BLACK AND ASIAN AMERICAN STAND-UP COMEDY AS A REFLECTION AND CRITIQUE OF STRUCTURAL OPPRESSION IN OUR MEDIATED WORLD

by

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"Last but not least: I wanna thank me. I wanna thank me for believing in me, I wanna thank me for doing all this hard work. I wanna thank me for having no days off. I wanna thank me for never quitting. I wanna thank me for always being a giver, and trying to give more than I receive. I wanna thank me for trying to do more right than wrong. I wanna thank me for just being me at all times. Snoop Dogg: Mariann, you a bad motherfucka."

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ii

INTRODUCTION 1

Chapter

1. AFRICAN AND ASIAN AMERICAN STAND-UP COMEDY – A BRIEF HISTORY 15

African American Stand-up Comedy 18
African American Comedic Trailblazers 30
Asian American Stand-up Comedy 36
Asian and Asian American Comedic Trailblazers 44
Conclusion: An Interrelated Fate 54

2. "PERFORMING DOUBLE CONSCIOUSNESS IN STAND-UP COMEDY: A PRACTICE OF ARROGANT AND UNASHAMED PERSONAE IN THE WORK OF DAVE CHAPPELLE AND GINA YASHERE 55

The Gift of Second Sight 58
Dave Chappelle's Shift in Persona from "Naïve" Racial Explorer to Arrogant Embodiment of the American Dream 64
Gina Yashere's Unashamed Persona as Justification for Her Pursuit of the American Dream 72
Conclusion: Closing Curtain 78

3. CONJURING COMMUNITAS ON STAGE AND WITH SCREENS 81

Unpacking Victor Turner's Communitas 84
Minhaj's Stereotypical Conjuring and Persona 92
Nancherla's Textured Persona as a Critique of the "Ideal" Woman 106
Nancherla and Minhaj's Conjuring Through Screens 114

CONCLUSION 130

REFERENCES 137

INTRODUCTION

> Thank God Paul Revere was white cus we wouldn't be sitting here now. Cus if he'd been black somebody woulda shot that nigga. [imitating white voice] Oh that nigger stole that horse… Who is the white woman whose supposed to have sewn the flag? [audience] 'Betsy Ross.'… Ain't that a bitch? Now come on, they had slaves…You know some big, fat, black Aunt Jemima was up all night sewing that flag. 'Oh chile, Lawd had mercy. I jus sewin this flag. I'm jus up so late, honey, I see stars.' [imitating Betsy Ross] 'Well bitch, put em in the flag and fry me some chicken.' And soon as the white men there the white lady jumped up, 'See what I did!' [1]

> White folks made up the word nigger and don't want me to say it. Ain't that a bitch? You made it up…You fucked up. You shouldn't've made up the word nigger. And you made up a song to go with it… Any meeny miney – you know the goddamn song I'm talking about! And you change the words when you see black folks. [imitating a white voice] 'Catch a tiger – have they gone?' Hey, so you fucked up. I say nigger all the time. I say nigger 100 times every morning; it makes my teeth white. Nigger, nigger, nigger, nigger, nigger, nigger, nigger, nigger, nigger, nigger, nigger, nigger, nigger, nigger, nigger, nigger, nigger, nigger. I say it. You think it. What a small white world.[2]

The narrative of American independence often erases black actors. By asserting the real creator of the flag as a black woman, legendary African American comedian Paul Mooney reminds us not only of the presence of enslaved black people during a pivotal moment in American history, but the sheer irony of the American Revolution and its founding document, the Declaration of Independence. That document declared freedom from British rule and marked all men created equal even as the author himself, as well as many of his peers, relied on the

[1] Paul Mooney, *Race*. YouTube. StepSun Music/Tommy Boy, 1993
[2] Mooney, *Race*.

enslavement of black persons, the colonization of indigenous persons, and the overall dehumanization of persons of color.

Mooney's joke is an example of Salamisha Tillet's critical patriotism, which she succinctly denotes as "dissidence and dissent."[3] Mooney mobilizes critical patriotism to assert social citizenship, what Tillet defines as "insertion into national narratives" that ultimately affirm a national belonging. Mooney asserts this national belonging for African Americans through restorative history as he retells one of the most important narratives in our country's anthology of origin stories. In Mooney's display of critical patriotism, we see the same black mammy of the white imagination not cooking, or swinging her hips as she hums and cleans, but with her hand in the creation of one of the greatest symbols of this nation. Like the writers, visual artists, and creators Tillet examines, Mooney's joke "instead of representing slavery as the foil to American democracy…foreground[s] slavery as the mnemonic property of the entire nation, and not…the exclusive intellectual property of blacks."[4] Mooney articulates this joint ownership with his opening declaration, highlighting that both the fate of black and white persons in America would have been drastically altered had Paul Revere been a brotha.

In other words, Mooney's bit serves to redefine national belonging by forcing audiences to contend with the history of slavery as a shared one. White audience members are called to grasp that not only do black persons belong, but they helped build the symbols and (infra)structures that the nation depends upon. Mooney is able to create a space that validates his emotional response to the denial of social citizenship communicated through laughter, shouts, and gasps. For black audience members, he potentially offers affirmation of their belonging and

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[3] Salamishah Tillet, *Sites of Slavery: Citizenship and Racial Democracy in the Post-Civil Rights Imagination*. (Durham: Duke U P, 2012), 11.
[4] Tillet, *Sites of Slavery*, 11.

their right to take up figurative and literal space as the nation and its mythology were built on the backs of their ancestors. Through his performance, the comedian has fostered community, a space where he belongs, where he can collectively reckon with the paradoxes of white supremacy.

Tillet's notion of social citizenship allows for an understanding of how a sense of national belonging and/or inclusion is partially dependent upon intentional insertion in national narratives, often asserted through the technique of critical patriotism. However, for this project, situating a sense of belonging within such a politically charged term as citizenship or nation, in some ways, posits legality as a sort of validation of who gets to stake geographic and social space in the American reality and imagination. In the process, it does not make visible the various immigrant communities who have greatly contributed to the construction of American infrastructure (i.e. Chinese immigrants building the railroad and Indian immigrants providing hospitality through motel ownership) and the legal and social actions taken to deny them citizenship and render them and their American-born children perpetually foreign. This project centers on belonging, as opposed to social citizenship, allowing space for us to consider the human as human and not only as citizen. While it is vital to include persons of color in narratives, this project seeks to stress the importance not only of people of color as protagonists but creators of their own stories. This project focuses on who gets to tell narratives, and who is privileged to be entertained by them. Understanding traditional national stories of belonging, initiated by history and taken up in theatre and film, as created to promote ideologies of white supremacy and center the joy of those privileged by it, is essential.

In the second selected bit from the same album, Mooney, through his commentary on the creation and usage of the incendiary word "nigger", reveals that ownership of the stories and a

certain level of access to the platforms used to tell them is directly correlated with marginalized persons' abilities to assert and subsequently experience a sense of belonging within the geographic and social concept of the United States. In the context of the joke, white persons created and own "nigger", a word that when whispered, yelled, or monotonically spoken reminds black persons of their otherness, their exclusion, and their non-belonging. However, as humorously argued by Mooney, when used by the person it was intended to harm, it permits previously unprecedented access as his teeth are now the color that warrants belonging. In fact, his pithy last line, "I say it. You think it. What a small white world," can be interpreted as a translation of Saidiya Hartman's "economy of enjoyment."[5]

In *Scenes of Subjection*, Saidiya Hartman links entertainment to chattel slavery, citing the "economy of enjoyment" as the foundation of the socially and legally prescribed dynamic between black and white persons in America from the plantation to the present. Ultimately, white persons, regardless of class, were gifted upon birth, due to their white skin, with the right to "force jollity."[6] They could demand that black persons suppress their own subjectivity, their own emotions and perform on command. At first, this seems to mirror Mooney's usage of the word "nigger". White people made up this word, which serves as a marker of white supremacy as it affirms their superiority. Thus, Mooney's use of the term should fall under the economy of enjoyment; his voice is being used to promulgate a white created and weaponized word that promotes white supremacy. However, despite having all the pieces – rhetoric from the white psyche and a black person functioning as a sort of medium – Mooney's yielding of the racial slur

[5] Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in the Nineteenth Century.* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015), 34.
[6] Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 23.

does not result in a satisfying extension of whiteness; instead it is a *small* white world. This is the power of stand-up comedy.

In its early days, the entertainment industry served primarily as an extension of white supremacy, reifying longstanding stereotypes and popularizing new ones. Minstrelsy was founded on blackface, yellowface, and brownface as white actors painted themselves all the colors they lacked to act out the inferiority of others to ease their own insecurities and feed their own fetishes. From the plantation to the Hollywood boardrooms there remains a desire for ethnic faces but not voices. Because of the overarching preoccupation with perceived Otherness, stand-up comedy that addresses the intersectional identities of the Other is radical in itself. As Dick Gregory stated regarding the significance of his integrating the Playboy club: "Heffner, when I first met you, you had the courage. When no one was bringing in blacks and minorities [to let us] stand flat footed in America and just talk, he brought me in."[7] The mere fact that a person of color can exist on a stage without singing, dancing, or doing cartwheels is in itself a significant act. It is an inversion of the power dynamics.

Initially the power of the microphone on the stand-up stage was only held by a few persons of color as Hollywood has always served as microcosm of the white supremacy that plagues us. Despite limited access, prominent African and Asian American comedians laid the foundation for large influxes of comedians of color. This unprecedented access afforded to comedians of color is one of the definitive markers of The Second Comedy Boom[8], which began circa 2009. Since there is no singular event, no specific performance that can be cited as the igniting moment, this project encompasses 2000 to the present in an effort to trace the long fuse

[7] Ryan Parker, "Hugh Heffner Gave Dick Gregory His Big Break," *The Hollywood Reporter,* Sep 27 2017, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/hugh-hefner-gave-dick-gregory-his-big-break-1043953.
[8] Jesse David Fox, "How the Internet and a New Generation of Superfans Helped Create the Second Comedy Boom," *Vulture*, Mar 30, 2015, https://www.vulture.com/2015/03/welcome-to-the-second-comedy-boom.html.

and the boom. The success of this current explosion is indebted to that of the First Comedy Boom which began roughly in 1979 and ended in 1995. During that period, the accessibility of comedic content on television contributed to a serious decline in comedy club attendance and subsequently the permanent closing of many stand-up clubs across the nation. The massive success of contemporary stand-up can be attributed to three main factors: (1) the priming from the first comedy boom resulted in a knowledgeable fan base, more open to niche and experimental material; (2) streaming and social media has created a multitude of in-roads to Hollywood; and (3) the current cultural landscape provides much fodder for exploration and critique.[9]

"Black and Asian American Stand-up Comedy as a Reflection and Critique of Structural Oppression in Our Mediated World," examines how African American and Asian American performers of The Second Comedy Boom navigate a stage initially founded on their own dehumanization and preserve the audience-performer dynamic throughout the processes of mediation. African and Asian Americans have similar yet nuanced relationships to the stage as they are combating different yet equally inferiorizing narratives about black and Asian persons. African Americans paved the way for Asian American comedians who are only just now gaining increased access to the stage because of federal restrictions on immigration. Our struggles are intricately connected and our stories reflect the same desire - to be heard and to be seen as human - to belong. The stage is a complicated space. Because of media technology and the proven profitability of joke tellers of color there is more access and more opportunity for people of color to make a living performing their talent. Yet, because they are minorities in a white supremacist

[9] Fox, "Second Comedy Boom."

world, they are all tricksters although their tricks are different; they are based on the sociopolitical contexts of their time, their physical embodiment, and their access to capital.

By charting the long fuse (1996 – 2009) and the boom (2009 – present), I explore the relationship between industry, technology, and the art form of stand-up. The serious business of comedy is reflected in the amount of money being invested in comedians and comedic content. Streaming giant Netflix's dominance in the stand-up arena can be illustrated by the fact that they alone average a special every week, pulling in newcomers and giants.[10] Jerry Seinfeld was paid a reported $100 million for one special, Dave Chappelle, $60 million for four, and Chris Rock an alleged $40 million for a single performance. By selecting who they want to appear on their platform, distributors like Netflix have an unprecedented influence on what voices are heard across the country and have the power to foreground specific styles and worldviews.

Simultaneously, with the increased accessibility of technology, up-and-coming comedians are using platforms like Instagram and Facebook to make a name for themselves. In the process, they are creating new entryways into the spotlight. Unlike the comedians who used the comedy club stage in hopes of securing the eponymous sitcom, that is not necessarily the goal of the new generation of performers. While their social media following can land them spots on television shows and perhaps one day garner them the now coveted Netflix special, it is not necessarily the end goal. "Adam Sachs, the CEO of Midroll — the company sells ads for popular podcasts such as *WTF With Marc Maron - [states]* 'many comedians could survive today with the revenue from their podcasts alone.'… a podcast with 40,000 downloads per episode can gross well over $75,000 a year, and shows in the 100,000-download range can gross

[10] Jesse David Fox, "Is Netflix Helping or Hurting Stand-up?" *Vulture*, Sep 18, 2017, http://www.vulture.com/2017/09/netflix-comedy-special-domination.html

somewhere between $250,000 and $400,000."[11] This potential to secure a lucrative career outside of the traditional stand-up venues, has also changed the way comedians develop and distribute their content. By analyzing stand-up performances from 1996 to the present we can chart how comedians have been affected by, and discuss the current evolution of, comedy. Furthermore, with the increased methods of garnering success as a content producer, historically marginalized persons – e.g. women, members of the LGBTQIA community, persons of color, Muslim comedians, etc. – are able to secure significant social and capital gain. With the increased presence of marginalized folks in the comedy scene, there are more performances devoted to exploring intersectionalities that explicitly touch on my areas of interest – race, class, gender, and sexuality.

With the influx of access and opportunities within the Second Comedy Boom, comedians of color are gaining a louder microphone and larger stage by which they can continue to assert their belonging in a culture and country still plagued with manifestations of white supremacy. While the democratizing power of social media has opened new inroads and prompted increased success for women and persons of color, it has also complicated existing challenges and posed new ones. Comedians of color are still contending with ways to craft their performances in order to maintain their own sense of dignity for audiences potentially unfamiliar with the cultural practices embedded and performed within their routines. Another potential challenge is ensuring the continued foregrounding of the indispensable audience-performer relationship essential to the transformative power of stand-up comedy over emerging media platforms.

The fact that stand-up comedy includes both the voices of marginalized persons who use the stage to speak back to the powers that be, and white comedians who either act as allies or

[11] Fox, "Second Comedy Boom."

opponents (or somewhere in-between) speaks to the capaciousness and the power of the art form of stand-up. However, to develop/produce a comprehensive exploration of the shifts within the art form, one must actively/intentionally engage with stand-up as a tripartite intersection with the entertainment industry and technology. By focusing on this specific intersection, several questions emerged that ultimately served as points of engagement for this project: *Why is stand-up comedy one of the most effective methods for asserting humanity and belonging? How do and how can comedians maximize on the newfound opportunities brought on by advancements in technology? How is the genre currently impacted by new business practices and decisions?*

Current scholarship on stand-up comedy tends to fall into three categories: (1) a hyper focused study that theorizes from a few select comedians' performances often analyzed alongside novelists or text-based works, (2) a wide scope that anthologizes humor, or (3) a historical account of the evolution of comedic traditions of a specific culture. While much of this scholarship is interdisciplinary and serves as crucial foundations for the study of stand-up, it often decenters the critical intersection of the entertainment industry, media technology, and stand-up comedy. Examining that intersection reveals the importance of how the culture in studio boardrooms and on production sets greatly impacts the art form. Not attending to the aforementioned intersection leaves the powerful mode of critique at risk of losing its effectiveness. It is essential to think strategically about how media is discussed and used in both actual performances and stand-up scholarship.

In my dissertation, "Black and Asian American Stand-up Comedy as a Reflection and Critique of Structural Oppression in Our Mediated World," I examine how African American and Asian American performers navigate a stage initially founded on their own dehumanization and preserve the audience-performer dynamic throughout the processes of mediation. I argue that

these comedians of color must embody a persona situated in what I define as the "sweet spot" along the jester – trickster continuum. Essentially the sweet spot is the necessary balancing of sometimes conflicting desires – to assert a denied humanity and to make white people laugh.

There are two major factors that went into the selection of my archive. Firstly, I was interested in examining the art form of stand-up and its interdependent relationship to both media technology and entertainment industry. The huge leaps in media technology, the major shifts in the production and distribution of content, and the increased number of comedians with access to stages made in the last few years alone, I decided to focus on contemporary performances, (2000 – present). Because of my interest in exploring stand-up comedy as a transformative art form that can function, for the comedian, as a restorative agency, I close read the works of comedians of color. This project originally focused on African American comedians. However, during my research as I began to notice the rise in presence and popularity of Asian American comedians, I realized that addressing the diversity of voices that marks the Second Comedy Boom required a more culturally expansive approach.

Secondly, the pervasiveness and popularity and of stand-up comedy performances by persons of color is directly connected to the its accessibility. Thus, Netflix specials of mainstream comedians, those who were identifiable, was an important factor for inclusion. In my research, I noticed a lot of scholarship was a hindsight look at important figures and moments in the history of African and Asian American stand-up. I wanted to examine comedic content that was being widely consumed as a way of archiving the present. Focused examination and analysis of stand up as it is birthed allows for us to speak directly to the sociopolitical history surrounding and feeding the performances close to real time Although the majority of the comedians I examine are wildly popular and highly successful, to date (with the exception of

Chappelle) because of the slow yet intense nature of academic inquiry, there is not a lot of scholarship on Gina Yashere, Hasan Minhaj, or Aparna Nancherla. By focusing on their contemporary performances not only am I generating "real time" scholarship, but I am gathering and collecting articles from journalists and critics who are trained and have unprecedented access to the creators. Thus, my analysis, which is heavily supported by their articles, interviews, commentary, etc. will help to provide a rich foundation for future stand-up scholarship.

In my first chapter, I include an abbreviated history of the genre and its African and Asian American practitioners. In the first section I use the theoretical works of black women scholars – including Saidiya Hartman, Salamisha Tillet, Glenda Carpio, and Claudia Rankine -- to provide a socio-historical context that informs our understanding of the cultural landscapes for African American performers as well as the ideologies, practices, and specific manifestations of white supremacy that they address in their performances. I then focus on African American comedic icons Moms Mabley, Red Foxx, Dick Gregory, Bill Cosby, and Richard Pryor, highlighting how their work impacted and forever altered the art form of stand-up. In the second half of the chapter, I apply Edward Saiid's germinal work, *Orientalism,* to deconstruct the nuances of Asian American experiences and the material produced and performed by Asian Americans. By identifying the unique struggles faced by Asians in America and Asian Americans, I highlight their nuanced struggles and several ways in which they are interrelated with, yet also deviate from, the plights of African Americans. The difficulty in locating Asian American comedic trailblazers illustrates that their impact on stand-up comedy follows a similar but not paralleled trajectory as African Americans. The 1965 Immigration act which opened the long-shut doors of America to the East privileged the professional class. This group of immigrants included a large number of doctors, engineer and scientists, many of whom

expect(ed)their American children to pursue social and financial security in their new environment by pursuing stable careers, not the profession of a comedian. Ultimately, I detail how for Asian and African American comedians, success on the stand-up stage is a balancing act between asserting their belonging and/or maintaining their dignity and making enough white people laugh so they can get paid. However, this sweet spot along the jester-trickster continuum shifts across time thanks to the contributions of earlier comedians of color.

Chapter two focuses on the performances of African American comedian Dave Chappelle and Afro-British comedian Gina Yashere who lives and works primarily in the United States. Building on the work of Bambi Haggins and applying DuBoisian double consciousness, I assert that the arrogant and unashamed personas of Chappelle and Yashere, respectively, are a performance of grappling with double consciousness. By comparing Chapelle's older stand-up specials with some of his latest Netflix specials, I close read selected performances to highlight the influence of social and monetary capital on his persona and subsequently the content of his jokes and his delivery. Chappelle is forced to reconcile his twoness; however, that twoness is not simply the racial and national identities of being African and American. Rather it is often that of blackness and richness as the latter complicates the former because poverty has been a systematic condition forced upon us since slavery. The second half of the chapter examines the simultaneous positionality of Yashere as she functions as an insider and outsider. She is a black woman who does not come from a history of enslavement but one of colonization. However, as a black woman in the American entertainment industry (which is also infested with historical and contemporary white supremacist manifestations), she is forced to contend with a history that is not necessarily hers, but is the shared one of the people of the Diaspora. Thus, her twoness is also a complication she explores on stage; her ability to do so and make the majority white

audience laugh at the same time is a mastery of second sight and a constant battle for comedians of color.

In my third chapter, I close read the performances of Indian American comedians Hasan Minhaj and Aparna Nancherla. I trace how, in conjunction with their personae, they use media – images, video, text, etc. – to conjure communitas. Borrowing from anthropologist Victor Turner I use his work to define communitas within the context of stand-up comedy as two-pronged. On the superficial level communitas is the presence of interconnectivity made possible, in part, by the comedians' rhetorical strategies that suspend structural hierarchies that may impede this goal. Secondly, on a deeper level within the space of the comedy venue, communitas ignites the imaginations of the audience members and inspires them to reconsider the world and their places within it. Through comparing and contrasting Minhaj's and Nancherla's performances, I assert firstly that conjuring through persona is more effective than that of stereotype. Secondly, the usage of media onstage by the comedians can be a technique for conjuring only if the media presented is offered as an object/site for collective exploration and not a replacement for comedians' rhetorical analogies or gesticulation of their bodies. I argue that when paired with a tightly developed persona, using media onstage as a site for collective exploration (and not just a visualized punch line) can successfully enhance the audience-performer relationship.

"Black and Asian American Stand-up Comedy as a Reflection and Critique of Structural Oppression in Our Mediated World" exemplifies the possibilities of the interdisciplinary study of stand-up comedy. This project helps further enrich the existing methodologies from numerous fields (including performance, media, and ethnic studies) and bridges the gap often found between academic inquiry and real-world application. My dissertation uses the history of the

genre to inform the present and future of stand-up comedy, and increases the appreciation for the ways in which comedians of color have navigated their successes.

Stand-up comedy is a unique genre as it has always served as an art form for comedians of color to be the fullest possible versions of themselves. Comedians of color use humor to facilitate difficult conversations, oftentimes offering their performances as sacrifice, presenting opportunities for their arguments to be dissected and debated amongst persons with (dis)similar worldviews. The nature of the comedian is to be purposefully incendiary for s/he functions as a voiced representation of our fears, anxieties, imperfections, limitations, values, etc. While some entertainment can divert our attention away from the societal ills that plague us, stand-up does the opposite. Instead of distracting us from the world outside the comedy club or off the screen, stand-up comedians provide a unique, hyper-focused perspective on contemporary issues, often giving insight through their creative use of metaphor, absurdity, false equivalences, embodiment, etc. By tracing and tracking the history of stand-up comedy in relation to its practitioners of color, alongside their mobilization of changes in media technology and the entertainment industry, we can create tangible methods for ensuring its continued success. By securing sustainable equity and access for comedians of color, we not only underline the importance of black, Asian, immigrant, first-generation, and Diasporic voices and stories, but we ensure the possibility for us to reimagine and thus recreate a society more committed to fostering a sense of belonging for all

CHAPTER 1

AFRICAN AND ASIAN AMERICAN STAND-UP COMEDY – A BRIEF HISTORY

> "The black community has been subjected to a kind of internal Orientalism. Its members too have been defined as 'The Other,' to be feared and controlled; the dark, exotic native son viewed as the near mirror image of civilized and respectable white people." [12]

> "A consequence of Dr. Said's tight focus on the oppressor rather than on the oppressed is that by the end of the book, the possibilities for change seem remote indeed."[13]

The American entertainment industry is founded on blackface minstrelsy, a tradition birthed from chattel slavery and best known for its use of humor to create and propagate demeaning portrayals of blackness. Thus, Hollywood is an institution with white supremacist roots evidenced even in its contemporary fruit. With this knowledge, how does a black comedian reconcile himself to the very institution that creates and reflects American sentiments of anti-blackness? How does he cater his performance to critique the very platform upon which he stands in an attempt to restore a dignity denied him and his people through continuous humiliation? I argue that he must make a choice. In true Western fashion, the decision is often posed as binary, leaving black comics to decide between becoming a *jester* or a *trickster*.

Jesters can be considered clowns, who secure social and economic gain by successfully acting out stereotypical blackness, e.g. coons, Sambos, Uncle Toms, Sapphires, Mammies, etc [14].

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[12] Ernest J. Wilson III, "Orientalism: A Black Perspective," in *Orientalism: A Reader*, ed. A.L. Macfie (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 2000), 243.
[13] Wilson III, "Orientalism: A Black Perspective," 243.
[14] Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies & Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*, (New York; Viking Press, 1973). In this book Bogle traces the development and presence of these stereotypes in popular discourse.

Jesters often run the risk of being called out and even excommunicated by the black community as they are accused of being complicit in promoting white supremacy.[15] Tricksters, on the other hand, typically use their performances to subvert the existing power structures that often seek to define, exploit, and consume black persons. However, if their tactics are not subversive enough, they are blacklisted from Hollywood and thus denied the apparatus needed to mass disseminate their deconstructive critique.[16] If they are *too* subversive, they fail to effectively critique the system and inadvertently run the risk of reinscribing black stereotypes. In his poem "The Jester," Langston Hughes – in addition to positing the comedian as a master manipulator of internal and external emotions – greys the space between jester and trickster. Hughes concludes the poem, "I am the Black Jester, / The dumb clown of the world, / The booted, booted fool of silly men. / Once I was wise. / Shall I be wise again?"[17] By positing the jester as once wise Hughes paints him as a trickster gone astray. This essay posits that Hughes paints the jester and the trickster as not simply binaries, but foils along a continuum.

The Asian American comedian faces a similar challenge. The major difference occurs in the types of stereotypes and combating "positive" yet equally reductive and restrictive stereotypes such as the model minority. Thus, for contemporary African American and Asian American comedians seeking economic gain without signing away their souls, it is not simply a matter of choosing a positionality as either jester or trickster, but rather of situating himself within what I refer to as the sweet spot along the jester-trickster continuum. I define the sweet

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[15] Yuval Taylor and Jake Austen, *Darkest America: Black Minstrelsy from Slavery to Hip-Hop*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 2012). This is not necessarily true of early black performers. While many contemporary scholars condemn these entertainers, Taylor and Austen detail the popularity of African American blackface minstrelsy, and cite African American vaudevilles as a respite from white hegemonic employment structures.

[16] As is the case with comedian, Paul Mooney. Best friend and collaborator to Richard Pryor, Mooney, while well known in black communities and in comedic circles, has been kept from wide mainstream success because of his blatant trickster ways.

[17] Langston Hughes, *The Weary* Blues (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1926), 53.

spot not as a singular fixed point, but a range along the continuum that allows for comedians to obtain notable financial success and fame without resorting to demeaning racial tropes. Existing in the sweet spot guarantees money and fame, but not necessarily retributive justice for the ways in which Hollywood has abused persons of color.[18] In order to obtain the latter, comedians of color must exist in the sweet spot, leaning more towards the trickster figure, upending the humiliation of blackface, yellowface, and brownface minstrelsy through subversive deconstructive performance. This performance must reframe comedy to include the purveyors of white supremacy, refocusing the audience's attention to the structures behind the demeaning black stereotypes.

Hartman's work reveals that blackface minstrelsy is a result of the "economy of enjoyment" created within and used in service of the peculiar institution of chattel slavery. Within this economy, enslaved black persons were expected to perform pre-scripted exchanges and act as host flesh for the white psyche and body. Hartman cites the auction block and the plantation as examples. During the march to the slave market, where the enslaved were to be displayed, poked, prodded, and molested, they were expected to parade into the arena performing a merriment antithetical to their true feelings of misery, trauma, loss, and hopelessness. In this context Hartman questions, "…whose pleasure is being considered?"[19] White people's. Thus, there are different expectations in terms of preferred performances, as well as varying types of social and state-sanctioned traumas and reactions to that trauma for Asian Americans. However,

[18] African American comedian, Kevin Hart grossed $87.5 million dollars in 2016 and became one of only seven comedians to ever sell out the 19,000-seat venue Madison Square Garden. He accomplished this by practicing observational comedy where, like Bill Cosby (minus the clean language), he tells jokes about his family and his life as a short man. He rarely *if ever* mentions race, politics, or class in a way that seeks to critique the oppressive nature of existing societal structures. Since he does not resort to acting out black stereotypes, but also opts out of political discussion, Hart exists in the sweet spot, more towards the jester end of the continuum.

[19] Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in the Nineteenth Century*, (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015), 34.

for black, yellow, and brown persons white supremacy still reigns as the status quo and people of color are left to navigate their lives in part as a response to being consistently exploited, demeaned, and dehumanized.

In the first section of this chapter, I will begin by explicating the context from which African American comedy is birthed. Following this contextualization, I will give a brief overview of representative black comedians whose style and careers impacted the genre of stand-up as we understand it today. The second section builds on the contextualization of African American stand-up as I examine the history of Asian American performance. By exploring these histories side by side, I argue that across African American and Asian American stand-up there has always been a balancing act of exerting agency and entertaining the white majority in a white supremacist society. Ultimately, African American and Asian American comedians have used the stage to assert their humanity and their belonging and to forge a path for future generations.

African American Stand-up Comedy

In order to understand the significance of contemporary stand-up as a refuge/incubator for the marginalized, we need to understand the historical relationship between the Other, with black persons serving as the penultimate antithesis to the American ideal – the upper middle-class white heterosexual male. In *Scenes of Subjection*, Saidiya Hartman links entertainment to chattel slavery, citing the "economy of enjoyment"[20] as the foundation of the socially and legally prescribed dynamic between black and white persons in America from the plantation to the present. Ultimately, white persons regardless of class were gifted upon birth due to their white skin, with the right to "force jollity."[21] They could demand that black persons suppress their own

[20] Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 34.
[21] Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 23.

subjectivity, their own emotions, and perform happiness on command. White persons could also use the black body to conjure their own joy through actions like rape, violence, verbal assaults, and more. Essentially, the black person was a canvas, a tool, an object to be used by white subjects to produce white laughter, white joy.

This "simulated jollity and coerced festivity"[22] extended beyond the slave auction to the plantation. Overseers forced the enslaved to sing lively songs as they worked the fields because the rhythm increased consistent levels of productivity.[23] The enslaved were also encouraged to dance, sing, and play instruments after work hours.[24] While these "celebrations" often served as a temporary salve for black suffering, for white plantation owners they justified their enslavement of black persons. "Forced jollity and coerced festivity" willfully blinded them to the deliberate structures created by their hands when they forcefully demanded such displays, falsely characterizing the Negro as docile, jolly, and content with his position as property. This shifted the blame onto the black body and sought to efface the white psyche as the master-mind.

In addition to property, the black body was used for the physical pleasure of the white body, through actions such as rape, violence, whippings, and using the black body as furniture, e.g. a footrest. This abuse of the black body was not exclusive to the slave owners, but to all whites,and this engendered the beginning of blackface minstrelsy. Abolitionists used blackface caricatures, rendering Negroes dimwitted, nonsensical, and happy in order to promote their anti-slavery message.[25] The Abolitionists still thought themselves to be superior, but that black inferiority should not result in enslavement.

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[22] Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 23.
[23] Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 44.
[24] Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 45.
[25] Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 27.

It is important to understand the dynamics between white owners and black property under chattel slavery, as Hartman dictates how these expectations created and governed the tradition of blackface minstrels and the treatment of black persons post-emancipation, allowing us to remember that "when one is considering the crimes of slavery, the popular theatre is just as central as the courthouse."[26] Thus, the abuse of the Negro moves from a simply literal one to one also symbolic, taking place on a stage that encourages others to treat the black body in a similar fashion. Hartman writes, "Songs, jokes, and dance transform wretched conditions into a conspicuous, and apparently convincing, display of contentment. As a result, this circumscribed recognition of black humanity itself becomes an exercise of violence."[27]

Hartman's declaration then encourages us to examine the three dominant theatrical forms mainly responsible for the comedic side of our contemporary entertainment industry – minstrels, vaudevilles, and burlesques. Although different in time periods of popularity and style all three genres are dependent upon the degradation of black persons in part to (1) justify black subjugation by white persons, and (2) to facilitate a release for the white actors and audience members from the suffocating restrictions of the governing practices of whiteness.[28] In minstrels (most popular from the 1840s – 1870s), which often romanticized plantation life, white actors in blackface makeup would trot around stage fumbling as they acted out hair-brained schemes. Speaking in white interpretations of black American dialect, the burnt corked white actors would dance, sing, steal chickens, and eat watermelon. In many ways these performances (re)created

[26] Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 27.
[27] Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 35.
[28] This is based on conversations I have had with my colleague, Nadejda I. Webb, about her research on whiteness and televisual reality.

and in some ways formalized black stereotypes including the Pickaninny, the Sambo, and the various reiterations of the coon.[29]

Unsurprisingly with the advances in technology, the minstrel-style of performance rode the radio waves into the homes of middle-class Americans, most notably in the form of the wildly popular, longstanding radio show *Amos n Andy*. The show even had a short-lived television translation which, through the character of George "Kingfish" Stevens, brought the stereotype of the Zip Coon[30] to the screen and reinstated it into the homes and hearts of the American public. In fact, it was often this very character, the Zip Coon, also known as The Dandy, who delivered the highlight of the minstrel show, the "stump speech." Without breaking black character, white actors would deliver a speech, often a social criticism, filled with numerous malaprops, puns, and at times pure nonsense. Thus, the Zip Coon was a self-important black person who had delusions of being of equal intelligence to his white peers, and this aberration was quite comedic. Beyond a site of white laughter at black expense, the format of the stump speech – a direct address to the audience that broke the fourth wall of the narrative--where a character would deliver a sociopolitical critique, served as an early model for contemporary stand-up.[31]

The degradation and exploitation of black persons was not exclusive to minstrels; however, its manifestation differed within the traditions of vaudeville and burlesque. Vaudevilles or variety shows were held in music halls and, unlike minstrels and burlesques, catered to a broad audience. Entire families – women and children and not just men – were able

[29] Univ. of Southern Florida, "History of Minstrels From 'Jump Jim Crow' to 'The Jazz Singer." Accessed Jan 15, 2018, http://exhibits.lib.usf.edu/exhibits/show/minstrelsy

[30] The sassy mammie stereotype was further promoted by Kingfish's often emasculating wife, Sapphire, and subsequently her name is now synonymous with our contemporary understandings of the angry black woman.

[31] Nicolas Sammond, "Minstrel as Performance," *Birth of an Industry: Blackface Minstrelsy and The Rise of American Animation.* Accessed Jan 15, 2018, http://scalar.usc.edu/works/birthofanindustry/minstrel-as-performance.

to enjoy a show together; this meant that beer was not permitted to be sold, and more importantly the comedy had to be clean. Thus, many vaudeville comics relied heavily on slapstick. Comics like Bob Hope, George Burns, and Mickey Rooney all got their start performing in the music halls, alongside magicians, contortionists, singers, and a hodgepodge of all kinds of talent. Because black patronage was strictly prohibited, and black performers were only allowed on the stage a few at a time, many black entertainers like Sammy Davis, Jr. got their start working the black vaudeville circuit.[32] Again, black talent was to be consumed by white persons, but black persons were not worthy to sit in the audience.

Advances in media technology transitioned vaudevilles to variety shows and eventually the early, late night format. They were predecessors to programs like the *Shows of Shows*, *The Ed Sullivan Show*, and *The Tonight Show*. And like their stage formats they were discriminatory towards persons of color, allowing them to dance and sing, but not to sit on the couch and talk with the host, human to human. Comedian, Dick Gregory, upon being asked to perform on *The Tonight Show Starring Jack Paar*, declined on that basis and was *then* told by the host himself that he could sit on the couch. And he did, for 22 consecutive shows.[33]

The televisual vaudevilles, or variety shows, not only offered a spotlight for a select few comedians of color but had a commitment to reaching broad audiences, through family oriented, clean comedy. They offered a specific avenue for comedians to shape their acts and personas to reach mass appeal. This in-road was so successfully mobilized and mastered by Bill Cosby that it served as the dominant blueprint for African American comedians looking for equal parts fame

[32] Christine, Acham, *Revolution Televised: Prime Time and the Struggle for Black Power*. (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2005), 57.
[33]Dick Gregory, "Dick Gregory and Jack Paar's Couch." *American Masters, PBS.* YouTube, 2017. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a9ASVyzbTV8

and fortune. The relationship between mass appeal, wealth, and clean comedy would be upended by the late, great Richard Pryor.

Essentially both minstrels and vaudevilles relied on the degradation of blacks in segregated venues, as did burlesque, despite being the more risqué of the three theatrical forms. Burlesque used a three-part structure that included both sensuous female dancers and male comedians, all thematically tied together by a satirical tone. The audience members were men who enjoyed the raunchy nature of the performance as well as the provocative dress and dance of the women performers. Black women were permitted to dance but only if they were willing to perform "acts which reinforced stereotypes."[34] Because of this racism, many dancers chose to work with an all-black burlesque company, one of the most notable being *The Creole Show*. Oftentimes the burlesques served as satirical and bawdy parodies of popular shows of the time, relying on the humor to bring this concept to the forefront. Although both vaudeville and burlesque featured comedic acts, the composition of their audiences and subsequently the content of their comedy differed greatly. Comedians performing on the burlesque circuit, unburdened with the task of delivering clean jokes in an effort to remain family friendly, often told sexual jokes some of which many would consider low-brow comedy.

As evidenced by minstrels, vaudevilles, and burlesque, our contemporary entertainment industry is founded on the simultaneous degradation/exploitation and exclusion of the ultimate Other, black persons. In its early days, these performances trivialized black experiences in a white supremacist America and at best erased their presence, with the white producers and hall owners desiring black talents, but not black minds, and excluding black persons from the audience. Because of the overarching desire for black bodies and faces but not minds or voices,

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[34] Jordan Vesey, "How Performers of Color are 'Revolutionizing' Burlesque," *PBS News Hour*, Aug 18, 2015, https://www.pbs.org/newshour/arts/shimmying-beat-history-performers-color-burlesque.

stand-up comedy that addresses the intersectional identities of the Other is radical in itself. As Dick Gregory stated regarding the significance of him integrating the Playboy club: "Heffner, when I first met you, you had the courage. When no one was bringing in blacks and minorities [to let us] stand flat footed in America and just talk, he brought me in."[35] The mere fact that a black person can exist on a stage without singing, dancing, or doing cartwheels is in itself a significant act. It is an inversion of the power dynamics.

When taking into consideration the role that the law and the theatre have played in creating and appropriating damning versions of blackness, protest is important. Through the account of enslaved black woman Suki, we see some trickster traits in action. While whites were channeling their own pleasure via the black body and by performing a blackness that whiteness created, the enslaved were using the concept of white pleasure for their own purposes. In the hands of black persons, the white obsession with slave pleasure becomes weaponized, fashioned by the very irony of the white logic that brings the tricksters who master it pleasure in possessing a moment of fleeting power. Hartman includes the account of Suki, an enslaved woman, sent to auction for aggressively refusing her master's sexual advances. Upon being "inspected" at the market, having men dig their fingers into her mouth to inspect her teeth, Suki, " 'pult up her dress an' tole de nigger traders to look an' see if dey could find any teef down dere.'"[36]

Hartman labels Suki's actions as a "deconstructive performance" that "provides the only possibility for the emergence of the subject, since criminality is the only form of slave agency recognized by the law."[37] Suki gains agency by acting in opposition to the decorum and

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[35] "Dick Gregoy's Roast," *The N.Y. Friars Club Roast of Hugh Hefner*, directed by Paul Miller (2001; New York, NY: Comedy Central, 2001), DVD.

[36] Hartman, *Scenes of Subjections*, 40.
[37] Hartman, *Scenes of Subjections*, 41.

expectations of slave behavior on the auction block. Upon initial inspection, one might label Suki a trickster. However, unlike tricksters, Suki does not bend the rules of the slave market, nor does she try to squeeze her actions through a loophole. She breaks them. Thus, her performance is deconstructive, but not subversive. While Suki uses satire to assert agency, there is nothing comedic about her performance. But the spirit of her gesture, the desire for her to be viewed as human, is the same one that fuels the actions of the tricksters who become masters of the inner workings of the institutions that dehumanize and exploit them so that they may locate opportunities for retributive justice with minimal lethal consequences.

In his anthology of African American humor, Mel Watkins includes a story about a trickster slave named Ike, titled "Swapping Dreams." This tale follows the conversation between a white master and a black slave regarding a dream that the master had where he visited "Nigger heaven" and saw "a lot of garbage, some old torn-down houses, a few old broken-down, rotten fences, the muddiest, sloppiest streets," and "a big bunch of ragged dirty Negroes walking around."[38] In order to comment on his master's dreams within the expected performance of his black inferiority, Ike posits that he had a similar dream, except that he visited white heaven. In Ike's alleged dream, the streets of white heaven are made of gold and silver with pearly gates and filled with milk and honey, *but* "dey wuzn't a soul in de whole place."[39] Ike does not explicitly contest what seems to be a nigger heaven that resulted from an earthly white oppression of black persons. Instead, he complies with the white understanding of white heaven as a paradise, with which he knows his master will agree. The subversion comes from the fact that Ike's imagined white heaven is devoid of inhabitants.

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[38] Mel Watkins, "Swapping Dreams," in *African American Humor: The Best Black Comedy from Slavery to Today*, (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2002), 29.
[39] Watkins, "Swapping Dreams."

Ike, a slave, feigns interest in the master's dreams only to speak truth to power. Feeding into the magical, overly spiritual Negro stereotype, Ike uses the opportunity to create a dream he had of white heaven and to comment, "dey wuzn't uh soul in de whole place." By positing it as a dream, just like his master's, he evades repercussion. In order to punish him, the master would have to admit his guilt in being an enslaver**.** It is the trickster's ability to discern his performance and strategically adhere and invert aspects of it that make his brand of humor effective, gaining him some votes of confidence and permitting him survival to do it all again.

Unsurprisingly we are still reconciling with chattel slavery. Because of its traumatic and devastating pervasiveness, black persons today, who have not personally experienced chattel slavery, are forced to contend with the idea that their ancestors were once property and still experience deep rippling aftermaths. In fact, Glenda Carpio, using the language of performance studies as she takes up the work of Victor Turner, cites slavery as the "originating breach" and proclaims that black cultural expression and embodiment is a process of redressing that breach. "Full redress" – unattainable yet unavoidable – does not and will not look the same for everyone. She writes, "each generation needs to map its own relationship to a breach that has fundamentally shaped the nation."[40] The plantation persists. The history is ignored. But it is still felt. Same shit, different decade.

In her text *Sites of* Slavery, Salamishah Tillet points out that while black citizens have gained access to many of the legal rights of citizenship—such as the ability to obtain a U.S. passport, vote, and collect social security—they are nevertheless barred access to "the more intangible components of citizenship, civic membership (the right to recognition), and economic

[40]Glenda Carpio, *Laughing Fit to Kill: Black Humor in the Fictions of Slavery.* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2008), 8.

equality (the right to earn)".[41] According to Tillet, this denial of the black person as civic citizen is the result of a collective cultural rejection and exclusion of black people from the American myths that constitute belonging and renders the African American's ability to construct a national identity stunted.[42] Essentially, "The end result is a civic culture that either forgets or casts itself in contradiction to the lives and contributions of enslaved African Americans."[43]

This perpetual exclusion, or "civic estrangement," produces for black people an experience of racial melancholia. However, Tillet does not "see this form of melancholia as destructive or damaging, but recognize[s] it as a potentially productive state."[44] It is through this melancholia that black artists engage in "the politics of recognition", revising the American myths to include black persons and their contributions. Ultimately, Tillet posits this as a way for black artists to assert their civic citizenship and grant themselves moments of freedom from the bondage of civic estrangement. She refers to this process as critical patriotism.[45] Tillet defines critical patriotism as a "democratic aesthetic" that "neither encourages idolatry of the nation's past nor champions a blind loyalty to the state. Staunch allegiance and inflexible attachment to the country are the normative terms of patriotism, but dissidence and dissent, what I call 'critical patriotism,' form essential components of this democratic aesthetic's discourse."[46] While Tillet's text focuses on how African American writers posit the neo-slave narrative as an act of critical patriotism, her focus on civic estrangement and racial melancholia provides a useful framework

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[41] Salamishah Tillet, *Sites of Slavery: Citizenship and Racial Democracy in the Post-Civil Rights Imagination*. (Durham: Duke U P, 2012), 8.
175.
[42] Tillet, *Sites of Slavery*, 7.
[43] Tillet, *Sites of Slavery*, 6.
[44] Tillet, *Sites of Slavery*, 9.
[45] Baldwin James, "Autobiographical Notes," in *Collected Essays*, (New York: The Library of America, 1998). This can be likened to Baldwin's a quote declaration in his essay "Autobiographical Notes" where he declares: "I love America more than any other country in this world, and, exactly for this reason, I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually."
[46] Tillet, *Sites of Slavery*, 11.

for engaging with black comedic content across generations because *it is still happening*. Racial melancholia and critical patriotism allow us to assert ourselves and own our rightful place in a country built with the blood, sweat, tears, and trauma of our ancestors. Claudia Rankine argues that understanding ourselves as injured is another way to assert our American citizenship.

Rankine's framing of racial trauma as injury is a useful framework for this project because it acknowledges the psychic, spiritual, and physical pain of black persons by incessantly making the white hands/mouths of the injurers visible. Rankine offers, "You are not sick, you are / injured— / you ache for the rest of life."[47] Accepting oneself as injured, rather than "sick," reassures black persons that they are not the cause of their own conditions. Rankine's declaration that "you will ache for the rest of life" is not necessarily a pessimistic one. Rather, understanding the ways that black people are under both psychic and physical attack helps us to redirect our energy away from self-doubt and self-loathing and toward self-care, healing, and empowerment. In fact, she affirms our positionality within the nations we helped forge by stating *"…Yes and this is how you are citizen: Come on. Let it go. Move on."*[48] To "let it go" is to resist internalizing the trauma of assault. This can be accomplished by remembering that you are not necessarily the cause of your trauma, it is only half yours. This is a refusal of ownership: "The world out there insisting on this only half concerns you. What happens to you doesn't belong to you. It's not yours. Not yours only."[49] To be a black citizen is to survive. It is to recognize yourself as injured, as traumatized, but to live on in spite of it all.

Rankine's frame of injury is a call to remembrance. We must remember how the past has influenced the present in order to understand our condition as inherited. The history she speaks

[47] Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric*. (Minneapolis: Graywolf, 2014), 143.
[48] Rankine, *Citizen*, 151.
[49] Rankine, *Citizen*, 141.

of is that of chattel slavery which Hartman reminds us is the foundation for contemporary race relations and the prescribed performativity of blackness. "Forced jollity" functioned as the white control over the black minds and bodies. Black persons were stripped of their rights to exert complete agency and/or express subjectivity. The use of the black body and its laughter and smiles generated the economy of enjoyment, the incestuous dynamic that "justified" enslavement, where slave owners conjured joy by demanding it and then claimed black persons were content, happy even, in their position as property. This dynamic dictated how white folks at-large treated black folks, as it extended beyond the plantation. Hartman also introduces the problematics of the stage, including the auction block and introduces the notion of the subversive deconstructive performance – a tradition carried on by contemporary comics.

Black comedians come to the stage carrying with them deep understandings, experiences, and pain having to exist within an "economy of enjoyment" that results in a civic estrangement that contributes to their injury of being black in a white supremacist nation. Grappling with the originating breach of slavery becomes a twisted rite of passage that ushered African American comedians into the spotlight and is reflected in their careers. For the remainder of this chapter, I will provide a brief overview of selected comedians who represent a particular generational grappling. While their performed redress reflects black humor at its finest, their passion, creativity, and comedic genius have transformed the genre of stand-up comedy and the entertainment industry at-large

African American Comedic Trailblazers

Moms Mabley (1894 – 1975)

Born as Loretta Aiken, Jackie "Moms" Mabley got her start touring as a part of The Chitlin Circuit (a network of black venues that hosted black singers, dancers, comedians, etc.) to perform for black audiences. After several decades of hard work, Mabley became one of the most well-known performers on The Chitlin Circuit and had quite a lucrative and stable career. Thus, when she started to make appearances on more mainstream (read – white) platforms like *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour*, many African Americans knew and loved her work. Mabley positioned herself within the sweet spot by combining a clownish costume with radical rhetoric that subversively deconstructed popular stereotypes. As such Mabley functioned as an interlocutor between vaudeville and contemporary stand-up.

Often donning colorful muumuus, floppy bucket hats, and oversized shoes, Moms took to the stage asserting her sexuality through her toothless and fiery mouth. Visually, Moms embodied the familiar figure of the mammy. This costuming, upon first glance, rendered her "safe" to white audience members looking to be entertained. Essentially, it functioned to get these unsuspecting viewers to let their guards down. Once they were primed, Moms would launch into a steady rhythm of stories, jokes, and songs that highlighted the issues of the time – including racism, the Civil Rights Movement, and Feminism. In fact, Moms' most notable contribution is her re-sexualizing of the Mammy figure. The bulk of Moms' jokes centered on her disdain for old men and her penchant for younger handsome celebrities, oftentimes Cab Calloway. Although a senior citizen herself, she needed a man who could keep up with her in the bedroom. Often shaded in metaphors and coded language, Moms disgustfully informed audiences of the shortcomings of old men and her frustration with them. They laughed.

Even in her life offstage she was blazing trails. Mabley was a proud lesbian who preferred dressing in men's clothing. Her lesbian lifestyle even served as fodder for some of her early routines. In July 1975, she became one of the oldest living persons to have a song on the Billboard 100 with her cover of "Abraham, Martin, and John," which is interesting enough a serious somber song lamenting the assassinations of Lincoln, Dr. King, and Kennedy. She was a pioneer for black people, women, lesbians, and senior citizens as she created a blueprint for how you can mobilize stereotypes as a deconstructionist process for addressing societal ills all whilst garnering fame and fortune and maintaining personal integrity.

Redd Foxx (1922 – 1991)

Hailing from St. Louis, Missouri, Redd Foxx, born John Elroy Sanford, is affectionately known as the "King of Party Records." While the raunchy comedian was not the first to cut a comedy album, he recorded over 50 during his decades long career. Honing his craft and rising to prominence on the same Chitlin Circuit Moms Mabley dominated some years before, Foxx became known for his penchant for the salacious and opened the doors for others to go deep "blue." With his party records and his own comedy club, Foxx built an infrastructure that supported his career (and swelled his bank account) without the support of white audiences. However, at the behest of singer Dinah Washington, Foxx opened her show and soon after landed a gig as one of the first black comedians to have a residency on the strip in Las Vegas.

Like Mabley, Foxx garnered popularity amongst white audiences later in his life, most notably with his sitcom *Sanford and Son*, where he played a junk yard owner whose adult son has yet to leave the nest. Pat Morita, a Japanese American comedian who used to open for Foxx, had a reoccurring role on the sitcom as well. In many ways Foxx had to transform himself as television was a not a medium suited for his dirty jokes and stories. With his ability to modify

his comedy across mediums in a way that was still humorous and preserved his agency and autonomy, Foxx offered a methodology for adaptation for future comedians – one where physicality paired with rhetoric created a memorable experience.

Dick Gregory (1932 – 2017)

A slightly younger contemporary of Foxx, Dick Gregory also hailed from St. Louis, Missouri. As he writes on the dedication page of his memoir *Nigger*, "Dear Momma, wherever you are, if ever you hear the word 'nigger' again, remember they are advertising my book." [50] Gregory grew up one of the eldest children of a poverty-stricken single mother. Through track and field, he was able to secure a better education for himself, which served to improve his condition. However, the racism that caused his rough living conditions as a child and young adult left Gregory with a rhetorical bite and deep disdain for the discrimination of himself and others based on the color of their skin. His experiences of dehumanization fueled his comedic delivery and style. Gregory's seriousness set him apart from Mabley's subversive jestering via costume and Foxx's shock factor brought on by his raunchiness. Sporting a suit and tie (and in the early years smoking a cigarette) Gregory stood on stage, stared white audiences in the eye and slapped them in the face with their own biases and prejudices before releasing the tension with a laugh that allowed him to continue performing. He made history in 1961 when he was the first comedian to integrate Hugh Heffner's Playboy club. In 1963, he made history again when he refused to perform on the *Late Night Show with Jack Parr*. Despite the show servicing as a huge launching pad for comedians, Gregory boycotted because the host never asked anyone black to join him on the couch to chat. Gregory went on to sit on Paar's couch for 22 consecutive shows. As one of the first black comedians with his particular focus on current events and his

[50] Dick Gregory, *Nigger: An Autobiography*, (New York: Dutton, 1967).

satirical delivery, he paved a way for new personas, ones rooted in an unapologetically in-your-face blackness, to achieve mainstream success.

Dick Gregory's sarcastic wit and infallible commitment to restructuring a better nation for black persons illustrated the potential for radical political activism and comedic performance to exist within the same figure. Alongside touring and performing his comedic bits, Gregory was very active in the Civil Rights Movement. While many black celebrities supported the Movement by bailing protestors out of jail, performing concerts, etc., Gregory was often on the front lines. He marched alongside Dr. King, was an outspoken advocate for Civil Rights, and consistently used his platform for the cause. In 1968, he ran as a write-in candidate for the Presidency of the United States. Gregory's commitment to black progress and his acerbic wit opened the possibilities for more variance in personas for black comedians looking to gain mainstream success and still sharply speak truth to power.

Bill Cosby (1937 – present)

While Mabley, Foxx, and Gregory broke down barriers and achieved significant success with black and white audiences, Bill Cosby's star shone brighter, largely in part due to their trailblazing and his disinterest in performing race-based material. Using black respectability politics, the comedian seemingly perfected the model for African American comedians to dominate the hearts of Americans across multiple mediums. Raised in projects in Philadelphia, Cosby was no stranger to the hardships of being black and working class. However, he focused his stand-up routines on family dynamics. This focus served him well and he landed tons of television roles, animated series, and of course the flagship *The Cosbys* which was voted the number one television show in America for four years in a row between 1985 – 89. Essentially, Cosby, for the longest time was the biggest black star.

Cosby saw politics of respectability as a viable way of being that resulted in success and a sort of transcendence. Unfortunately, Cosby's decision to focus on family and perform clean comedy (without cursing and adult rated material) served as a pseudo self-serving prophecy. The comedian garnered such fame, fortune, and respect by adhering to the politics that felt it should be a tactic employed by all. As such, in his later years he used his platform to critique and condemn the hip-hop generation who he felt were not living up to the promises fought for by the Civil Rights generation.[51] He cited their baggy pants and their use of profanity as offensive to the freedom fighters and an impediment to their ability to pull themselves up by their bootstraps. His judgement served to be quite ironic as he is currently serving time in prison for sexual assault.

Richard Pryor (1940 – 2005)

Inarguably the comedic godfather of *all* present-day comedians of any race, Pryor was a force. Raised in Peoria, Illinois in a brothel owned by his grandmother, worked by his mother, and enforced by his father, Pryor's life was at complete odds with the politics of respectability pushed by Cosby. Nevertheless, with Cosby seeming to serve as the primary blueprint, in his early career Pryor marked his entire style after the comedic forefather and it worked – until it didn't. The dissonance between who he was portraying on the stand-up stage and who he was proved too detrimental to his wellbeing and it came to the fore while performing for an all-white audience in a lucrative Vegas residency. He cussed the audience and left the stage, eventually landing in the Bay Area chopping it up with Huey P. Newton and the Black Panthers. It was during this time he discovered his voice and became empowered to use it.

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[51] Adam Serwer, "Bill Cosby's Famous 'Pound Cake' Speech, Annotated," *BuzzFeed News*, Jul 9, 2015, https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/adamserwer/bill-cosby-pound-for-pound.

Building on Gregory's boundary-pushing foundation, Pryor used theatre techniques to depict black persons in all walks of life with dignity rendering him, till this day, unparalleled. Equally as important, the comedic genius has been attributed with desegregating comedy. Pryor performed in front of mixed audiences what was historically only done in the company of kin folk. This desegregation allowed white persons a front row seat to experience how black people made fun of them and one another, which involved liberal use of the controversial word, "nigga." Pryor shifted the genre from a focus on jokes and punch lines to long drawn out stories told from the embodied perspectives of black characters. By giving life to the junkie, wino, pimp, and others, Pryor humanized the lowly and instilled a sense of pride in the working-class black persons who saw themselves and their loved ones in his masterful portrayals. Pryor's comedic routine centered predominately on racism and its everyday manifestations. Overall, it was his willingness to be vulnerable, to open himself all the way up, that birthed such timeless and poignant insights and generated such deep belly laughter.

The Impact of African American Comedic Trailblazers

As evidenced through the selected performers, African American comedians have, and continue to, use the stage as a space to assert their denied humanity. Moms Mabley chose to do so in an exaggerated costume and Gregory chose to do so in suit and tie, but both relentlessly pursued the same goal. In addition to complicating notions of race Moms Mabley and Redd Foxx challenged perceptions of older people as desexualized with their emphasis on romance and sexual exploits. Cosby sought to assert belonging by proving African Americans were just like white people in our familial joys and struggles. Gregory and Pryor chose a straightforward approach to discuss societal ills plaguing black people. Their varied methods allowed for more contemporary comedians like Eddie Murphy, Chris Rock, Wanda Sykes, Mo'Nique, and many

others to adopt a mix to formulate their styles as they set out to use the stage to speak to the particular manifestations of white supremacy seeking to continuously render them as 'Other'.

Asian American Stand-up Comedy

For African Americans the originating breach is chattel slavery and remains a site of contention for past, present, and future generations. The originating breach(es) for Asian Americans can best be explicated through a brief/condensed exploration of Edward Said's work on Orientalism. Said defines orientalism as, "a system of knowledge about the Orient, an accepted grid for filtering through the Orient into Western consciousness just as that same investment multiplied – indeed, made truly productive – the statements proliferating out from Orientalism into the general culture." [52] While knowledge is often promoted as an objective way of attempting to understand and make sense of the world, the history of colonialism tells us otherwise. The problem as detailed over his germinal work is that Orientalists, unable to account for their own biases and their own need to constantly (re)create ideologies that justify their colonial practices and salves for their insecurities and overall fragility, color – quite literally – everyone else as an 'Other.' This is accomplished by creating and maintaining the Occident-Orient binary whereby the Western World is rationale, civilized, and industrial and the East is backwards, underdeveloped, and simple. This ignorance is willful and insidious and reveals, "The relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony…"[53]

For the purposes of this chapter we will focus on how this power dynamic sets the stage for Asian American performers. Much like how the plantation birthed the economy of

[52] Edward Said, *Orientalism*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 6.
[53] Said, *Orientalism*, 15.

enjoyment which prescribed the uneven power dynamic between African Americans and whites (rich and otherwise), Orientalism necessitated a specific performance by Asian Americans. Asian American performances needed to confirm the Orient, "as a European invention… since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, and remarkable experiences."[54] This expectation straightjacketed Asian American performers in a similar fashion to African Americans. Both African and Asian American performances required a perpetually erroneous, reductive, and subservient stance. The Black community serving as an internal "Other" and the Asian community function as the external "Other."

The first documented Asian person in the United States was a 19-year-old Chinese woman named Afong Moy. She was brought to America alongside a large shipment of Oriental goods including fans and lacquerware. She was toured around the country in her "natural habitat," a Chinese saloon, as paying patrons watched her drink tea and speak Chinese. Arguably she was one of the early documented participants/victims of American human zoos. In 1904, Igorot men from the Philippines were displayed at the world fair in St. Louis (along with Congolese man Ota Benga). Attendees watched them eat, build tools, and perform mock fights. Essentially, white Americans created a space where they could feed their curiosities about Asians (and Africans) and ultimately be satiated by their own imagination as they continued to bolster their own sense of superiority over the Eastern World.[55]

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[54] Said, *Orientalism*, 1.

[55] Soshi Parks, "These horrifying 'human zoos' delighted American audiences at the turn of the 20th century," *Timeline*, Mar 19, 2018, https://timeline.com/human-zoo-worlds-fair-7ef0d0951035. As always even within this horrible institution persons of color found a way to use it to their advantage. Lakota Sioux activists like Chief Sitting Bull used it as a space to fight for equality through the display of Native American humanity and inspired his "employer" Buffalo Bill to participate in "the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934, which emphasized Indian self-determination over the plundering and assimilation of Indian lands and communities advocated by the 1887 Dawes Act."

In order to mold a sense of self in opposition to the Asian Other, the white imagination rendered its construction of Asian, of The Orient as homogenous. Historian Erika Lee asserts:

> Americans formed their own type of Orientalism. By the time that large-scale Asian immigration to the United States began in the mid-nineteenth century, diverse Asian peoples were considered one monolithic group, regardless of national origin, ethnicity, class, and religion and were fixed in the American mind as backward, submissive, and inferior. They were the opposite of the forward-thinking expansionist American: always Asian and never American.[56]

In the American imagination there is no difference between a Japanese woman and a Chinese woman, between Punjabi and Tagalog, Hinduism and Islam. Instead these peoples, places, and customs become dominantly defined by what they are not – *Non*-Western. This intentional lack of nuance in the white imagination is perhaps both a justification and byproduct of the Occident-Orient, West-East binary used by Americans (gifted from the Europeans) to assume a position of authority based on a fantastical sense of superiority. Thus, when the first large numbers of Asians immigrated to the country during the California Gold Rush (1848 – 1855), they became the representatives of Asia. In other words, in the American imagination Asian equaled Chinese. The larger influx of Chinese laborers into cities on the West Coast led to the development of Chinatowns. Within these Chinatowns came the emergence of Asian-owned-and-operated nightclubs like Forbidden City.

Much like the human zoos, white Americans ventured into the Chinatowns and into the clubs to marvel at the culture, custom, and appearance of the Asian Other, without the hassle or danger of traveling across the ocean. Proving Said's point that, "In a quite constant way, Orientalism depends for its strategy on this flexible *positional* superiority, which puts the

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[56] Erika Lee, *The Making of Asian America: A History*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015), 26.

Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand."[57] From the Word Fair of 1904 to the railroad tracks to the nightclubs, despite the shifting contexts and the evolving manifestations of Asian agency, in the white imagination, they were still seen as less than. However, despite this pervasive ignorance, Asian American performers were breaking new ground and paving a path in the entertainment industry that would make it possible for persons like Hasan Minhaj and Aparna Nancherla, whose work I explore in my third chapter, to adopt more nuanced personas and performances.

By the late 1800s, parts of the United States, most notably California, experienced the emergence of first- and second-generation Chinese Americans. White American irrational fear (a bit redundant as white fear is often marked by its irrationality), grew alongside the Chinese American population and politicians sought legal methods for "protecting" themselves and the other good white natural-born citizens from the foreign invaders. After all the .002% of the American population who were Chinese were already doing damage.[58] Imagine if they were to grow to constitute 5.6% of the population (as marked in the 2017 census).[59] With law as their tried and true weapon, they overtaxed these "foreign" miners, making it difficult and damn near impossible for Chinese and Chinese American laborers to live. In 1854 the Supreme Court barred Chinese and Chinese Americans from testifying in court, a move that rendered them legally defenseless against the xenophobic white supremacist violence and crime (in)directly sanctioned by the ruling. Then in 1882, the United States shut their doors to the East, with the Chinese Exclusion Act. In 1892, the Chinese Exclusion Act was renewed with additional restrictions that required, "Chinese residents…to carry special documentation – certificates of

[57] Said, *Orientalism*, 7.
[58] Lee, *The Making of Asian America: A History*, 45.
[59] Office of Minority Health, "Profile: Asian Americans," *The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services*, https://minorityhealth.hhs.gov/omh/browse.aspx?lvl=3&lvlid=63

residence – from the Internal Revenue Service (IRS)."[60] In 1893 and 1902 Chinese immigration was rendered *permanently* illegal.

The legal actions taken against Chinese immigrants and Chinese Americans set the tone for how other immigrants from the East – Southeast Asians, Indians, etc. – would be welcomed. The Immigration Act of 1924 placed stringent rules on immigration, restricting the number of immigrants allowed to enter the country per year. The Act also required that potential immigrants be college-educated whilst also denying degree-holding immigrants from Mexico and the East.[61] Then in 1943, Chinese Americans were finally being granted citizenship. This generosity on behalf of the government occurred two years after the bombing of Pearl Harbor and at the very beginning of American created and operated Japanese internment camps.[62] These legal actions and inaction, and the overall mistreatment of Asian immigrants and Asian Americans, resulted in a manifestation of civil estrangement similar to that of African Americans. At least three generations of washing the dirt out of white families' clothing to literally sweating under the sun to lay the train tracks that would create the same infrastructure determined to expel them, and Chinese Americans remained foreign and excluded from the narratives and the representations of Americanness. They continued to be civically estranged.

Chinese Americans in the entertainment industry – performers, emcees, promoters, club owners, etc. – addressed civic estrangement by simultaneously adhering to and aligning with the expectations presented by white consumers as prescribed by Orientalism, and challenged these beliefs by asserting their Americanness. This intersection of acquiescence and disruption resulted in elaborate performances that often included seemingly disparate actions – a Chinese

[60] Lee, *The Making of Asian America: A History*.
[61] Lee, *The Making of Asian America: A History*.
[62] Lee, *The Making of Asian America: A History*.

person singing an American ballad without the slightest trace of an Oriental accent or an Asian woman in "traditional" garb flawlessly executing the latest American dance. Promoters capitalized on this "compromise" by billing acts as "The Chinese Frank Sinatra" or interestingly enough, "The Chinese Sammie Davis, Jr."[63] Many of the Chinatown clubs fashioned themselves after the renown Forbidden City, offering burlesque style performances and mainstream dance numbers. These clubs became known as The Chop Suey Circuit, an informal network of clubs that featured Asian American performers.[64]

While singing and dancing were often the highlights of these performances, humor also was present and served an important function. While stand-up comedy as a genre was not present itself, humor was often used within and in-between acts. One of the most successful, well-known, and evergreen performers who got her start in these spaces was Jadin Wong. Born in 1913, Wong began working in the Chinatown clubs of San Francisco after a brief, semi-successful stint in Hollywood where she played an extra in a film after being "discovered" tap dancing for money on the streets of Los Angeles. While she became a headliner at Forbidden City, performed in Europe, and entertained her fellow Americans stationed overseas in the military, in regards to this chapter two of her most significant contributions are her successful career as an agent for Asian actors, and a later-in-life career as a stand-up comedian. She helped to launch the careers of hundreds of Asian American actors and indirectly increased representation and expansion of types of roles for Asian Americans.[65] Tracking her stand-up material that substantiated her later years as a comedian is difficult. However, traces of it are present as asides in her early dancing acts. A reviewer recalls her performance, "Miss Wong hits

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[63] Kwan, "Performing a Geography of Asian America," 120.
[64] Kwan, "Performing a Geography of Asian America."
[65] Joann Faung Lee, *Asian American Actors: Oral Histories from Stage, Screen, and Television*, (London: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2000), 80 – 86.

microphone for a line of comedy chatter, announcing that 'dancing is strenuous but better than going back to laundry' (Coghlan, 1943) Obviously this is an example of dancer Jadin Wong playing to her audience through self-Orientalizing mockery." [66] Wong's joke exemplifies how Asian American performers used humorous devices to simultaneously assert agency and meet the expectations of white audience members.

The Chinatown nightclub scene quickly became fodder for Hollywood films, but Asian Americans were not new to the screen. First-generation Asian American, Anna May Wong had already been featured in numerous movie pictures prior to the founding of Forbidden City and its contemporaries. Unfortunately, and unsurprisingly, her characters required her to operate within the white imagination as she played stereotypical dragon ladies. Despite her "success", as always, white filmmakers like their vaudevillian forefathers exercised their ability to consume their fantastical images of Asians, without the necessity of Asian bodies. White actors and actresses donned yellowface, as they'd done alongside burnt cork blackfaced white actors on the minstrel and vaudeville stages. This resulted in films like Dragon Seed, Fu Manchu, and many others. However, interestingly enough, after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the start of World War II and the height of Yellow Peril, Asian Americans were allowed to play themselves on the screen once again. After all, why have a good white person play the foreign villain when you can get the foreign 'Others' to play themselves?

While humor was always present within the Chinese American and Asian American communities and performances, it was not something that fit within the restrictive Hollywood stereotypes, only in the instances where they were laughed at. However, because of all the sacrifices made by early Asian American performers and the opening of the doors of American

[66] SanSan Kwan, "Performing a Geography of Asian America: The Chop Suey Circuit," *TDR: The Drama Review* 55, no. 1 (2011): 123, http://www.jstor.org.

to the East once more in 1965, along with advancements made by African Americans in the Civil Rights Movement, it was all the more possible for Asian American comedians to emerge and gain success.

One of the most notable impacts of the Immigration Act of 1965, which eliminated and increased quotas by number and region, was the way it benefitted Indians looking to come to the United States. Like the Chinese, Koreans, and Japanese, Indians have been living on the continent of North and South America for hundreds of years, with more noticeable populations in the 1800s. They too toiled on the railroads and worked as agricultural laborers. They also faced similar discrimination as other members of the Orient. They were not allowed to become naturalized citizens, testify, vote, or carve out a better life for themselves.[67] Their performances were often relegated to mystical dances and spiritual rituals. In the late 1800's Hindu holy man Swami Vivekananda visited what is now the University of Chicago for the World Parliament of Religions, promoting the values of Hinduism as a way of adopting tolerance for all. [68] Ruth St. Denis, a white dancer from an affluent family, became one of the leading expressionists of Indian dance. With the further opening of the doors to the Orient in 1965, many college-educated Indians immigrated to the United States serving as physicians, chemists, engineers, and other positions the government was looking to fulfill.[69] Since then, Indian Americans have become one of the fastest growing and largest financially well-off immigrant groups in the country.[70] The same is true for many Chinese Americans who are one of the largest international student

[67] Lee, *The Making of Asian America*.
[68] The Art Institute of Chicago, "Swami Vivekananda and His 1893 Speech," https://www.artic.edu/swami-vivekananda-and-his-1893-speech.
[69] Pew Research Center, "The Rise of Asian Americans," June 12, 2019, https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2012/06/19/the-rise-of-asian-americans/.
[70] Gustavo López, Neil G. Ruiz, and Eileen Patton, "Key fact about Asian Americans, a diverse and growing population," *Pew Research Center's FactTank: News in the Numbers*, Sep 8, 2017, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/09/08/key-facts-about-asian-americans/.

groups in the United States.[71] Most importantly, these professionals provided a financially stable home to a growing first and second generation who had the privilege of chasing their dreams of being comedians.

For the remainder of the section of this chapter, I will provide a brief overview of selected Asian American comedians who have paved the way for the likes of contemporaries.

Asian and Asian American Comedic Trailblazers

Pat Morita (1932 – 2005)

Noriyuki "Pat" Morita was a Japanese American comedian and actor born in San Francisco, suffering with spinal tuberculosis. He spent the first decade of his life in the hospital, only learning to walk at age 9. Two years after figuring out how to put one foot in front of the other, upon being discharged from the hospital at age 11, he was escorted into a Japanese internment camp with the rest of his family. Upon their release, the family opened a restaurant in Sacramento where a young Morita entertained customers with his jokes. After graduating high school, he adopted the name Pat in an effort to be more palpable to white audiences.

Best known for his role as Mr. Miyagi in *The Karate Kid* films, Pat Morita originally started out as a comedian. As mentioned earlier, he had a close relationship with friend and mentor Redd Foxx. While many may recall seeing him as recurring character Ah Chew on *Sanford and Son*, most are not aware that Morita began as a stand-up comedian, who opened for Foxx. While there are few clips of his stand-up performances floating online, a look into his comedic style is limited. Much of the scholarship and writing around his career focuses on his

[71] Institute of International Education, "Open Doors – International Students," 2018, https://www.iie.org/Research-and-Insights/Open-Doors/Data/International-Students/Places-of-Origin.

acting roles, which are very prolific. In fact, Morita starred in the first American sitcom with an Asian lead actor, *Mr. T and Tina* (1976). [72] Morita played the titular character, Mr. T (Taro Takahashi) a Japanese inventor and successful businessman who relocates to the United States to open a branch of his company. Susan Blanchard plays Tina Kelly, a white woman who Mr. T hires to care for his children. Although the sitcom only aired for five episodes, Morita continued working on popular shows such as *Happy Days*, and *M*A*S*H*. However, as mentioned earlier, he became best known for his role as the karate guru to young Danielson in the popular trilogy, *The Karate Kid*.

There is a limited focus on the comedic style of Pat Morita. However, based on a few online clips[73] as well as interviews[74], his humor can be described as self-deprecating. He used his platform to restate the biases and general discomfort that white persons held about Asian Americans. In doing so, he allowed himself and the communities he represented to be seen as human and challenged the notion of what it meant to be American.

Johnny Yune (1936 – 2020t)

Born in Korea, Johnny Yune got his start in American entertainment most notably starring in kung fu spoofs where he is mistaken as Bruce Lee.[75] However, in the 1970s he was a frequent performer on *The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson*.[76] In his bits, Yune catered to the superiority complex of white audience members by speaking out and against the lack of freedom of speech in his home country of Korea and lauding his ability to do so in America. In

[72] Humor Mill, "On This Day in Comedy…In 1932 Comedian and Actor Pat Morita Was Born," Jul 2, 2018, http://humormillmag.com/day-comedy-1932-comedian-actor-pat-morita-born/.
[73] "Karate Kid star PAT MORITA the self billed "hip Nip" of stand up comedy (w. timing strip) 3/27/1965," *YouTube* video, posted by Spookylorre, Aug 28, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rMrVk4anT6w
[74] Pat Morita, "Pat Morita Interview," Bob Hope Comedy Collection, *Television Academy Foundation's The Interviews*, https://interviews.televisionacademy.com/interviews/pat-morita?clip=chapter1#interview-clips.
[75] Hong, Elliot, *They Call Me Bruce*, (New York, NY: Multicom, 1982) DVD.
[76] Kwak Yeon-soo, "Comedian Johnny Yune dies at 84," *The Korea Times*, Mar 2020, https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2020/03/121_285928.html

the late 1990's he hosted the first locally-produced Korean-language variety show *The Johnny Yune Show* broadcast in Los Angeles.[77] In an era when seeing an Asian performer on television, let alone laughing at his jokes was still rare, Yune offered hope and a blueprint to emerging comedians and actors helping to make space for them in the industry.

Henry Cho (1962 – present)

One of the most remarkable things about Cho is his Korean, American, and Southern identity. The intersection of these seemingly paradoxical identities serves as fodder for the majority of his comedic material. Cho rose to prominence in the late 1980s and early 1990s appearing on shows such as *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno* and *The Arsenio Hall Show*. In many of his appearances he addresses the shock and/or confusion of audience members as they experience this Korean American man, (donning a mullet in the early days), delivering jokes with a thick accent.[78] While his comedic material is often filtered through the lens of being a first-generation American, born and raised in Knoxville Tennessee, Cho's jokes resonate with audiences not simply because of their fascination with him as some novelty, but also because of his focus on all types of relationships, interactions, and family. In many ways Cho functions as the realized dreams of Asian American performers from The Chop Suey Circuit who used singing and dancing as a way of communicating, of proving their Americanness. Cho's mere presence and his natural Southern twang does that work.

Much like predecessor Bill Cosby, Cho's comedy is family-friendly. The clean comedian mobilizes observational comedy to gain laughter. Although he has sustained a successful career, it is perhaps these very choices coupled with the overall challenges of

[77] Yeon-soo, "Comedian Johnny Yune dies at 84."
[78] "Henry Cho - What's That Clickin' Noise," *YouTube* video, posted by Warner Records, Oct 26, 2009, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U7_3xxQXgFs&t=3

representation for people of color in Hollywood that has not rendered him popular. However, as we will see in the next section, he has helped paved the way for another Cho, Margaret, to become a household name.

Margaret Cho (1968 – present)

As a child, despite being born and raised in a diverse San Francisco neighborhood, Margaret Cho was teased and bullied mercilessly for her looks. A young Cho also survived sexual molestation and rape over several years. Cho revealed her sexual abuse to a friend who betrayed her confidence, and her peers began to tease her and state that her sexual assault was justified because she was ugly and fat. These experiences, combined with her time as a phone sex operator and a dominatrix, would result in a radical and unprecedented stand-up career that begin in the 1990s in a comedy club adjacent to her family's bookstore.[79]

Since the early days of her career Cho has appeared on countless television shows; in fact, she was lauded for having the first Asian American sitcom (albeit because Pat Morita's *Mr. T. and Tina* only lasted several episodes) loosely based on her and her family's life.[80] Cho has numerous stand-up specials and is a LGBTQIA* activist, who identifies as bisexual. Cho continues to use her personal experiences with microaggressions, racism and sexism in the quotidian as well as in Hollywood, and more to fuel her stand-up performances.

Cho is known for using foul language to critique racism, heteronormativity and other forms of oppression. In doing so, Cho has defined herself outside of the white-constructed demeaning Asian stereotypes that render women as docile and subservient beings sexualized for white male desire. She interweaves impressions of her Korean mother (accent included) based on

[79] "People – Margaret Cho," *PBS Pioneers of Television*, https://www.pbs.org/wnet/pioneers-of-television/pioneering-people/margaret-cho/.
[80] Michelle Woo, "All Grown Up," *Character Media*, Sep 15, 2014, https://charactermedia.com/20-years-later-margaret-cho-looks-back-on-all-american-girl/

her experiences being mistaken for another Asian celebrity and is the frequent assumption that she can't speak English, as well as many other incidents.[81]

Her willingness to share her experiences, deconstructing them while turning them into hilarity for audiences, makes her a transformative force in terms of Asian American representation in the industry and the genre of stand-up. Much like her predecessor, Richard Pryor, Cho took the trauma of her life, caused by the various manifestations of white supremacy and deconstructs them on stage. Her sharp insight and unapologetic delivery queered Asian American performance and challenged damning stereotypes.

The Rise of Southeast Asian American Comedians and Comedic Actors

During the late 1800s/early 1900s when The Chop Suey Circuit and The Chitlin Circuit offered lucrative careers for primarily Chinese and Japanese Americans and African Americans respectively, the presence of Indian American comedic performances seemed inconsequential. During this time in the American imagination and the immigrant reality, a false equivalence dominated that conflated Indian with Hinduism. Sikhs, Muslim, and Hindu Indians in America faced unwarranted discrimination as they were referred to by the derogatory term, Hindoos.[82] Like Chinese, Japanese, and African Americans were denied basic human rights because of the color of their skin. However, through the Othering, the exoticization that constitutes the American imagination, Indian became equated with a sort of tantalizing spiritual mysticism. In 1893 at the Art Institute of Chicago Hindu Monk, Swami Vivekananda, gave what would

[81] "Margaret Cho – Fresh off the Boat," *YouTube* video, posted by Just for Laughs, Sep 5, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E9OjfHzR5mE.
[82] Michael, J. Altman, *Heathen, Hindoo, Hindu: American Representations of India, 1721-1893*, (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2017).

become a landmark address to the Parliament of Religions, that would serve as a precursor to the American buy-in to Hinduism which of course includes the practice of yoga.[83]

With India being monolithically defined as spiritual, it makes sense that outside of the performances of spiritual practices Indian classical dance would be popular. In the early 1900s, dancer Uday Shankar gained fame in the United States through his riveting performances of Southeast Asian culture. Dancer Ruth St. Denis, a white woman "inspired" by Hindu teachings, spent her life choreographing and performing dances and productions based on her own interpretations of the East.[84] St. Denis's career and success demonstrates that in many ways Southeast Asian culture and the perceived mysticism and spirituality that marked it was desired by American audiences despite the cultural background of the performers.

One of the few and unfortunately long-lasting examples of brownface and Indian representation is Apu, in the iconic, long-running animated series, *The Simpsons*, as the stereotypical Quickie Mart owner who is voiced by a white man imitating a terrible Indian accent.[85] Creators of *The Simpsons* follow a longer history that mirrors the history of Hollywood desiring stereotypical depictions of Chinese, Japanese, and African Americans, outside of persons from the culture. In other words, Hollywood embraces brownface but not brown people. Peter Sellers played Hrundi V Bakshi, an odd dinner guest in *The Party (1968).* In *Short Circuit (1986)* and *Short Circuit 2 (1988),* a young and white Fisher Stevens plays Ben Jabituya, an Indian robotic engineer who becomes increasingly uncomfortable with how the government is mobilizing his work. Ironically, historically speaking, actors with Southeast Asian heritage needed to hide their backgrounds to secure work. Actress, Merle Oberon, hid her Indian roots by

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[83] Altman, *Heathen, Hindoo, Hindu*."
[84] "Ruth St. Denis," Jacob's Pillow, https://www.jacobspillow.org/about/pillow-history/ruth_st_denis/.
[85] Deconstructing the problematics and pervasiveness of Apu is actually the focus of a documentary by Indian American comedian Hari Kondabolu and features comedians like Aziz Ansari and Hasan Minhaj.

lying about her heritage, claiming that she was born in Tasmania. Indian actor Sabu Dastigir was only 13-years-old when he starred in *Elephant Boy (1937),* where he played an Indian boy whose family had an elephant. However, in his subsequent roles, he played an Arab, and even a Native American. Within the context of Hollywood, brownness was interchangeable and therefore marked most definitely as nonwhite.

As mentioned in the introduction, the American-born children of Southeast Asians who immigrated to the United States under the landmark Immigration Act of 1965 grew up under the Second Comedy Boom. Thus, the increase in the Southeast Asian population as well as the increasing popularity of their comedy resulted in many up-and-coming stand-up comedians. In this next section, I highlight several important figures whose presence and talent helped to usher in greater representation for Southeast Asian Americans in Hollywood. Unlike my previous section on African American comedy that focuses exclusively on stand-up comedians, this list also includes comedic actors. Because Southeast Asian American stand-up comedy is still relatively young, it is important not just to note the stand-up stars but the comedic actors too, as they played an important role in increasing the opportunities available to all Southeast Asian Americans in the industry.

Kal Penn (1977 – present)

A first generation Indian American, Kal Penn (born Kalpenn Suresh Modi) hosts a diverse resume that intersects the entertainment industry and the political realm. The New Jersey native rose to fame with his role as Kumar Patel in the now-classic stoner flick, *Harold and Kumar go to White Castle* (2004). The film was so popular that Penn went on to star in two more, making history as the first Hollywood franchise with Asian American protagonists.[86] The

[86] Stefan Milne "Is *Harold and Kumar Go to White Castle* Actually Important?" *Seattle Met*, Apr 17, 2019, https://www.seattlemet.com/arts-and-culture/2019/04/is-harold-and-kumar-go-to-white-castle-actually-important.

films challenged model minority stereotypes in unexpected ways as the characters' affinity towards marijuana, and the hilarity that comes from their pursuit of it, complicates our interpretation of them as model minorities.

In addition to helping further expand inroads for (Southeast) Asian American actors, Penn also actively volunteered for Barrack Obama's presidential campaign. He was later offered and accepted a position with the Obama administration and served as the Associate Director of the White House Office of Public Engagement for a little over a year. He also served on the .[87] Penn has leveraged his celebrity and his knowledge in the political arena helping to increase opportunities and equality for Southeast Asian American actors as well as everyday citizens.

Aziz Ansari (1983 – present)

Like Henry Cho (sans the twang), Ansari was also born and raised in the South – North Carolina to be exact. And like Cho, he uses the space of the stage to challenge preconceived notions of what it means to be American and what it means to be Southern. In fact, these concepts, along with racism, constitute a large portion of his comedic material. Marked by satire and prodding examinations of the seemingly mundane and the spectacular, Ansari's performances are deep investigations into our culture and our practices that often reveal contradiction and ridiculousness.

Ansari started his career in the early 2000s, and filmed his first recorded special in 2010. With a total of four one-hour stand-ups Ansari has solidified himself onstage with his nerdy nasal delivery and his insights on everything from racial slurs to popular movies. However, equally as significant is his series *Master of None* (2015 – 2017) which was released by Netflix as one of its earliest original scripted series. Written by and starring the comedian himself,

[87] Ted Johnson, "Kal Penn joins White House team," *Variety* Apr 7, 2009, https://variety.com/2009/biz/news/kal-penn-joins-white-house-team-1118002205/?jwsource=cl.

Ansari plays a 30-something actor trying to get his big break. It has received critical acclaim and earned several awards including three Emmies – including two Outstanding Writing for a Comedy Series (2016 and 2017)[88] – and a Golden Globe for Best Actor in a Television Series (2018). [89] It also helped launch the career of Lena Waithe, a queer African American writer and actor, who wrote and starred in the series and has since gone on to produce several television shows and a film.

With the work of Margaret Cho as a foundation, Ansari continues to complicate the desire to consume Asian Americans in strict stereotypical ways. Instead of relying on the novelty of his intersectional identities of Indian, American, and Southern to garner laughter in its own right, Ansari's comedy offers the intersection as springboard for larger (and humorous) conversations around race and belonging. Rather than deliver jokes that allow white audiences to comfortably consume him, Ansari shifts the perspective to the systems that privilege whiteness at the expense of people of color like him.

Mindy Kahling (1979 – present)

Perhaps best known for her portrayal as superficial and romance-obsessed Kelly Kapoor, on the American version of *The Office*, Mindy Kahling (born Vera Mindy Chokalingam) actually began her career off-Broadway. The actress wrote and performed in *Matt and Ben,* a comedy inspired by her and her roommate's sustained impromptu improvisations on their imagined bromance between actors Matt Damon and Ben Affleck. [90] While this project was the creative

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[88] Kaitlyn Tiffany, "*Master of None* wins Emmy for Outstanding Writing for a Comedy Series," *The Verge*, Sep 17, 2007, https://www.theverge.com/2017/9/17/16324312/master-of-none-emmys-2017-outstanding-writing-comedy-series-netflix.

[89] Shannon Liao, "Netflix's Master of None wins Aziz Ansari the 2018 Golden Globe for Best Actor in a TV Comedy," *The Verge*, Jan 7, 2018, https://www.theverge.com/2018/1/7/16861812/golden-globes-2018-aziz-ansari-master-of-none-best-actor-tv.

[90] Kelsey Klemme, "How Mindy Kaling Paved a Path For Herself and Others in Hollywood," *E! News*, Nov 2, 2019, https://www.eonline.com/shows/peoples_choice_awards/news/1083940/how-mindy-kaling-paved-a-path-for-herself-and-others-in-hollywood.

endeavor that propelled her career, it was birthed from years of studying and writing comedy as she was a member and contributor to many on-campus organizations – improv groups, satire publications, etc. – and a playwriting major. Prior to acting she even performed stand-up. However, her time as both an actor *and* writer for *The Office* is what solidified her position and her influence in Hollywood.

Her presence as one of the few women and minority writers on the show was significant in itself and was initiated through the NBC diversity hiring program.[91] In fact, she was initially only asked to write, but an episode about Diversity Day facilitated an opportunity for her to also act on the show which led to her becoming a series regular. Thus, Kahling's career in itself serves as a testament of how inclusion initiatives serve to create space for talented people of color to shine and challenges narratives about unqualified minorities taking opportunities from more talented (white) individuals. The success of her writing and acting career with *The Office* led to her writing, acting, and (at times) directing her own series on television, *The Mindy Project*. Kahling stars as Mindy Lahiri, a bubbly, pop culture enthusiast doctor. Recently she has written and starred in the Amazon Original film *Late Night* where she plays the only woman in a writer's room for late night television, a premise based on her personal experiences.

Kahling's success is also significant because as a dark skin, curvy woman, she has garnered success in an industry that unapologetically promotes whiteness and slimness as the universal markers of beauty. Essentially, her complexion, body type, heritage, and gender are all things that should have stopped her career in its tracks. However, because of her talent and her pervasiveness, it instead shapes her material and becomes the fodder for her onscreen characters.

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[91] Hadley Freeman, "Mindy Kahling: 'I was so embarrassed about being a diversity hire,'" *The Guardian*, May 31, 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2019/may/31/mindy-kaling-i-was-so-embarrassed-about-being-a-diversity-hire.

She acts on the difficulties in navigating an industry, and a world at-large, that is committed to her erasure.

An Interrelated Fate

This chapter begins with several quotes from Wilson's essay where he writes to create a sense of sharedness of struggles between black and Arab communities. By asserting that Black persons experience a sort of Orientalism – which is to say an equally damning yet nuanced version of othering that renders them as "less than," this chapter (and my project as a whole) does similar work. By contextualizing the historical and contemporary sociopolitical climate for African and Asian Americans, I highlight the dehumanization that traumatizes us all due to the infallible reign of white supremacy. This chapter takes up the critique of Said's monumental work mentioned in the second quote, by focusing on the ways in which African and Asian American comedians use their performances to assert belonging, complicate stereotypes, etc. I highlight the ways in which persons of color have made, sparked, and opened space for change. Ultimately, this chapter (and my project overall) brings together seemingly disparate communities with their own complicated and nuanced relationships to underscore modes of resistance and to build bridges among communities. The intersections between African and Asian American stand-up comedy and its relationship to the entertainment industry serve as examples of the power of narratives, the way they shape our realities, and how we can use our voice, at times, to alter the perception of others in society and to assert belonging.

CHAPTER TWO

PERFORMING DOUBLE CONSCIOUSNESS IN STAND-UP COMEDY: A PRACTICE OF ARROGANT AND UNASHAMED PERSONAE IN THE WORK OF DAVE CHAPPELLE AND GINA YASHERE

In one of his three specials of 2017, *Equanimity,* Chappelle walks onstage, vape in hand, sporting a corduroy shirt with his logo – a stylized 'C' – stitched to his muscular shoulder. This same logo appears in the film's opening along with images of Washington D.C., the Warner Theatre, and photos of a young Chappelle, all set to the sound of Roberta Flack singing, "Killing Me Softly with His Song." The intro to this 2017 performance uses this song to pay homage to Chappelle's first one-hour special, *Killin' Them Softly*. However, the Chappelle before us now is completely different from the one circa 2000, who graced the stage with oversized clothes draping a then very lanky frame, a little wetness still behind his ears. A lot has happened in 17 years. And, as indicated by his attire, attitude, and the $60 million-dollar paycheck he received from Netflix to produce three exclusive specials, Chappelle knows it too. Like many others before him including his comedic godfather, Richard Pryor, the performer had to reconcile himself to a stage, and an industry, founded on his exploitation. The comedian decidedly returned to this conflicted platform with an air of confidence - arrogance even. Fed by his desire to prioritize his own laughter, the comedian seemingly finds joy in his self-induced snickers that he generates at the expense of shocking his audience from one moment of discomfort to the next. The power to emotionally manipulate audience members is not a new dynamic to live performance, but it is a complicated one when yielded by a comedian of color, whose ancestors and relatives were sold, mocked, and demeaned on the very stage upon which he stands. This

chapter will examine the way that comedians Dave Chapelle and Gina Yashere use their platforms to address this problematic past and influence its promising future.

Black persons in America first appeared on stage "clothed" in remnants of burlap sacks, feet and hands in shackles, as they were forced to help sell themselves on the auction block. Despite being torn from their loved ones and crushed into submission via backbreaking labor, whips, and rape, enslaved black persons would have to appear jovial, healthy, and agreeable. In this version of performance, pain was masked, often under the threat of further violence so that white masters and buyers would feel at ease paying top dollar for passive bodies.[92] Blacks also began to appear onstage, symbolically, as white persons in blackface imitated them, painting them as dimwitted, docile, mischievous, sub-humans. Mel Watkins recounts examples of the numerous white persons – e.g. Elvis, and Benny Goodman - who imitated black musical expression to the reward of great fame and fortune, and quips: "But none of these subsequent mimetic excursions into black cultural life would be as methodically demeaning or as lastingly damaging as minstrelsy."[93] The degrading portrayals of blackness presented an opportunity for unity amongst Southern and Northern whites, the American born and the white immigrant: "By focusing on and exaggerating the supposed earthly peculiarities of blacks, black-faced mimics provided the simple, folksy entertainment white audiences demanded and assured them that, indeed, they were superior to their enslaved brethren." [94] Essentially, through laughter, white audiences furthered exerted their authority over black persons by poking fun at the black condition, a condition made possible by the white heart, mind, and hand. This dynamic morphed

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[92] Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 27.
[93] Mel Watkins, *On the Real Side: Laughing, Lying, and Signifying: The Underground Tradition of African-American Humor That Transformed American Culture From Slavery to Richard Pryor*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 82.
[94] Watkins, *On the Real Side*, 86.

but did not dissolve as actual and not just symbolic black persons (as opposed to not white imitators in blackface) took to the stage. In her text *Bodies in Dissent,* Daphne Brooks illustrates that even in the process of mobilizing performance as self-actualizing art and dismantling notions of both positive and negative essentializations of blackness, performers needed to work within spectacularizing blackness in a way that rendered it less familiar.[95] Ultimately, the early American entertainment industry (minstrels, vaudevilles, and burlesques) solidified a blackness that epitomized white fears and fancies of black persons by way of the stage. They feared that black persons would rape, murder, and torture white persons; they were/are projecting. This solidification was so successful that even today, black performers continue to be haunted by this spectacle of blackness upon stepping into the spotlight.

Stand-up comedy is a uniquely American art form that stems from the country's theatrical practices of vaudeville, burlesque, and blackface minstrelsy.[96] As Saidiya Hartman points out in her canonical text, *Scenes of Subjection*, through her elucidation of what she refers to as "the economy of enjoyment,"[97] these popular forms of entertainment are direct descendants of chattel slavery and are best known for their use of humor to create and propagate demeaning portrayals of blackness. In his comprehensive historical examination of African Americans in the film *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, & Bucks,* Donald Bogle illustrates the ways in which black persons were stereotyped on screen, since the medium's inception. His research highlights the permeation and propagation of white supremacy via films like the White House screened *Birth of a Nation.* Thus, it can be argued that the American entertainment system, informally

[95] Daphne Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850 – 1910*. (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2006).
[96] Jack Kney, *The History of Comedy*. CNN. 2017 – 2018.
[97] Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 34.

known as Hollywood, is an institution with white supremacist roots evidenced even in its contemporary fruit.

With the global popularity of American stand-up as witnessed by the tremendous success of comedians like Dave Chappelle**,** Chris Rock, Deon Cole, and Wanda Sykes, the anti-blackness inherent to these institutionalized cultural expressions is being turned on its head. Historically, the stand-up comedy scene remained segregated even as the genre's continuous objectification of the black body[98] paradoxically oscillated between repulsion and thinly disguised desire.[99] The black body, in this context, functioned as a voiceless symbol, unable to declare his own personhood, his own subjectivity. In a televised roast of Hugh Heffner, comedian Dick Gregory detailed the significance of his groundbreaking performance where he integrated the Playboy Club: "Heffner, when I first met you, you had the courage. When no one was bringing in blacks and minorities [to let us] stand flat footed in America and just talk, he brought me in."[100] In other words, it was a significant thing for a black person to stand on stage, without the aid of tension-relieving props or costumes, without the dancing and singing that put white folks at ease, and say what was on his mind. To be able to air his grievances, offer his critique of a world that socially and legally saw him as less than, was a humanizing and empowering act.

The Gift of Second Sight

The comedians of the African Diaspora are confronted with the racially problematic stage in the pursuit of their slice of the American Dream. Because of their embodiment and their

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98 The Other being defined as anyone who does not fit into the American ideal of the upper-class, white, heterosexual male.

99 Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

100 "Dick Gregory's Roast."

presence on a stage historically designed to exploit and degrade them and their people, black comedic performances are curated expressions of the comedian's complex relationship to the industry. So how do they wield their performances to critique the very platform upon which they stand in an attempt to restore a dignity denied them and their people through continuous humiliation? How do they deliver a routine that critiques the systematic inequalities founded by white colonizers and slave owners that continue to impact the lives of black and brown persons across the world? How do they make those same white persons laugh while being condemned or called out?

This question of *how* manifests differently for each comedian and is dependent upon their physical embodiment (body size, gender expression, skin complexion, etc.), geographic and socioeconomic context, and many other factors. However, I argue that these aforementioned identities are key to crafting a nuanced persona, a persona that simultaneously decries sociopolitical amorality and implicates itself within the same problematic structures it condemns. It requires that the comedian operate, however explicitly or implicitly, within an inherited framework of double consciousness. Prophesized by DuBois in 1903 with his publication of *The Souls of Black Folk*, the sociologist coins/defines double consciousness:

> The Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, —a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.[101]

[101] W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black* Folk, (New York: Dover Publications, 1994), 2 – 3.

Recognizing the gift of second sight – the seeing of oneself both through the knowledge of self and others, and navigating between these differing perspectives at will – is buried by its author underneath rightful preoccupations. The sociologist is particularly concerned with the ramifications of racial trauma caused by the psychic and lived struggles of being forced to navigate a historically constructed paradoxical identity only a few decades post-emancipation. DuBois focuses on the *challenges* of double consciousness in the face of precarious freedom, detailing seemingly insurmountable odds against the Negro and the need to vote as a measure of self-defense.

Thanks to historical distance (over a hundred years post slavery as opposed to Du Bois' few decades) as well as advancements in civil rights, contemporary comedians are able to more fully demonstrate the blessing of second sight. Through carefully curated performance acts that exhibit the emotional and psychic gymnastics of being black in America, contemporary comedians of the African Diaspora are able to not only master but capitalize on their gifts of second sight. I argue that this is done through the focused use of a persona. In this chapter, I will examine the works of African American comedian Dave Chappelle and Afro British comedian Gina Yashere to illustrate how their personal personas are a performance of double consciousness and that they are a direct reflection of the stage as a site of bondage and freedom. I posit that both Chappelle's and Yashere's creation, curation, and embodiment of an arrogant and unashamed persona, respectively, is (1) a performance strategy symptomatic of their unapologetic acceptance of their increase in social and monetary capital; (2) a performed externalization of an internal grappling with DuBoisian double consciousness, and (3) a reflection of the mastery of second sight in which they manipulate and thus capitalize on the white gaze.

Glenda Carpio takes up the criminality of the stage and the methods of fugitivity commissioned by artists and pairs them within the framework of performance studies. Carpio cites slavery as the "originating breach" and proclaims that black cultural expression and embodiment is a process of redressing that breach. "Full redress" – unattainable yet unavoidable – does not and will not look the same for everyone. She writes, "each generation needs to map its own relationship to a breach that has fundamentally shaped the nation."[102] While deeply entrenched in the specifics of American chattel slavery, because of the imperial power of the entertainment industry and the usefulness of media as tool for contemporary colonization, this mapping extends beyond the borders of the United States. So how is a mastery of second sight reflected in the performances and personae of black comedians Dave Chappelle and Gina Yashere? How do their comedic routines function as individual redresses for the originating breach of slavery?

Saidiya Hartman reminds us that chattel slavery is the foundation for contemporary race relations. "Forced jollity" functioned as the white control over black minds and bodies.[103] Black persons were stripped of their rights to exert complete agency and/or express subjectivity. The use of the black body and its laughter and smiles generated the "economy of enjoyment," the incestuous dynamic that "justified" enslavement, where slave owners conjured joy by demanding it and then claimed black persons were content, happy even, in their position as property.[104] This dynamic dictated how white folks *at-large* treated black folks, as it extended beyond the plantation. Hartman also introduces the problematics of the stage, including the auction block. Because vaudeville, a genre filled with degrading portrayals of blackness is the progenitor of

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[102] Glenda Carpio, *Laughing Fit to Kill: Black Humor in the Fictions of Slavery.* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2008), 8.
[103] Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 27.
[104] Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 27.

American entertainment, "when one is considering the crimes of slavery, the popular theatre is just as central as the courthouse."[105]

Through his own performance, African American comedian Deon Cole offers a poignant look at the mobilization of second sight as he performs his quotidian mastery to elucidate its utility and existence for his mixed audience. In his one-hour stand-up special framed as a seminar, Cole instructs his audience on topics such as dating, self-esteem, and most notably managing one's blackness. Prior to commencing his lesson, he cautions: "White people I'm bout to say a lot of stuff you not gone like, but just sit there and take that shit, alright? And women I'm gone say a lot stuff you not gone like, but if you take heed into the shit I say this evening, I promise you when you leave here, you gone be a better bitch."[106] With these opening lines Cole parallels his comedic performance with that of an educator. His teaching method consists of seemingly unfiltered claims based on personal observation. While rhetorically rough and possibly painful to hear (at least for some) his method serves to improve the lives of his audience members or his "students." Cole, who can be likened to an adroit educator, mobilizes his pedagogical skills to craft a parable that communicates across varying levels of cultural competency – which is mastery of second sight.

Like most comedians, Cole offers a more colorful, fictionalized telling of semi-autobiographical material where he uses his imagination to push his black interiority to the forefront. Cole begins his lesson on "managing your blackness" by opening with a declaration directed towards audience members that, "Black people can't be black *allllllll* day long." Inspired by his own experience travelling on a plane full of old white people, Cole details how he

[105] Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 27.
[106] Deon Cole, *Cole Blooded Seminar*. Comedy Central, 2016.

uses his "manages his blackness," or rather exerts his mastery of second sight, to ensure comfort during his flight:

> There was a middle seat open next to me and I ain't want none of them sitting there talking to me the whole damn flight…So I had to turn my blackness up. So I reached into my bag, pulled my baseball cap, put it on sideways, put my sunglasses on, Put my headphones on turned that shit up real loud. I was like [singing and dancing] 'Kill these niggas, all these niggas. Kill these niggas.' Didn't NOBODY sit next to me. They was sitting on each other laps, before they came to this seat [pointing to his side]. Soon as they closed the door and locked it I was like, 'Hooo,' took all that bullshit off and pulled my Sudoku book out, and was like [mimics filling out the puzzle book, looks up and mouths counting, as in deep thought, pushes invisible glasses up higher on his face]. Gotta manage your blackness.[107]

Cole is able to capitalize on the limitations of the white imagination when it comes to black being and avoid being cramped on his flight. Cole knows that the hip-hop loving black man often and quite erroneously communicates to white persons a violent, loud, and overall unpleasant person.[108] Thus, he uses costume, movement, and rhetoric to perform a character that he knows the white persons on the plane will find distasteful and avoid. They are fearful that his performance of anger will result in violence against them; it is arguably a projection of white guilt. Once he achieves the desired result – an empty seat – he discards the act and its accoutrements. He rids himself of the "bullshit" and settles into his actual routine of quiet puzzle solving, a mode of being almost in complete contradiction to his performance, but one that articulates a truth about his understanding of himself. The hoots and screams from the audience members serve as significant interjections confirming that Cole is articulating a truth about his black experience that resonates with a large portion of his "classroom." While Cole labels this performance an exercise in "managing your blackness," I posit that Cole is using his gift of

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[107] Cole, *Cole Blooded Seminar*.
[108] Which is intriguing as young white men are the top consumers of rap and hip-hop.

second sight to inform his performativity of blackness, to exert his will into existence, and to manifest his desires in a world founded on his exploitation. Ultimately, Deon Cole's comedic routine demonstrates that black performativity – the use of rhetoric, voice, energy, and spirit – functions as a language by to articulate the gift of second sight.

In this bit, we watch Cole inform white audience members of the linguistic and physical code switching performed by black persons depending on context. He even posits that because of this code switching white persons are restricted from truly witnessing the variations of black personalities and are left to process only what black persons choose to portray. This carefully curated performance of identity by black persons coupled with the already existing stereotypes of blackness render most white persons with a myopic view and/or understanding of the multiplicities of black personality, being, and humanity. Second sight provides black persons, and in this case black comedians, with a tool to invert the power dynamics inherent in Manifest Destiny, which makes no distinction between geographic or corporal real estate/colonization/empire, by capitalizing on the loopholes in its ungirding logic. In other words, black comedians, like their enslaved trickster ancestors, are able to weaponize white-rendered expectations of black being and behavior for their own benefit. When (re)performed on a stage, the duality of double consciousness, more specifically second sight, becomes further mediated as the stage itself presents its own duality, as it serves as both a site of freedom and bondage for black occupants.

Chappelle's Shift in Persona - From "Naïve" Race Explorer to Arrogant Embodiment of the American Dream

Dave Chappelle was last seen in the limelight abruptly departing from his critically acclaimed, *Chappelle Show*, an endeavor that solidified his spot in history with *Season 1*

Uncensored becoming the "top-selling TV-to-DVD set ever, with nearly 3 million copies sold since its release in February 2004." [109] Chappelle is a long way from his *Killin' Them Softly*, a performance in which the comedian employs naivety as a technique for exploring his position in the world as an everyday young black man. He is no longer just Dave Chappelle the man, but rather, Chappelle the brand. Thus, both the mirrored usage of Roberta Flack's song and his hiatus -where we were left with little to no means of consuming new content from the comedian - acts as an invitation. We are encouraged to take a comparative look at Chappelle's new material and his first special to see what, if anything, has changed.

The absurd, silly tone that permeates *Killin'' Them Softly* has been replaced by an arrogant performance of authority that centers his wealth and fame. In *Equanimity,* Chappelle describes his experience voting as a resident of Ohio in the 2016 presidential election. He arrives at the polls in his Porsche, declaring the "Obama years were very good to me." He joins the "long line of dusty white people" and waits to cast his ballot. Despite declaring these working-class persons as his least favorite type of white people, Chappelle explains:

> I didn't see one deplorable face in that group…they felt like decent folk…not to sound fucked up, but I felt sorry for them…I know that rich white people call poor white people - trash. And the only reason I know that is because I made so much money last year, the rich whites told me they say it at a cocktail party. And I'm not with that shit…And I stood with them…And I listened to them…say naïve poor white people things. [Imitating white rural accent] 'Man Donald Trump is gonna go to Warshington and he's gonna fight for us.' I'm standing there thinking in my mind, You dumb motherfucka. You. Are. Poor. [pause] He's fighting for me.[110]

Even in the introduction of this bit, Chappelle flagrantly displays the fruits of his wealth by explaining that he drove his Porsche, a luxury vehicle, to the polling place. Chappelle delicately balances the humanity of the dusty white people and his wealth, by countering the then

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[109] Gary Susman, "New 'Chappelle' DVD is fastest-selling TV disc ever," *Entertainment Weekly*, June 1, 2010. http://ew.com/article/2005/06/01/new-chappelle-dvd-fastest-selling-tv-disc-ever/.
[110] Dave Chappelle, *Equanimity*. Netflix, 2017.

popular declaration of Trump supporters as deplorables, a narrative employed by Hillary Clinton. However, Chappelle manages to allow them their personhood while deconstructing their illusions of white privilege under a relentlessly capitalistic president. As explained by columnist Matthew Love, "Rather than point out the obvious racial divide, however, Chappelle implicates himself in a class war."[111] Chappelle embraces his wealth and all the problematics therein and in doing so offers a complicated scenario where no one is left without critique.

Despite its unapologetic nature, Chappelle has constructed an externalized performance of double consciousness. As coined by DuBois, double consciousness is the trauma experienced at the attempt to deal with the question of, "how it feel[s] to be a problem." [112] This results in a "two-ness – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body."[113] In Chappelle's case, the comedian grapples with both his position as a black person - an identity that has historically been subjugated – and his American identity. It is important to note, however, that his American identity is the complete fulfillment of the American Dream – fame and fortune. Thus, the tension already inherent in an African American identity is further challenged by his status as a member of the upper class.

In the Age of Spin, the second performance of his 2017 three-part special, Chappelle's transcendence of his blackness by way of his radical acceptance of his class is manifested in his embodiment of the white figures who served as subjects of critique in his earlier standup. In one bit, Chappelle exits a club a little wobbly and bumps into a friend who insists on being his designated driver. Soon after hitting the interstate the pair eventually spot the blue and white lights of a police car in the rearview mirror. Chappelle informs the audience: "Now, I should tell

[111] Matthew Love, "The 11 Best Jokes From Dave Chappelle's New Netflix Specials," *Vulture*, http://www.vulture.com/2018/01/dave-chappelle-bird-revelation-equanimity-best-jokes.html.
[112] DuBois, *Souls*, 3.
[113] DuBois, *Souls*, 3.

you, the friend that was driving me was black, which really doesn't have anything to do with the story other than to let you know there was fear in the car. Not my fear." Chappelle notes the shared/cultural fear that black persons have of police as expressed through his friend, and he immediately counts himself out of it. His social capital, his fame, seemingly has resolved his fear as he continues, "I'm black, but I'm also Dave Chappelle. So, I figured, you know, shit will probably be fine." This anecdote acts almost as a complete inversion of a similar bit in *Killin'' Them Softly*.

With his newfound confidence and overall lack of fear in the face of interacting with the police, 2017 Chappelle embodies the figure of his white friend, Chip, in *Killin'' Them Softly.* Dave sits in the passenger seat enjoying his high as his drunk white friend, Chip, zigzags down the street attempting to race an unknowing car. Dave is so afraid that before the officers even approach the vehicle, he begins to spread his (butt) cheeks. This vocalized gesture is both a homage to Pryor and a refrain that he uses throughout his special to communicate both the fear that pervades black persons when interacting with law enforcement and the officers' inhumane, injurious, and at times fatal treatment of people of color. Instead of asking them for identification, officers violate black persons with degrading strip searches for the smallest, and often fabricated infractions. As Dave retells the ways in which his fear manifests, he notes the unbothered nature of his white comrade, Chip, who "didn't even turn his radio down. Isn't that weird, a little bit? I mean you get pulled over, wouldn't you turn your radio down? Nobody wants to get their ass beat to a soundtrack and shit." Dave was so sure that his fear was warranted that it is fair to say, that had he been the driver, he would have turned off the radio as he was certain that the traffic stop would not go well and would not want to relive a police beating whenever triggered by a specific song. However, in *The Age of Spin*, a Chappelle who

previously quivered at the pending interaction with police sits in the passenger seat completely nonchalant as his *black* friend is placed under arrest. Chappelle comments on the ordeal, "The body language of the arrest looked good. Just talking. So, then I started fucking with the radio. You know a traffic stop is going good if you're listening to the radio when someone else is outside of the car." Chapelle-as-Chip is no longer frightened or even concerned with the fate of his friend who is being placed under arrest. The comedian has seemingly transcended the black cultural reality of fearing the cops.

Chip, despite being intoxicated and speeding, evades repercussions by claiming to the police officer, "I didn't know I couldn't do that," – a declaration that befuddles young Dave, as he was unaware that such an argument could be successfully presented to a police officer. Much as Chip enacts a performance of ignorance, Chappelle, now a wealthy celebrity, ensures his own "safety" through a curated performance. However, whereas Chip feigns ignorance, Chappelle performs a venomous alignment to white authority through the rhetorical beating of his black friend. After expressing selfish concern for his own fate once his friend is put in the back of the squad car, Chappelle narrates: "And the police walked up to the window. 'Mr. Chappelle, we had to arrest your friend. He refused to take our breathalyzer test.' I said, "That motherfucker. Not complying? That's odd. So, officer, what's gonna happen to me?' 'You're fine. We're just gonna have to ask you to step out of the car so we can impound the vehicle, and we'll arrange for you to have a ride home.'" Chappelle uses profanity to perform caustic/acerbic incredulousness, lampooning his alleged friend who was arrested in an attempt to protect Chappelle from the consequences of drunk driving. This intense response, when compared to the aforementioned uneventful arrest and the officer's calm and respectful tone seems paired with the comedian's

own confession of fearlessness upon being recognized by the cops, renders his decision to lambast his friend unwarranted, unfounded, and unnecessary.

Chappelle uses the figure of Chip throughout his 2003 special as a way to explore the problematics of race. He highlights Chip's aggressive nature of talking with the cops as a humorous display of white privilege. Chip's actual violation of the law, drunk driving, serves as a contrast that highlights the white supremacist, anti-black nature of our "democracy." Chappelle also refrains "sprinkle some crack on em" throughout this special to consistently comment on the corrupt nature of law enforcers who wrongfully murder black persons and cover it up. In his routine cops hit and kill a black person, murder a black man who attempts to converse with them while high on marijuana, mistake a man for a thief and take his life in his own home, and cover their tracks with crack. These commentaries on race are what define his persona as a naïve racial explorer. This is completely different than Chappelle's current tone, where he calls his black friend a "motherfucker" to a white officer of the law. This new arrogant persona can mean one of two things: (1) that despite declaring himself safe within the comfort of his fame, Chappelle is in fact fearful of his interaction with the police, or (2) he is positioning himself as an utterly selfish sellout as a means of sacrificing himself as a site of class critique. While I argue that there is space for both, this chapter is more of a mediation of the latter point as it offers a space to chart the trajectory of his art form and the external influence that money and fame have had on his style.

In her 2007 book, *Laughing Mad*, Bambi Haggins explores and remarks on the aesthetics of what she terms post-soul baby comedians – those born after the black power movements. By comparing Chappelle's stand-up with his sketch comedy, Haggins denotes the process and function of the post-soul black comic persona. Publishing prior to his more recent 2017 Netflix

specials, Haggins notes Chappelle's comedic persona is informed by his "identity formation in predominately black and predominately white spaces…enjoys a sort of dual credibility – the comic persona is infected by both the Afro-centrism of the black hip-hop intelligentsia, and the skater/slacker/stoner ethos of suburban life. This dual cred allows him to speak for and to Gen X and Gen Y subcultures in both the black and white communities."[114] Haggins is in fact positing that Chappelle has been able to cultivate his gift of second sight in part due to his presence within both black and white communities, particularly in the role of wealthy celebrity.

It is inarguable that the Dave from 2003's *Killin' Them Softly* is different than the Chappelle before us. He is no longer the unidentifiable "everyday" black man, so he makes no efforts to feign having the same interactions with the law as he once did or as many non-famous black persons do. But again, with so many alternate ways of approaching this evolution, Chappelle chooses to boast about it.[115] It is an extreme acceptance of his new reality that often communicates a transcendence and newfound importance. He feels like he is better than we are.

Chappelle's (relatively) new socioeconomic identity, while not invested in the politics of respectability or mimicking the expressions of whiteness – e.g. speech, dress, artistic taste – is directly addressed to capital. In order to maintain a certain level of income as an entertainer in America, you must have a majority white audience. In order to maintain a white majority audience, you must be able to craft your critique so that it is nestled in tension relieving laughter, so to not offend them too deeply, as Chappelle states after calling out Trump's

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[114] Bambi Haggins, *Laughing Mad: The Black Comic Persona in Post-soul America*. (New Brunswick: Rutgers Univ. Press, 2007), 179.

[115] Chris Rock, *Tamborine*, Netlfix, 2018. This is very different from how Rock addresses police brutality against black persons in his latest special, *Tambourine*. In this stand-up he addresses his relationship to law enforcement as both a black man and a famous entertainer. He presents and dispels the myth that fame protects from police brutality: "I'm only famous from like 5 feet away. Nigger. Nigger. Nigger. Nigger. Nigger. Oh it's Chris Rock." Rock, unlike Chappelle, attempts to close the distance between two seemingly polarized identities – black and famous – which increases his proximity to the everyday black persons in his audience. It makes him more relatable.

ridiculous solution to curb terrorist attacks by restricting immigration of persons from countries the government knows have no association with bombings or shooting on American soil. Nevertheless, being intertwined with these systems does not necessarily dictate that you must perform your self-awareness so vividly upfront. So why is Chappelle doing this? This is something about stand-up that necessitates a certain level of authenticity and vulnerability. In order for a comedian to successfully manipulate the emotions of audience members, to elicit and sweeten the laugh he has to be willing to offer his own emotional complexity as a foundation. Chappelle is partly famous for abruptly walking away from a wildly popular and extremely lucrative show to focus on his own personal sanity. Yet he returned 12 years later to an even more financially profitable deal with Netflix. Thus, Chappelle is forced to address his departure, hiatus, and return. However, the need to provide context to his audience and his fans does not dictate the need for an arrogant tone.

Chappelle's creation and adoption of his arrogant persona is a performance of power. The comedic genius uses it to show us that he is not concerned with our demands of him as a performer; nor is he concerned with our (in)ability to understand the intended message behind his performance. To be concerned would mean to never produce for fear of misinterpretation, which is practically inevitable when dealing with predominately white audiences, with no firsthand experience of double consciousness. This is what led him to leave his wildly popular and critically acclaimed sketch variety show. As repeated in numerous articles and interviews, Chappelle, whilst dressed in blackface to make a critique about the mental gymnastics black persons perform to avoid feeding into stereotypes, was laughed at by a production assistant in a way that indicated he was being laughed at and not with. While Chappelle has not returned to sketch, he has to stand-up; is there something about this medium

that lessens this potential? The art form's necessity for performed authenticity and its history of rawness and controversy, imbue the comedian with more authority to manipulate the audience into generating, to a certain extent, the desired laughter. Its openness to improvisation also allows Chappelle the opportunity to explore, correct, or engage with his audience in real time, which makes it understandable as his selected site for return.

Gina Yashere's Unashamed Persona as Justification for Her Pursuit of the American Dream

Queer Afro-British comedian, Gina Yashere, has been crossing the pond for many years, performing for both English and American audiences. She steadily gained success in the UK with appearances in shows like *Mock the Week* and *The Lenny Henry Show.* Since then, she has appeared in numerous British television programs, breaking into the American market, competing in the series *Last Comic Standing* and has since appeared on late night shows like *Conan* and *Jay Leno,* and acts as a British consultant for *The Daily Show* with South African comedian, Trevor Noah. In 2008, Yashere was the first British person to perform on *Def Comedy Jam,* and in 2010 the American cable network *Showtime* premiered her one-hour special, *Skinny Bitch*.[116] Yashere's performances in the United States center on her intersectional identity, her relationship with her "mum," and her fascination with the hypocritical nature of American so-called democracy.

While Yashere's comedic strategies are similar to that of Chappelle's, her positionality within the industry significantly impacts her creation and employment of her comedic persona. Chappelle has reached legend status, and while having to navigate a marginal identity of

[116] Gina Yashere, "Biography." GinaYashere.com, http://www.ginayashere.com/biography.

blackness, the comedian could rely on his identities as a citizen and a man, both of which aid greatly in an American and male-dominated business. Yashere, who is successful in her own right, does not possess the same level of social or monetary capital as Chappelle nor can she assuredly rely on her nationality or gender. Thus, embodying a performative bravado like her colleague would not necessarily translate into fame, fortune, or even laughs per minute. However, by leaning into her status as "talented misfit" she can use "[her] difference as a means of survival, foregrounding and capitalizing on the very stigma that threatens…[her]…existence."[117]

By mobilizing her marginalized positionality Yashere establishes herself as an Afro-British woman to an American audience she assumes is somewhat ignorant of the Diasporic complexities of blackness outside of a heterosexual male context. Adorned in androgynous clothing, sporting natural hair cut very close to her head, the comedian directly addresses the audience: "Some of you look a little bit confused. Did you know there were Black people in England?" She then singles out an audience member, stating: "You look confused, sir. You're looking up at me like 'Is that Idris Elba? What is happening?'" The comedian simultaneously claims and affirms her personhood and its misconceptions all the while illustrating how her identity as a black, queer, masculine-presenting woman is overshadowed and wrongfully attributed to maleness. In other words, she challenges the ways in which the governing practices of patriarchy and heteronormativity in Western culture only leaves space for the one black British star, Idris Elba. In trying to make sense of her positionality she is both dismissed as a British person and as a woman.

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[117] Joanne R. Gilbert, *Performing Marginality: Humor, Gender, and Cultural Critique.* (Detroit: Wayne State Univ. Press, 2004), xi.

Yashere's comedic style is rooted in her desire to challenge Americans' lack of awareness of a larger, global blackness. Performing on a U.S. stage, she balances both her belonging and precarity by expressing her fear that after finally making America her home, under the new Trump administration, she is likely to be deported. This approach forces audience members to confront the U.S. reality that exploits U.S.- American blacks and deports black immigrants like her. At the same time, her performance must avoid alienating her audience. She explains, "I am four out of six things that Trump doesn't like – black, female, immigrant, gay." While she calls out the President directly, Trump serves as a synecdoche, a figurehead of American, and arguably global, white supremacy that actively attempts to erase her, to eradicate her presence in their nations. By conjuring Trump, Yashere builds trust and solidarity with her liberal Los Angeles audience. This kinship is further fueled with her rhetorical bashing of the British by labeling their "ninja racism" superior to all others. She then declares her penchant for "good old-fashioned American racism" which as she explains is found in places like Alabama and Mississippi, regions she actively avoids based on warnings from American films. By citing Trump, Britain, and the American South as the progenitors of racism, Yashere allows her immediate audience to absolve themselves and laugh at their non-progressive forefathers and countrymen. She further strengthens the bond between herself and her audience by illustrating America as her escape and fantasy, solidifying the foundation for the fullness of her unashamed persona to emerge.

Through comedic narratives about her fearful immigrant mum, who uses the threat of accidental death and murder to deter her children from venturing too far, Yashere extends the connectivity between herself and fans by tapping into American's fetishism and exoticism. Coloring herself as the foreign 'Other', though not the apparent intention, she facilitates

audiences' pleasure in consuming herself and her performance as they would an exotic fruit. In a three-prong bit about her mother's "scrapbook of bus and train crashes," Yashere explains the constraints placed on her during her childhood in the name of safety. Whenever young Gina wanted to go on a school trip her mother would whip out her morbid collection of newspaper clippings as justification for her restrictive parenting style and deny her permission to join her class in their excursions. Fans laugh not necessarily as a way of relating to her experiences, but rather at the foreign nature of it all. They find humor in the idiosyncratic yet substantiated ways in which Yashere's immigrant mother's anxieties around raising her children in another country manifest. It, as in Chappelle's case, feels like a question of whether they are laughing at the comedian instead of laughing with her. What seems partly in response to her mother's parenting style, young Gina begins cultivating a strong desire to go to America where, judging from movies and television, the children were having "a great life." By juxtaposing the claustrophobic nature of her childhood with the desirous freedom represented by America, Yashere sets up the United States as a utopia, further appeasing her audience's own sense of superiority and overall greatness. The comedian's tactic of connecting to her audience via subtle finger pointing at the other "bad whites," her childhood as site for fetishization, and buying into the American dream, propels the performer toward the full embodiment of her onstage presence.

Yashere's unashamed persona fully emerges when she is faced with the decision to choose between racial dignity and an overall sense of safety or wealth. Like Chappelle, she incorporates a bit where she contemplates the role of media in the creation and continuation of degrading black stereotypes. In her opening, Yashere quips on the lack of diversity in roles, citing her inability to fit:

> I'm not Hollywood. Look at this. [pointing to herself]…This is not the Hollywood look. There's two looks for black women in

> Hollywood. You either look like Halle Berry or Precious. And there's no, there's no sliding scale. I used to get sent for the most ridiculous auditions when I was in Hollywood. This was an actual audition I got sent for I'm not even making this up. This was the name of the character - Ghetto Hoochie Number 3. I had one line… 'Nigga, it's not yo baby!' I said to my agent, 'I will not say that. I refuse. I will not say it. I got integrity. I'm a black woman – I will not do it. And then I saw the money. And then I was like, 'Nigga, it's not yo baby!' [breaking from her Hoochie character to her as an actor] Do you think I'll get promoted to Ghetto Hoochie Number 1?" [118]

Yashere begins the bit by citing the racist nature of the entertainment industry and how it is not inclusive of complex portrayals of black women. She identifies a binary that jumps from the desirous thin, light skin black woman who served as the Hollywood epitome of desire for many years to a heavy set, dark skin woman whose fictitious backstory includes neglect and abuse. Essentially Yashere points out that there is no space for those who visually and experientially look and act like her – an average sized, queer, black woman. Thus, she uses her experience at a specific audition to highlight the absurd and frequent nature by which these stereotypical roles occur. When Yashere initially learns of her expected lines of dialogue, she actively refuses to participate in the degradation of herself and fellow black women. However, when she is informed of the potential monetary gain, she quickly changes her tune. This is what makes her persona unashamed. Despite leading with her morals and how this role was a violation of them, Yashere makes no qualms about acting contrary to her values for the sake of monetary gain. Not only does she eagerly acquiesce, but she seeks more capital as indicated by her inquiry about a promotion. Audience laughter signals a collective awareness of the negative stereotypes and limited roles for black persons in the media, but if Yashere – a black woman – is willing to play one, then surely the entertainment industry must not be all that unjust. Another

[118] Gina Yashere, *The Stand-Ups*. S2E2. Netflix, 2018.

interpretation includes a laughter that takes away the complicity of white persons in creating and spreading these stereotypes, as so too does Yashere with her willingness to participate.

This bit can also be seen as a playful engagement with racial problems of Hollywood and Yashere's struggles as an entertainer. However, she is once again enticed by the possibility of money. When booked by her agent to perform in Birmingham, Alabama, Yashere refuses. She recalls from her engagement with American cinema that the state is where "good old-fashioned racism" governs the land, renders her presence unwelcome, and destabilizes her sense of safety. However, upon learning how much the gig pays she gleefully acquiesces to eventually be pleasantly surprised. "I'm from England. All I know about Alabama is from your movies. So I wasn't expecting to be staying in no nice hotel. I was expecting to be staying in a shack on a swamp, run by some guy wearing overalls, who referred to me as, [imitating a southern accent] 'Boy!'" This again reifies the audience's identity as "good" – read as not racist – white people, and paints Yashere as amenable, another method of justifying her unashamed persona.

Yashere's slow reveal of her unashamed persona is indicative of both a performance of double consciousness and a mastery of second sight. The comedian, as evidenced by her bit about being mistaken for Idris Elba, is extremely cognizant of her intersectional identity and how it shapes the American audience she entertains. Haggins argues, "in order for the comedic discourse produced by the black comic to be effectively edifying, it must be self-aware *and* self-reflexive – able to illicit thought along with the laughter." [119] If we were to define the term "edifying" within the goals of her stand-up and its relationship to her career and livelihood as a whole, then it would refer to her ability to build her following and obtain the fame and fortune she actively pursues. Thus, Yashere is aware that if she wants to continue to succeed as a

[119] Haggins, *Laughing Mad,* 7.

comedian that she must create bridges for her fans, which can only be done with a keen sense/understanding of how she is experienced by white audiences and how she can manipulate their perception to ensure her desired outcome of fame and fortune. It requires the self-awareness and self-reflection posited by Haggins. This is also known as second sight. Chappelle's sharp deployment of an arrogant persona articulates the comedian's agency and the sense of power he gains from unapologectically yielding it. This greatly varies from Yashere's persona which acknowledges and somewhat acquiesces to the limitations of agency as a queer, black, immigrant woman as evidenced by her decision to seemingly abide by the mantra, "if you can't beat them, join them."

Closing Curtain

In her book *All Joking Aside: American Humor and Its Discontents*, Krefting highlights the relationship between the personae or "commercial auto-ethnographies," audience reception, and capital:

> Personae are continuously plopped into the American marketplace offering a smorgasbord of identities for consumption. The fact that this puts us (read: consumers) in the position of placing a monetary and cultural value on someone else's identity is fascinating as much as it is potentially disturbing. In the case of the comic personae as commodity, what sells and what does not lends commentary about a country that likes to imagine itself as a harbinger of democracy, even as its constituents eagerly declare postracial bliss and pooh-pooh the need for feminism."[120]

Krefting helps us to understand how comedians like Chappelle and Yashere are able to the use their second sight - a deep understanding of how you perceive yourself and how others

[120] Rebecca Krefting, *All Joking Aside: American Humor and Its Discontents*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2014), 7.

perceive you - to develop lucrative personae. Chappelle's arrogant persona sells because of its seemingly paradoxical nature. It is both an olive branch and a shield. On one hand, through his unabashed acceptance of his privilege, Chappelle offers himself as site for the critique of the problematic nature of being a member of the upper class. On the other hand, he performs a self-flagellation akin to a slap on the wrist, which satisfies the need for repentance, but protects from the deeper prodding of external critique that would render him ineligible for monetary gain.

Yashere's unashamed persona sells because it offers her white majority audience a safe distance from their complicity in the creation and dissemination of degrading portrayals of blackness through laughter. Their laughter signals they are aware of the negative stereotypes of black persons in the media, but are comforted that black not just white persons are guilty of perpetuating them. The bridge building that precedes the unveiling of Yashere's unashamed persona is just as important as the persona itself. It allows Yashere to shape the audience's perception of her multilayered marginality from her intersectional identity as a queer, black, immigrant woman, further priming white audience members to miss the sting and the ramifications of her persona and their complicity. White audience members are able to evade responsibility by accepting her critique as mere playful sarcasm.

Through the arrogant and unashamed personae, Chappelle and Yashere have translated their second sight into the ability to emotionally manipulate their majority white audiences into laughing – a technique that translates to into social and monetary capital. These personae and their acceptance encourage us to examine how contemporary blackness is created and consumed within the realm of the stand-up stage.[121] Through close examination we can attempt to deconstruct personae and other comedic strategies to make conjectures about the relationship

[121] This aspect of my research has been greatly influenced, inspired, and developed via conversations with my colleague Nadejda I. Webb whose research triangulates consumption, whiteness, and media.

between specific tactics and financial success. We can also illuminate and track emerging trends in Afro-Diasporic stand-up performances that not only offers us insight into the creative practices of the black comedian, but also increased insight into whiteness and white-preferred black cultural expression. In addition to continuing research on what makes stand-up comedy such a powerful and effective tool for having such difficult conversations about race, these diverse perspective can potentially allow for opportunities to create and identify interventions to further remedy a global entertainment industry plagued by anti-blackness.

CHAPTER THREE
CONJURING COMMUNITAS ON STAGE AND WITH SCREENS

Unlike many other forms of live performance, stand-up inextricably relies on the relationship between the comedian and her audience to sustain its success. If an audience is not tickled by the delivered jokes, they might boo the comedian and, even if she is only mid-performance, the show comes to a halt. The stand-up audience holds a certain amount of immediate power in relation to the actual existence of the show; thus, the comedian must develop a bond with her audience; she must conjure communitas. Each comedian uses a variety of techniques to conjure communitas, some rendered more effective than others dependent upon the comedian's personal style, the particular audience, and even the space. However, given the ever- evolving media landscape, comedians are now forced to take into consideration the ways in which media and technology can be a determinant to or method for conjuring communitas.

Advancements in technology have impacted the essential and delicate dynamic between the comedian and her audiences and subsequently the presence of communitas. Media technology in the hands of the audience member is disrupting the essential relationship between audience and comedian. Show goers use their cell phones to record the bits they see in the space of the comedy club and upload it to social media where the joke becomes spoiled before the comedian can reach the next city. In other instances, the joke, now taken out of context, becomes a site of critique for people who did not experience the show in its entirety. In response, many comedians and comedy clubs have a adopted a new "no cell phone" policy. Comedy goers are required to lock their phones in cloth pouches that can only be opened by a special magnet held by staffers. Essentially, there is already a sense that persons in the

stand-up business are thinking critically about the ways in which they present and preserve their material in a media dominated world. Policies like these are evidence that they are seeking and implementing strategies to ensure that audiences across geographic spaces and mediums are able to experience and/or witness the comedian's conjuring and enjoy the fullness of the show.

It is important to note that this strategic interplay with media goes beyond regulating recording devices. Many mainstream comics from Kevin Hart to Ellen DeGeneres have experimented with the use of digital media in their performances. DeGeneres plays a video clip of meerkats popping out of their boroughs to illustrate a point she makes verbally. Many mainstream comics make use of media technology and media-related content in their performances. Kevin Hart has his audio technicians add a reverberating echo to one of his punch lines to further enhance its comedic effect. In his recent special, Chris Rock jokes about the impact of cell phones on romantic relationships. In addition to embodying a carefully crafted persona and layering the weight of their bits to stratify across a varied audience, comedians are coming to rely on the usage of digital media and mass media related jokes to conjure communitas. However, without strategic implementation comedians run the risk of compromising the audience- performer relationship, which has a direct impact on the conjuring of communitas. In addition to understanding their conjuring methods and how comedians must also be aware of the potential drawback of using digital media as crutch. For the purposes of my argument I use analog media to define the technology traditionally used for stand-up – e.g. microphones and lighting. I use the terms digital media and digital screen media to address technology that is relatively *new* in stand-up, more specifically screens. I use the term media technology to refer to both analog and digital media.

In order to examine the impact media technology relatively new to the genre has on the conjuring of communitas in stand-up and offer suggestions on how to use it to maximize methods, I close read the performances of comedians Hasan Minhaj and Aparna Nancherla. Minhaj and Nancherla are useful examples for several reasons: (1) they are rising in popularity and have a solid presence in mainstream media; (2) their status as marginals, a concept I will discuss at greater length later in the chapter, impacts their methods of conjuring; and (3) they use screens – e.g. Powerpoints, video clips, and images – within their performances. Their performances offer intersectional examinations of the conjuring and presence of communitas within their work. Communitas is dual layered and conjured by comedians most notably through a plethora of rhetorical devices. At its superficial layer, it is the sense of interconnectivity often elicited through the recalling of shared experiences. It is also prompted through the presentation of human emotions in a way that offers multiple entry points by which audience members of diverse backgrounds can access the interconnectivity by understanding the feelings brought about by the comedian's stories. On a deeper level, communitas ushers us beyond understanding and challenges us to reimagine things as they are and more of how they can be.

I begin my argument firstly by citing and analyzing Hasan Minhaj and Aparna Nancherla's primary methods for conjuring communitas. I then examine how their conjured communitas is impacted by their usage of screens within their performances. I argue that when used as an object for collective exploration the use of screens in stand-up performances work to heighten communitas. I also contend that communitas is (1) a sense of sharedness, an experience of interconnectivity and (2) an ignition of the practice of reimagining that then translates to the outside world. With the incorporation of screens in mainstream stand-up, these foci can help us

better understand how to strategically center communitas, as it is crucial to the audience-performer dynamic within stand-up.

Unpacking Victor Turner's Communitas

Anthropologist Victor Turner coined the term communitas to make a distinction between community in order to "distinguish this modality of social relationship from an 'area of common living.'"[122] Thus, communitas was birthed as a way to more accurately describe the bond formed between individuals undergoing rites of passage within the African tribes studied by Turner. The anthropologist seems to be most concerned with the application of communitas as well as its relationship to his other concepts, which has made obtaining a clear-cut definition of the term from his text no simple task. For the purposes of this chapter, where I trace the methods of conjuring communitas present within selected stand-up performances, understanding communitas in relationship to structure is most useful. Essentially, communitas is, "a spontaneously generated relationship between leveled and equal total and individuated human beings being stripped of structural attributes…"[123] In other words, communitas is a process by which societal structure (ranks, class, status, etc.) is suspended and a space for a sort of pseudo universality rooted in the human experience can emerge; as such a sense of sharedness is created in the space of the theatre based on the experiences outside of it.

It is important to note that Turner references different modalities of communitas, some of which are not dependent upon spontaneity. In fact, he explains, "My focus here is rather on cultural – and hence institutionalized – expressions of communitas, communitas as seen from the perspective of structure, or as incorporated into it as a potentially dangerous but

[122] Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure* (New York, Aldine Transaction, 2011), 96.
[123] Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1974), 202.

nevertheless vitalizing moment, domain, or enclave."[124] At first read it appears that Turner offers a contradiction; on one hand he seems to assert that communitas occurs with the suspension of societal structure and on the other hand it is an institutional structure itself. "Thus, social and cultural structures are not abolished by communitas…but the sting of their divisiveness is removed so that the fine articulation of their parts in a complex heterogenous unity can be the better appreciated."[125] However, the relationship between communitas and structure is not one of a complete dismantling, rather, as previously mentioned, one of suspension of the structure of social hierarchy. If we think about this in relation to comedic acts, in order for communitas to exist there must be (a) a structure to suspend, and (b) a structure in terms of a space and place where conjuring can occur. In other words, without the structure of the entertainment industry and the structure of the individual show itself – a logistical coming together of audience members and performers – communitas could not be conjured. In fact, Turner explains, "Yet, when communitas operates within the relatively wide structural limits, it becomes, for the groups and individuals within structural systems, a means of binding diversities together and overcoming cleavages."[126] Thus, it is the capaciousness of the structure in which stand-up exists – a space, an audience, and laughter-- that allows for the breathing room needed to conjure communitas. Essentially, stand-up requires a comedian, a space, an audience, and laughter, as well as a very loose but promising structure from which audiences have the potential to reaffirm and/or reconsider their worldviews.

I argue that stand-up is a form of institutionalized communitas. As we explored in the first chapter stand-up has a longstanding history within the quotidian and the

[124] Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors*, 243.
[125] Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors*, 208.
[126] Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors*, 206.

entertainment industry at-large. It is one of the most common genres found on Netflix[127] (one of the largest streaming platforms), and it is a popular genre used by social media entertainers looking to carve out a piece of the market for themselves. Stand-up comedians create moments between themselves and audience members that cannot be replicated. Stand-up comedy is its own distinct, lauded, lucrative art form with experts, practitioners, and enthusiasts. It is also a world-within-a-world, often a left-leaning haven, for those bold enough to critique the larger society in which we live.

My application of anthropological theory to stand-up comedy is not unprecedented. Many theatre scholars have used Turner's work to explain important elements of performance studies. As you might recall, in my first chapter I reference Glenda Carpio's use of Turner's notion of the originating breach to cite slavery as such for black creatives and their work an attempt at redress. Other scholars have specifically applied this notion of communitas to theatrical performances. In the introduction to her text *Utopian Performatives*, Jill Dolan uses communitas as a way of describing and examining the "magic" that is present in live performances. Her research is unique in that it draws on this anthropological theory to analyze that "magic."

My intervention is multifaceted. Firstly, by applying the theory of communitas to stand-up comedy, I am examining the blurred distinction between the art form and theatre at-large. Stand-up, while sharing a lot in common with the theatre, is not often seen in the same light; this is despite, comedian Richard Pryor's intentional and innovative use of theatrical

[127] In 2017, it was reported that they released a new special each week and it appears that the trend has continued. Attempting to pin down an actual figure is difficult as Netflix is particularly protective of their statistics and are not required to report them. https://www.theverge.com/2017/3/2/14794042/netflix-comedy-special-weekly-releases-schumer-chapelle-chris-rock

techniques and practices on the stand-up stage that forever altered the genre and made his brand of humor irreplicable and unparalleled. The blurring of the distinction between theatre and stand-up welcomes space for cross analysis; conjectures about one can be used to inform our understandings of the other and subsequently enrich our scholarship of both. In this case by applying the borrowed concept of communitas to stand-up, I can examine the ways comedians, by way of direct address, conjure communitas and not only offer insight on how to direct and/or enhance it within the genre, but how to intentionally conjure it within any live performance. Secondly, since I am not invested in examining or elaborating on the "magic" itself that is communitas (or in other words the presence and or amounts of interconnectivity and reimagining *amongst* audience members), but rather the techniques devised and deployed by the comedians I study to conjure it, I shift the focus within explorations of the audience-performer dynamic from the viewers' experiences to the performer's conjuring. By focusing on the performer, even if we lack a surefire way of detailing the magic that is communitas, we are not prevented from further developing practical ways of conjuring what Turner has deemed, "an indispensable human social requirement."[128]

Applying communitas to stand-up comedy shows us how the art form functions in our individual social lives and the societies we inhabit. Live theatre serves a purpose. Stand-up comedy in particular meets our need for release in the form of producing laughter. Through laughter we process our traumas, dissect our worldviews, and reimagine our collective future. Turner articulates, "Exposure to or immersion in communitas seems to be an indispensable human social requirement."[129] Communitas "bind[s] diversities together and overcoming

[128] Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors*, 243.
[129] Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors*, 243.

cleavages."[130] Communitas, "remains open and unspecialized; a spring of pure possibility as well as the immediate realization of release from day-to-day structural necessities and obligatoriness."[131]

As previously mentioned, communitas and structure share a complex relationship. Communitas paradoxically requires the suspension of one particular type of structure – a social one – and the construction of another – the one created by the comedian through jokes within a designated venue. However, there is a process that occurs outside of the structures of the entertainment industry and the performance itself. It is a process by which the individual comedian sees the structures she inhabits and mentally steps outside of them to examine them afresh. In this space she finds the funny and returns to the structure of the stage to report her findings. Turner calls this state that of liminality – the state from which communitas springs forth.

It is through an intentional entering of a liminal state that the comedian is able to conjure communitas. Like communitas, liminality is complicated by Turner as it is multifaceted and was originally applied as a way of understanding the cultural practices within African tribes. For the purposes of applying this term to the stand-up comedian, Turner's explanation of liminality as representing, "the midpoint of transition in a status-sequence between two positions"[132] is most productive. Essentially liminality is the vacillation between the position of outsider and insider. Comedians manage to inhabit the role of observer through focused study of human interactions and thus take a step back from the very culture they inhabit. In the realm of stand-up, liminality is the purposeful, symbolic separation whereby the comedian distances herself from her cultural

[130] Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors*, 206.
[131] Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors*, 202.
[132] Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors*, 237.

context in order to gain new perspectives on what drives us as humans; she makes us laugh at her uniquely humorous expressions of her liminal revelations. From this distance, comedians can also gain the outsiders' perspective from which they can hinge their critiques. Liminality can also be a comedian literally setting herself apart, limiting her social interactions for a period of time to undergo deep self-reflection that serves as content then used to reconstitute the stage as a liminal space.

In her opening bit for the Netflix comedy series, *The Standups* (2018), an awkward offbeat and seemingly insecure Aparna Nancherla tries to take advice from a woman's magazine and attempts to walk around as if she has a "sexy secret" in an effort to appear confident. Instead of verbalizing the results of her "thought experiment" she instead recreates it. With swinging arms mimicking the movement of walking and an uncertain tone, the comedian informs us, "I always think of it in the middle of street and then it sorta derails from there. I'll just be walking around, I'll just be like, 'Oh, oh yeah. Sexy – Okay, sexy secret. You got a sexy secret. I don't know [pause] My underwear's [pause] got a hole in it [pause] but not in a good place."[133] By reenacting her inner dialogue reflective of her awkwardness and insecurities, Nancherla allows her comedic bit to serve as a pathway by which liminality emerges. Once the space has been reconstituted as liminal, her persona, which we will discuss later in greater detail, is what ushers in communitas.

In addition to offering different modalities of communitas, Turner also notes varying modes of liminality. Turner asserts, "Major liminal situations are occasions on which a society *takes cognizance of itself*, or rather where, in an interval between their incumbency of specific fixed positions, members of that society may obtain an approximation, however

[133] Aparna Nancherla, *The Standups*, Netflix, 2018.

limited, to a global view of a man's place in the cosmos and his relation with other classes of visible and invisible entities."[134] I propose that stand-up up comedy shows can, at times, be considered minor liminal situations. They are moments when people can come together to do a simultaneously individual and collective self-reflection. They are minor in the fact that these instances do not encompass the entire society, but they still call for those present to deconstruct and reimagine our world so we can identify areas in need of revision and potentially posit ways to make change. By understanding stand-up shows as minor liminal situations we can understand the importance of the art form in relation to larger society, as well as how comedians can use their offstage identities and circumstances to inform their conjuring practices and render the space of the theater as a liminal one.

Some comedians are able to mobilize their status as marginals to more readily and/or more uniquely access this state of liminality as in some ways it reflects their forced marginality. Marginals are, "simultaneously members…of two or more groups whose social definitions and cultural norms are distinct from, and even opposed to one another… these would include migrant foreigners, second-generation Americans, persons of mixed ethnic origin… and women in a changed, nontraditional role."[135] The comedians I study in this chapter, Minhaj and Nancherla, are able to borrow from their status as marginals[136] to (1) access liminality, and (2) conjure communitas with audience members based on a shared marginal identity. As a person who has not been fully accepted or included as a part of the dominant culture, "marginals, like liminars are also betwixt and between, but unlike ritual liminars they have no cultural assurance

[134] Turner, *Dramas, Fields, Metaphors*, 239 – 240.
[135] Turner, *Dramas, Fields, Metaphors*, 239 – 240.
[136] Intersectionality focuses on the individual as it emphasizes how a persons identities converge, whereas the term marginal refers to an individual's place in society, or rather how governing structures decenters them and pushes them to the fringes.

of a final stable resolution of their ambiguity."[137] So when a comedian steps outside of his dominant American culture, as a marginal, he re-enters but is never quite a fully accepted citizen, but rather a hyphenated American.

In his 2017 Netflix special, *Homecoming King*, Hasan Minhaj illustrates this marginal status when talking about the joy he felt upon receiving the hottest new toy from his mom: "One year she came to school and brought me a *Ghostbusters* proton pack. The wheelie thing, the backpack, the gun that catches ghosts… Literally shut down Pioneer [middle school]. Kids were losing their minds. [imitating a child classmate] 'What? Saddam Hussein's a Ghostbuster?' 'Yeah, I'm a brown Ghostbuster. Deal with it."[138] Despite declaring his Americanness vis-a-vis his investment in a popular American film, Minhaj's peers are confused by his seemingly oxymoronic expression of his intersectional identity. While young Minhaj's response understands that his identity as both an Indian American *and* a ghostbuster is possible (because the two are not mutually exclusive) the response of his classmates, which reflect that of the dominant culture, is that of impossibility and even danger. Minhaj's perpetually forced exclusion provides him with nuanced perspective from which his comedic material emerges. Minhaj defamiliarizes the familiar and attempts to familiarize the unfamiliar, a technique that reflects his seasons of self-imposed liminality and his incessant, societally imposed identity as a marginal.

Thus far, I have defined communitas, detailing its presence as necessary to produce the laughter that makes stand-up stand-up. Through unpacking and applying communitas to stand-up comedy I have illustrated the role of the comedian in conjuring it and the importance of examining his/her methods of doing such. I have also established the relationship between

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[137] Turner, *Dramas, Fields, Metaphors*, 233.
[138] Hasan Minhaj, *Homecoming King*, Netflix, 2017.

communitas and liminality and the comedian's reconstitution of the venue as a liminal space often influenced by the comedian's status as marginal. The rest of the chapter has been broken into two parts. In the first part I examine how Minhaj and Nancherla conjure communitas through close reading aspects of their performances. In the second section I discuss how their use of screens (PowerPoints, videos, images, etc.) impacts their conjuring. In this chapter, I argue: (1) Some methods of conjuring are more effective than others; notably conjuring through persona is more effective than that of stereotype; (2) The usage of media onstage by the comedians can be a technique for conjuring only if the media presented is offered as an object/site for collective exploration and not a replacement for comedians' rhetorical analogies or gesticulation of their bodies.

Minhaj's Stereotypical Conjuring and Persona

Hasan Minhaj is a first-generation Muslim Indian American who, until the age of eight, lived with his father in a predominately white neighborhood of Davis, California, until his mother completed medical school and joined the family in the States along with his little sister. Minhaj had small acting roles before landing a gig as a senior correspondent for *Comedy Central's Daily Show with Jon Stewart,* an opportunity that propelled his career. He performed at the Radio and Television Correspondents dinner in 2016 and the White House Correspondents Dinner in 2017 where he describes his home network, *Comedy Central*, as "basically an internship for Netflix."[139] This assessment seemingly rings true in that he currently hosts his own show on the streaming giant titled, *Patriot Act*.

[139] Hasan Minhaj, "Minhaj Full White House Correspondents Dinner Speech." *YouTube*, ABC News, 29 Apr. 2017.

Patriot Act blends the styles of late night, stand-up, and TED talks. Minhaj (along with other late-night hosts like Samantha Bee) attempts to popularize a hybrid comedic televisual format. In the first episode of *Patriot Act* the comedian explains bringing his idea for the show to life: "I wanted to make a show that was about culture and politics and the news and I wanted to do it surrounded by iPads…It looks like Michael Bay directed a PowerPoint presentation. It's insane."[140]*Patriot Act* borrows from a lot of different traditions. Minhaj carries his body as if he is performing stand-up. He paces across the stage situating himself in front of various persons in the in-studio audience. However, because he divides his attention equally between his live audience and his at-home viewers, the comics gaze transitions back-and-forth between the members of his front row and the camera.

This genre blending structure is not exclusive to *Patriot Act* but is actually an extension of Minhaj's overall style as seen in his 2017 Netflix stand-up special *Homecoming King*, where the comic uses a souped up stage, with background graphics on a screen to punctuate his humor. *Homecoming King* began as an off-Broadway one-man show in 2015 before being filmed for streaming on Netflix and in the process was rebranded as a stand-up comedy special, which accounts for some of the ways in which it deviates from the standard style of its marketed genre.

Before enacting his primary strategy of building communitas Minhaj's geographical connection to the audience serves as a common and necessary precursor. Minhaj appears onstage in a carefully curated outfit of matching denim shirt and pants without a hair askew on his head or face. His physical presentation is as curated as his performance. Standing in front of a large configuration of aesthetically designed screens, that in many ways serve as his co-stars,

[140] Hasan Minhaj, "Affirmative Action," *Patriot Act*, Netflix, 2018.

Minhaj is met with applause and roars upon appearing before the crowd. The comedian shouts within the swelling cheers, “Davis, what's up? I'm home. I had to bring it back here. Netflix said, ‘Where do you want to do the special? LA, Chicago, New York?’ I was like, ‘Nah, son. Davis California.’”[141] With this declaration, Minhaj connects to the geographic space and subsequently its inhabitants. Essentially, he has returned to his hometown to perform amongst his peers and neighbors. This personal significance serves to heighten the audience’s appreciation of the comedian as well as increase their own sense of importance within the construct of the show.

Essentially, Minhaj’s acknowledgement not only serves to hype up the audience but it introduces them as co-stars within the performance, as their reactions and the interaction between him and one another is what will constitute or create the shared experience of the performance. After this introduction of the audience, Minhaj further solidifies the foundation upon which communitas can be conjured by rooting his audience in an individual and collective present. In a layered bit he announces his one-year wedding anniversary as he condemns the judgmental attitude produced by dating apps like Tinder. Audience members feel more connected to the comedian as he has offered personal information about himself and they feel connected to themselves and one another as they relate through laughter about the perils of modern-day dating. Through the geographic connection, intentional grounding in the present, and other devices, audience members are called to remain active participants as Minhaj’s narrative begins to unfold. Now that the groundwork has been laid, Minhaj continues his conjuring (of communitas) primarily through the use of stereotypes which serves as a form of shared language.

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[141] Minhaj, *Homecoming King*.

Minhaj uses a variation of techniques, including direct address, speaking Hindi without translation, and miming actions, but one of his primary methods for conjuring communitas is his use of stereotypes. Minhaj namely works with the stereotypes of the stern immigrant parent (SIP) and the fresh off the boat (FOB) sibling, represented by his father and sister respectively. His use of stereotypes serves as a common language by which persons across cultures and persons with varying levels of cultural competency can recognize. Minhaj's reliance on the SIP and the FOB stereotypes to conjure communitas results in a re-inscription of stereotypes themselves and a stereotype stand-in of a persona.

Through the figure of his father, Minhaj deploys the stereotype of the stern immigrant parent (SIP) as the antagonist to his hip-hop loving first-generation self. Through the strategic retelling and reimagining of selected childhood narratives, Minhaj constructs his father, the SIP, as a person who evacuates his individual identity to instill within his first-generation son an uncompromising expectation of class aspirations, in part, as recompense for the sacrifice of immigration. Minhaj, describes immigration as the ultimate gift: "Every immigrant father feels like if they brought you to the US...Happy Birthday. Starbucks, Wi-Fi, freeways, happy birthday. No more birthdays. Go be president." According to Minhaj we learn that his father's tools to ensure that he makes the most of this eternal gift are conditional love and, at times, corporeal punishment. The cost is a secrecy that creates a distance and lack of intimacy between father and son.

While Minhaj's father's evacuation of self is directly connected to anxieties around the success and assimilation of his children, his refusal to act outside of the authoritative role leads audience members to believe that he is, in fact, a stereotype. Minhaj's characterization of his father's evacuation of an individual identity is illustrated by the difficulties a young Hasan has in

attempting to bond with him. After revealing what appears to be a hard-won narrative about how his parents met, Minhaj explains, "It's crazy because we know nothing about our parents and out parents know nothing about us. 'Dad, your favorite color?' [imitates his grumpy father] 'Stanford!' 'What? No. No, I want to know more about you.' 'Why? Get into Stanford.'" In this short bit we witness a pre-college age Hasan attempting to bond with his father through learning about his likes. Instead, the teenager is met with a demand. By using the opportunity to offer personal details about himself to instead voice his educational expectations of his son, Minhaj's father forfeits the performance of his individual identity for a future that he views as much more important than his own individual present.

The character of the father seems to hold the belief that performing his individuality will somehow interfere with his child's ability to succeed; there is no space for both. Minhaj offers a different, and somewhat reductive, interpretation of his dad's evacuation: "And I think it's just that, like, immigrants love secrets. Right? They love them. They love bottling them up deep down, and unleashing them on you later when it's no longer relevant. 'Mom's a ninja; Dad's a communist.' Why are you telling me this right now?" Through defining his father's evacuation of an individual identity as "secrets" Minhaj renders his father's coping strategies futile, further flattening and contorting his father into a digestible stereotype. His father, understanding his evacuation of an individual identity as a way of being necessary to ensure his child's success, abandons the tactic. Hasan had succeeded. The father has done his job and can now relax the restraints he constructed to suppress his individuality, which sensibly results in what others may describe as a gushing due to the duration and extent of his evacuation. Minhaj's use of the verb "unleash" describes not only the forceful emergence of his father's evacuated identity, but weaponizes it. Then, in the next breath he undermines his father's release by labeling it

irrelevant. Minhaj's understanding of relevance is, however, relative to his own desires and expectations. The comedian cites the unveiling of his father's "secrets" as irrelevant, perhaps because he has long ago given up on trying to get to know his father and has accepted him as an embodied enigma.

Parental suppression or evacuation of an individual identity is not exclusive to immigrants. Many mothers, fathers, and guardians perform a fractional version of themselves for their children, widening the truth of who they are as their child ages. However, Minhaj's wedding of this common parental dynamic with the expectations of upward mobility, the sacrifice and struggles of being a "foreigner," and corporeal punishment codes his father as a stereotype – the stern immigrant parent. Minhaj's SIP is not unique, rather it is a stereotype borrowed from a long tradition of the foreign other in television and film. Whether it's the model minority, the tiger parent, or the overprotective Middle Eastern father, this is a longstanding, pervasive, and easily recognizable stereotype that perpetuates American superiority and continuously "others" nonwhite immigrants.

It is the recognizability and relatability (through relational proximity) of the stern immigrant parent that conjures communitas within the audience. Audience members who are first-generation or who come from immigrant families more broadly see the manifestations of aspects of the stereotype in the people and experiences of their lives. Those who are not from an immigrant background will not be able to relate experientially but can engage superficially with the stereotype as it is and has been widely represented in the media. Through the inclusion of the stern immigrant stereotype in popular culture those with little to no ties with immigrant communities deduce from the televisual representations that immigrant parents have very high and specific expectations

of their children's behavior, educational performance, and career aspirations. Essentially, every immigrant expects their children to get all A's, attend ivy league schools, graduate at the top of their class, and become a doctor, lawyer, and/or engineer. The immigrant parent, invested in this specific trajectory, holds no qualms about withholding affection, verbalizing dissatisfaction, and using corporeal punishment to ensure their expected outcome. Minhaj's characterization of his father as a stereotype successfully conjures communitas- albeit superficial. Audience members with strong ties to immigrant communities, feel their experiences or those of their loved ones have been validated by the comedian's performance, thus conjuring communitas. Audience members with weak or no ties to immigrant communities are able to lean on the televisual education that renders the stereotype as the truth, ushering in communitas. Those that fall somewhere in between are able to see both, and thus communitas is ushered in based on their intellectual capabilities to see and vacillates between multiples perspectives.

Minhaj continues his conjuring via stereotype in the characterization of his sister as the "FOB in a frock." Minhaj molds his sister, Ayesha, into the FOB which is short for Fresh Off the Boat as a way to connect with his audience. The FOB stereotype is often used to insult newly arrived immigrants who stand out because they have not assimilated to American culture. They are seen as foreigners with weird customs and clothing; despite being (or perhaps because he is) a first-generation American this is how young Hasan views his sister. Minhaj, who is the child of Muslim Indian immigrants, was born and raised in the United States and has adopted many of the customs of his birth country. His sister, born and raised in India until the age of five without young Hasan's knowledge of her existence, has a very different relationship to the United States upon her arrival. As noted by Hasanupon

meeting her, he comments that she is dressed in a stereotypical manner wearing a "quinceañera dress" with a "mushroom cut." The comedian notes her appearance because it is reminiscent of the odd combination of "Princess" and "Toad" from the *Mario* video games; Princess Daisy, a beautiful blonde woman, is adorned in a long, puffy, pink dress, and Toad is a short little creature with a mushroom for a head. He combines the two video game characters to create a visual of his description of his sister, Ayesha, that is displayed on the large screen behind him. Essentially, with the head of an unfamiliar species clothed in ballroom attire, Ayesha stands out as "foreign" to her new American context. She is likened to a nonhuman entity whose attempt to fit into American culture has left her overdressed and subsequently made her stand out even more. Even though she does not fit in, her attempt is admirable.

Minhaj's characterization of his sister, Ayesha, as naïve, innocent, and longing for acceptance further flattens her into a stereotype and conditions audience members to consume her with self-righteous empathy. In most of the comedian's performed stories, Ayesha is actively pursuing acceptance from her older *American* brother. Despite his coldness towards her, Ayesha's youthful naivete compels her to keep trying to win young Hasan's acceptance. In one narrative she excitedly follows him around the playground (and even into the boys' bathroom) affectionately calling out, "Hasan-bhai," a term of endearment with a literal translation of "Hasan brother." In another instance, she senses his jealousy upon her receiving the blue BMX bike he wanted for *her* 5th birthday, a bike that he wanted a few years prior, and offers him the first ride as an olive branch. Young Hasan, unable to control his jealousy, accidentally destroys her bike while trying to ride away from her. Upon seeing the paint peeled from her bike, a confused Ayesha cries, "animé tears of innocence," asking her Hasan-bhai,

"'Why? I gave you the first ride.'" Ayesha is the FOB, the newly arrived immigrant chasing after American acceptance – as represented by young Hasan – which constantly eludes and hurts her. It denounces her in front of its white peers, it destroys the gifts given to her by her parents, and the audience goes, "aww."

Hasan acts out the scene as he simultaneously inhabits the positions of his younger self, his present-day self, and his child-version of his sister. With this complex tripartite embodiment, it becomes apparent that this performed moment is not just a simple retelling, but rather a re-examination as evidenced by the inherent self-reflection birthed from occupying three characters at once. This symbolic re-seeing is indicative of a period of liminality granted by time. The comedian has gained a temporal distance which has influenced his re-creating and subsequently results in a moment where he reconstituted the stage as a liminal space. This reconstitution creates an opportunity for communitas (specifically connectivity) can emerge. In fact this is true for many of his re-tellings, re-seeings, and/or re-creations.

Minhaj's characterization of his sister as the FOB stereotype is a performance for the approval of his white peers. The zenith (or nadir) of young Hasan's jealousy towards his sister comes to a fore on the school playground when he attempts to re-solidify his acceptance amongst his white American peers and shouts at Ayesha, "Hey! You're not my sister! But she couldn't understand English. But she got what I was saying. She starts crying and runs out [of the boys' bathroom]. I was like, 'No!' [dramatic pause] She's going to tell Dad." In order to distance himself from his FOB sister, who represents everything un-American, and thus everything to be laughed at and made fun of, Hasan publicly denounces her. He expresses his severance in English, a language that she does not yet understand, declaring an allegiance to his American identity at the expense of his familial relationships.

This public denouncement culminates after a private one he makes to his parents in the form of anti-immigrant rhetoric that first cites his alignment with his white peers. A jealous Hasan, who up until the very moment of meeting his sister believes himself to be an only child, not only expresses resentment at his sister's existence, but also her inability to fit into American culture. She did not read like an American and as such would become a target of ridicule to herself and her fledgling American older brother. Her inability to "pass" is a source of embarrassment, her existence a threat:

> I hated that brown girl so much…I was like, 'Build that wall.' I was like a little Republican… 'Look, Mom, Dad, let's just be real. Oh my God, these brown people… Oh jeez. Coming into our house, eating our Fruit-Rollups. They don't speak the language. I say we tell them to go back where they came from…[Dad responds] 'You can't say that. We're family.' I'm like, 'No that's you. '…You guys decided to bring over this FOB in a frock.'[142]

While his childhood jealousy is just, his wedding of it to anti-immigrant sentiments serves not only as depiction of his juvenile angst but his preoccupation with non-belonging. Ayesha is not a part of the family and in young Hasan's argument it has nothing to do with the fact that he was not informed of her existence. She does not belong because she is not of the same American culture that Hasan was born into. She is there to take resources – space in his home, snacks from his kitchen– and she does not even know how to communicate in his language, English.

Minhaj's FOB sister conjures communitas on multiple levels. On one level the FOB sister is relatable. Like the SIP stereotype audience members laugh either at their experiences being the FOB or having relatives who functioned as the FOB. Audience members can potentially remember being the "FOB in a frock." Others may be first-generation Americans

[142] Minhaj, *Homecoming King*.

with a non-assimilated/recently immigrated relative who had to deal with the embarrassment at the hands of "Codys, Coreys, and Coles," their peers who "don't understand other cultures." On another level the FOB sister stereotype is recognizable. It is a version of a pervasive stereotype in televisual history. Shows like *Perfect Strangers* were based on the humor of a foreign other's continuous social faux pas because of their ignorance and inability to fit in. The butler character in *The Birdcage, and* the best friend in almost every romantic comedy, are painted as simple foreigners. They are the comedic "Others" to be laughed at.

His FOB stereotype also works to conjure communitas as it offers an inversion that allows for a safe distance from which privileged audience members can laugh. Through the acted-out metaphor that likens anti-immigrant advocates to envious, tantrum-throwing children, Minhaj presents a recognizable political reality that one can either find funny because of its truth and/or ironic because its hateful rhetoric is being weaponized by a person who is usually a target. Minhaj's use of stereotypes fosters an equally superficial form of communitas. It stops short only asking audience members to laugh at the relatability and/or recognition of these stereotypes, instead of pushing them to reimagine them, an important component of communitas.

Minhaj's failure to apply Stuart Hall's technique of "looking through the eyes of representation"[143] when working with stereotypes, results in a superficial conjuring that fails to push audience members to reimagine what they have accepted as truth. The comedian uses the language of stereotype to tap into a collective knowing. By focusing on his childhood as a way of exploring his father's parenting style, Minhaj paints him as the stereotypical stern immigrant parent. From whispering into his infant son's ear, "You better get into Stanford," to slapping him in the face for running around the grocery store, to celebrating his son's birthday by

[143] Stuart Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, (London: The Open University, 1997), 274 – 75.

allowing him to select the bathroom knob, Minhaj's father is a stern figure who doles out conditional love. While Minhaj's stories and character development may resonate with other immigrants in the crowd – validating some of their own experiences and generating a more culturally specific communitas – he does not complicate the stereotype. Thus, while some people are laughing out of personal familiarity, others are laughing at the recognition of a popular stereotype. Minhaj is not operating within the spirit of Hall's technique, which the cultural media theorist defines as a strategy by which a creator's content:

> locates itself within the complexities and ambivalences of representation itself, and tries to contest it from within… It accepts and works with the shifting, unstable character of meaning, and enters, as it were, into a struggle over representation, which acknowledging that, since meaning can never finally be fixed, there can never be any formal victories… this strategy makes elaborate play with 'looking', hoping by its very attention to 'make it strange' – that is, to de-familiarize it, and so make explicit what is often hidden – its erotic dimensions.[144]

Minhaj's use of stereotype is not the work of "looking through the eyes of representation," because the comedian's presentation reflects a calculated superficiality. In other words, the comedian does not perform an introspection that would shift, challenge, or re-present the stereotype itself. He does not play with it in order to expose its roots or to identify the cracks in its foundation nor the materials that brought it into being in the American imagination. His stern immigrant father is a distant disciplinarian with expectations that his son graduate from a top-tier school and go on to be an engineer. His fresh off the boat sister behaves exactly the way you would expect a "foreigner" to –; she dresses poorly, doesn't speak English, and is socially inept within her new American context.

[144] Hall, *Representation*, 274 – 75.

Instead of complicating the stereotypes, Hall's prescribed method for rightfully seeking to escape the problematic binary of positive and negative representation, Minhaj actually relies on their fixed nature, their inherent or popularized meaning to get laughs. By relying on this historical meaning Minhaj inadvertently reinforces the same stereotypes he seemingly wants, but fails, to complicate – all for the sake of laughter. Interestingly enough, he admits to it.

Later on in the special, the comedian informs us that real-life Ayesha hates her brother's stories about her: "Oh my God, Hasan-bhai, you are so melodramatic. You make me sound like a refugee baby to entertain white people." To which he confesses, "That is true. I'm doing that right now. It's not fair, because she's not a refugee."[145] The young Hasan who denounces his FOB sister on the playground for the approval of his white American peers is now the adult Hasan who uses their unique bonding stories as means of gaining approval (in the form of social and monetary capital) from his white audience members. While the venue has changed, the desire and the tactics have not.

Minhaj's failure to employ Hall's strategy is not only reflective of a deliberate desire to entertain white people, but it also results in a stereotypical stand-in of a persona. Amidst contouring the characters of his father and sister, Minhaj attempts to define his persona by positioning himself in relation to his family members. Minhaj's stern immigrant parent (SIP) and FOB sister act in contrast to his "Indian fuckboy" persona, creating a gap that serves as another possible entry point for the conjuring of communitas. The Instagram page for his show, *Patriot Act,* features a photograph of Minhaj from on set with the term "Indian fuckboy" and the following definition superimposed alongside his image: "someone whose traits include, among others, having a lined up beard, obsessing over sneakers, being really

[145] Minhaj, *Homecoming King*.

into black culture; substituting Jay-Z for a personality." Throughout the special, by contrasting himself to his sister and his father, audience members are mainly left with a sense of who the comedian is not, rather than who he is. He defines himself through absence, most notably the ways in which his life deviates from his father's expectations. The comedian did not attend an elite university, but did earn a bachelor's degree in political science. He did marry an Indian girl, but one from a Hindu family, a controversial union reluctantly welcomed by his father upon his sister's passionate behest. He paints himself as the rebel child next to his "foreign-born" sister who learned English and "went to an Ivy League Law school" and "does mergers and acquisitions." Essentially his sister has achieved the dreams set out by her father; in Minhaj's words, "she is the one percent."

When Minhaj attempts to formulate a more comprehensive persona he relies on blackness to do so. Audience members understand factual information about the comedian; he is an Indian Muslim, first generation American who grew up in Davis, California. However, outside of these geographic markers we never get a real sense of him as a person, and thus we are left with a vapid persona that he attempts to fill with references from black popular culture. Upon meeting the sister he did not know he had, Minhaj contends that his father, "brought her out like *Maury* for immigrants. 'Hasan, you are the brother.' I'm like 'No, no!" She was breakdancing." *Maury* is a popular show best known for its paternity test episodes that predominately feature African American guests. The program often showcases a woman desiring a former lover to claim their child. Oftentimes, during the 30 minutes, she breaks down crying and runs backstage upon hearing the results that the male guest is not in fact the father of her child. The man remains on stage doing a victory dance.

As Minhaj eagerly and emotionally awaits the day when his mother joins him and his father in the United States, he likens himself to Drake, using his hands to gesture like the rapper all the while sort of singing his next lines. The fact that these moments, that arguably have the most potential for his persona to shine through, are instead used as a time for him to "prove" his knowledge of black culture and hip-hop is, to say the least, an interesting choice. It seems as if the comedian has taken stereotypes about blackness and inserted them in where a persona should be. In other words, his persona lacks a perceived amount of authenticity as it is not rooted in human emotion rather, superficial interests. As discussed in my first chapter, Minhaj is not the only one to use stereotypically constructed blackness as a medium or a substitute. In fact, in some ways, although not racist and nowhere demeaning as earlier comedians, Minhaj is continuing a prolonged tradition. However, with his substitution we realize that we really do not know much about the comedian other than he is, in part, by self-definition an Indian fuckboy.

Minhaj's persona functions in a similar fashion to that of his aforementioned stereotypes. Its conjuring of communitas is just as superficial as its development. On one level audience members recognize and possibly identify with the nerd who loves hip-hop. However, there is no examination of how the Indian fuckboy came to love rap. There is no deep-dive or explanation of how he developed the love of an art form birthed outside of what many may understand as his own cultural inhabitance, and seems solely to exist as a marker that provides audiences with the opportunity to relate but not reimagine.

Nancherla's Textured Persona as a Critique of the "Ideal" Woman

Like Minhaj, Aparna Nancherla is an Indian American stand-up comedian with a solid and diverse resume in television. As an alumni of the revered improv school *Upright*

Citizens Brigade, she has seen great success writing for *Late Night Seth Myers* and *Totally Biased with W. Kamau Bell.* In 2013, her career took off when she performed a set on *Conan*, where she "became the first female South Asian comic to perform on late-night television — at least, according to her. 'I will say that I and a friend planted this information in the news.'... 'We basically put it out there in the hopes of being corrected — and then we weren't.'"[146]

Nancherla has done voice acting for an animated series, starred in a web series, honed her skills at top-notch improv schools, and co-hosts a comedic self-help podcast. She is probably best known for her role as Grace on Comedy Central's *Corporate*, a comedic series about office life. It is important to note that the comedian really found her stride when she began discussing more of her personal life, specifically her struggles with mental illness.[147] Her willingness to bring more of her offstage self to her performances results in the textured persona that we see on stage. Nancherla's idiosyncratic, feminine persona and her ability to translate it across a wide array of mediums aids the comedian in developing a strategy for conjuring communitas no matter the venue. Her methods are highly adaptable; thus, while examining her 30- minute set in the Netflix series *The Standups* (the same show that featured Gina Yashere) we are not surprised that she uses a persona communicated equally through rhetoric, tone, and body language. Her later introduction of screens (in this case a PowerPoint) is complimentary as opposed to disruptive.

Nancherla's persona is an awkward yet sweet woman trying to make it in today's world. The comedian embodies this by wearing a very plain, yet feminine outfit – a basic

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[146] Ophira Eisenberg interview with Aparna, *NPR's Ask Me Another*, podcast audio, Mar 15, 2019. https://www.npr.org/2019/03/15/703735010/aparna-nancherla-introvert-goes-corporate.
[147] Jesse David Fox, "Aparna Nancherla Resisted Writing about her Mental Illness," Good One Podcast, Vulture, Aug 6, 2018.

floral print dress, with stockings and flats. Her shoulders are curved, her voice high pitched and uncertain. She is representative of the insecure person inside of all of us that emerges whenever situations arise that make us feel intimidated, overwhelmed, etc. We recognize her mastery in her ability to build a persona that simultaneously deploys a unique manifestation versus its universality. We laugh at her idiosyncrasies and with her discomfort, a feeling we know as well.

Nancherla conjures communitas through the creation and performance of a textured persona. Communicated through rhetoric, tone, and gesticulation, Nancherla embodies a socially awkward, anxious depressive persona that conjures in part due to its idiosyncratic nature and the fact that we can relate to it. One of her primary comedic techniques for constructing and performing this persona is self-degradation through verbalization. In her opening, Nancherla informs us:

> I feel pretty good. I recently celebrated the one-year anniversary of a relationship. Thank you for not clapping. No. I noticed the hesitation. Go with it. A year is too soon… Uh, I am what you call a rescue. Like my boyfriend did find me at a kill shelter. So, it really was only a matter of time, but it's fine. It's fine because he is always like 'She saved me.' You know, so, it feels like everyone knows their role in the relationship.[148]

With this opening, Nancherla establishes her character as one who actively battles positive and negative representations of herself, partially influenced by the perception of others. Despite her initially proud tone she does not expect the audience to validate her. Once they fail to do so, she pivots and then mimes their energy, backtracking on her declaration and undermining herself. She begins by declaring that she is happy about celebrating one year with her boyfriend. Then as she starts to explain how they met the audience understands that her elation is in part

[148] Nancherla, *The Standups*.

fueled by what appears to be low self-esteem. By likening herself to a shelter animal she marks herself as undesirable and disposable. But because her boyfriend willingly overlooked her undesirability and disposability, she is then able to celebrate her relationship – one in which is she is unworthy and undeserving.

In addition to self-deprecation, Nancherla mobilizes self-description as another tool for constructing her persona. Immediately following her commentary about being "rescued" by her boyfriend of one-year, she informs the audience:

> I am kinda surprised I met someone. I am, what I would consider, a socially awkward person, and it expresses itself in a lot of different ways. Like I wear my coat a lot indoors, mostly cause I'm cold, but it always sends the wrong message. Like, if you keep your coat on too long at like a party or something, someone is always like 'You gotta take your coat off. You seem uncomfortable and like you wanna leave.' I'm always like, 'That is accurate.'[149]

In this bit Nancherla verbalizes an understanding of herself; she is socially awkward. Unlike her self-deprecation, which carries a judgment, this is a mere statement, a description. By not assigning a binary of good or bad, Nancherla avoids condemning her personality and instead exhibits a certain level of self-acceptance. In doing so, the audience more easily accepts and relates to her, thus making it even easier to find the humor in her foibles and insecurities.

Her tactics of self-deprecation and description are buttressed by her use of her body and tone to act out idiosyncratic scenarios that further illustrate her socially awkward persona. Nancherla explains that she is working on being more outgoing and has been consulting women's magazines for tips and advice. One magazine advises her to appear more confident by walking around with a sexy secret. After failing at the "thought experiment" she decides

[149] Nancherla, *The Standups*.

that maybe it is "too advanced" and instead she should, "work on the secret [and then] build." With arms swinging, she reenacts her revised attempt as she walks down the street: "'Okay. Secrets, [pause] secrets. [pause] What are my secrets? [pause] I don't know. [pause] My email password [pause] isn't [pause] strong enough." As she utters the last two words "strong enough," she deflates. Her knees bend and gravity pulls her arms and torso closer to the floor. She shrinks. She shrivels. Her deflation matches her tone as her whiny voice trails off. Prior to reaching her physical and emotional low point, the consistent pauses serve to indicate the uncertainty present even in her inner dialogue. Despite putting forth the effort, the activity only prompts an interior dialogue that reminds her of her insecurity and reinforces it. Her body movement externally communicates her inner turmoil. In fact, much of her performance is a balancing act between the interior and exterior; *how can I feel confident even if I am not?* The battle between her self- understanding and the external influences is exacerbated by what seems to be a futile attempt to live up to societally idealized and constructed concepts of "woman." She fails to conform to this ideal.

Nancherla uses sarcasm and sarcastic imitation as subtle condemnation of the societally prescribed woman – which reads as the upper-middle-class white woman – who often does not have to the feign confidence, but can construct it based on their positionality as opposed to sexy secrets. Prior to detailing her exercises with appearing to be more confident, Nancherla explains:

> "I'd say the weirdest tip I've ever read was very short and disturbing. This is all it said. It was just like, [imitating a peppy white woman's voice] 'To look more confident when you're walking around, look like you have a sexy secret.' Apparently, some women's magazines are now just like, 'Print this. See if it's words. You know? We don't know anymore. We're tired.'[150]

[150] Nancherla, *The Standups*.

When giving voice to the written advice in the magazine Nancherla consciously decides to increase the peppiness and pitch of her tone. With a stiffened neck, she moves her head from side to side, using her eyebrows to punctuate "sexy secret," her voice becoming even higher at the last syllable of selected words. She effectively imitates a bubbly, dimwitted, Caucasian woman. Because this imitation is in such contrast to not only her persona but her beliefs around the utility of the advice being given, it reads as sarcastic. As she continues, the comedian's sarcasm becomes more obvious as she actively imagines the publishing process of women's magazines. Through her imagined scenario she labels some women's magazines nonsense.

Nancherla's argument extends beyond the pages of women's magazines and is actually a condemnation of the superfluous and unattainable societal construct of "woman." Her bit continues with her advising the audience, despite the stain of her sarcasm, to try the "sexy secret" advice: "It's a valuable thought experiment. It's like when a beautiful actress plays an ugly character and you're like 'Oh I bet she grew a lot. You know? I bet she learned a lot about herself.'" Nancherla's sarcasm switches the butt of the joke from herself to society and its ridiculous gendered expectations. The comedian likens the publication of such advice like the sexy secret to that of Charlize Theron in the movie, *Monster*. Theron is a woman who is beautiful by society's standards and relinquishes her privilege to play an "ugly" woman. Theron's actions are lauded and applauded. We expect playing an "ugly" woman will enlighten her and enhance her inner beauty. She has evolved. However, as subtly pointed out by Nancherla, this expectation is ridiculous for several reasons: (1) her "ugliness" is temporary; she will return to her previous mainstream attractive phase once the director shouts cut; (2) she is financially (and socially) compensated for the "experiment;" (3) the lessons she

is said to have learned are unclear – *It's hard to be "ugly?" "Ugly" women have different struggles than "pretty" ones?*

Ultimately, Nancherla shows us our focus is off. Instead of wondering why it matters that she played an "ugly" woman, we should consider why people are deemed "ugly" in the first place. Through our collective glorification of the actor's temporary theatrical transition from "hot" to "not" we reify the same problematics we are lauding her for "transcending." Nancherla's somewhat subtle satirical tone ironically renders her performance a critique of and dialogue with the archetype of "woman." Through Nancherla's sarcasm we understand her self-degradation to be an internalization of the external voice of society pushing her to conform to set standards and, in the process, reminding her of all the ways in which she does not. We can then understand her self-description as an attempt (at times unsuccessful) to combat the internalized archetype.

Nancherla's use of self-degradation, self-description, and sarcasm are strategies she uses to construct and deliver a textured persona. Her persona is successful in conjuring communitas because audience members are able to latch on to one, two, or even all three techniques. By embodying the insecure woman, Nancherla taps into a familiar archetype to critique the absurdity of the societal concept of "woman" and the difficulty in trying to live up to such a fantastical ideal. By sharing the stage with the ideal woman, Nancherla asks us to reconsider the ways we contribute to the archetype's creation and the ways we have internalized her.

Nancherla's use of archetype is more effective than Minhaj's use of stereotype. Nancherla confronts and dissects the problematic thinking that enforces the societal behavior that serves as the skeleton, skin, and organs of the archetype. Using archetypes (instead of

stereotypes) decreases a comedian's chance of re-inscribing and reinforcing problematic worldviews. World-renown screenwriting teacher Robert McKee explains:

> The archetypal story unearths a universally human experience, then wraps itself inside a unique, culture-specific expression. A stereotypical story reverses this pattern: It suffers a poverty of both content and form. It confines itself to the narrow, culture-specific experience and dresses in stale, non- specific generalities…. Stereotypical stories stay at home, archetypal stories travel.[151]

According to McKee it is Nancherla's usage of the woman archetype that allows for her idiosyncratic representation to garner resonance. The universality of the societally constructed woman is fueled by the pervasive belief that she needs to do everything in her power to become and/or remain beautiful. This idea of the utility of archetype pushes us to think of her persona itself as an archetype. Nancherla's socially awkward and anxious persona works because it is a universally human experience but with her specific nuances (delivery, embodiment, narratives, etc.) situated within a "culture-specific expression."[152] Unlike Nancherla, Hasan Minhaj instead relies on stereotypes. His "fresh off the boat" sister lacks the complexity to tap into a universal human experience, leaving audience members to find their laugh in familiarity of the stereotype. In the moments when he attempts to offer more insight into his sister's personality it is overshadowed by his utility of the stereotype and by his superficial persona.

Essentially, both comedians are successful in conjuring communitas. Through their storytelling and their deliveries, the performers help audience members tap into their humanity and suspend societal structures that cause divisiveness for the sake of laughter. However, communitas is not just about connectivity but it models and encourages us to

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[151] Robert McKee, *Story: Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting*, (London: Methuen, 1999), 102.
[152] McKee, *Story*, 102.

reimagine and challenge our societies, which the reification of stereotypes does not. This is not to say that the entirety of Minhaj's special is completely devoid of this call for us to rethink our world. Those moments, however, do not fall into his primary method for conjuring.

Nancherla and Minhaj's Conjuring Through Screens

Both Nancherla and Minhaj use screens to recreate the liminal within the space of the theatre needed to conjure communitas. Nancherla does so through the collective explorative of a curated piece of images and text she presents, whereas Minhaj does so through applying a hypermediated persona to a hypermediated setup; everything from the duration of the images on screen to the location of the lighting is preplanned. This intricate performance of the screens eats away at the illusion of improvised (or at the very least, loose structure) that is at the core of stand up.

Minhaj primarily uses screens to (1) aide him in setting the visual and emotional scene, (2) visualize the rhetorical, (3) and mimic the spoken. While exciting and engaging, this particular use of video and images, and the scale to which they appear results in a hyper-mediated ecosystem that often interferes and clouds the immediacy inherent to (conjuring) communitas. Nancherla uses images and displays text as a site for collective exploration which facilitates an interaction between herself and her audience, asking them to engage in the communitas practice of imagining and reimagining. Her performance serves as a model for how screens can be used within stand-up whilst keeping communitas intact; Minhaj's use of screens functions as a cautionary tale of how, despite their intended purpose, when used in tandem with superficial methods of conjuring, screens only mirror the pitfalls of a stereotypical persona.

In their preeminent text *Remediation* Bolter and Grusin demystify the belief that there is this divorce between contemporary media technologies (in the case analog vs. digital) and its predecessors. In fact, a desire to make a distinction between new forms of mediating as well as newer forms making older ones obsolete has been a preoccupation with practically every major innovation. As continued in modern times, people were anxious about what the advent of film would mean to live theatre, what television would do to film, and currently the impact that streaming has on television. But what time has shown us is that the older forms do not disappear, but rather adapt. This can be attributed to the fact that despite the tools or the particular look and/or feel of a particular form, they all rely on immediacy.

Carefully uncovering the function and purpose of media, digital and analogue, 2D and 3D, etc., Bolter and Grusin explain how all forms of media are committed to transmitting a sense of immediacy.[153] Some artistic renderings seek to simplify the modes of representation in order to accomplish this goal of transmitting immediacy. The authors identify this mode of representation as transparent media. Its opposite, hypermediacy "expresses itself as multiplicity", its logic "acknowledges multiple acts of representation and makes them visible."[154] Bolter and Grusin further argue that "the logic of hypermediacy multiplies the signs of mediation and in this way tries to reproduce the rich sensorium of the human experience."[155] When comparing the booming presence of screens, projecting complex and moving images and the intricate lighting of Minhaj's stage to the simplicity of more traditional stand up

[153] My focus is on immediacy rather than liveness as immediacy centers the object itself, in this case stand-up, and the ways in which it attempts to transmit this sense of immediacy. In order to investigate the notion of liveness and its presence and importance to stand-up would require fielding personal and audience reactions and perhaps seeing the piece in-person; it takes the focus off understanding the devices used by the comedian and places more emphasis on the feelings and experiences of the show goer. While, I imagine this would bring about interesting insight, it is somewhat outside of the scope of this chapter.

[154] Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding Media*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 34 – 35.

[155] Bolter and Grusin, 34 – 35.

performances (stage, spotlight, and microphone) the comedian's setup is intentionally hypermediated.

Nancherla's performance, which also includes digital technology pales in comparison and would not fall under Bolter and Grusin's definition of hypermediated. However, it is important to note that:

> Hypermedia and transparent media are opposite manifestations of the same desire: the desire to get past the limits of representation and to achieve the real. They are not striving for the real in any metaphysical sense. Instead, the real is defined in terms of the viewer's experience; it is that which would evoke an immediate (and therefore authentic) emotional response. Transparent digital applications seek to get to the real by bravely denying the fact of mediation; digital hypermedia seek the real by multiplying mediation so as to create a feeling of fullness, a satiety of experience, which can be taken as reality.[156]

In this passage, Bolter and Grusin offer numerous terms that assist us in working towards an understanding of the intention of new media, in this case media technology that is relatively "new" to the genre of stand-up. However, in relation to the argument presented in this chapter the most important concepts are hypermedia, transparent media, mediation, and immediacy. They allow us to understand stand-up comedy as media and invites us to consider a relationship between communitas and immediacy. Stand-up comedy is media and thus seeks to elicit an emotional response from its audience. The most sought-after response is laughter, but in order to achieve varying levels of humorous intensity comedians will manipulate a wide range of emotions to make the laugh that much sweeter. Essentially whether it be through fashioning their artform to function as transparent media or hypermedia, stand-up comedians attempt to connect with audience members in such a way that they forget they are experiencing pre-planned *speech* and instead feel as if they are having a conversation, or interacting with a

[156] Bolter and Grusin, 53.

person they know. In other words, despite the simplistic or elaborate nature of their stage setup comedians attempt to get at the real, the immediacy as seen in the audience's emotional reaction, by dissolving the notion of rhetorical curation. However, the rhetorical, gestural, and the stage itself work in tandem to produce the media known as stand up. So how are we to understand Minhaj's and Nancherla's performances? What are we to make of their innovative use of digital technology within a stand-up, arguably a medium for delivering messages, in itself?

It is important to note that with this definition, despite Nancherla's use of screens within the stand-up performance (which is a media in itself) does not render her performance hypermediated. By 2019 standards, Nancherla would not count as hypermediated. While a lot has changed since 1999, the year Bolter and Grusin's *Remediation* was published, considering what is now possible technologically Nancherla's use of newer media technology is quite simplistic. Nancherla's special falls more in line with the more traditional and more transparent structure of stand-up in that she does not attempt to use her image and text filled PowerPoint to bring attention to media itself (the television), but rather she uses it as a site for collective exploration about a particular topic – in this case digital communication. The presence of the television and the use of her clicker do not function to create "a feeling of fullness" or a "satiety of experience, which can be taken as reality." Instead it is used as a tool for dissecting and taking a closer look at the ways in which we communicate. It is used to ignite the imaginations of the audience members, to conjure the aspect of communitas that calls for us to reconsider our world and our places within it.

Nancherla's use of PowerPoint is a recreation of the liminal (as it pertains to her), with the television screen serving to help externalize her internal musings about digital

communication. Her talk on digital communication can be broken down into two main parts. In the first half she focuses on emojis and their lack of diversity. In the second half she close reads text including social media comments, yelp reviews, and text messages from her parents. Her interaction with each form of digital communication offers an opportunity for the performer to exercise a different comedic technique, eventually culminating in a technical comedic expression as layered as her onstage persona. Nancherla's use of screens to further develop her archetypal persona works to synthesize her onstage personhood and asks her audience members to appropriate her lens for the upcoming exercise of collective exploration. The comedian's talk is presented with the humorously long and contrasting title and subtitles along with the explanation of their origin:

> 'You Had Me at Y.O.L.O.: A Tenuous Exploration of How Digital Language Exists in an Ever-Evolving Landscape,' which of course is a title I got from a random TED Talk title generator. I feel like it did the trick, but in more casual terms, that is, a.k.a. ponderings such as, 'Why do all the family emojis only come in one skin tone? But the blonde man comes in all of them? [157]

After introducing the topic for discussion, the comedian presents a slide detailing some key information about herself. She explains, "before I really deep dive into stuff, I just wanted to give you a little background on myself. Anytime you present your ideas in this kind of forum, people should know something about you." Her use of the term "forum" is multifaceted; she sarcastically treats the space as a TED talk, inviting the audience to play along, priming them to understand and subsequently laugh at her humor. In order to create the world that her sarcasm suggests, she includes an extensive list detailing her person(a). The 6th slide of her 19-slide presentation reads:

Who Am I?!?"
· "Comedian, Writer, Have a website"

[157] Nancherla, *Standups.*

- "Daughter, Sister, Friend, Enemy, Emmy, Oscar"
- "Anxious Depressive, Therapy Regular, PMS Enthusiast
- "Introvert, at times, Violently Quiet"
- "Feminist, Internet Troll Collector"
- "Heterosexual, Emphasis on rose"
- "Cis-Woman, Barely Confident in Explaining What Cis Means"
- "Person of Color, Will Round Out a College Brochure Photo"
- "Closeted Rascal"
- "Someone who uses quotes incorrectly"[158]

Nancherla uses PowerPoint transitions to present each bullet point and provides commentary to offer further explanation of the text she presents onscreen. This list serves as a synthesis of her carefully curated persona that instructs audience members on how to interpret and relate to her. Her style of capitalization suggests an identity; by playing within the writing rules of proper pronouns that dictate you capitalize the first letter of a person, specific place and thing, Nancherla subtly infers that these bullet points are in fact identities. Thus, she creates multiple entry points for enhanced relatability and increases communitas. This would not have been subtly suggested without being able to use a screen to project a PowerPoint from which audience members can read and see the written word and the nuanced capitalization. Nancherla reintroduces her onstage-self once she brings in the screen (an actual television) to re-solidify her persona in order to ensure that her inclusion of media is not disruptive but rather functions as an extension of her archetypal persona. By using a media technology relatively new to mainstream stand-up to extend an already tightly constructed comedic technique, Nancherla continues to use the screen to conjure both aspects of communitas, connectivity and reimagining.

Nancherla's inclusion and exploration of what she has termed "Emoji Nation," serves to facilitate an interaction between herself and the icons in the comedic service of the audience.

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158 Nancherla, *The Standups*.

Following her title slide the performer substantiates the need or reason for her talk by showing a slide with all the variations of the family emojis. As she clicks her clicker, more and more variations appear on the screen; there are family emojis with two moms, two dads, a mom and a dad, all of whom are white. After displaying them on screen for the audience to see, she comments, "beautiful, different combinations. Heartwarming, but also if you'll notice, a little bit of an Aryan nation starter kit." Nancherla uses this time and space to not only present the material, but to voice her inner thoughts about it. She renders the interior exterior for the purpose of conjuring communitas. She creates a bond of connectivity in that everyone is exploring the items together and, through the offering of her own interpretation, she asks audience members to agree, disagree, or develop their own opinions about the method of communication. She facilitates an exercise in reimagining the ways in which we communicate, the feelings that can be evoked when communicating, and the rapid pace in which communication evolves and takes on new meanings. Since Nancherla is recreating the liminal through the explanation of her thought process in critically examining the emojis, it only makes sense that she uses the screen to display the pictorial language. Their display serves as reference for her re-performed liminal riffs. It provides the visual support needed for audiences to appropriate her liminal lens and make the joke land.

Another example of her use of icons as a method for facilitating interaction occurs when she is questioning the existence and/or utility of certain emojis. While displaying a slide that features a white hand with all its fingers, save the thumb and pinky, curled into the palm, Nancherla voices her confusion, "…I don't know if that's 'hang low' or 'call me.' All I know is, if I show up somewhere and someone does this at me, [mimes the emoji with her hand], especially a white guy, I gotta leave." Much like an instructor, Nancherla presents the image of

the hand in order to illustrate her confusion as to what it is communicating and its overall usefulness as an emoji. She then goes a step further and attempts to apply the gesture in real life as a way of trying to make sense of it. The "punchline" comes when she extends her feelings from confusion to fear, a logical fear of white supremacy, perhaps misplaced because the hand gesture could be harmless. However, maybe not, as it could mean something of which she is not aware , something dangerous. By presenting the image on screen alongside her thought process and her emotional response, Nancherla encourages her audience to consider her perspective while formulating their own.

As Nancherla examines text-based content, she combines her use of persona extension and reaction to imaginative close reading, a play on the traditional technique that is demonstrated through the comedic practice of acting out. Nancherla reads what she identifies as crowd sourcing social media. She explains, "Yelp one-star reviews, they seem negative, but I find them, like, a very untapped source of literature." While she means this comment to be sarcastic, considering her profession, her statement is genuine in that these reviews offer great raw data to be mined. Thus, the inherent seriousness implied by equating these reviews to literature is actually true when it comes to her appreciation for them as a comedian and her approach to analyzing them in order to conjure communitas. One of her first close readings is a restaurant review: "Awful service. Was offered crack on my way to the restaurant. House ferments tasted like soft garbage." As Nancherla reads, she embodies a reviewer, adopting a tone of disappointment and disgust. She sharpens her inflection at the words "crack" and "soft garbage" as a mode of performed interpretation. Nancherla then uses this pseudo reenactment as a jumping off point for additional ponderings about the place and/or person: "I was like, I think this lady was actually just in an alley, and she was like, 'This restaurant is terrible.' By the time

the comedian reaches the text-based exploration of her "talk" she has several tricks up her sleeves – persona extension, reaction, and now imaginative close reading – these three techniques work together to give the vibe that audience members are watching something (a movie, tv show, couple at the mall) together with our good friend, Aparna. She is verbalizing her feelings about what she is seeing and experiencing, and we are laughing.

By using the personal, Nancherla offers herself as a fully fleshed, flawed, loveable, and unique human being; she becomes a case study granting permission to audience members to examine ways in which they relate to and/or deviate from her persona. *What are my specific insecurities? How can I move past suffering from them and discover ways to enjoy them by learning to laugh at myself?* The comedian uses the personal as a pathway to encourage show-goers to exercise their individual imaginations as they work towards discovering what is shared between themselves and the woman on stage. Nancherla's performance of the personal serves as a simultaneous conjuring of both connectivity and reimagining. Like her comedic techniques, Nancherla's methods for conjuring are complex, which results in a rich experience for viewers where the desire to represent the mediated world on the stage extends, rather than detracts, from the presence of communitas.

Because of its pervasiveness in our modern-day culture it makes sense that Hasan Minhaj would also incorporate visuals of social media in his performance. However, his use is greatly varied from that of his contemporary, Nancherla. While she uses screenshots as a site for collective exploration, Minhaj tends to use real-time videos as a miming tool. Essentially the videos become a visualization of his rhetorical speech. With the Facebook post (picture, textbox, and text included) Minhaj recalls the story of how his high school crush reached out to him about his first comedy show as a headliner. He reads Bethany's message: "Hey! Um. Long time, no

see. You're doing comedy now, so cool! Listen, me and my girlfriends live in Manhattan and we were wondering if we could get some tix?"[159] Early in the show, Minhaj goes through a detailed narrative about his high school crush, Bethany aka "my white princess." She was the first white person who did not make him feel uncomfortable about his culture; in fact, she appreciated it. Things go sour for the young lovebirds when her parents decide she needs to have a white boy as a prom date since they would be showing pictures to their friends and family.

Thus, it makes sense that after reading this message aloud that Minhaj uses the time immediately afterward to perform a reaction that foreshadows the sweet revenge he is about to enact. After voicing a sinisterly satisfying, "Um, ohhkay," he takes a long gulp of water, his moans of pleasure serving a dual purpose – physical and emotional gratification. Minhaj's response functions much like Nancherla's technique of using screens to set up a comedic reaction to what is being presented onscreen. However, the verbal response and the dramatizes way he drinks his water encompasses his real time reaction in totality. Within seconds his actual response to Bethany is presented onscreen, the words appearing after he verbalizes them; it is reminiscent of the film technique where actors talk aloud as they write as a way for readers to hear what they are composing. Except, Minhaj's use of the strategy is a bit odd, considering that he also presents the text onscreen and his reading does not offer any additional insight for the audience. Instead, the comedian relies on a "self-aggrandizing onstage brashness, a baller's persona where name-dropping cockiness and pop culture"[160] marks him. He combines this superficial persona with his use of digital media technology to carry him. This reliance on his persona proves problematic as it is rooted in stereotype and arguably hypermediated in its own right.

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[159] Minhaj, *Homecoming King*.
[160] Dennis Perkins, "The Daily Show's Hasan Minhaj," *AV Club*, May 25, 2017.

Minhaj's hypermediated persona combined with his hypermediated stage does work "*to create a feeling of fullness, a satiety of experience, which can be taken as reality."*[161] The audience becomes enveloped in the multiple forms of representation, so much so that the potential to forget that they are inside a construction is possible. However, this satiety is fleeting because of its superficiality. Minhaj fails to tap into hypermediation to **"**reproduce the rich sensorium of the human experience."[162] He does elicit the immediacy as reflected in audience reactions that serves as the goal for mediation. But when it comes to conjuring communitas, Minhaj settles for the immediate gratification of connectivity at the expense of the deeper, more sustaining aspect of communitas that calls for reimagining.

In fact, Minhaj's conjuring does not ignite our ability as audience members to reimagine the world outside of the theatre, but it impedes our ability to witness it in action and practice it ourselves. As mentioned earlier in the chapter, when characterizing his sister, Ayesha, as the "FOB in the frock," Minhaj mentions how her appearance signaled her unbelonging in what had become *his* American space: "Every single brown mother makes your daughter *quinceañera* dress, chop cuts. Why? Princess from here down, Toad from here up. I've got this shit following me around on the playground." Immediately following his cartoon-based description of his sister, Ayesha, the comedian uses his large screen to display a photoshopped gif of the popular Nintendo characters meshed together to illustrate his point and further land his joke. While this image serves a purpose in "creating a sense of fullness" it also robs audience members of the practice of imagining the rhetorical. We no longer have the opportunity to do the work of picturing in our minds the odd combination the comedian has presented. Instead he provides the visual. On the one hand, it does work to further punctuate his point about the odd

[161] Bolter and Grusin, *Remediation*, 34 – 35.
[162] Bolter and Grusin, 34 – 35.

contrast of fashioning that brown mothers seem to apply to their daughters. On the other hand, it lessens the concept of interaction in that we are not given the opportunity to contribute to the communitas through imagining. The same rings true when he uses the screens as modern scenery backdrops.

When retelling the story of how he sneaks out the house to go to prom with Bethany, the screens feature a multicolored cartoon that includes houses, shrubbery, and a picket fence with a sign that reads, "Tonight! Davis High Senior Prom" and underneath some illegible cursive. Minhaj uses this backdrop to reenact his dramatic escape from his second story bedroom to his white princess's house. The comedian sits in a chair center stage, in front of the image, mimicking the act of riding a bike while nervous, excited, and wearing a suit. As he narratively arrives at Bethany's doorstep the screen does too. The neighborhood scene has been replaced by a smaller, off-center image of a white door with pink framing; yellow light colors its many window panes. Minhaj is using screens to set the scene, something very common in plays. It seems to act as a digital adaptation of early comedians' (especially those in vaudeville, as mentioned in the first chapter) reliance on props. Minhaj is setting an atmosphere which does work to create a fullness and world within itself. However, like his use of the Toad-Princess mashup gif, this scenery works at the expense of our imagination – the space directly correlated to the deep level of communitas. While communitas inspires us to reimagine our world, that is only possible when we exercise and practice using our imaginations in generative spaces like the collective space of the stand-up theatre. Through the comedian's modeling of the creative critical lens needed to reimagine our world and our places within it, we learn to develop and apply our own lens outside of it. While the first step to conjuring communitas is to inspire connectivity, the other, deeper and more sustainable aspect is to ignite and empower the

imagination. Unfortunately, Minhaj's stand-up interferes with our ability to build and use that latter muscle.

Unlike Nancherla, the majority of Minhaj's use of digital media technology feels disruptive and intrusive to the audience-performer dynamic. However, this is not true for all methods of Minhaj's hypermediation. His use of lighting is more subtle but, like his use of screens, it is a constant reminder that we are, in fact, experiencing pre-planned speech, taking us out of the rich media experience he has worked so hard to create. After standing at the yellow door as his heart is being broken by the parents of his high school crush, the door fades, and the screens are black, save several white faint pulsating lines that look like the trails of fallen stars. A three-rayed spotlight beams down on Minhaj as he explains how he felt in that moment of racist rejection:

> The sad part is I felt bad for being there. That's the embarrassing thing. Who was I to ruin their picture-perfect celebration? You've seen movies. How many times have you seen that on screen? And it's not like they were toothless yokels yelling, 'Sand nigger!' from the back of a truck. I could let that just roll off my back. I'd eaten off their plates; I kissed their daughter. I didn't know people could be bigoted, even as they were smiling at you. It's hard to understand when you see people that they love you, but their afraid of you at the same time. And I didn't know what that meant.[163]

It is obvious that this is a heavy moment, not one for laughter. Through the retelling of this traumatic story, Minhaj attempts to explain the way he felt that day when he risked punishment from his stern immigrant parent by sneaking out to go the prom with the girl he liked only to face passive aggressive racism at the hands of her parents. As he tells the story, it seems that most of the emotion comes from his confusion at their kindness and the ways in which he has internalized this racist rejection. For once, the screens are not there displaying bright, bold,

[163] Minhaj, *Homecoming King*.

colors or pictures. They are black. The entire stage is dark. The spotlight on Minhaj forces us to focus on the comedian's dramatic retelling. His usual rapid-fire speech is slowed, his excited tone replaced by a more somber one. Through watery eyes, he tells us of his shame and he uses lighting as a medium to reinforce this mood. As the story continues to unfold, the mood shifts, as do the colors of the screen and its lighting. When teenage Hasan is asked by Bethany not to tell the class that her parents were racist, the color blue is presented on the screens; this quickly turns to red when the class confronts the couple as Bethany ignores their questions and Hasan ends up taking the heat and looking like a "dick" for not taking her to the prom. Young Hasan is angry. But as soon as the narrative fast forwards to the aforementioned moment for sweet revenge, the screen returns to its most used shade of bright yellow. This color scheme and the lighting that it gives off aids the comedian in eliciting the desired emotion from his studio audience. It helps usher audience members through young Hasan's shame, shock, anger, and excitement.

Nancherla takes a more transparent approach, Minhaj a hypermediation. It is not the hypermediation in itself that works against the conjuring, rather the way in which he uses it. Instead of using the screen as a site for collective exploration, it serves as a constant reminder of the belabored curation that show is. His performance, an extension of his superficial braggadocious personality, conjures superficial communitas, the first level which only allows for interconnectivity and not reimagining; there is that initial connectivity but a vague and confusing call for reimagining. *Immigrants are people, who sometimes get annoyed at their own family's inability and/or refusal to assimilate? Sometimes brown people exploit their relatives to entertain white people? There are generational approaches to parenting and dealing with racism?* While the call for reimagining in *Homecoming King* is vague and general, I would like

to note that it does showcase his humanity and in doing so challenges us to extend that same attention, kindness, understanding, and relatability to others who may look like him and his family – other immigrants. However, this call does not come from his primary mode of conjuring via stereotype which easily drowns out his other techniques. This problematic method for conjuring makes it easier for audience members to take the first half of the message that potentially confirms their individual, and sometimes problematic, worldviews and not the rest. But perhaps, by mediating on Hall's notion that "meaning can never finally be fixed, there can never be any formal victories"[164] we understand that misinterpretation is a pervasive and inherent risk. As mentioned in the previous chapter, comedian Dave Chappelle's struggle with being misinterpreted (laughed *at* rather than *with*) was so painful, it pushed him to walk away from a his wildly popular and lucrative sketch comedy show. However, an inability to ensure the audience's takeaway does not eliminate the need to think critically and strategically about how to incorporate media technology new to stand-up in performances in a way that preserves and enhances all aspects of communitas. Fortunately, Nancherla's performance serves as an example.

This need to think about the incorporation of screens (and potentially other forms of media technology new to stand-up) in a way that preserves (and maybe even enhances) communitas is not exclusive to the works of Aparna Nancherla and Hasan Minhaj. Our world continues to grow more and more technologically diverse, and varied forms of media technology become more ingrained into our lives. They constitute and define our identities, our movement, and the way we interact with one another. Stand-up's success lies within the presence of communitas, and its ability to be conjured is often wedded to the simplicity of the traditional stage set-up. Without a careful understanding of this often invisible merger practitioners of the

[164] Hall, *Representation*, 275.

art form seeking to re-present the media technology rich life lived outside of the theatre onto the stage can inadvertently manipulate the physical space and the rhetorical structure in a matter that deprioritizes and/or decreases communitas. Communitas is conjured into the space not solely through the physical elements of the venue but through an unfolding of oneself that invites others to do the same.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, this project points to the pervasive issues of access and the contemporary obstacles and successes in relation to the availability of platforms and income for comedians of color. The first chapter historicizes the relationship of African and Asian American comedians to the problematic institution of Hollywood. Nevertheless, within the trappings of white supremacy, inherent to the industry itself, comedians of color have historically found ways to navigate the entertainment business while simultaneously (1) asserting humanity and belonging, (2) maintaining a sense of dignity, (3) increasing access and modes of being for future generations, and (4) shifting the genre of stand-up comedy forward for *all* practitioners. Thus, despite Hollywood (writ-large) serving as a contemporary manifestation of the same power imbalances of chattel slavery that serve to exploit the creativity and intellectual property of the perpetual "Other," through the generations, comedians of color have made serious strides in their pursuit of equity. As we see in chapter two, the careful creation and curation of a persona situated in the sweet spot (a positionality that allows for the balancing of the aforementioned imperative values) is a tried and true technique for speaking truth to power whilst ensuring financial security and even class mobility. Through examining the works of Dave Chappelle and Gina Yashere we also understand that while white supremacist infrastructures and practices bequeathed unspeakable intergenerational traumas still experienced in the present-day, they also handed us the blessing and burden of second sight – a tool mastered by comedians of color to capitalize on their positions as second-class citizens and manipulate white audiences for personal profit. In the third and final chapter, I explore how comedians have utilized and benefitted from advances in media technology that weaken the hold of network television and instead ushered in

newer and more innovative platforms such as streaming services who create a space where comedians of color are not only able to distribute their content, but are welcome to exercise greater creative control and experiment with the genre itself. By examining selected performances from Indian American comedians Aparna Nancherla and Hasan Minhaj, I assert that intentional inclusion of media technology, specifically screens, *within* a stand-up performance can serve as a new and exciting way to connect with audiences and ignite reimaginings of our oppressive societal systems.

Because of all the changes in the entertainment industry brought about most obviously by the advancements in media technology – the devices used to create, capture, and distribute comedic content – comedians of color are thriving as far as representation is concerned. However, because of the rapidly shifting nature that marks advancements in technology, nothing is certain. As more and more traditional networks transition to designing and implementing their own streaming services (e.g. Disney Plus, CBS, etc.) the future of continued access and creative authority for comedians of color is precarious. As evidenced in the *Homey Don't Play That!: The Story of In Living Color and the Black Comedy Revolution,* institutional support for performers of color is fickle. What started out as a small show on a then infantile FOX, ended up being the program that helped launch the network into its current size and reach. *In Living Color* was so socially and financially successful that in response to stealing 29 million of its halftime-show viewers, in 1993, the NFL responded by hiring Michael Jackson, arguably the top entertainer of the time. Prior to Jackson's NFL mini-concert, the halftime show was less spectacular, with previous performances by local university marching bands, figure skaters, and even an Elvis impersonator. Essentially (and ironically), *In Living Color*, a show ran by and predominately featuring comedians of color, including Keenan Ivory, Damon, and Marlon

Wayans, Tommy Davidson, and multi-hyphenate megastar Jamie Foxx, built the empire that is now Fox Television. However, by 1994, after five seasons, the show came to an end as the network started moving away from minority content. It acquired the licenses to air NFL games and no longer needed to rely on *In Living Color* to finance its entire operation. In other words, black creators were pushed out of the doors to the house they built. This story is not unique and not potentially exclusive to traditional television. If it can happen at a network, who's to say it will not happen to streaming services? Stable/continued access is not guaranteed for comedians/creators of color but neither is it the only area of concern.

The streaming giant Netflix has always hosted a wide plethora of content from creators of color, especially for comedians, as the platform releases weekly stand-up specials and within the last two years alone has strongly promoted and further propelled the careers of Asian and Asian American comedians including Ali Wong, Jo Koy, and Ronny Chieng. However, with the changes in Netflix's relationships to networks, who used to rely on them to distribute older content but have now developed their own streaming services, it is yet to be seen how this new shift will impact access for comedians of color. At present, it appears that with companies like Disney pulling their content from Netflix to host on their own sites, a gap has been left that seemingly is being filled more and more with content from creators of color. But as time has proven again and again comedians of color cannot look to these entertainment institutions for a sense of stability as we are often treated as second-class citizens. This brings up the issue of not only the importance of access but that of equity. In 2018, African American veteran comedian and Oscar winner, Mo'Nique, blasted Netflix for only offering her $500 thousand dollars for a recorded special at the same time they wrote a check for relatively-new and white comedian Amy Schumer in the amount of $11 million dollars. While her delivery, call for action (she

asked subscribers to boycott) and the overall lack of care and concern for black women did not champion a lot of supporters, Mo'Nique used her voice to highlight a pressing issue. Amidst her call-out and the subsequent misdirected backlash, her contemporary, African American comedian Wanda Sykes, backed Mo'Nique tweeting that Netflix offered her even less, further affirming what we already knew – entertainment institutions including Hollywood newbies like Netflix are not excluded from the wage gap, a gap that seems to impact female comedians of color most pressingly. The question then becomes if the issue of continued success for comedians of color is directly connected to access and equity, what can we learn from the newer Hollywood institutions that are streaming services and what still needs to be changed?

Like its cable predecessors, most notably HBO, relying on a subscription relationship with the consumer eliminates the need for money from advertisements and thus lessens the power held by these companies in influencing the content created and/or distributed by the platform. In other words, there is more power to be distributed between the company and the creators as they are not beholden to arbitrary and often antiquated ideas at times only held by advertisers to appease their own consumers even at the expense of social progression. Within the relationship between the subscribed and the subscriber, there is the potential for viewers to voice their wants and desires and for streaming services to hear and meet those desires without having to fear the responses of advertisers, which often ends in a compromise where viewers of color often get the short end of the stick. The subscriber – subscribed relationship represents a shift, but this "excess" of power does not automatically default to creators or viewers of color, a large amount remaining in the hands of streaming services executives. Thus, engaging with the question of the sustainability of access and equity for comedians of color in our digital manifestation of Hollywood means that more representation is needed at the executive level of

these companies. Ideally this would ensure opportunities to collaborate with creators of color and to write them checks that accurately depict the value of their creative, cultural contributions.

By receiving what is owed to them, creators of color cannot only maximize access for themselves and others, but help to create their own infrastructures outside of traditional Hollywood. As he details in his memoir, *I Can't Make This Up: Life Lessons*, Kevin Hart, arguably the most successful African American comedian of our time[165], used the technology of his day to promote his own career. He compiled contact information for his fans from a sign-up sheet and sent personal-sounding invites asking them to join him at the comedy club in their city. He has adapted this technique for our contemporary social media outlets and currently boasts 87.7 million followers on Instagram alone. At present he runs his own non-traditional network, Laugh Out Loud, where he provides a platform for his own comedic material and offers the spotlight for many up-and-coming comedians, most notably, the now uber-successful Lil Rel Howery. Kevin Hart's ownership of his own platform is similar to that of Red Foxx's comedy club, Eddie Murphy's production company, and the historical Chitlin Circuit itself. By owning the platform, you maintain creative control. However, Hart's Laugh Out Loud network is unique in that, because of modern technology, his platform is one of digital distribution. The business-savvy comedian does not need to gain or ask permission to distribute/publish content before uploading it to the application or the website; he can interact with viewers and develop content catered specifically to them. Advances in technology have made both comedians and their fans more accessible and have generated alternative inroads to lucrative entertainment careers. In fact, many up-and-coming comedians have generated millions of followers from social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram. The emergence of these alternative distribution methods

[165] He is the first and *only* comedian to have sneaker line and it's with *Nike* one of the biggest clothing brands.

and the ability for comedians to engage directly and continuously with followers begs the question – *Will the sweet spot no longer matter? Can comedians of color in the United States sustain lucrative careers without considering or catering to the white viewer?* While I am not certain if this is possible, I do know addressing the issues of access and equity in regards to entertainment requires persons of color to serve as executives in existing entertainment institutions and the continued construction of minority owned and operated ones.

The grand opening of black writer, actor, producer, and director Tyler Perry's studios definitely appears to be addressing the need for minority owned and operated entertainment institutions. Serving as one of the largest production sites outside of the Los Angeles area, the 330-acre lot outside of Atlanta boasts over 40 buildings and has everything needed to film. Perry's Studios have already housed talent such as the third installment of the *Bad Boys* franchise starring Will Smith and Martin Lawrence and the highly anticipated sequel, *Coming 2 America*, the brainchild of the comedic genius Eddie Murphy. The impact that Perry's studios have on the entertainment industry is palpable and essential. The multimillionaire employs a plethora of persons of color in a variety of capacities, including in front of and behind the cameras. However, in the last year, he has come under fire for his lack of inclusion in the writer's room. Shortly after his grand opening, Perry took to social media posting a picture of a stack of scripts with a caption that celebrated his own ingenuity as the sole writer for the majority of his film and television endeavors. Social media users seized this opportunity to reignite pervasive dialogue about the pitfalls of his writing citing his creative work as stereotypical and especially harmful to black women. These critiques highlight an important issue to consider even within a black owned and operated entertainment institution – who gets to tell the stories. Equally as imperative as ownership is maintaining a diverse group of

storytellers/writers, diversity being measured across race *and* ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, class, region, etc.

Stand-up comedy is one of the most powerful and effective tools for discussing and thinking through race, class, gender, and sexuality, and one of the most effective ways for individual transformation in that it challenges us to reconsider our biases, prejudices, classism, etc. Comedians of color have and continue to be at the literal and figurative forefront, crafting and using their performances to help us collectively self-reflect. More comedians of color than ever before are experiencing the opportunities maximized by advances in media technology and shifts in the entertainment industry to tell stories that assert their/our humanity and their/our belonging. The changes in these systems present a particularly generative moment by which we can shape the future of the genre to ensure the presence and quality of our voices and create greater stability in terms of access and equity. However, this declaration is merely an echo of a truth long ago understood; access and equity require the infiltration of minorities in existing Hollywood institutions, the creation and ownership of our own, and everything else we have the strength, desire, and vision to manifest.

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