The feeling of intimacy created by this kind of performance is another key factor making the performance of stand-up comedy especially effective for creating social change; by sharing their own personal experiences and beliefs, comedians can summon those of their audience as well.

There are countless books and websites from professional comedians dispensing advice to aspiring stand-up comedians, and a recurring theme in each one is the importance of forming a bond with one’s audience and conversing with them. Gene Perret, a writer for many successful comedians including Phyllis Diller, Bill Cosby and Bob Hope, finds the topic so important that in his book of advice, he dedicates an entire chapter to it, entitled “Respect Your Audience.” Perret’s advice, while by no means unique, is notable in that he has the experience of many

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

comedians to draw from, and in a genre of performance that is so difficult to typify, his unique ability to share the experiences of numerous highly successful performers makes him a more objective source than that of a comedian speaking solely from his or her own experience. Perret's insights towards the relationship between performer and audience center around two main themes: the audience is a partner in any performance, and the audience decides what's funny.<sup>17</sup> These two insights are linked in that the audience *must* be a partner in the performance *because* they decide what's funny. Scholar John Limon notes the same phenomenon in his book, *Stand-Up Comedy in Theory, Or, Abjection in America*, in which he summarizes:

It is simple to intuit...why comedians might, above all other artists and entertainers, hate their audiences...Because they are not, as performers, entirely distinct from them. Audiences turn their jokes into jokes, as if the comedian had not quite thought or expressed a joke until the audience thinks or expresses it. Stand-up is all supplement.<sup>18</sup>

Perret talks about the vital importance of gauging audiences' reaction to jokes; this is how a performer learns what is funny and what is not, there is no other way.<sup>19</sup> Jokes are only funny if people laugh at them. This is another factor setting stand-up comedy apart from other genres of performance. A play is still a play no matter what the audience thinks of it, as is a speech or lecture. Comedy is unique in that there is ultimately only one necessary outcome—laughter, and without it, stand-up comedy fails to be comedy. With this inherent reliance on the audience for validation of humor, it makes sense that in stand-up comedy, there is also a strong emphasis on interaction with the audience. In many texts this back-and-forth is described as a dialogue or

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<sup>17</sup> Gene Perret, *Successful Stand-Up Comedy: Advice from a Comedy Writer* (Hollywood: Samuel French, 1994), 27-33.

<sup>18</sup> John Limon, *Stand-up Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 13.

<sup>19</sup> Perret 35.

conversation and while some comedians suggest that it is only important to give the *illusion* of such a dynamic, most agree that it is a real relationship.<sup>20</sup> In his book, *Comic Insights: The Art of Stand-up Comedy*, Franklyn Ajaye tells beginning comedians, “[The audience] can detect when you’re detached and just doing [your monologue] in a rote fashion with no attempt to really connect with them.”<sup>21</sup> The audience, while not necessarily as vocal of a participant in the dialogue, is nevertheless going to react negatively if they feel ignored. And unlike other types of performance, where the audience is expected to remain silent most of the time, in stand-up there is immediate feedback—the audience has the opportunity to respond right away to whatever they’re hearing. They can “reply” to a comedian’s monologue by laughing, not laughing or openly challenging him. This form of direct audience-agency means that a comedian must be highly perceptive to the reactions he is getting, and adapt to them by changing his tone, topic or attitude. Through this exchange, the audience and the performer interact with each other in an unscripted and genuine way.

It must be noted that the largest stand-up performances, which, as stated earlier, take place in stadiums and sports arenas, have an altered form of interaction in that the laughter of such massive audiences is largely reflexive. Limon notes, “An individual has a right to say: I am certain (I remember) that I did not experience joke *x* as funny, but I was laughing along with the audience...The audience itself cannot claim this.”<sup>22</sup> Limon’s distinction is between the individual and the community, and his point is that while an individual may merely laugh out of reflex, that still counts as their contribution to the community. The effects of such a moment are that an audience member who finds no humor in a joke, by laughing reflexively, still helps generate group laughter which convinces other audience members to laugh reflexively. As the

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<sup>20</sup> Peret 33. Ajaye 87. Double 91.

<sup>21</sup> Franklyn Ajaye, *Comic Insights: The Art of Stand-up Comedy* (Los Angeles: Silman-James, 2002), 13.

<sup>22</sup> Limon 12.

size of an audience increases, each audience member's percentage of individual contribution decreases. The result of this is that each individual voice holds less weight. Through this phenomenon, such a massive audience loses its ability to "think critically," as a whole, and will only respond reflexively. Thus, as its audience grows, a performance becomes more and more distanced from the "conversation" dynamic upon which stand-up comedy is based. Comedians have to work little, if at all, for a laugh, and the interactive tension is gone. Added to this is the fact in such large performances, the "headliner" is well-publicized, so the audience is self-selecting, and thus more likely to be composing of fans. Limon characterizes such cases, when there is a performer who:

Has been so successful (in [their] routine, or [their] career) that [the audience's] laughter is indiscriminate. This behavior only indicates that [they] are the sort of audience inclined to find humor (not every audience is this unresentful) where it knows it to have passed before.<sup>23</sup>

In fact, many of these large performances, when recorded and released, are referred to as "[*Name of Comedian*] *In Concert*," suggesting that they are doing something significantly different than the traditional stand-up comedy performed in clubs and small-to-medium-sized venues, instead performing a "concert," with less audience tension. However, somewhat problematically, the most popular—and thus most socially relevant—performers actually reach the majority of their audience through recordings of large shows. This phenomenon has a great effect of the reception of stand-up comedy in popular culture, and will be addressed further on in this paper.

## THE INTENT OF THE COMEDIAN

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<sup>23</sup> Limon 12.

Though, as earlier stated, the purpose of this paper is to show the many ways in which stand-up comedy as a medium of performance is capable of creating social change, it is by no means necessary that a comedian engage with social issues to be successful. However, in exploring the ways in which comedians generally communicate with their audiences, it is clear that there are aspects of comedy performance that make it a form which boasts honest and critical observations, and—as previously stated—maintains a general sense of respect for the audience. To compare, a medium such as humorous oration or public speaking may be mistakenly seen as a kind of stand-up comedy. Both can include telling jokes, practiced physical gesture, and the forming a relationship with the audience. However, what differentiates a speech, or any other type of performance, from a stand-up act is the performer's intent and the performance's content. Audiences of a speech know, to some extent, that there is a purpose to a speech—they should feel motivated, angered, interested or informed, as a result of having listened to the speaker. As a result among savvy audiences there is a tendency to mentally detect a “message” and isolate it so as to be aware of it. For example, a political speaker's audience will be thinking of what they say in terms of politics, the same applies to a religious speaker. There is a piece of information to be taken away by the audience, and that is the most important part of the event. In comparison, a stand-up comedian's audience is prepared not to hear a message or learn about an issue, but to experience humor. The audience is not scanning for an underlying meaning, they are ready to laugh. Some comedians believe that because they are performing in the forum of comedy, they are essentially un-influential. Jay Leno speaks to this in an interview when describing a joke he tells to mock Ronald Regan's stance on the death penalty in the 1980's, saying that Regan wanted to end the use of the electric chair. He recalls the crowd's confusion before he hit the punch line, which was that Regan wanted to replace the chair with

electric bleachers to accommodate all of the people on death row. “The crowd goes, ‘Oh yeah, that’s what I believe already.’ You take them one place, but then you bring them right back to where they are. If you try and change their mind, you’re no longer a comedian.”<sup>24</sup> However, Leno misses the point that it is precisely *because* comedians are not primarily working to change people’s minds that they have the ability to do just that. When Leno’s interviewer, fellow comedian Franklyn Ajaye, challenges him on this point by citing people like George Carlin and Richard Pryor as performers known for working with socially progressive material, Leno concedes, acknowledging that they are examples of very talented performers who were able to succeed in challenging audiences because they “ put the jokes before anything else.”<sup>25</sup> Leno, then, agrees that comedy has the ability to be socially progressive as long as it not trying to change people’s minds about issues, but instead focus primarily on humor.

However, to be socially challenging without being preachy requires a careful mastery of the form of stand-up. The key to being successful in encouraging any sort of change in an audience’s way of thinking is to be totally personal and honest. In an informal interview, comedian Louie Anderson speaks of Richard Pryor as one of his major influences because of Pryor’s ability to achieve such a task:

Richard was the best at surgically opening himself up on stage...like his whole guts and everything, and laying it out on display. I think he was best at displaying his insides, and that’s why you loved him so much because he’d go up there and you’d go, This guy is hiding absolutely nothing from me, and he’s being

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<sup>24</sup> Ajaye 127.

<sup>25</sup> Ajaye 128.

completely honest, but yet he's funny and he's right and he's making me think but he's not making me feel guilty about what I am.<sup>26</sup>

To succeed, then, in making a stand-up audience think, a comedian must present his own, honest views, based on accurate perceptions of the world. He must make an audience think critically without making them feel guilty—he can tell a joke or a story that hinges on the recognition of racism, for example, but audience members must discover that racism themselves by doing the “work” of getting the joke. Comedian Dave Chappelle tells a joke which, at its heart, is a commentary on class and racial stereotypes. In his special, *For What It's Worth*, he addresses the following joke to the white members of his mixed-race audience, after telling them he's been studying white people:

I know what you drink. [*pause*] See how quiet it got? Grape juice. Surprise motherfuckers! You didn't know I knew about grape juice, did you? Oh, don't play dumb with me. A lot of black people don't have the privilege to know what grape juice is...because they have grape *drink*. It's not the same formula you get. Ain't no vitamins in that shit. You might have one of your black friends over...Todd. “Todd? Would you care for a glass of grape juice?” “What? Nigger what the fuck is *juice*? I want some grape drink baby. Mmm...it's purple.” “I...don't think I know what grape drink is.” “What!?”<sup>27</sup>

Chappelle creates comedy out of the act of classifying a group by its race. In the joke previous to this, he has just addressed the stereotype of black people liking fried chicken and watermelon. In applying the same structure of stereotype to white people, he is forcing the white members of the audience to feel what it's like to be so broadly

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<sup>26</sup> Ajaye 56.

<sup>27</sup> *Dave Chappelle: For What It's Worth*, dir. Stan Lathan, perf. Dave Chappelle, DVD, Sony, 2005.

stereotyped without directly telling them how frustrating it feels. Beyond that, he is linking race and class privilege in suggesting that white people have the privilege of affording grape juice, while the black community is not only left with, but enjoys, the less-healthy, inorganic “grape drink.” In suggesting that white people keep grape juice a secret, Chappelle is drawing attention to the idea that this class division which is based on race is intentional, and is caused by white people. Yet he never directly states this, but lets it come through in his jokes. The discomfort and humor the audience experiences is based on their recognition of the truths buried in what he says. By affirming that the white audience members have black friends, Chappelle is giving them a way to feel invested in the joke; those in the audience who do not have any black friends welcome the chance to at least imagine that they do in the face of the discomfort his joke causes them about feeling white. Yet coupled with this small point of entry into the world of the joke, Chappelle draws attention to the ignorance of the white community towards their own privilege—the white friend has never heard of grape drink, and admits it pompously. The disparity of knowledge and privilege between “friends” is even more disconcerting than the larger idea of disparity between races. Chappelle then makes a move to further ingrain the joke to people’s view of everyday life. He connects his observations to a common cultural touchstone, a well-known television commercial:

Remember that commercial for Sunny Delight when all the kids run outside playing and they all run to the fridge? [*mimics childlike running, out of breath*]  
 “Alright, I got some purple stuff, some Sunny D” As soon as he says Sunny D all the kids go “Yeah!” Watch the black kid in the back. If you ever see that commercial again look at that black kid, he be like [*whispered*] “I want that

purple stuff...” That’s drink! Nigger, that, is drink. They want [*pause for laughter*] they want drink. Don’t want all them vitamins nigger, I want drink. Sugar, water, purple. That’s the ingredients: sugar, water...and of course, purple.<sup>28</sup>

In being exposed to Chappelle’s observations of every-day society, audience members are left with no new information on race or racism, only the new perspective Chappelle has given them. But this perspective stays with people longer than statistics or speeches because they are constantly reminded of it when they see grape juice or grape drink in a store, or when they see commercials reminiscent of the one Chappelle references.

However, comedians do not need to completely avoid aggressive or “hot” content to be effective. Ajaye also interviews George Carlin, a comedian noted for his political and taboo subject matter, asking him, “How can a young comedian do challenging or confrontational material to an audience that might not agree with his or her point of view?” to which Carlin responds there are two ways:

“One is to have a tone in the body of what you’re saying that keeps it from being solely a hateful screed. The other way, and this is especially important to those who are beginning, is that the audience must see you as a non-threatening but authoritative within yourself.”<sup>29</sup>

The phrase “non-threatening” can be read to mean that a comedian should not directly challenge an audience by making them feel guilty or being preachy, but instead rely on the humor inherent in their own jokes to make their point. To be “authoritative within [ones]self” refers to the importance of personal honesty, as previously noted. It is of the utmost importance that

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<sup>28</sup> *Dave Chappelle: For What It’s Worth.*

<sup>29</sup> Ajaye 87.

comedians are personally honest in their material, because that is a key point which differentiates them from orators, religious speaker and politicians—they speak their own, unique opinions and observations. This is what ensures that the audience leaves with a new perspective on an issue, instead of a message or “point.” This aspect of comedy is perhaps what makes it so popular in current society. In a culture of people who are instinctively wary of private agendas, there is something to be respected in a person who speaks only for themselves, who is not working to get you to agree with them, but make you laugh.

## THEORIES OF THEATER APPLIED TO STAND-UP COMEDY

*Exploring the Dynamics of Pedagogy, Aggression and Community*

The relative newness of stand-up, as it has been popularized since the nineteen-fifties, coupled with the fact that it is generally seen as a “pop culture” phenomenon as opposed to one of artistic merit, has resulted in a general shortage of scholarship on the form. This presents a challenge to anyone looking to analyze stand-up comedy academically. However, stand-up can still be illuminated by applying theories written about other mediums, as long as the differences between stand-up comedy and the medium the theory was written about are acknowledged and accounted for. Therefore, in order to explore the subtler dynamics of stand-up comedy within the greater discussion of performance theories, I will analyze stand-up comedy under the theories of Bertolt Brecht, Michael Goldman and Victor Turner. The application of these theories will help to validate stand-up comedy as a medium capable of creating social change through challenging its audience, as well as to define the different dynamics at work within stand-up comedy that make it possible to reach people in a unique and complex way.

### BRECHT: THE COMIC AS THE IDEAL STORYTELLER

One problem with suggesting that stand-up comedy is capable of creating social change is that it is difficult to reconcile the notions of education and entertainment as being truly compatible. It is easy to think of performances which alternate between educating and entertaining, with an audience being aware of when they are being taught and when they are being entertained. But stand-up comedy does these both simultaneously, and Brecht’s theories help explain how that is possible.

Brecht's theory of theater centers around the idea that theater should shed light on society's social dynamics through the acting out of everyday interactions on stage.<sup>30</sup> He hoped to challenge the audience by engaging it in both the personal and the larger structural processes at work in a story. In doing this, audience members are forced to reckon with more than just their empathy for the character on stage; they must also recognize the oppressive or unjust social structures which affect the characters. Being simultaneously intellectually and emotionally triggered affects audience members in a unique way; they are able to create connections between their empathetic and rational reasoning, thus attaching emotional passion to intellectual awareness, strengthening the power of each. As earlier referenced in this paper, the intent of a comedian is not to convey "knowledge" to their audience, but to show them a humorous situation and let them draw their own conclusions based upon what makes them laugh. Brecht has a similar point in view in that he prefers a medium of theater which does not seek to overtly educate, or rely purely on sentiment, but instead trigger the audience to feel a meaningful combination of the two. Brecht calls this epic theater, because of its use of "clear description and reporting" and "choruses and projections as a means of commentary."<sup>31</sup> By understanding epic theater and analyzing the ways in which it relates to stand-up comedy, we can more clearly define the ways in which stand-up comedy itself is able to at once entertain *and* educate.

Brecht's plays use aspects of their staging, production and acting successfully to alienate their audiences from becoming only emotionally immersed in the world created onstage. In his essay, "The Street Scene: A Basic Model for an Epic Theater," Brecht specifically outlines the ways in which the re-telling of a recent incident on a street corner can be the most effective way of creating epic theater. The similarities between that scene and the performance of stand-up

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<sup>30</sup> Bertolt Brecht, "The Street Scene: A Basic Model for an Epic Theatre," *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, Ed. and trans. John Willett (London: Methuen, 1964), 121.

<sup>31</sup> Brecht 121.

comedy are many. Brecht states that the street scene “is not interested in creating pure emotions” and allows characters to be derived “entirely from their actions.”<sup>32</sup> In stand-up comedy, jokes often involve content that would typically elicit pure emotions; situations of intense embarrassment, danger or misfortune performed in the Aristotelian manner would be dramatic, not comedic. However, in the hands of the stand-up comedian, tragic or embarrassing events are funny, because the comedic retellings of the events are distanced enough to allow the audience to see them more objectively. Additionally, in dramatic theater, a character is not necessarily derived entirely from his actions; a character can give a soliloquy or monologue which divulges his motivations or feelings to the audience, causing them to empathize with him. But when a comedian is acting out a story, she does not typically divulge the inner workings of the characters involved, but merely acts them out, or tells the story they are involved in. Comedians are extremely successful in fulfilling this requisite of Brecht’s epic theater, that:

What the audience sees is not a fusion between demonstrator and subject, not some third, independent, uncontradictor entity with isolated features of (a) demonstrator and (b) subject, such as orthodox theater puts before us...The feelings and opinions of the demonstrator and the demonstrated are not merged into one.<sup>33</sup>

In a comedic performance, this is clearly seen when a comedian mimics a person’s actions and then proceeds to joke about them. The comedian does not try to faithfully represent the whole essence of the person they are mocking, but instead merely demonstrates their actions to place them in the larger context of a joke. Doing this increased the audience members’ agency, allowing them to form their own opinions about the situation, instead of feeling like they are

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<sup>32</sup> Brecht 122.

<sup>33</sup> Brecht 125.

merely listening to someone else's. In drawing their own conclusions, the audience is more likely to be willing to recognize the larger structural issues at work in a joke (or play) because it sees for itself the realities of the situation.

An example of this simultaneous education-entertainment is a joke told by comedian Margaret Cho, involving her experience on an airplane. According to her on-stage reenactment, a male flight attendant--presumably white based on Cho's imitation of his diction--is handing out meals to the airplane passengers, offering each person an "Asian chicken salad?" pronouncing the name of the item with a slick, practiced ring in his inflection. Cho becomes his character in that she acts out everything necessary about him to tell the story, including voice, facial expression, and gait, but she goes no further than that. When the attendant reaches her, Cho demonstrates how he freezes up and looks terrified, his eyes darting between Cho and the salad, finally summoning up the courage to quickly offer Cho a "...chicken salad?"<sup>34</sup>

Hearing this story second-hand allows the audience to consider the incident without being completely distracted by the discomfort felt by the flight attendant. Comedy helps the audience see more than just the immediate conflict of the situation: a fear of offending someone by being politically incorrect. They are able to move beyond just feeling empathetic towards the flight attendant, and instead laugh at how such a small event could cause the flight attendant so much anxiety. Yet at the same time, the majority of Cho's audience is white and upper-middle-class, and laughing at the flight attendant is like laughing at themselves. The humor comes from the flight attendant's suffering, yet while Cho is only asking the audience to recognize the absurdity of the flight attendant's actions, there is an inevitable link to thinking of one's own actions: *I call it an Asian chicken salad, I would be nervous too*. Cho does not accuse her audience in any way yet the self-awareness is present, partly because the flight attendant is so obviously white-

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<sup>34</sup> *Revolution*, dir. Lorene Machado, perf. Margret Cho, DVD, Wellspring, 2004.

sounding, calling to mind one's own whiteness, and partly because of the immediate shock of thinking of something familiar in a new way: the "Asian chicken salad"—it suddenly represents racism and prejudice.

Immediately after relaying the incident, Cho follows up with the question, "What did he think I was going to do?"<sup>35</sup> This is in perfect keeping with Brecht's requirement that, when necessary, there be a "direct changeover from representation to commentary" in order for the demonstrator to share their own views.<sup>36</sup> Cho proceeds to launch into an over-the-top imitation of a stereotypical "Oriental" woman, physically crouched, facial features contorted, raging that "This is not the salad of my people!"<sup>37</sup> She enacts a physical representation of the stereotypical character that the flight attendant fears. Yet the flight attendant is not listening to the story, so the caricature is solely for the benefit of the audience. They are the ones who see both the absurd stereotype that they fear *and* the reality of the situation—Cho herself. The joke is complete with the audience recognizing the irrationality of the flight attendant, and then joining Cho in acknowledging the absurdity of the cultural assumptions it plays on. The plane anecdote is clearly something that can and does happen; in current society there *is* typically an intense discomfort surrounding situations involving race and potential racism. And often, as a result, people of color are treated differently due to political correctness; mainstream society expects them to explode and attack even the smallest incident.

What Cho does by performing the joke is, first, to let her mostly white audience know that she's aware of the discomfort surrounding such situations, that it's no secret. Secondly, she

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<sup>35</sup> *Revolution*.

<sup>36</sup> Brecht 126.

<sup>37</sup> *Revolution*; For further discussion of the tendency of the "Western world" to create an ethnic "other" that has no basis in reality, see Edward Said's book *Orientalism* (Vintage: New York, 1979). An argument from this school of thought would focus on the fact that the Asian chicken salad is not the salad of *any* people, but has been created as a way for Americans to consume ethnic authenticity. This concept is further elaborated on in an article by Jerry Herron for the *Detroit Metro Times*, detailing the phenomena of America's mass-chain commoditization of "ethnic" cuisine restaurants: "Swallowing Our Cultural Differences" <<http://www.alternet.org/story/9314/>>.

challenges the cultural assumptions and stereotypes at work in the story: the assumptions of the white flight attendant--and by proxy some of her audience—that people of color react unreasonably in such situations, and the general stereotype of the “Oriental” woman. By singling out this moment, then, Cho is able to demonstrate several social dynamics. Brecht might agree that by presenting the situation in a way that alienates the audience, Cho is “labeling [it] as something striking, something that calls for explanation, is not to be taken for granted, not just natural.”<sup>38</sup> The key evidence of this is in her question, “What did he think I was going to do?” Cho doesn’t pretend to understand the situation, which would make it seem normal, natural. She is making fun of a “politically correct” social system which, problematically, despite trying not to be racist is nevertheless hyper-conscious of, and even scared of, race. Her enactment of the stereotype of an “Oriental” woman is meant to convey her own stance on the situation—that she isn’t so “unreasonable” as to get angry over the name of a salad, in fact the joke makes it sound as if she would have able to overlook the use of the word “Oriental” entirely. Instead, her focus is on the humor of flight attendant’s fear. In doing this, Cho can convey to the audience that making a scene about offensive words isn’t her real goal, it is to get people to move beyond political correctness for the sake of being politically correct.

#### GOLDMAN: CONVERSATION AND AGGRESSION BETWEEN COMEDIAN AND AUDIENCE

As Brecht’s theories illuminate a study of the pedagogy of the comedian, Michael Goldman’s theory sheds light on the dynamics of exchange found in the performance of stand-up comedy. The relationship between comedian and audience is complex and dialectic, earlier in

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<sup>38</sup> Brecht 125.

this paper it was described it as a conversation, however the subtleties of power distribution, the role of aggression and discomfort, and the sacredness of social norms are all factors that add complexity to that relationship. Goldman's theories address these issues and help explain why they all bolster to stand-up comedy's capacity to challenge society, thus creating social change.

Goldman's theory of theater focuses on the actor's role as the "sacred blasphemers." In stand-up comedy, this translates to the ability of the performer, or comedian, to address topics which are socially taboo. To Goldman, drama is the exercise of publicly confronting that which is fearful. Often this involves the process of breaking social taboos, and in doing this the actor claims power over the audience. This power in part stems from the actor's bravery to confront such fearful things, but also comes from the power of the convention of the stage, and the fact that "whatever he is doing, whatever crimes he may appear to commit, he is not to be interfered with" because actors onstage are free from social retribution.<sup>39</sup> While this feat of bravery is given extraordinary attention, it also poses a great threat to the audience, for watching the actor break taboos "arouses the fearful sense that aggressions we ordinarily suppress are walking in the world."<sup>40</sup> This challenge to conventional morality makes the actor especially susceptible to violence, in the same way as if the audience "were a potential mob confronted by a provocative stranger."<sup>41</sup> Goldman describes the actor's power as "'terrific' energy" noting the word terrific's roots in describing both the awesome and the terrible.<sup>42</sup> The dual forces of the actor make him at once exposed and vulnerable, powerful yet at the mercy of the audience.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Michael Goldman, *The Actor's Freedom: Towards a Theory of Drama* (New York: Viking Press, 1975), 9.

<sup>40</sup> Goldman 9.

<sup>41</sup> Goldman 16.

<sup>42</sup> Goldman 7.

<sup>43</sup> Goldman 9.

In applying Goldman's theory of theater to stand-up comedy, there must be a distinction made between the expectations of the audience in each arena of performance. In theater, a performer has a character to portray, and a storyline to follow. It is understood by the audience that the actor assumes another personality to enact. In theater, there is a palpable sensation of the uncanny—as Freud describes the gap created between an imitation of reality and reality itself.<sup>44</sup> The “ontological subversiveness” of an actor “shifting identities,” while unsettling, is not overly threatening because it takes place within the realm of fiction.<sup>45</sup> But in stand-up performance, the pretense of fiction is gone; a comedian's audience can hold them accountable for everything they have to say if they so choose, even despite the fact that many stand-up comedians employ a stage character, some kind of trademark voice and manner that they develop and “put on” for performance. Because they are still performing under their own name, comedians are forced to take ownership of their observations and narratives in a way that actors do not.

An example of the difficulty posed by stand-up comedy is Sarah Silverman's reprimand from the Media Action Network for Asian Americans after making a deliberately ignorant joke using the word “chink” while performing on *Late Night With Conan O'Brien*.<sup>46</sup> The joke is as follows: Silverman wants to get out of jury duty and is advised by a friend to write something overtly racist on her juror sheet, like “I hate chinks.” She worries about being thought of as a racist, and ends up writing “I love chinks” instead.<sup>47</sup> The humor of the joke is in Silverman's performance of ignorance; the character she is “wearing” for performance does not understand that using the word chink is offensive in itself. Beyond this, she is embodying the oxy-moronic idea of “good racism,” making humor in the conflict between the use of the offensive term to

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<sup>44</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. David McLintock (New York: Penguin, 2003), 121-124.

<sup>45</sup> Goldman 9.

<sup>46</sup> *Movie and TV News @ IMBD.com: Studio Briefing- 18 July 2001* “Asian-Americans Protest ‘Inappropriate’ Term On Late Night,” February 3 2008 <<http://www.imdb.com/news/sb/2001-07-18#tv4>>.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

convey a well-intentioned idea. Both of these explanations require that the audience understand and believe that the term chink is, in fact, racist. The entire joke hinges upon it. Yet MANAA publicly deemed the joke “offensive” and “inappropriate” and demanded an apology, which it received, from NBC for letting it air.<sup>48</sup> Because there is not an official distinction between Silverman as a character and Silverman, the actual person who is performing, she can be accused of the very racism she is satirizing.

Much of Silverman’s comedy plays off of the same dynamics as those in the aforementioned joke. Behind the microphone, she plays a character that is unabashedly open in her prejudices. A profile in the *New Yorker* describes her as:

Approachable though deranged, a sort of twisted Gracie Allen...she never breaks character. She talks about herself so ingenuously that you can’t tell if she is the most vulnerable woman in the world or the most psychotically well defended...[Silverman] crosses boundaries that it would not occur to most people even to have. The more innocent and oblivious her delivery, the more outrageous her commentary becomes.<sup>49</sup>

The dynamics of Silverman’s comedy interact with Goldman’s theory in that she takes the risk of exposing herself—or rather, the character she has constructed—to the audience, and in doing so she confronts the frightening situation of revealing her (character’s) own ignorance in a society which would typically judge her harshly for it. Goldman’s explanation of such a performer is that “We come together to adore their fearful energies, to be infected by their risks and recklessness,

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<sup>48</sup> *E! News* “PC Police Bust Conan O’Brien Show,” July 18 2001, March 5 2008  
<<http://www.eonline.com/news/article/index.jsp?uuid=56d9b005-f1ee-4150-b3ba-4740a0a7a663>>.

<sup>49</sup> Dana Goodyear, “Quiet Depravity: The Demure Outrages of a Standup Comic,” *The New Yorker* 24 Oct. 2005, 17 Feb. 2008 <[http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2005/10/24/051024fa\\_fact?currentPage=1](http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2005/10/24/051024fa_fact?currentPage=1)>.

to enjoy what happens to them.”<sup>50</sup> Silverman’s success then, is not in spite of, but *because* of the controversy she creates. The audience enjoys seeing her unabashed prejudice because it is thrilling and fearful for someone to so openly reveal things that are so unacceptable by social standards. Seeing Silverman be reprimanded by MANAA only reminds us that she is breaking very real social standards with real-life consequences, thus heightening the thrill of her on-stage blaspheming.

“Everybody blames the Jews for killing Christ,” she says in one joke. “And then the Jews try to pass it off on the Romans. I’m one of the few people that believe it was the blacks.”<sup>51</sup> The prejudice of the joke is unexpected, and its proud racism is so over-the-top that it borders on absurdity. But because Silverman’s character keeps a straight face, it is not absurd, it’s ironic. She makes no apologies or acknowledgement of the offense; the only thing signifying to the audience that it is a joke is the fact that she is performing as a comedian. Through this challenging style of humor, Silverman takes on the taboos that Goldman speaks of and confronts them in a way that involves both aggression and vulnerability. She focuses on controversial topics (AIDS, rape, racism) that instinctively draw strong reactions from people, daring to risk of being horribly offensive. The effect is that she essentially poses a challenge to the audience; though she is a comedian, it is difficult to laugh at some of Silverman’s offensive jokes, to accept that she is speaking in character and is not truly an ignorant bigot. Unlike in theater, where there is a curtain rising and falling to designate the beginning and end of an actor’s performance of a character, in stand-up, the comedian simply walks on and off stage. The distinction Goldman draws in his theory, between the actor with his audience and “the provocative stranger” who is in danger of being assaulted by the “potential mob,” is blurred here. Silverman is the ultimate

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<sup>50</sup> Goldman 13.

<sup>51</sup> *Sarah Silverman: Jesus is Magic*, dir. Liam Lynch, perf. Sarah Silverman, DVD, Interscope Records, 2004.

example of the “ontological subversive” because her character is so closely woven into her own personality that it is difficult to believe she is playing a part.

This tension between performer and audience can be found in the work of other comedians as well. John Limon’s analysis of a famous joke by Lenny Bruce similarly explores the challenge posed to an audience by the performer. Bruce, like Silverman, was known for his shocking performances and socially taboo subject matter. His wide-spread fame suggests that his fans were attracted to him precisely because of his scandalous content, for it was what his reputation was built upon. Limon cites one of Bruce’s jokes, which drew an unheard of seventeen seconds of laughter from an audience one night:

If you’re, er, [pause]

Ever seen this bit before, I want you to tell me.

Stop me if you’ve seen it. [long pause]

I’m going to piss on you.<sup>52</sup>

The audience pauses for a half second after the joke, before erupting into unrestrained, ongoing laughter. The humor at work in the joke is that Bruce is directly acknowledging the dynamic between the “shocking” performer and his audience.<sup>53</sup> The juxtaposition of the politeness in the first three lines and vulgarity of the last line serve as a symbol for the ritualized interactions of the stand-up performance as a whole: it is a sacred space in which the comedian is charming, affable and vulnerable, all as a strategy for attacking us. What Goldman’s actor engages in metaphorically, Bruce suggests literally—total exposure to the audience. The joke acknowledges the power that the performer holds over the audience in its mock-threat of urination, while at the same time noting the power of the audience as a willing participant in the exchange, proven by

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<sup>52</sup> Limon 16.

<sup>53</sup> Limon 16.

the fact that it has the power to “stop him” if it has already seen the joke. Limon’s analysis of this joke also focuses greatly on the presence of aggression in the relationship between performer and audience.<sup>54</sup> Goldman’s appraisal of aggression supports this connection, and applies to the joke, for he fittingly deems aggression:

[A] flow direct from actor to audience—the thrust outward to make connection in the performance, to create and control a response. It is itself a response to the terrible challenge the audience represents, the devouring expectation or crushing indifference the actor senses *out there*.<sup>55</sup>

Bruce and Silverman both profit off of the desire of the audience that they be shocking and offensive. Yet, as both Goldman and Limon note, this desire has a tinge of aggression in it. To the audience, the comedian is a sacrificial lamb of sorts. It is her job to face the fearful task of breaking social taboos, and while the audience gives her license to do it, there is still a society outside of the arena of performance that does not give her license, and to whom she must answer.<sup>56</sup>

The mixture of strength and exposure which accompanies being onstage puts the performer in a unique position. The audience feels an urgency towards whatever she engages in because it is so closely tied to her: tied by its fear of the forces she takes on, its awe at her power over those forces and the audience itself, and its consent to the creation of the sacred space of the stage. And in the realm of stand-up comedy, this fear and awe is amplified with the dissolution of the clear “character,” for without a character to embody, the comedian is forced to do all of this as *herself*, which means facing the consequences of her blasphemy—something actors

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<sup>54</sup> Limon 27.

<sup>55</sup> Goldman 23.

<sup>56</sup> Bruce’s societal retribution was considerably more severe than Silverman’s; on November 4, 1964 he was found guilty of obscenity and sentenced to four months in the workhouse, after a highly publicized six-month trial.

seldom have to do. Yet this extreme danger lends credibility to comedians. The more danger they put themselves in, the more they command our respect; thus the most respected comedians are the ones who are pushing the most social boundaries and who, in doing so, have the potential to create social change.

#### TURNER ON SETTING: LIMINALITY AND COMMUNITAS

In examining the effect that stand-up comedy has on creating social change, two of its most readily identifiable qualities are its ability to create a temporary sense of community and comment on current society. The community-building aspect of stand-up comedy has already been addressed in this paper in terms of the ways in which the setting of a performance and its position of being “outside” society can contribute to it. However specifically focusing on the interactions between the comedian, the material of a routine, and the audience provides a better understanding of the work that the actual *performance* of stand-up comedy does to create a sense of community. Theorist and anthropologist Victor Turner’s work helps to expand on that idea and identify how the unique space which is socially constructed during a performance of stand-up comedy facilitates social change.

Turner’s theories focus largely on the role of liminal spaces in society. Liminal spaces are typically the middle undefined stage in a rite of passage which involves removal from and reintegration back into society, a space of “mid-transition.”<sup>57</sup> Liminal spaces are characterized by a removal of personal identity, which is replaced by a group uniformity, an inversion of social order or social values, and the action of “play[ing] with the elements of the familiar and defamiliar[iz]ing them.”<sup>58</sup> The liminal space is meant to exist outside society, and provide those

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<sup>57</sup> Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theater: The Seriousness of Human Play* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1982), 26.

<sup>58</sup> Turner 27.

in it with the possibility to think without being restrained by traditional societal constraints, and as a result gain new perspectives. While Turner's theories mainly grew out of his observations of tribal societies in Africa, he later applied the same ideas and observations to the realms of religion, theater and performance in post-industrial societies. To account for the differences between tribal and post-industrial societies, Turner makes the distinction between liminal spaces, which are more systematic rituals that *all* people in a community typically go through, and liminoid spaces, in which people have the option of joining an anti-structural space for a temporary amount of time.<sup>59</sup> In post-industrial nations, he argues, there are more liminoid than liminal experiences, and their purpose is not as much to create a space which is the antithesis of society, and more to "make tolerable the system as it exists, [to] keep its members in a more flexible state with respect to that system, and, therefore, with respect to possible change."<sup>60</sup> Liminoid spaces are typically more idiosyncratic and personal, while liminal spaces focus more on an entire community and its common symbols, history and representation of its collective character.<sup>61</sup> Applying Turner's concepts of liminal and liminoid space to stand-up comedy deepens our understanding of how certain cultural critiques are received in stand-up comedy, where they might not be otherwise. It also illuminates this paper's previous exploration of the function of community in watching stand-up comedy, and the effects participating in a temporary, equalized and socially-inverted community has on the audience.

In the filmed special *The Latino Kings of Comedy*, comics Joey Medina, Alex Reymundo, George Lopez and Paul Rodriguez each perform a stand-up routine to an audience in El Paso,

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<sup>59</sup> Turner 42.

<sup>60</sup> Turner 52.

<sup>61</sup> Turner 54.

Texas.<sup>62</sup> Cameras panning the audience show that it is mainly composed of people who would identify as “Hispanic” or “Latino” on a government census. However, through the interaction between performance and audience, more information is collected; at one point Paul Rodriguez does an informal poll of the audience to see who is present. First, he asks who is Hispanic, and decides that the low level of cheering means there are merely “some” Hispanics present. There is only slightly more applause when he asks who is “Latino.” When he finally asks who is “Chicano,” the audience erupts and it is clear that the majority of the audience identify as Chicano—a term used by American-born Mexicans to identify themselves.

The exchange is also significant because it actively confirms Rodriguez’s and the audience’s assumption that they are all from the same cultural group. The terms Latino and Hispanic are both nebulous; Hispanic is a term created by the United States government which technically refers to all Spanish-speaking people, and Latino is a term that typically refers to anyone from a Latin American country, but can also be interpreted more broadly to mean anyone from a country that speaks a romance language<sup>63</sup>. These terms are often used both colloquially and officially by mainstream America to label a group of people as one race, but the term Chicano is much more specific, and is more likely to trigger a sense of cultural pride because the specificity of the term ensures that all who identify as Chicano share a similar culture—a combination of Mexican and American—not fully either, but a mixture of the two. In comparison, identifying as Hispanic or Latino, one may be from Portugal, Brazil, or by some definitions even Italy.<sup>64</sup> In establishing that the majority of the audience is Chicano, and perhaps in encouraging them to identify as such, Rodriguez establishes an “insider” community in which

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<sup>62</sup> *The Latino Kings of Comedy*, dir. Jeb Brien, perf. Paul Rodriguez, George Lopez, Joey Medina, Alex Reymundo, Paramount, 2003.

<sup>63</sup> Michael Grande, “Latino and Hispanic? It’s Time to Rethink These Terms!” *Global Politician* 5 July 2005, 10 March 2008 <<http://www.globalpolitician.com/2946-hispanic-latin-america-south-america>>.

<sup>64</sup> Grande, *Latino and Hispanic?*

it will be okay mock aspects of Chicano culture. By authenticating himself and his audience as Chicano, Rodriguez is hereafter free to make his jokes without explicating them to a white audience for fear they will misunderstand. He and the other comedians are essentially performing satire to the group being satirized, all to the effect of identifying essential traits of their shared identity, upsetting mainstream stereotypes imposed upon them, and subtly advising the audience in ways to challenge such stereotypes and address negative aspects of their shared community—all effects which fall within Turner’s description of the liminal state. The group gathered presumably identifies with a shared community that has a fairly defined history, culture and collective characterization (stereotype).

It is important to remember, however, that in reality not everyone in the audience is actually Chicano; from camera shots of the seats there are clearly people of other races present. However, for the purposes of the routine and the space in which it takes place, all audience members are treated as though they are members of the “in-group.” Turner refers to the phenomenon of the creation of a temporary community in a liminal or liminoid spaces as *communitas*. He notes that spaces of *communitas* are typically extremely inclusive, that “One wants to make the Others, We” perhaps out of a desire for proselytization, or conversion of someone to a certain way of thinking.<sup>65</sup> By inviting all members of the audience—regardless of race—into the position of being Chicanos, the comedians are working to, in a sense, “convert” those who are not a part of the Chicano community. Ideally, non-Chicanos will leave the space feeling more connected to the community and thus feeling more strongly about the problems the people face.

Much like Margret Cho’s use of “Mock Asian” as defended in Elaine Chun’s essay “Ideologies of Legitimate Mockery,” in these performances, each comedian is able to mock

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<sup>65</sup> Turner 51.

Chicano culture because they are able to authenticate their status as members of the group they are mocking.<sup>66</sup> This authentication is done by showing their knowledge of Chicano culture through personal anecdotes and by their use of the Spanish language. Each performer covers significant ground in their routine, alternating between specific, cultural comedy and larger universal themes. However, the mockery and analysis of Chicano culture is of the most importance for the sake of this paper's analysis. In the case of each performer, mockery is accompanied by the frequent adoption of a thicker Chicano accent, the acting out and explanation of stereotypes about the Chicano community, the feminization of whiteness, and the merest suggestion of painful truths about the Chicano community.

The first performer of the group, Joey Medina, addresses the poverty in the Chicano community by valorizing an aspect of it that is very American, in the sense of the Protestant work-ethic: thrift. Turner speaks to this in his noting that liminal spaces often involve the negation of mainstream representations of a community.<sup>67</sup> Medina tells a joke in which he proclaims that "money changes people." First he imitates someone who is newly rich; he adopts a slightly feminized "white" accent, and begins listing the prices of all the expensive clothing he is wearing from Armani and Versace. Then he goes on to proclaim that Chicanos are not like that, and adopts a heavy Chicano accent and physical swagger, saying "Wassup?" and bragging that all of his clothing is cheap, his shoes were on sale at Payless and his t-shirt is borrowed.<sup>68</sup> In this way, Medina sets up a situation in which Chicano thrift is superior to a mainstream obsession which exorbitantly expensive designer labels, something which he associates with whiteness. That the "white" accent is feminized serves to further the inversion of traditional

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<sup>66</sup> Elaine Chun, "Ideologies of Legitimate Mockery: Margaret Cho's Revoicings of Mock Asian," *Pragmatics*, 14 (2/3), 263-289.

<sup>67</sup> Turner 54.

<sup>68</sup> *The Latino Kings of Comedy*.

power roles, as a man so obsessed with fashion is emasculated, thus unwittingly appearing less powerful despite having lots of money. Also present, though less obviously so, is the suggestion that when a Chicano becomes rich, they begin to act more “white.” This is implied by the fact that Medina introduces the joke with the assertion that money changes people—he is referring to someone who is poor and becomes rich, as well as by his change of accent. If an essential trait of being Chicano is spending little on clothing, and suddenly someone who identifies as Chicano no longer has to do that, Medina’s joke challenges their identity—someone who wears Versace and Armani is not a “real” Chicano. By establishing thrift as a general positive characteristic of the Chicano community, Turner would argue, Medina is doing work that is eufunctional, or contributing positively to the community; something which takes place in liminal states.<sup>69</sup>

In isolating and joking about these traits of the Chicano community within the space of stand-up comedy, Medina is inverting traditional race, class and power norms. Traditionally in America, wealthy white men hold more power than anyone else. However, by collectively laughing at the inversion of power, the audience is contributing to a space in which the negative aspects of these typically privileged identities are being explored and acknowledged. In this space and time, the audience is agreeing with Medina that, in fact, the pretensions and excesses of the wealthy are wasteful and not worthy of the respect they often inspire. Of the utmost importance is the fact that there are undoubtedly members of the audience who are wealthier than the poor Chicanos in Medina’s joke, as well as people closely resembling the very rich people he mocks. Because Medina casts his entire audience as poor Chicanos, these people are forced to temporarily laugh at themselves from a new perspective, that of someone poorer than them. Though they will emerge from the performance as wealthy as they were before, they will have an additional perspective on their place in society. For these people, then, Medina’s joke is

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<sup>69</sup> Turner 54.

not as much a mirror in which they observe themselves through self-reflection, but is more like a photograph in which they temporarily take on the lens of another person's perspective.

Communitas functions here; they have been included, and made a part of the collective "we" of the joke in order to proselytize them. For to not only hear, but experience (through their consensual laughter) the situation of mocking themselves as someone else (they are "being" poor Chicanos) is a unique incident which will, arguably, remain with them and be more striking than any lecture or book telling them about the disparity of wealth in the Chicano community.

Next, Alex Reymundo challenges the stereotype that Mexican immigrants are lazy, indirectly warning Chicanos in the process. He begins by telling the audience about his father who came to America with "Five children, four dollars, and three jobs," stating, "He wasn't lazy, he was fucked." The one-liner functions to legitimate his later critique as well as to draw attention to the fact that many stereotypes about Chicanos are contradictory, for if they are supposedly poor, and they supposedly work a disproportionate number of the nation's minimum-wage jobs, then it follows that they cannot be lazy; for many of these jobs are extremely labor intensive, and one cannot support a family on the salary of only one such job, necessitating that a person work at least two. This is further illustrated in Reymundo's follow-up joke. He shares that he owns a Mexican restaurant with his brother, and that they painted a mural on one of the walls in the restaurant, depicting a picturesque Mexican landscape with a man taking a siesta under a tree. Reymundo describes his father's reaction to the mural: "I never took a siesta! Banditos think we're lazy because of bullshit like this!" Reymundo shares that he repainted the mural to depict a Mexican pushing a plow, while walking a dog and wearing a beeper and adds, "When people say, 'What's that?' I answer, 'That's a busy fucking Mexican!'" Before telling the joke, Reymundo paints his father as a kind of example of the American Dream, a man who worked far

more than most in order to give them the opportunities of “living in a white neighborhood.” The joke further demonstrates the way in which a group of people who typically come to America as poor immigrants cannot afford to be lazy—it is a contradiction in stereotypes. By implicating himself as unwittingly perpetuating the stereotype, Reymundo subtly checks the audience, saying that they too have a responsibility to make sure they are not perpetuating stereotypes about their own culture. In presenting this story, Reymundo is encouraging the audience to work towards changing the characterization of the community outside of the liminal space they are in.

George Lopez also plays on stereotypes of poverty as he jokes about the ways in which white people and Chicano people react to finding a line of people. First he imitates the white person, who is put out that there’s a line for whatever they want and decides to leave. In comparison to this, Lopez then acts out the scenario of Chicano people finding a line and frantically rushing to get in it, even if they don’t know what it’s for. He physically emphasizes the point by imploring his imaginary Chicano friend to “Get in line! Get in line!” bulging his eyes and looking comedically urgent. He further jokes that Chicanos will then let everyone they know cut in line with them. The humor of the joke stems from the implication that Chicanos do not receive any “handouts” in society, and therefore must be on the lookout for whatever they can get—if there is a line, they will probably want or need whatever is at the end of it, and weren’t going to be told about it in the first place. The secondary throw-away line about Chicanos letting all of their friends in is testament to the type of climate created in a community where people who are struggling work together to beat a system or overcome a problem.

Lopez takes a second shot at a similar cultural dynamic in a following joke in which he claims that Chicanos are never happy for each other. “We never congratulate each other,” he says, “We need our own line of Mexican greeting cards, because the ones at the Hallmark store

are too happy—we don't understand that." In this joke, he again addresses a dynamic which results from the general poverty of Chicano communities, but which stands in opposition to the previous joke—the fact that people can be resentful of each other's success. This theme permeates the rest of Lopez's routine and emerges again in another joke in which he laments that, upon hearing good news, a Chicano's first response is always negative. He goes on to act out a man finding out his friend got a job at a hospital, who then immediately calls the hospital to tell them his friend smokes marijuana. The joke gets a big laugh in part because of Lopez's physical comedy, however the idea behind it is somewhat sobering. The inversion of these problems into something humorous is possible because it is being done through the liminal space of comedy. As Reymundo challenges the audience to watch that they don't perpetuate stereotypes, Lopez chastises them for letting the injustice of their community's poverty continue as they sabotage each other in petty ways.

If Lopez were to convey the same sentiments without humor, in a non-liminal space, the response from the audience would be quite different: perhaps resentment towards Lopez for being critical (especially considering his own wealth), or an urge to disagree with him about the way poverty affects the Chicano community, or even agreement with him but little else in terms of reaction because people are desensitized to hearing about the problems they are already aware of. But instead, Lopez takes advantage of the space he is performing in: a space separate from mainstream culture, where he is free to make critiques he otherwise might not voice, in order to improve the situation he and the audience are temporarily separated from. By using stand-up comedy, he is able to get people to listen to him: members of the Chicano community are being made aware of destructive things they do in the community, while non-members—through the *communitas* they have been included in—are more likely to act as allies to the Chicano

community in the future, because they glimpsed the problems Lopez talks about from the perspective of a Chicano.

## LIMITATIONS OF STAND-UP

*Socially Progressive Comedy Is a Goal, Not a Given*

In their essay, “When the Truth Hurts, Tell a Joke: Why America Needs Its Comedians,” Roger Cohen and Ryan Richards analyze the importance of the stand-up comedian in American culture.<sup>70</sup> The two argue that jokes and routines which deal with taboo social issues like racism, cancer or pedophilia are socially progressive because they create ways to talk about things which, while present and important in society, are often left unspoken. They argue that stand-up comedy reflects the society it mocks, and thus serves as a useful tool for social change<sup>71</sup>. For example, humor that “draws criticism for being offensive and for perpetuating negative stereotypes” is, in actuality, progressive, because it pushes the boundaries of what is socially acceptable. Much of the essay focuses on racial stand-up comedy and the way in which racial minorities can use such comedy as a tool to take on stereotypes of their culture. By personally engaging with the racial stereotypes forced upon them, Cohen and Richards argue that minority stand-up comics add depth to the simplistic stereotype a white audience might have of a race or ethnicity. The article argues that minority comedians connect with their white audience by making them laugh, and in doing this, make stereotypes about their own culture or race more difficult to perpetuate.

Much of what Cohen and Richards say is true; it is important to talk about race and racism in American society because the topic has become taboo, despite the fact that racism is still present in society on institutional and personal levels. The myth of the Civil Rights movement of the 1960’s “ending” racism is dangerous and has made it nearly impossible to have any sort of dialogue in the United States on the topic of race. People who talk about race in the

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<sup>70</sup> Roger A. Cohen and Ryan A. Richards, “When the Truth Hurts, Tell a Joke: Why America Needs Its Comedians” *Humanity in Action*, 2006, March 2 2008 <[www.humanityinaction.org/docs/Richards\\_\\_Cohen.doc](http://www.humanityinaction.org/docs/Richards__Cohen.doc)>.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

mainstream media may be labeled overly liberal or “politically correct” if they are trying to draw attention to racism, or may be accused of being a racist if they mention race in a way that is unexpected or uncomfortable to people.

It is also true that stand-up comedy is a useful tool for having that conversation on race. Laughter can be extremely truthful and disarming; people will laugh at something in a joke that told in all seriousness they might completely ignore. Additionally, by nature comedy is observational, and as a result can be one of the most progressive means for identifying an often ignored reality. Satire has long been a way for people to voice discontent in climates where it is normally not allowed. In the same way that medieval court jesters were able to criticize their king because of the freedom they were granted in the name of entertainment, modern stand-up comics are sanctioned to push social boundaries and say the things that make people uncomfortable because the audience takes pleasure in it.

However, the essay takes a wrong turn when it suggests that all comedy that is perceived to be offensive or that is accused of perpetuating negative stereotypes is, in actuality, progressive; this argument is misguided and potentially dangerous. Towards this point, the authors reference a popular and controversial Chris Rock routine from his 1996 HBO Special *Bring The Pain* in which he says the following:

There's some shit going on with black people right now. There's like a civil war going on with black people. And there's two sides. There's black people, and there's niggers. Every time black people want to have a good time, ignorant-ass niggers fuck it up.... I love black people, but I hate niggers...I am tired of niggers. You can't have shit when you're around niggers—niggers who live next door to you will break in your house and steal your shit!...A nigger will brag about some

shit a normal man just does. A nigger will say some shit like 'I take care of my kids.' You supposed to you dumb motherfucker! What kind of ignorant shit is that?!"<sup>72</sup>

Rock later addressed the joke in an interview with *60 Minutes*, defending it by saying it expressed a lot of popular feeling at the time. However, in the same interview, he shares that he has never told the joke again, because “some people that were racist thought they had license to say ‘nigger.’ So, I’m done with that routine.”<sup>73</sup> Cohen and Richard’s essay, to be fair, does responsibly relay the fact that the routine is hotly debated, and does disclose that the world’s largest white-supremacist website, Stormfront.com, references the routine to support their views. However, they cling too desperately to their assertion that *all* taboo comedy is *always* socially progressive, as evidenced when they reason “At least these white supremacists are starting to appreciate the multi-dimensionality of a stereotyped group and experience the cognitive dissonance of quoting and appreciating the opinion of a black comedian.” This statement is a contradiction in terms and almost reads as a satire of liberal thought in itself.

And satire itself is the issue at hand in this instance. For when a social satire is misinterpreted by an audience, it is taken as truth instead of as an imitation of something which the satirist wishes to attack. In racial stand-up comedy, this misinterpretation is a dangerous failure, because it not only reinforces old stereotypes—it can actually strengthen them. If a minority comedian is perceived to be supporting their own cultural stereotype, those with existing prejudices will view the routine as validation and authentication of their own prejudiced beliefs.

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<sup>72</sup> *Chris Rock: Bring The Pain*, dir. Keith Truesdell, perf. Chris Rock, DVD, Dreamworks, 2002.

<sup>73</sup> Ed Bradley, “Rock: Bring On Oscar ‘Safety Net’” *60 Minutes*, 17 Feb. 2005, 4 Feb. 2008  
<<http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2005/02/17/60minutes/main674768.shtml>>.

One way comedians avoid having their satire misunderstood in this way by balancing it with jokes and monologues which clearly display their true opinions. Chris Rock does, in fact, do this in the majority of his comedy. Another way to prevent a misunderstanding of satire is to perform for audiences composed wholly of the group being satirized—although in cases of racial comedy, any satire performed in this way can only serve as in-group entertainment that everyone present can relate to, instead of as an attempt to challenge the assumptions or state of society-at-large. Whether to create social change or to make more money, comedians looking to reach a larger audience need to make their routine appeal to as many people as possible. For this reason, many comedians whose routine focuses heavily on a minority group will work to incorporate universal themes into their act, like family or relationships, so that they will have a broader appeal and attract more people. However, with the evolution of the internet in the use of media and communication, it is by no means guaranteed that someone viewing a segment of a comedic performance will see the entire thing. The ability to take a performance like Rock's, so heavily grounded in the context of his own routine, out of that context greatly increases the possibility of alternative interpretations of that satire, including some which are severely misguided.

It is a weakness of Cohen and Richard's work to invalidate the idea that stand-up comedy, in some instances, can have the effect of being socially conservative or even socially regressive. In their essay, it is implied that every unexpected observation or insight imparted in a joke is indisputably progressive simply on the grounds that it challenges people's assumptions. However, humor's format of challenging assumptions can just as easily be used to make people laugh at things which are assumed, not out of an understanding civil rights and equality, but out of a history of prejudice. Thus, when someone with a history of prejudice watches Chris Rock perform this satire, they are not having their assumptions of a racial stereotype broken down,

instead they perceive it as a black man complaining about the inadequacies of black people. They might still laugh, but the assumption being challenged is the idea that black people believe they are deserving of equality and equal treatment. For example, a clip of this routine is posted on the internet website Youtube.com, on which users can post comments relating to the video they watch. One user named mosis2 posted the following underneath Rock's routine:

'I take care of my kids' ... how very true... Niggers DON'T take care of their children, and DO end up in jail. And THAT is why whites don't want you anywhere near us. Do you blame us?<sup>74</sup>

The sentiment of this post is that of a white person taking Rock's satire too broadly and applying the term "nigger" to all black people, as shown when they contrast it with "whites," who the poster refers to "us." The final result of the joke for this person is not to break the barriers of racial stereotypes, but instead further his or her perceived gap between whites and blacks.

Rock privileges his audience by assuming that everyone who listens to his satire is enlightened enough, smart enough, to understand it as satire. Just as the *Latino Kings of Comedy* privilege their audience by allowing them access to the viewpoint of a poor Chicano, Rock allows the audience access the viewpoint of a slightly snobby, middle-class black person. As noted earlier in this paper's discussion of Goldman, Rock's power over the audience comes from his confrontation of the frightening—in this case, it is both the use of the word "nigger" and the vulnerability of being black and yet openly acknowledging the stereotypical problems of the black community and displaying contempt for those he blames for causing these problems in language that so closely resembles that of racist white people. Rock is essentially taking on the

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<sup>74</sup> Youtube.com, User: mosis2 "Chris Rock Niggas vs Black People Part One," June 2007, 12 March 2008, <[http://www.youtube.com/comment\\_servlet?all\\_comments&v=peoffYMIqXg&fromurl=/watch%3Fv%3DpeoffYMIqXg%26feature%3Drelated](http://www.youtube.com/comment_servlet?all_comments&v=peoffYMIqXg&fromurl=/watch%3Fv%3DpeoffYMIqXg%26feature%3Drelated)>.

argument of the white racist, and delivering it as a black man, which makes both black and white people uncomfortable.

It is essential that the nuances of such risqué performances be understood because, contrary to what Cohen and Richards suggest, not every stand-up routine indisputably inspires social change. Stand-up has the capabilities of achieving the goal of social change—which is not the same as to say that stand-up in itself achieves this goal. This paper devotes such close study to the performance of stand-up comedy precisely *because* it does not always work towards creating social change; in isolating and understanding the conditions in which social change most likely, it is my hope that more performances will be able to achieve the difficult task of creating a dialectic space in which racism along with other types of social oppression can be effectively challenged.

## CONCLUSION

Much of what is at stake in this analysis of stand-up comedy lies in understanding the value of in-between spaces. The elements of stand-up comedy which have been the focus of study here all share in common the fact that they are based on the tension of a meeting between two different things. In a study of the setting of stand-up comedy, the challenge is first to create a space which is liminal or littoral in nature, meaning it exists as a respite from everyday society. There is a tension between the rules and norms of the constructed space of stand-up comedy and the rules and norms of the outside world. Stand-up comedy is made unique by the fact that it encourages such a space, in which people can think critically about the outside space from within the safety of the liminal or littoral space.

Secondly, the way in which the audience and the comedian interact is a meeting of many different tensions. There is the element of conversation in a performance, in which the comedian delivers her material and the audience reacts, each adjusting and responding to the other accordingly. Then there is the balance of the aggression and awe which the audience feels towards the comedian, who confronts fearful things onstage, but in the process of doing so breaks social norms. This can be characterized as a meeting of the sacred and the blasphemous: the audience condones the stand-up stage as a sacred space, thus allowing the comic to behave blasphemously there. The audience members feel, to varying degrees, a combination of awe at watching the comedian take on frightening taboos, but also feel aggression as a result of the fact that it offends their social sensibilities.

Finally, there is a pedagogy which takes place in stand-up comedy. The act of experiencing a well-crafted joke couples entertainment with instruction in a unique way. Because it is not classified as educational or instructional, stand-up comedy has the potential to convey

messages that often cannot be voiced in other ways. And in being genuinely entertaining, it has the ability to reach those who are often not reached by other forms of instruction. The dialectical nature of stand-up comedy ensures that the best performances are those in which the humor is based in truth, making it an ideal tool for effectively critiquing unjust or oppressive situations.

In studying stand-up comedy specifically in regards to the situation of race and racism in America, the concept of analyzing in-between spaces is especially appropriate, for one of the most unique things stand-up comedy is able to do to create social change is to provide audience members with the unique experience of seeing things through a genuinely different perspective. By engaging in the Brecht-like dialectic stand-up comedy fosters, white audience members are afforded the opportunity to take on a new perspective. W.E.B. Du Bois spoke to this phenomenon in 1903, remarking at the “peculiar sensation [of] double consciousness.”<sup>75</sup> While Du Bois was speaking toward the difficulty of asserting the African American identity in a post-slavery and pre-Civil Rights United States, his observations on racial identity and oppression are extremely appropriate for exploring the positive effects of racial stand-up comedy.

Du Bois voices his frustration with a question that is always in the air white people and himself as a representative of black people: “How does it feel to be a problem?”<sup>76</sup> In the context of modern stand-up comedy, this question could be addressed by a comedian, critiquing oppressive forces in society, or by white members in the audience who might, through a joke about white people, begin to feel their role as part of the “problem” of racism. Du Bois also talks about the role of the black American, “born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world.”<sup>77</sup> This statement carries with it the assertion that white people, then, can only have one sight of the world, because the second sight is brought about through the experience

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<sup>75</sup> William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg, 1903).

<sup>76</sup> Du Bois 2.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

living as someone of a “minority” or “othered” race. Mainstream racial comedy directly addresses this by offering white people an opportunity, however brief, to take part in that second-sight. Through hearing jokes which are based on the observations of racism in society, and in laughing at those observations one knows to be truthful, white people can experience the “double consciousness...[of] looking at one’s self [or one’s culture] through the eyes of others.”<sup>78</sup> In this way then, stand-up comedy does have the power to do unique things, to create social change through giving people the opportunity to see the world through new perspectives.

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<sup>78</sup> Du Bois 3.

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